

A Tale of Two Men

by ancientgirl

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

Chapter 1 - Some Rethinking is in Order Here

Chapter 1 of 26

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I've been wanting to do a Lucius fic for a while now and I think I've finally gotten to the point of being ready for it. While I originally intended for this to be mostly written about Lucius, I decided it might be interesting to explore the relationship between he and Severus, so as you can see by the title, this is a tale of two men and they will both get equal time here.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

Thank you to June for her help, and for her suggestion for the title. It works out much better than what I originally intended.

A Tale of Two Men

Chapter 1 Some Rethinking is in Order Here

Lucius Malfoy sat in his office at the Ministry of Magic, staring out the window. He was one of the few real aristocrats in the wizarding world, a man whose entire life was based on what was seen on the surface: a rich, successful, prestigious wizard, with a trophy wife and son, a huge mansion, and well-connected friends. He was envied by many. Yet he was unhappy, for the day was cold and dark, much like what his life had become.

His downward spiral started seven years ago, shortly after Draco graduated from Hogwarts. Lucius was arriving home when he'd received a message from St. Mungo's stating that his son had been brought in for injuries. When Lucius arrived, Draco told him that he'd been visiting a Muggle department store, looking for some clothes, when he was caught in the middle of an attack by several Death Eaters.

It was then that Lucius was hit with the sudden realization of how easily he could have lost his son. And for what? An attack meant for Muggles. Lucius realized then that Muggles weren't the enemy, it was the wizarding world itself. It didn't matter that Muggleborns or halfbloods were infiltrating their world, there would always be magic. There would always be wizards and witches. Instead, they were killing each other for no good reason. After all, didn't pureblood wizards and witches often become parents of Squibs?

Everything the Dark Lord stood for was a lie. Muggles and Muggleborns weren't any different than purebloods, they were all human beings. Voldemort himself was a halfblood, something that was unknown to a huge section of the population, including most Death Eaters.

Lucius stood and ran his hands through his hair. He began questioning his actions and activities a long time ago; he wasn't the same man anymore.

Narcissa Malfoy saw a change in her husband, but she had her own things to worry about, so she didn't ask questions. She needed to survive. The less she knew about Lucius the better, as far as she was concerned. Then wanting to cement her chances of coming out of the impending war alive, she gave herself to Lord Voldemort, never looking back. The Dark Lord had few concubines; Narcissa was now one of them. It was a position of great prestige.

So Lucius lost his wife to the Dark Lord, a crazed madman. He told himself that Narcissa had simply tired of her husband. But deep inside he knew better, and he wasted no time in grieving for her. Lucius knew he needed to send Draco somewhere safe, and sent him away to Spain for several years after he'd gotten out of St. Mungo's.

Draco stayed put for about five years. Then two years ago at the age of 23, he wrote his father a long letter telling him how much he loved him, and that he was coming back to England to be closer to him. However, knowing that his father and mother was still in service to Voldemort, Draco wrote that he would not tell them his whereabouts.

For this Lucius was glad. It meant that he could tell the Dark Lord that his son was lost to him, that Draco had proven to be a disappointment and was not worthy of being in his master's service. Much to his surprise, when Lucius informed Voldemort of Draco's lack of enthusiasm, the Dark Lord dismissed the entire situation. Even though Lucius hadn't spoken to his wife in several years, he suspected that she might have had something to do with Voldemort's disinterest in their son. He quickly dismissed the thought. No, his wife didn't have a maternal bone left in her body; she'd proven that by walking away from both of them.

Lucius paced his office now, and looked at the clock on the mantle. It was just after five o'clock. Knowing that there was a Death Eater meeting that evening, Lucius decided to leave and ready himself for the evening's festivities. As he walked down the Ministry corridor, he decided that tonight would be the night he would reveal himself to Severus.

For three years now, he'd known his friend was a spy, yet he kept it to himself. He'd found out by accident. One morning, after one of the Dark Lord's meetings, Lucius Apparated to Knockturn Alley. He wanted to get rid of a few of Narcissa's trinkets when he'd caught a glimpse of Severus walking towards one of the small private rooms behind Borgin & Burkes. Lucius approached the room silently and heard voices. Whomever Severus was meeting, they both seemed to be comfortable enough in the knowledge that they would not be seen so much so that they'd neglected to place a Silencing charm around themselves.

He'd listened closely. The person Severus was meeting was Arthur Weasley, considered by Death Eaters to be a blood traitor. From what little Lucius had overheard, it seemed that Severus was originally to meet Arthur at some other location, but he'd had no time to Apparate to the safe house. Severus recounted all that happened during the Death Eater meeting, even the location of the next attack in Muggle London. It was shortly after that incident that Lucius decided he too would assist in bringing down Voldemort. If Snape could betray the Dark Lord and survive, so could Lucius.

Secretly, without even Severus' knowledge, he began sending the dark-haired wizard secret messages three years ago. Even though Severus was in Voldemort's inner circle, it was Lucius that was just one step closer to the evil wizard. Not because Lucius was a better wizard, or any more powerful than Severus. All in all, both men were equal in power and knowledge of the dark arts. What gave Lucius the edge was money and connections, no more than that. It was Voldemort's need for funds and someone inside the Ministry that kept Lucius slightly above the rest.

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Severus had no idea who was sending him the messages, but he knew that whoever was sending them, truly wanted to help the Order's cause. He knew this because the first letter included a thumbprint made with a drop of the informant's blood. A diagnostic spell confirmed that the sender had made a blood oath, swearing to the truthfulness of the information and his allegiance to their cause. Blood was life, but it was also death. The Order knew that by giving them a drop of his blood, the informant had given them the power to end his life if they so chose. Severus knew of several very potent potions that could kill instantly just with a drop of someone's blood, even if the drop of blood was dried and old. That was the informant's way of proving his loyalty.

There were times in the past three years when Severus and Albus discussed placing a tracing spell on the messages, thinking that they should one day show up at the elusive wizard's doorstep. But Severus knew that if his informant wanted to be known, he would have told him who he was from the beginning. There was only one way the informant could know so much about Voldemort's plans, and that was because he was a Death Eater himself. It was best for them both if Severus never knew who was sending him the precious information.

It was Friday evening. Severus started preparing himself for tonight's meeting at the Riddle mansion. While the large structure appeared to be old and decrepit, in much need of life and repair, Voldemort had been hiding out in the house for many years now. This was known only to a handful of people among his followers, and of course it was known by much of the Order. But the Dark Lord was well protected and his home, up to now, had been completely inaccessible to most of the outside world.

Severus was gathering his Death Eater robes and mask, when Albus stepped through the Floo.

"Be on guard, Severus. I have an odd feeling about tonight," said the old wizard solemnly.

Severus chuckled and shook his head. "Albus, don't tell me Sybil's mad declarations of doom have finally penetrated your normally rational mind."

Albus placed his hands on Severus' shoulder and looked into his eyes. Gone was the usual cheerful lightness; instead Albus' eyes shone with concern.

"No, Severus, it's just a feeling I have. Like when a parent feels a child is in danger."

"I am not a child, Albus. I can take care of myself, you know that," whispered Severus, now concerned himself. He knew Albus was normally positive whenever he left for his meetings. The Headmaster always told him to be careful, but assured him that everything would be all right. Tonight, there was a sense of foreboding coming over him now. Severus felt his entire body tingle with fear for the first time in years.

"No, Severus, you are not a child. But you are the closest thing to a son I will ever have, and because of my feelings toward you I feel the need to treat you as one." Albus closed the small distance between them and hugged Severus. The moment passed and Albus turned away to leave. He paused to give Severus one final look before he walked out the door, hoping that his walk back to his office would lighten the heaviness he felt in his heart.

Severus stood in the middle of his living room for several minutes thinking on what had just happened. He stilled his thoughts for a moment in order to shield his mind of anything and everything that could be seen by Voldemort, should the Dark Lord decide to take a peek.

Quickly bundling up his robes and mask into his arm, the Potions master left his rooms and journeyed outside the castle through a passageway built especially for him to get in and out unseen. Once he was outside the boundaries of Hogwarts he Apparated to the Riddle property and made his way up the path to the mansion's front door.

As he walked in, he noticed Lucius had already arrived. There was something going on with Lucius he dared not ask. Years ago his friend's wife had left him so that she could be a concubine to the Dark Lord. He'd sent Draco off to Spain and began acting oddly.

Severus knew the reason for Draco's semi-permanent exile; the young man had kept in touch with him through the years, and they saw each other on a somewhat regular basis. But Severus wondered now if perhaps Lucius had changed his original thinking on what was happening throughout the wizarding world. He recalled that when Voldemort came back into power Lucius was less than thrilled. The blond wizard hid it well, but they had been friends for many years; Severus knew there was something going on, but kept his distance. He couldn't risk exposing himself, even to Lucius.

Lucius spotted Severus across the foyer; they nodded to one another and continued their separate ways. Lucius walked into the large ballroom and took his place at the front, next to the large throne placed on the far wall of the room.

The room filled and everyone quietly waited the Dark Lord, who walked in followed by several female Death Eaters, including Bellatrix Lestrange and Narcissa Malfoy. Voldemort looked out at his followers and narrowed his yellow serpentine eyes, as he stood to address them.

"I have been working on a project, something I believe will allow us to further infiltrate even beyond the wizarding world. I am aware that these are difficult times. Much of our world suspects there is a threat living among them; they know we are out there. I have in my ranks a Spells Master. He is developing some useful spells, one of which may be useful in gathering information from sources that until recently we were unable to penetrate." The Dark Lord sat on his throne as his concubines took their places at his feet.

"It is well known that the goblins at Gringotts are good at keeping secrets. Their minds are like a safe with no combination. But I have been given a spell that will bring down the walls of Occlumency, Fidelius, and any other type of secret-keeping spell. Unfortunately it is not yet perfected; furthermore the time the mind is exposed is very short, too short to get much information, but that is why it must be tested. I will choose one of you here to test this spell. The rest of you will be given my instructions by Wormtail."

Voldemort scanned the room and let his eyes fall upon Severus. It had been a long time since he'd used Severus in any way. Today the Potions master would prove his worth for a few moments.

"Severus, approach me. The rest of you, on your way." Voldemort waved off the crowd as he held his eyes on Severus, who walked towards him slowly.

While Severus' face remained impassive, inside he was concentrating like never before. He knew that if the spell worked like Voldemort hoped, this could very well be the end of him.

"Now, Severus, let us see what is swimming in that head of yours."

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There you have the first chapter. I hope you enjoyed this.

Thank you for reading.

Chapter 2 ? To Begin Again

Chapter 2 of 26

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Chapter 2 To Begin Again

Lucius kept his place just off to the side of Voldemort's throne. The Dark Lord's face held a bored expression as he looked intently into Severus' eyes, until his serpentine features suddenly contorted into a hideous mask of anger. He shot up off his throne so fast that the few left surrounding him jumped in surprise. All but Severus, whose eyes never left Voldemort's. Even Nagini, who was usually so still she looked like a statue, lifted her head.

"I should kill you right now with my bare hands." Voldemort was holding his wand so tightly that Lucius could hear the knuckles cracking.

Severus remained calm and silent.

"Say something!" yelled Voldemort. "Have you nothing to say, no excuse? Say something, you traitor!"

"Get on with it," said Severus defiantly, knowing that he was not going to walk out of that ballroom alive.

Voldemort complied. Severus' body flew across the floor and hit the farthest wall of the ballroom.

Lucius thought he heard something crack. He hoped it was just his friend's ribs.

"My lord," hissed Bellatrix, who had been watching from her place on the floor. "Let me kill him for you. You should not soil your hands with the death of a traitor."

Voldemort laughed. "No, Bella, I wish to play with Severus for a while." He looked to Lucius. "His death will be on Lucius' hands. After all, he is the one who brought Severus into our family. It is only right that he take him out."

Lucius said nothing; he merely bowed and accepted the "honor." As he watched Voldemort produce shackles and tie Severus from a chain hanging from the ceiling, Lucius only hoped that the dark-haired wizard died quickly, before the Dark Lord had a chance to order him to kill Severus. The blond wizard knew he could never kill his friend. If the Dark Lord ordered him to, not only would Severus probably die tonight anyway, but Lucius would most likely follow.

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At Hogwarts Albus sat in his office. He was deep in thought, wondering why Severus had not arrived yet. It was Voldemort's recent custom to have meetings twice a month; they never lasted more than an hour or so. Typically, Tom would talk about raids that had gone on the weeks before, and then plan more raids. Severus joked that if it wasn't for Wormtail always seeming to do something idiotic and receiving punishment, they would all die of boredom. The meetings had their uses, however. The Order had a better understanding of how the Dark Lord worked, as he had kept the same stagnant pattern now for almost nine months.

Minerva entered through the narrow hidden door beside a large bookcase.

"Any word?" she asked.

Albus shook his head. "No, and I am beginning to wonder if I should have insisted he make up some excuse this time."

"Albus, even if you had, you know how Severus is. He would have told you that you worry too much and gone anyway."

"Something is happening to him, Minerva." He stood and began walking towards the same door Minerva came through. "We need to see Poppy. I want her to be prepared if he comes back injured."

Minerva grabbed him by the arm. "What if..."

"No!" said Albus, then regained his composure. "Let's not think about what if."

Together, they walked down to the hospital wing, both hoping that the Potions master came back alive.

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Back at the Riddle house, Voldemort was making quite a mess on his ballroom floor. There were puddles of blood, urine and feces all over. This was due to not only the flogging of Severus' body, but the many rounds of the Cruciatus Curse that had been cast on the exhausted man.

"I think I've had my fill of you, Severus." A quick swish of his wand, and the floor was cleaned. Voldemort then allowed Severus to drop heavily onto the newly-cleaned spot. He then turned to Lucius.

"Take him back to Hogwarts. Nail him to the gates of that wretched castle and finish him off. Then return here. I have a few things I need for you to acquire for me that involve a few galleons." He turned away and looked towards his concubines, choosing Bellatrix and Narcissa. He nodded towards the door behind them and they stood. After torturing Severus, he needed a different sort of release. Lucius would have to wait most likely hours until Voldemort finished getting his fill of the two women before he gave the blond the list of things he needed. The snake-like wizard made it a habit of having Lucius do his personal shopping for him, while rubbing the man's nose in the fact that Mrs. Malfoy was busy in his bed. Tonight would just be another list of items he would make his senior Death Eater get for him.

Lucius waited until they left before he approached Severus' body. Wormtail had already gone, taking Nagini down into the dungeons for her nightly feeding; Wormtail was smart enough to not anger the snake. He picked up Severus' robes, or what was left of them, and repaired them as best he could. Death Eater robes weren't made of normal material. They were actually made from thread spun from the shredded skin and internal organs of long dead wizards, much like their masks were made from the skulls of dark wizards. When torn, the robes were not easily repaired. But at the moment, there was nothing else available to Lucius, at least nothing he could immediately think of using. In his nervousness he hadn't thought of Transfiguring part of the rug and making it into a blanket.

"Severus," Lucius said as he bent down next to the still body of his friend. He leaned down next to his ear. "Wake up, Severus."

He looked at Severus' chest. The Potions master was still breathing, but his intake of air looked shallow and Lucius could hear wheezing. Lucius knew that he needed to get him back to Hogwarts. Covering Severus' naked body, he placed his hand on his shoulder and Apparated them both away.

They appeared several yards away from the gates of the school. Lucius levitated his friend's body and walked towards the gates. He used to be able to enter Hogwarts freely as a school governor, but Dumbledore had rightly increased school security in view of Death Eater activity. Lucius knew that he could not enter but it would be easy enough to trip the wards, as someone would surely come and investigate. Besides, Voldemort wanted Snape's body to be taken to Hogwarts and found on the gates.

He gently placed Severus on the ground and lifted him up slightly so that he was leaning against the stone wall, easily visible to anyone approaching the gates from the side.

Severus let out an anguished moan.

"Severus," Lucius said as he cupped Severus' face.

Slowly his weary bloodshot eyes opened.

"That's it, friend, wake up. Listen to me, Severus. It is my duty to finish what the Dark Lord started. He ordered me to bring you here, where I am to kill you."

Every intake of breath for Severus felt as though he was breathing in a cloud of acid. Every organ inside his body felt as though it were on fire. He only hoped at that moment that because of what friendship they had, that Lucius would take that into consideration and finish him off quickly and painlessly.

"You will not die at my hands." Lucius let go of Severus and stood. He backed up slowly. "I have helped you for three years now, you and the Order. I ask that you help me now. Help me rid my soul of this trail of death I have helped to pave."

Severus eyes now opened wider as he watched Lucius cast a Killing Curse at a lizard crawling up the side of the gate, then blast the gates. The school's wards went off and Lucius disappeared.

As much as it hurt, Severus smiled. It had been Lucius all this time.

Albus had been in the hospital wing when the wards sounded off. He immediately ran out of the castle and met Hagrid halfway down a small hill that led towards the gates. The two approached cautiously, as they neared. Hagrid could make out the form of a man slumped near the iron gates, leaning against the stone wall.

"Headmaster, it looks like Professor Snape." Hagrid rushed towards the gates and was just about to open them, when Albus yelled out.

"Hagrid, no!" Albus ran towards the half-giant, who had a puzzled look on his face. "We must be sure it is Severus, it could be a trap." Much as Albus wanted to go to Severus' aid, he knew that by the very fact that Severus had been beaten so badly, it meant something had gone very wrong.

Hagrid stood close to the gates, ready to open them as Albus neared Severus.

Albus bent down next to the injured wizard.

"Si bonus sis, venias," whispered Albus.

Severus strained to turn his head, hoping that his voice would come to him. "Si Nequam, nequaquam."

"Hagrid, hurry!"

Hagrid carried Severus through the gates, so that Albus could protect them, his wand at the ready. Once they were securely within Hogwarts' castle, Albus gently floated Severus up the small hill and towards the castle.

Hermione Granger, who'd been teaching at Hogwarts for almost two years, was on her way to Severus' rooms. She'd finished her rounds and was going to see Severus for their nightly glass of wine together. Hermione was about to turn down into the hall leading down to the dungeons when she glanced out a window and noticed Albus and Hagrid bringing something up the path. She gasped when she realized it was Severus, and she ran outside to him, fearing he was dead.

"Severus," she called as she neared. She stopped and noticed the bruises on his face and black-and-blue welts on his exposed chest. "Oh, Severus." She cried with tears falling down her cheeks.

"Don't cry, Hermione. Poppy will mend him in no time. He is safe now, although I am surprised. If Voldemort did this to him I can only imagine it is because he has found out about Severus' duplicity." Albus tried to reassure Hermione, who hadn't taken her eyes off of Severus' unconscious body. "Someone must have helped him get here in some way. Voldemort would not have allowed him to live, and Severus was in no condition to Apparate by himself."

They all continued on into the school. To avoid being seen, they took hidden passages to the hospital wing, where Poppy and Minerva were waiting.

"Oh goodness, he looks terrible," said Poppy as she steered Albus towards a bed near the end of a row. It was a larger bed, usually used for the adults when they needed to spend time in the infirmary. Albus laid the Potions master on the soft bed and allowed the Medi-witch to take over.

"I'll need a few moments with him." Poppy closed the curtain around the bed and began her examination while the others stood back and waited.

Hagrid excused himself, wanting to get back to the gates to make sure there was no one walking around that should not be there. Albus and Minerva sat on one of the beds next to Severus' own. Hermione waited near the foot of their bed, hoping that the wizard would not suffer any permanent damage.

After fifteen minutes the curtains opened. Severus lay in bed, his eyes now open, but he was in visible pain.

"He suffered very little internal damage, considering what he's been through," Poppy announced soberly. "He has a slight concussion but he should be fine with a day or two of rest. I've given him some Skele-Gro to help mend his broken bones, and before he goes to sleep I'll rub some salve on his skin, for the bruises." Poppy looked at Severus who was struggling to sit up. She pointed her wand to his pillow, which then grew slightly, lifting the injured man's upper body. "I'm going to get some things ready for him. You can visit for a bit, but please, no excitement." She then walked to her office, leaving them alone.

Albus was the first to approach Severus. "What happened, my boy?" he asked.

"It was an ordinary meeting. The Dark Lord began telling us that he has a Spells Master in his employ. This master has come up with a spell that allows the caster to look into another's mind for a period of about thirty seconds. No matter if the victim is using Occlumency, or is under a Fidelius Charm, nothing can prevent the mind from being penetrated by this spell," said Severus. His voice sounded hoarse and he was very tired.

Albus eyes grew wide. "Good lord, Severus. How did you get out of there alive?"

Minerva and Hermione moved closer to the bed. Minerva stood now beside Albus, and Hermione took a place on the other side of the bed.

Before he continued his story, Severus adjusted himself so that he could also see Hermione. "It was Lucius' duty to kill me at the gates of the school."

"How did you get away from him?" asked Hermione.

Severus looked at her. "I didn't. Lucius brought me back and cast a Killing Curse at a lizard, then he tripped the wards so that someone would find me." He now looked at the Headmaster. "Albus, Lucius is the informant. He is the one who has been helping us in secret these last three years. He wants to continue helping the Order, he wants to atone for his own sins."

Albus smiled. "Then he will be welcomed to our side. I had hoped after Draco came to us that his father would soon follow. You yourself told me a long time ago there was a change in Lucius."

"We will have to protect his identity," Severus spoke as he planned. "I must go into hiding."

"And I will announce that Hogwarts' Potions master was found dead outside the school gates," Albus said. "I believe Mr. Lovegood will be willing to help us with the announcement the The Quibbler."

"Albus," Minerva said as she placed a hand on Albus' arm. "Severus needs his rest. You can talk more in the morning."

Albus nodded. "I will stop by tomorrow." He turned and walked away with Minerva at his side. Together, they would tell Poppy to move her "dead" patient, and then they'd find a safe place to hide Severus.

Severus looked to Hermione and smiled.

"It seems that our nightly glass of wine will have to be postponed for a while," he said.

Hermione chuckled and sat down on the bed. She caressed his cheek.

"I was so scared when I saw Albus levitating you coming up the entrance. I thought..." She stopped, not wanting to further think on what might have happened to him.

"Shh...I am fine, Hermione." He took hold of her wrist lightly kissed her pulse point. Until now, he had never touched her in such an intimate way. This for him was intimate; it was more than taking her hand while showing her how to chop an ingredient. From the moment Hermione returned to Hogwarts to teach, she'd hounded him mercilessly. She came to Hogwarts with a degree in History, but Albus thought it would benefit the students more if she taught Muggle Studies. It had taken her a year for Severus to finally accept her as an equal and not just a former student, and then another year to break down the walls and become his friend.

Hermione didn't pull away from him; she'd wanted this type of affection from him for so long. He was finally reaching out to her for more than just knowledge and conversation; he was taking comfort from her. She had longed for this from the moment she came back to the school. Not wanting to push him too much tonight, she decided to leave while they were both on a high note so to speak. Besides, she noticed Poppy giving her a look that said, "It's time to go."

"I think I should go. Poppy is giving me that look," said Hermione.

He snorted. "I know that look." He squeezed her hand and kissed it once more. "Stop by tomorrow and bring me my potions periodicals?"

Hermione smiled and nodded, then decided to test the waters a bit more before she left. She leaned down and kissed him on the mouth. She left before he had a chance to say anything.

When she was gone Severus placed his fingers on his lips. He could have died that evening, and never would have known her kiss. He allowed himself to lay back and wonder when her next kiss would come. Severus knew he would have never thought this way had he not been through what he did that evening. He would have to thank the Dark Lord some day for opening his eyes to what he'd been missing, for making him realize that anyone could begin again.

~*~*~*~

When Lucius left Severus, he returned to his home. He knew that he would pay dearly for not returning to Voldemort's side right away, but he needed to make some arrangements for the future, mainly the future of his son. There were times when he'd sat outside the Dark Lord's bedroom all night before he had finished with his concubines. He thought he had plenty of time. Lucius failed to kill Severus, but did cast a Killing Curse. This would buy him time, if in his anger Voldemort decided to trace his wand. Ultimately he would be punished though for not killing the Severus as he had been instructed to do. Not knowing if he might live beyond a day or two for his infractions, he decided to throw caution to the wind. In for a penny in for a pound, was the Muggle saying. Many would have been surprised that Lucius knew about Muggle sayings, but then not many knew of the changes Lucius had gone through since his son had been sent to Spain seven years earlier.

He walked into his bedroom and took off his cloak and then looked into the mirror.

"This is it, Lucius. This is where you do things right, the way they should have been done. Tonight you begin again."

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Thank you for reading. I hope you enjoyed the chapter.

The quote Albus used to identify Severus was taken from here:

<http://www.last-names.net/surname.asp?surname=Nequam>

The entire entry is as follows:

Dishonest, lazy. Alexander Nequam, of St. Albans, wishing to devote himself to a monastic life, in the abbey of his native town, applied to the ruler of that establishment for admission. The abbot's reply was thus laconically expressed: "Si bonus sis, venias, si Nequam, nequaquam." If good, you may come; if wicked, by no means. It is said he changed his name to Neckham, and was admitted into the fraternity.

Chapter 3 - Punishment and Realization

Chapter 3 of 26

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Chapter 3 Punishment and Realization

Lucius scribbled a quick note and owed his solicitor. It was well past midnight, but he paid the man well, enough so that being awakened at odd hours was part of the package for being employed by Lucius Malfoy.

Upon Lucius' death, he wanted all his assets all of the Malfoy vaults at Gringotts, all of the properties in the Malfoy name, every enterprise that held the Malfoy name in any way, shape, or form to belong to Draco. He was happy in the knowledge that his son was already free of Voldemort's hold. While he knew Draco was somewhere safe in England, Lucius knew that his heir would never be a slave to the insane wizard.

"Emil!" he called out. Emil was the head elf in the Malfoy household, acquired just after Narcissa left Lucius.

"I am here, Master," said Emil as he popped in just in front of the bedroom door. Emil was a freed elf. His previous master and entire family had been killed during the raid that almost ended Draco's life. The elf was different from any other elves Lucius had ever seen; he was educated and wore clothes real clothes, not tea towels. Lucius gave the elf a home and put him in charge of teaching the other elves in the household how to speak properly.

"Emil, I need for you to take an inventory of all of the books in the library. Title, author, category, as much information as you can give me." Lucius was pacing. The list of books was for Severus. There were many potions and dark arts books that might assist the Order in some form, and he wanted Severus to have them all.

The elf knew something was wrong. His master was acting odd.

"Of course, Master. When do you need this list?" asked the elf.

Lucius stopped pacing and looked at the green elf. "I need it yesterday."

Emil's ears popped straight up. "I see. I will ask Dari to help me. We can work quickly."

Lucius nodded and Emil blinked out. Dari and Emil were inseparable and made very good team. For several weeks after Emil came to the Malfoy home the new head elf had shown up on several occasions with a black eye or a scratch on his face. One time he had a bite on his ear. Lucius later found out that Dari hadn't taken kindly to having her job taken from her.

Lucius had never officially named Dari head elf, but she'd considered herself that since she had been with the Malfoy family the longest. He was equally puzzled when he started seeing them take walks together in the garden at night. Thinking they'd ironed out their differences, he decided to ask no questions.

He stretched out on a purple chaise near the window and waited for the owl to return from the solicitor. Ovid was a fast owl, so no doubt he would return quickly.

Lucius turned his head and looked out at the night sky. There was no moon, but the stars shone so brightly that there was a trickling of light surrounding the gardens.

He wondered if truly any god existed. Was he or were they looking down on him now, deciding his fate, dividing all the good and evil he'd done in his life? Was any god on his side now? Would his past be measured with all he'd hoped to accomplish in the future? Did Lucius even have a future?

He stood quickly, and began pacing once again. He thought back on his life, his son, his wife. He fell to his knees, and began to shake. He didn't want to die, yet he felt a coldness enveloping him at that moment. No doubt the soil that would surround him upon his death would be cold like this. It wasn't long enough; he'd not lived long enough. He couldn't allow himself to be taken down so easily. Whatever happened upon his return to the Dark Lord's home, he had to live through it. Whatever Voldemort did to him, he knew he had to take it and live.

A noise coming from the window caught his attention. It was his owl, Ovid, returning with a message for him. He took the small scroll from Ovid's talons and read it.

Mr. Malfoy:

As per your request, I will meet with you in front of Gringott's at eight-thirty in the morning in order to make the changes to your account. I have prepared all of the papers you have requested regarding your properties and enterprises.

As always, this will remain in the strictest confidence.

Kindest regards,

Maximilian Oberon

Lucius threw the parchment into the fire, then walked to his bed and looked at the clock on the night stand. He might be able to get a few hours of sleep before meeting Maximilian. Lucius needed to be as sharp as possible. He had no doubt that his Dark Mark would be burning the minute the sun made its way up the horizon, and he would have hell to pay once he showed up at the Dark Lord's mansion.

Before he allowed himself to fall asleep he softly called out to Emil. The elf knew that he wasn't being summoned, but merely being given an instruction. Lucius was able to communicate with his head house-elf this way very easily due to their master-elf bond, and it enabled the elf to continue whatever duties he was performing. Emil was to awaken his master at seven-thirty in the morning, giving Lucius enough time to get himself ready and Apparate early.

Once the Dark Lord awoke and saw that Lucius was not there waiting for his shopping list, he would immediately Summon him by activating his Dark Mark. Lucius knew that once his Mark was activated, the next time he tried to Apparate he would automatically be taken to the Riddle home. Other than walking or using Muggle means, the only way to transport himself would be via Floo. It was imperative that Lucius finish what he'd set out to accomplish that morning. He might not be alive by the end of the day.

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At Hogwarts, Severus was already driving Poppy to drink, and it wasn't even eight o'clock in the morning yet.

"Severus, for heaven's sake, if you don't drink your Skele-Gro I will be forced to administer it to you through another orifice."

Severus scowled. "Are you suggesting you will administer that through my..."

"Arse!" finished Poppy.

"Now listen here, Poppy. I've always hated taking Skele-Gro, and I have gotten to the point where the potion makes me want to vomit just from the smell. I would rather deal with the pain than drink that disgusting concoction again."

"What do you mean, 'again'? You all but choked on last night's dose, and your ribs aren't getting any better," the nurse lectured. "Fine, you are an adult after all, I can't force you to take your medicine." Poppy turned and began to walk away, then called out over her shoulder. "You're a Potions Master, so why don't you make something better."

He now leaned back slightly and felt a sharp jab of pain. What Poppy had suggested was something he'd never really taken the time to think about. Make a better potion? Why not!

He was in hiding after all, and needed to do something with his time. Also, there was the question of what he would do after the war was over, something he felt would happen soon. For months now he felt that Voldemort was growing more and more deranged. A man like the Dark Lord would eventually either self-destruct or try to destroy everything around him, and that is where he would make the mistake that would allow the Order to turn the tide.

His thoughts were interrupted by Albus' voice. Severus looked up and saw the Headmaster walking towards his bed.

"Severus, how are you feeling this morning? Poppy has told me that you have decided on a more natural method of recuperation." Albus smiled, knowing full well what a difficult patient the young wizard was.

"Albus, I refuse to drink that vile potion. Besides, as I am no longer concussed, and am fully functional, I fail to see why I have to spend any more time here than I already have," Severus said as he tried to swing his legs to the edge of the bed.

"I don't think you will get an argument from Poppy about you leaving," agreed Albus. "I spoke to Mr. Lovegood this morning. By this afternoon the entire wizarding world will believe you dead."

"Good, but I've just realized now the only problem is getting a message to Lucius. He most likely returned to the Dark Lord's home last evening," said Severus.

"He can't have spent the entire night there," argued Albus.

Severus shook his head.

"Yes, he could. As of late Voldemort has been flaunting Narcissa in Lucius' face. She left him so long ago, but it still disturbs him to see his wife as the plaything to that maniac. It's the Dark Lord's custom to make Lucius wait outside his chambers on occasion for instructions, while he plays with Narcissa," spat Severus angrily.

It bothered Severus to see Lucius being taunted in such a way. Lucius had always been a proud man, happy in his marriage to his beautiful wife. When Narcissa left him so openly to be with Voldemort it was a blow to the wizard's ego. To add insult to injury, Voldemort was constantly treating Lucius as his errand boy, and his friend had no other choice but to grin and bear it. The blond wizard was constantly spending galleons to make purchases for the maniac who was bedding his wife.

"Then all we can do is hope that Voldemort hears the news of your death before Lucius says anything to him," Albus said. "Lucius is a smart man. He will wait to be asked and even then, I am sure he will elude the subject as long as possible."

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Lucius spent his morning with his solicitor. As he predicted, as soon as the sun fully perched itself just above the horizon, his Dark Mark began burning. It was incredibly painful but he had no other choice than to try and ignore the pain. It took less than an hour at Gringotts to add Draco's name as a vault owner on all of the Malfoy accounts. Once they were finished there, Maximilian guided Lucius to his office where there were a slew of parchments for the elder Malfoy to sign as well. These guaranteed Draco ownership of Malfoy Enterprises and Malfoy Manor. Upon Lucius' death the vaults and every business and property owned by Lucius would transfer to Draco. Narcissa and thus Voldemort would gain nothing.

After another hour of signing paperwork and reading contracts, Lucius was satisfied that Draco's future was taken care of, at least financially. He bid goodbye to Maximilian and they went their separate ways. With his Dark Mark burning what felt like a hole in his arm, Lucius knew he had to get back to the Dark Lord's home. He took a deep breath and Apparated.

As was expected, Lucius appeared in the large ballroom of the Riddle home. The room was dark but for a spotlight shining on Lucius.

"Did I not tell you to come back immediately?" hissed the disembodied voice of Voldemort.

Suddenly, before Lucius could answer, he heard the whip. Just a split-second later, he felt the sting of its leather on his flesh. Lucius felt his arms and legs bound so that he was standing spread-eagled. He looked down on himself and realized he'd been stripped. His clothes were gone and he felt a trickle of blood traveling down his back.

"You understand, Lucius, that I cannot have you so blatantly ignoring my orders," said Voldemort calmly just before yet another lash connected with a whirl of wind.

Lucius cried out only once during his punishment, when the tip of the whip grazed his scrotum.

After whipping him for almost an hour, Voldemort unbound his servant's arms and legs.

Lucius fell to the ground.

Wormtail then threw a bucket of cold salt water on him and ran away quickly.

Voldemort looked at Bellatrix and Narcissa and motioned towards Lucius' limp body. As the two women approached the suffering wizard, Voldemort caught Narcissa's arm.

"Finish him." His eyes glittered as he saw the hesitation in the witch's expression.

"But, my lord, I do not know the location of all his assets, his fortune," said the blond woman.

Voldemort scoffed. "I want his blood, Narcissa! All he had to do was come back and wait outside my door like many times before. Yet today, Lucius decided to assert himself. Well, no more, not again. No one defies my orders!" He shoved her towards her estranged husband.

Narcissa moved quickly, and helped Bellatrix lift Lucius. They guided him to a small room where they dropped Lucius heavily on a small cot next to the wall.

"If you cannot go through with it, sister, I can do it for you," offered Bellatrix happily.

Narcissa stared blankly at Lucius' battered body.

"No, I will do it." Her voice sounded hollow, devoid of any emotion. "I want to be alone with him, Bella."

"I want to see him die," insisted Bellatrix.

Narcissa turned to face her sister. Her eyes narrowed and her expression was now dark.

"And I said I wish to be alone with him. Get out!" The quality of her voice was such that Bellatrix paled and without another word left the room.

Narcissa turned back and stared at Lucius.

His breathing was heavy and his body was shaking.

"So it has come to this, Lucius." She approached him and knelt down next to the cot. "I had hoped never to be in this position, but the die is cast and I cannot go back."

Lucius lifted his head slightly and looked at her. She stepped back and turned her wand to him. He heard her mumbling a few spells, and his pain lessened immediately. He could still feel the tingling sensation of the aftereffects of the leather whip, but it wasn't too bad; Voldemort had taken the liberty of using his whip on Lucius' back, arms, legs and chest not his face, feet, hands, or genitals. He then felt the roughness of his clothes against his raw skin.

When he was being tortured Narcissa had noted the placement of his clothes after they'd been spelled off. She also noted that his cane was placed right next to his clothes.

She now held his trademark serpent-head cane in her hands and pulled out the wand, thrusting it in front of him.

Lucius sneered. "You aren't honestly going to try to kill me with my own wand, are you? You know you can't, Narcissa," he spat out.

She smiled sadly and shook her head. "Always thinking the worst," she said as she sheathed the wand and handed the cane back to him. Lucius looked at her warily. "Go ahead, take it."

As he took his cane Lucius wondered why she had given him his wand why she armed him. Did she want to duel with him?

"The door on the eastern side of the cellar is open. You can get there through the room next door. I will open that for you." She turned to leave.

"Narcissa," Lucius called out to her with great effort, as he tried to sit up.

She took hold of the doorknob and turned her head to look at him. Her eyes filled with tears.

Suddenly the realization of what she was doing, what she had done, hit him like a ton of bricks. "No, Narcissa, no," he said as he shook his head in disbelief.

"I have done all that I could to keep our son safe. I gave up the last seven years of my life for Draco and now I will give my life for you. I love you; I have always loved you, Lucius. You need to live. My life..." she sobbed, "I am expendable. It is better to die now quickly than have him chase me down and torture me later. It is up to you alone now, Lucius. This is my last gift to my son and to you. Tell Draco...tell my son I have always loved him." She quickly opened the door and walked away.

Lucius stared at the door for several moments. He felt the burning sting of tears prickling his eyes. For so long he'd thought her heartless. She had abandoned her son and her husband with no explanation. But now he realized why she had done what she did. It was Narcissa who had convinced Voldemort that Draco wasn't good enough to be a Death Eater. She had given herself to the Dark Lord to deflect any interest he had for her son and to keep Lucius in his good graces. And now Narcissa had made the ultimate sacrifice. By helping Lucius escape she had just guaranteed herself death.

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I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Thank you for reading.

Chapter 4 - There Is Always a Price to Pay When We Atone For Our Sins

Chapter 4 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

Thank you to all of those who have taken the time to read this and review. I appreciate all of your comments.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

Thanks to June for all of her help and suggestions, especially with the title of this chapter.

Chapter 4 There Is Always a Price to Pay When We Atone For Our Sins

Lucius knew that his time was limited; he had to escape now or Narcissa's sacrifice would mean nothing. He stood shakily and walked to the door, opening it slowly. He peeked out warily; making sure no one was about. When he saw that the coast was clear he walked the short distance to the room next door. As promised, it was open. Lucius then walked into the room, looking for a door to the cellar that she had mentioned. He noticed a tapestry moving slightly, as though there was a wind behind it. There was nothing else in the room no furniture, windows, or other doors only the tapestry. He then walked quickly towards the tapestry and moved it, revealing a short stairway down, which he surmised would lead to the cellar. He ran through as fast as he could in his condition.

Lucius made his way down the stairway, but just before he rounded the corner to the cellar, he heard voices. He held back and kept as close to the wall as he could, and waited until whomever it was passed by. He heard laughing and thought he recognized the voice, then decided to move a bit closer.

"Are you sure he said that?" asked a male voice. Lucius thought it sounded like Rodolfus Lestrage, his brother-in-law.

"Yes, of course; I'm not deaf! I even asked her if she wanted me to do it. It would have been interesting to watch Lucius die," said the woman, who he now was sure was Bellatrix. *'That crazy bitch,'* thought Lucius.

"Shut your mouth, you stupid woman," hissed her husband.

"Don't call me stupid!"

"Are you so blind then that you do not see what is happening?"

At this point Lucius heard shuffling, as though they might have been shoving each other.

"Lucius has always been among the most trusted. If he was condemned to death for such a minor infraction as being late, then we must all tread lightly!" exclaimed Rodolphus.

"I still have his favor as his concubine."

"Then why has he sent you away with me on an errand? Does he ever send your sister on errands?" Rodolphus taunted his wife. The two began walking and their steps faded into the distance.

Lucius hurried as he knew that this was his only opportunity for escape. He would have to travel just beyond the caretaker's house before he could Apparate. If he Apparated while still on the grounds of the Riddle property, it would alert Voldemort.

As Narcissa had told him, he escaped outside through the door on the eastern side of the cellar. When he finally reached a point beyond which he knew he could safely Apparate, he allowed himself to briefly rest; he didn't want to splinch himself. He bent over slightly and arched his back. He could feel that the wounds that were left by the whip were bleeding and now stuck to his shirt. After a few deep breaths he straightened himself, and felt something poking at his chest, through the inside pocket of his jacket.

He reached in and took out an old key. Before he had a chance to read the inscription on the side he felt the pull of the Portkey.

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The previous night, while Severus recuperated in the hospital wing, Albus had spoken briefly with Arthur Weasley, the Minister of Magic and a few other key Order members and informed them that it was Lucius who had been their secret informant these last three years. It was decided that once Severus felt well enough they should meet at number twelve, Grimmauld Place to meet and form some sort of strategy, they would need to continue the ruse that Severus was dead and might possibly have to protect Lucius' identity.

The next morning, after Poppy forced Skele-Gro down his throat, she gladly released Severus from the hospital wing. Albus then called an Order meeting.

It was now nearing late afternoon at the small home still affectionately called The House of Black by Harry at times. Albus and Minerva sat in their usual spot on a small love seat. Arthur and Molly Weasley were present, as well as Remus and his wife of two years Tonks. Mad-Eye Moody was speaking to Kingsley Shacklebolt who was desperately trying to get away from the older retired Auror. Ron, the youngest Weasley son, sat next to Ginny, who looked like she was a million miles away.

Severus was sitting in a corner of the sofa, next to Hermione.

"Funny how he allows Hermione to fuss over him, yet Poppy can't even get him to stay still for a second," said Minerva to Albus, as she looked on at the two young professors.

Albus chuckled and nodded his head in agreement. He then stood, eager to get the meeting started.

"Everyone," called Albus. "Let's begin the meeting."

"Albus," interrupted Arthur. "We are still missing Harry and..."

Arthur was interrupted by a noise just outside the front door. It sounded as though something large had fallen on the doorstep. No one moved, they all waited to see if there was any additional movement.

Severus quickly stood and walked to the door, wand at the ready as he slowly opened the door. He looked out and saw a crumpled mass of what appeared to be a man. As he approached he saw a mass of long blond hair. He instantly put his wand away and bent down over his fallen friend.

"Come quickly," Severus called out to the others in the house. Suddenly a mass of people crowded the doorway. Severus moved the hair from Lucius' face. He didn't see any bruises but he could see that his friend's white shirt was soaked with blood.

Albus and Arthur came outside. Albus performed a Mobilicorpus spell to lift and move Lucius into the house.

"How the bloody hell did he find this place?" asked Ron, clearly not trusting the elder Malfoy. While he'd been informed that Lucius was the informant who had been helping them, Ron wasn't convinced that the man was to be trusted.

Arthur noticed Lucius clutching a key. "I gather that key must have something to do with it. It looks similar to the one Harry has for this house."

They carefully placed Lucius on the couch and surrounded him. Severus sat on the edge looking down on his friend.

Lucius moaned, his pain evident to all watching. His eyes began to flutter open. He looked around, then his eyes stopped at Severus. He tried to speak, but was stopped by Severus.

"You are safe here, Lucius."

Lucius lifted his head, so now he was able to see everyone better. Severus was sitting next to him; a young woman was standing next to Severus, and her hand was placed on his shoulder. He thought she resembled the young woman who accompanied Harry Potter and the youngest Weasley boy during Draco's years at Hogwarts. Albus Dumbledore stood behind them, as did Minerva McGonagall. He then noted Arthur and Molly Weasley, and a few other people he could not recognize at the moment. He spotted on a woman with light pink hair and smiled.

"Nymphadora," he whispered.

Tonks smiled; she'd often wondered if her uncle would ever remember her. As an adult, she knew him to be a Death Eater, but he was kind to her the few times she'd seen him when she was a child, even though her mother Andromeda and Narcissa were estranged sisters.

Lucius made a motion to sit up but felt a hand push him back lightly.

"You should rest a bit, Mr. Malfoy. You're bleeding." He moved his head in search of the voice and saw a young woman with long red hair. "I can't heal you well if you are tense," said Ginny, who was a Medi-witch.

He was about to speak, when he noticed two young men walk into the room. One had glasses and messy brown hair, and the other was his own son.

"Father!" Draco rushed towards the couch. Severus allowed Draco to take his place; the two had become close after the younger man turned to the Order, but Severus had always respected Lucius' position as Draco's father.

"Draco?" Lucius reached up and cupped his son's handsome face. He lifted himself and hugged the young man tightly. "My son, my son." Tears filled his eyes. It had been seven long years since he'd laid eyes on his son. As he held Draco he felt the events of that day rush against him like a train.

"Forgive me, Draco." Lucius's voice trembled as he held his face against his son's shoulder.

"There is nothing to forgive, Father." Draco held him tightly, feeling his own tears escaping. "You did what you had to do, and you kept me safe."

Lucius shook his head. "No, son, it was your mother who kept us both safe. I was so wrong about her. How I wished her dead so many times for what she did to us."

Draco stiffened. He'd hated his mother for abandoning them and now his father was telling him she'd done it to help them.

"Where is she now, Father?" Draco pulled back as Lucius lifted himself into a sitting position. His father looked as if his heart was going to break into pieces at that moment.

"I fear...I fear that your mother is paying for allowing me to escape," said Lucius. Draco's sudden intake of breath pulled at his heart even more. "Her last words to me were that she wanted you to know that she loved you, Draco, she always loved you."

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At the Riddle home, Narcissa stood in the middle of Voldemort's bedroom, with her head bowed down.

Voldemort's face had a look of contempt as he glared intently at her. He walked around her in increasingly smaller circles, like a predator preparing to make a kill.

"There must be something in the pumpkin juice here. What is it with the Malfoys as of late that they cannot seem to take orders?"

"He was my husband, I could not bring myself kill him," Narcissa said, just before she was grabbed by the hair and pulled roughly back towards Voldemort.

"Foolish witch, I am not concerned with what you can or cannot bring yourself to do. I ordered you to kill him!" He let go of her hair and shoved her roughly away from him.

Narcissa lost her balance and fell to her knees.

"Get up and look at me!" yelled Voldemort.

Narcissa stood, still refusing to look at him in the eye.

He took her by the chin and forced her to face him. "You were a smart woman, weren't you? Giving yourself to me the way you did, keeping my interest away from your son and husband. I applaud you, you had me fooled. Not an easy thing to do, Narcissa." He spat.

Narcissa pulled away from him, "No, not easy, but I did it nonetheless."

When she'd left Lucius earlier she immediately went back to the Dark Lord's bedroom. Knowing he could be easily manipulated into having sex with her, she began to seduce him before he had the opportunity to ask her how she'd done away with her husband. Lucius was injured and needed time to get out of the house. She didn't know how long it would take him to make his way down to the cellar and off the property, so she kept Voldemort busy for several minutes, until Voldemort realized she'd not mentioned Lucius. He used Legilimency on her and saw that she'd allowed Lucius to escape.

Now the woman stood before him defiantly. Narcissa knew she would die, and in an odd way she found it almost liberating. She decided that fear was of no use at this moment. Whatever the Dark Lord did to her meant nothing as long as she knew her husband and son were safe.

"It is impossible for you to comprehend how much I love my son, and my husband. You have no life inside of you. You are dead, your soul is dead, and one day soon the whole world will see you die. Including me."

Voldemort's face darkened, "You cannot see me die if you are dead." He grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled her towards him and the large blade he held in his hand.

Narcissa felt the sharp burn of the knife as it went through her chest. She grabbed Voldemort's shoulders as her eyes opened wide in surprise.

As blood trickled from her mouth, he pressed his lips close to her ear and whispered, "I will use this same knife, to gut your son."

Narcissa looked down at the knife embedded in her chest, then looked into the bloodshot eyes of Tom Riddle. She smiled and laughed softly.

"We shall see, Tom, we shall see."

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I hope you enjoyed this chapter. I will have a bit more Severus and Lucius interaction in the next chapter.

Chapter 5 ? And the World Will Bleed Once More

Chapter 5 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

I was going to post this chapter over the weekend, but I decided to just have it up today.

I'd like to thank all of those who have taken the time to read this and leave me such lovely comments.

Thank you to June, who had a time with this one. I promise June, I will never send you a chapter again at four o'clock in the morning. Insomnia isn't pleasant.

Thanks to Whimbley for some of her suggestions.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

Chapter 5 And the World Will Bleed Once More

At number twelve, Grimmauld Place, Lucius sat on the couch next to Draco. Ginny had performed some temporary healing spells on Lucius so that he might be more comfortable during his talk with the rest of the Order. Any more permanent spells for his recovery would be done in private as any medi-witch or wizard would do for a patient. Feeling that Lucius's recounting of what he'd gone through might be emotional, Minerva suggested that the women leave the room, allowing the wizard a modicum of dignity.

Moody and Shacklebolt stood near the window, keeping an eye on Lucius. Remus sat quietly in a large leather wing back chair next to the fireplace. Harry stood next to Ron, Arthur and Albus. Severus sat on the coffee table in front of Lucius. They were all waiting for the blond wizard to speak.

After a long silence, Lucius realized he still held the key that had brought him to Grimmauld Place. He held it in the upturned palm of his hand and stared.

Draco looked at it and took it from his hand.

"Mother's key," Draco said. He knew that the key belonged to his mother, as he had seen it on several occasions in her jewelry box when he was a young child.

Harry approached the couch to get a better look at the key.

"That's a key to this house." Harry looked to Albus.

"And used as Portkey, it seems," said the old wizard.

"But how?" asked Ron. "This house is protected by a Fidelius Charm; no one can find it unless the Secret-Keeper tells them the address."

"Or unless the person is a member of the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black," Lucius interrupted quietly. All eyes were on him now. "The Black family's blood magic supersedes any Unplottable spell and Fidelius Charm if it is performed by the head of the family." Lucius took hold of the key and held it tightly in his hand; he brought it close to his mouth and closed his eyes tightly, wanting just one final time to hold something near him that had been held by his wife. "Phineas Nigellus Black and his wife Ursula Flint Black had five children, four of which received keys to this house. Their second child, Phineas, supported Muggle rights; he was disowned and did not get a key. Their third child was Narcissa's great-grandfather, Cygnus Black. This house was to be the family's safe haven if ever they needed one. In time of emergency, the key is activated and brings the holder here, always here."

"Narcissa had that key with her all these years," said Severus as he looked into Lucius' icy eyes. "She could have come here any time, and she could have brought anyone."

Lucius smiled sadly in return. "But she did not. My wife was smarter than I ever gave her credit for. She knew well before I did the truth about the Dark Lord."

Albus approached the couch and sat on the edge on the far end of Lucius' spot.

"Harry has one such key from Sirius, who kept it after he was disowned, so we have two keys here. Do you know where the other two are, Lucius?"

The location of the other two keys worried all those in the room.

"The other two branches of the family have become estranged or died out, so their keys were redistributed to the remaining relatives. Regulus Black was in possession of one that he carried with him at all times. I can only assume it was with him when he was killed," said Lucius.

Remus then spoke, "No, I've seen a key like that on several occasions at Andromeda's home. I've always thought it strange that it looked so much like Harry's key. I've only seen it from far away, but I'm sure it has the Black family coat of arms."

Arthur now stepped forward. "Regulus must have sent it to Andromeda, knowing he would be killed."

"That's three," said Severus. "Tell me that Bella doesn't have the fourth."

Lucius nodded. "She did."

"Who has it now?" asked Harry nervously.

"She gave it to the Dark Lord years ago, just after the Dementors revolted and freed her and nine other Death Eaters from Azkaban. Her mind was still not fully rational; she gave it to him as some sort of piece of jewelry. I do not recall ever seeing it again."

"Why didn't she use it when she was in Azkaban?" wondered Ron aloud.

"Apparently, the Portkey and Black family magic had not been powerful enough to help her escape Azkaban; perhaps that is why she went insane from trying to use it over the years," explained Severus.

"I believe I have seen it though," said Severus as he struggled to remember. "It hangs on a nail next to the Dark Lord's fireplace." Severus looked at the others. "At least it was there up until two months ago. I was Summoned to his room to give him his stamina potion and I noticed the key ring for the first time. I saw the key from a distance, but couldn't place the crest until now."

"That key needs to be brought back here," said Arthur. "We can't take the chance of him getting too close a look at it. Voldemort will know that's the Black Family crest."

At once, Lucius' arm began to burn; he grabbed it and looked at the others. He was being Summoned; no doubt Voldemort wanted to finish what Narcissa could not. It was

possible for Voldemort to summon only a selected few Death Eaters, thinking Severus dead there was no need in wasting his time and summoning him.

"I'm being Summoned and Narcissa is most likely dead," he whispered. Lucius dropped the key he'd still been holding and covered his face with his hands. "Narcissa, forgive me, my wife, forgive me for hating you so all of these years after you left us." A wave of guilt washed over him now that he knew of her sacrifice.

Severus placed his hand on Lucius' shoulder in an effort to comfort him.

"Lucius, don't blame yourself for your feelings. They were a natural reaction for what was done to you. Anyone would have felt betrayed."

Draco sat motionless, knowing all too well what his father felt at the moment. He was too numb to fully realize that his father might be next to die.

With great effort, Lucius stood and began gathering his things. "I cannot avoid my fate forever." He looked at Draco. "If I should not return, you will be receiving a letter from Maximilian. He will tell you what you need to do."

Severus stood next to Lucius now and took hold of his arm in an effort to keep his friend from leaving just yet.

"No, don't leave just yet."

"Severus, you know as well as I do that the next time I Apparate anywhere I will only show up at his home."

"Did he torture you because he knows you did not kill me?" asked Severus.

As Lucius was readying himself to leave it had occurred to Severus that they did not know why the blond wizard had shown up at Order headquarters in the condition he did. Surely Voldemort would have killed him instantly when he found out Lucius had not done his duty and killed Severus.

Lucius shook his head, "No, I was punished for not returning immediately after taking you to Hogwarts."

Albus approached the two men. "Lucius, I believe you are being Summoned then because he has no doubt received word that Severus is indeed dead."

Lucius looked confused.

"Our contact at the Quibbler was able to assist us in the cover-up. Perhaps you are being given a second chance to stay within the ranks and become our spy," stated Severus.

"Then I shall go back." With one final nod to all, Lucius hugged Draco and walked out onto the porch and Apparated from Grimmauld Place. As his father left, Draco felt as though he himself had just died. Harry walked to him and held him tightly, giving him what comfort he could.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

After allowing the body of Narcissa Malfoy to drop heavily on the ground, Voldemort stood over her, watching the blood ooze out from her wound. He heard a door opening behind him and turned.

Bellatrix walked in, holding several packages and a copy of the Quibbler in her arms.

"My Lord, I have what you..." Bellatrix slowed her walking as she noticed the motionless and bloody body of her sister on the floor. "I...I have what you asked for, M...My Lord."

"At least there is someone who still follows orders." Voldemort took the packages and paper from Bellatrix's arms, as she stared at her sister. "I trust you will not make the same mistakes as your sister and brother-in-law made?"

Bellatrix blinked several times before turning her face back to Voldemort. "No, I am your servant," she answered, although there was little enthusiasm to her tone.

"Good, now take her out of here." The cold-hearted wizard dropped his packages on his large bed and he began unfolding the paper in his hands.

"What would you have me do with her?"

"Burn her, bury her, I care nothing of what happens to her corpse," he spat. "Just get her out of here before the stench of death fills my sleeping quarters." He began reading the Quibbler, his dead concubine now forgotten.

Bellatrix waved her wand and silently cast a spell to levitate Narcissa's body. She walked out of the bedroom and into the ballroom, passing several other Death Eaters who had been standing outside waiting for their own instructions from the Dark Lord. As they looked upon the still beautiful blond woman's body, their faces were somber and confused. No one said a word as the ever growing chill in the air grew colder by the second.

Bellatrix walked outside to the Riddle family cemetery and lowered Narcissa gently to the ground. She stared down at her sister and at once fell to her knees. Her shaky hand reached out and touched the dead woman's soft cheek.

"Cissy, my beautiful sister." Bella now gripped the limp body and held it close to her own body. "My only solace in this world. Why did you not take me with you?" It had been years since she'd shed a tear for anything or anyone. The sensation of her eyes watering and now flooding with emotion was almost too much for her to bear. Bellatrix hated the world and everything in it, except for two things. Contrary to much belief, Bella cared deeply for Rodolphus. She also loved her sister Narcissa and now she was gone. Knowing she had a duty to perform, Bellatrix allowed herself one final look at Narcissa, then stood. No doubt she would find out why her sister had been killed. The conversation she'd had earlier with her husband now echoed in her mind as well as her ears.

'If Lucius was condemned to death for such a minor infraction as being late...' Rodolphus had said. What minor infraction did Narcissa commit, Bella wondered.

"Tread lightly, Bellatrix," said the voice of her husband from behind her.

She wiped her nose on her long sleeve and proceeded to dig a hole.

"Excavar," she intoned. Waving her wand in circular patterns, the ground began to bubble slightly, until a hole was formed. Bellatrix took off her outer robe and placed it on Narcissa, and then lowered her sister's body into the unmarked grave. After the dirt was replaced and her sister finally buried, she turned and faced her husband.

"What shall we do, Rodolphus?"

"What can we do?" The wizard looked towards the Riddle home. "We dug our graves when we first took the Dark Mark. There is no turning back for us. We must follow this path we have set for ourselves. We have crossed the Rubicon, my wife, and we must play this game out to the end." Rodolphus looked into her dark eyes. "No matter what the outcome."

Bellatrix nodded as her husband took her by the arm.

"Come, he is waiting for you." Rodolphus felt her stiffen. "No, not for that," he said. "Severus is dead. There is an article in the Quibbler. We are all being Summoned," he sighed deeply, "It is time for the world to bleed once more."

'But with whose blood?' wondered Bellatrix as she took one last look at her sister's grave.

~*~*~*~*~

I'd originally planned on having more Severus and Lucius interaction, but my plot for this chapter took a turn. I promise there will be more of the two men in the next chapter.

Bella's and Rodolphus' relationship: Since we really don't know much about this I decided that Bella may or may not love her husband completely, but she does care for him deeply, so I wanted to show them as having a good solid comfort level.

Also, I couldn't find information on whether a Summoning affects every DE or just a select few, so I chose to use the latter theory.

I also opted to use a Spanish word instead of Latin, seeing as JKR herself has admitted her spells and words are a mix of what she herself made up and Latin and I believe another language I can't remember right now.

Excavar - excavate

Thank you for reading this. I hope you enjoyed this chapter.

Chapter 6 ? Devoted to a Madman

Chapter 6 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

I'd like to thank all of those readers who have taken the time to read this and review. Thank you all for your wonderful comments and support.

I had planned some Severus and Lucius interaction here but as you will see, my muse got the better of me. He really can't make up his mind sometimes. I hope you enjoy this regardless.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

Thanks as always to June for all of her help and suggestions

Chapter 6 Devoted to a Madman

Lucius stood in the middle of the Riddle mansion's large ballroom, a light shining on him. He heard the murmur of the crowd he knew surrounded him in the darkness. His mind was going at a million miles an hour. So much had happened in the last twenty-four hours, so much had changed.

"It seems that I was hasty earlier." Voldemort emerged from the darkness to stand in front of him. "When I condemned you to death I failed to ask you about Severus."

As Voldemort spoke, Bellatrix and Rodolphus crept into the room. Bellatrix's eyes went wide, when she saw her brother-in-law standing in the middle of the room, very much alive.

"Narcissa was supposed to kill him!" she hissed at her husband.

Rodolphus leaned down and whispered in her ear, "Your sister's infraction."

The woman felt her stomach turn; now realizing why Narcissa had asked her to leave her alone with Lucius. Would the Dark Lord punish Bellatrix for not ensuring her sister's obedience?

Voldemort stared at Lucius, trying to perform the same advanced Legilimency spell that he'd used on Severus. He saw nothing. The state of Lucius' emotions was saving him from being found out; Lucius' mind was a whirlwind of activity, so nothing was clear.

The Dark Lord mistook this for an error in spell casting; he looked to Wormtail and tried the same spell. Unfortunately, the pudgy wizard had grown quite mad over the years, and he was now nothing more than a human robot, coming to life only when spoken to and directed.

Not able to see anything in Wormtail's mind either, Voldemort surmised that the spell was not consistently effective and needed more work. He made a mental note to give his Spells Master an incentive to work harder; a few lashes might give him the push he needed.

He turned his attention back to Lucius. "For once I am quite pleased that someone did not follow my orders. Had Narcissa killed you as I ordered her to, then you would not have the opportunity to continue serving me."

Lucius let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"Pity she is no longer with us," said Voldemort as he turned and walked to his throne.

Lucius felt his heart skip several beats. Narcissa was dead, and she was dead because she had allowed him to escape. All of those nights he'd lain awake, hating her for leaving him, but now he realized he had always loved her even when she chose to become Voldemort's concubine even before Lucius knew why she'd done so. As Lucius tried to maintain his emotionless expression Voldemort continued to speak.

"I have decided that we have been wasting our time attacking small towns and communities." The Dark Lord now sat on his throne. "Perhaps getting the attention of the wizarding world requires going after what they find most important. We will attack all financial institutions and schools. I will be discussing our plan with a few of you in the days to come."

Lucius' mind began to focus now.

"Lucius, how long has it been since you have been properly fucked?" asked Voldemort with a smirk on his face.

"A little over a year, my Lord," said Lucius shakily, not knowing what the insane wizard had in mind for him now. He'd only had short affairs here and there, but nothing that meant anything to him. After Narcissa left him, he felt that no woman could be trusted, so he rarely became involved emotionally.

Voldemort looked around the room. When he spotted Bellatrix near the back of the room, he motioned to her to come to him.

She approached him slowly and bowed her head when she reached him.

"Yes, my Lord?" she asked quietly.

Voldemort ignored her.

"Lucius, I have not rewarded you for ridding us of the traitor, Severus. Take Bella here and acquaint yourself with the Noble and Most Ancient House of Black." He waved both Death Eaters off towards a small bedroom. "One Black pussy is no different than another, as I know well. Have your fill, and then go to your home. I will call upon you when I have decided which of your fellow Death Eaters will help me to begin planning our assault."

Lucius looked at Bellatrix, who still hadn't lifted her head. He then looked at the smiling face of Voldemort and nodded, then grabbed hold of Bellatrix's arm and dragged her into the small bedroom earlier indicated.

Once inside the room Lucius let her go. He walked to the other end of the room and fell into a large chair.

Bellatrix remained next to the door, not moving.

"You are supposed to be dead," said Bellatrix.

Lucius looked up. "At this moment, with every fiber of my being I wish to the heavens that I was."

"He killed her because she allowed you to escape." Bellatrix moved to sit on a small chair next to the door. She studied the large bed in the center of the room, a feeling of sickness now running through her.

Lucius nodded. "She knew she would die, she told me..." His voice faltered for a moment. "She said that she still loved me."

Bellatrix closed her eyes and nodded; she already knew this. She was after all her sister's confidant. While she never knew why Narcissa had left Lucius, nor her plan to keep Draco under Voldemort's radar, Bellatrix did know that her sister loved her husband.

"I have no desire to be with you, Bella, as I am sure you have little desire for me at this moment."

The dark-haired witch nodded her head in agreement.

"We will stay in here until an appropriate amount of time has passed and then go about our lives," instructed Lucius.

They both sat in silence for the next two hours.

~*~*~*~

Back at number twelve, Grimmauld Place, Severus was in the study observing the other Order members "discussing" the revelation of Lucius' identity as their spy.

Albus, Arthur, Remus and Shacklebolt were in a heated conversation with Moody. The old retired Auror didn't trust Lucius. Even though their spy had risked his life for the last three years by sending them secret messages, Mad-Eye felt that the Death Eater was merely seeing the writing on the wall. Thinking that the war would be won by the side of good, Malfoy was trying to endear himself to them by pretending to help, Moody claimed.

Harry sat with Draco, holding his hand and allowing his boyfriend to take comfort in him. Harry first brought Draco to Order Headquarters two years ago. They had run into each other in Spain, where Lucius had sent his son into hiding after he'd almost been killed during a Death Eater attack in a Muggle store. Harry was wary of his former nemesis at first, but after they spent time talking he realized that Draco wasn't the same person he knew in school. Since his return to England, Draco had also spoken to Harry on many occasions about his father's seemingly changed attitude towards his world and beliefs. It had taken long conversations and arguments, but soon the Boy-Who-Lived believed his lover. If Draco said Lucius was to be trusted, then that's the way it was.

For his part, Ron kept out of what was happening. He decided he would have to form his own opinion based on what the elder Malfoy brought to the Order. He would keep a very close eye on the blond.

Molly kept herself busy in the kitchen, making supper. Minerva and Tonks sat at the table discussing what might have driven Lucius to finally decide to switch sides.

Hermione, who'd noticed Ginny leave the room quietly, followed her to the library. She saw her friend sitting at the window seat looking outside.

"Ginny," she said as she walked further into the room. "Is there something wrong? You don't seem yourself."

The red-headed girl smiled sadly and looked to her friend. "Seamus broke our engagement."

Hermione's eyes went wide. "Ginny, I didn't know you two were engaged."

"It happened last weekend. We were planning on telling our families this weekend."

Hermione sat down next to Ginny. "What happened?"

Ginny shook her head. "Two days after we got engaged, he broke things off and said that he'd changed his mind, that I wasn't passionate enough for him." She wiped a tear that had escaped from the corner of her eye. "Me not passionate enough. Hermione, there were times when I wondered if I would have had a better time with myself and a vibrator."

Hermione laughed as Ginny crossed her arms.

"So Seamus just broke it off? He didn't even want to try and work things out?"

"Oh yes, he came back last night, asking me to forgive him. But how am I supposed to forgive something like that, when he likens having sex with me to being with a corpse, and he's the one with a limp noodle for a penis."

Hermione fought back her laughter, not wanting to further agitate her friend. "Well, don't think on it. You'll meet someone else who will know how to appreciate you."

Ginny shook her head. "I'm done with relationships, Hermione. I'm just so tired of having my feelings trampled on. At this point, I don't even know if I could love anyone. Love is something I just don't think exists anymore. At least not for me."

They turned their attention to a faint knock on the door.

Severus had grown tired of the jabbering in the living room and went in search of Hermione. When he found she wasn't in the kitchen with the other women, he surmised she'd be in the library. He entered and noticed she was there, but not alone.

"Excuse me for interrupting, ladies," he said.

Ginny knew the two friends might want to spend some time alone, so she stood and began to walk out.

"We're done, Severus. I'm sure Hermione is tired of listening to my romantic woes."

"Ginny, don't say that," chided Hermione.

Ginny smiled. "I'm only joking. I'd better get back to the kitchen and help Mum with supper." She walked out and closed the door behind her, leaving the two alone.

"Might I ask what that was all about?" asked Severus, as Hermione hugged him.

"Seamus Finnigan proposed to her last weekend, and then broke their engagement a few days later. He said she wasn't passionate enough."

Severus chuckled as he approached her. "I get the feeling it is Mr. Finnigan who is lacking in the passion department."

Hermione nodded. "How are you feeling?" she asked. She'd noticed Severus flinching slightly when she hugged him.

"Tired." He rubbed his eyes and sat down. "And worried."

"About Lucius?" Hermione could see the concern on his face.

He nodded. "Yes. I only hope the Dark Lord takes the article about my fake death into consideration when he decides Lucius' fate. Perhaps reading of my death will allow Lucius to once again be in his good graces."

Hermione noticed the concerned tone Severus had. She'd never seen him like that, as though he feared that Lucius may not come back alive.

"Were you and Lucius good friends in school?" asked Hermione, curious as to how close a friendship the two men had.

"I began my first year as he was in his seventh." Severus then looked into the fire, remembering his first meeting with Lucius Malfoy.

~*~*~*~*~

Hogwarts 1971

As he sat under the Sorting Hat, young Severus Snape couldn't help but wonder what his life for the next seven years would be like. He'd already gotten a taste of what might be to come on the Hogwarts Express. He'd been targeted by two boys who thought it amusing to make fun of his pale complexion and long stringy hair. One of the boys was tall with dark hair and gray eyes, the other wore glasses and had hair that looked like it had been through a windstorm.

"Slytherin!" yelled the Sorting Hat after a few moments.

For the first time in his life Severus turned to look at a table full of smiling people. His classmates applauded him as he walked slowly towards the long table. He sat next to two large older boys. Severus sat quietly; he wasn't used to being around that many people and he was the type of person that kept to himself.

After the Sorting Ceremony he filled his plate with foods he'd never seen but that looked delicious. As he ate, he didn't notice one of his seventh year classmates watching him from the other end of the table. At one point, Severus felt eyes on him and looked up. He met eyes with a handsome young man, who had long pale blond hair and cold gray eyes. Not knowing why he was being stared at, he went back to his meal.

As the evening passed the students were taken to their new rooms and left to settle in. The next morning, as he was walking into the Great Hall for breakfast, Severus passed by the Gryffindor table and felt the cold sting of being hit by a glob of oatmeal. He didn't dare hex the two perpetrators there in front of everyone. But he saw who they were the same two boys from the train, only he now knew their names: Sirius Black and James Potter.

Severus sat at his table, and was joined by the same older boy that had stared at him the night before.

"That you will find is one of the many faults Gryffindors have," said the young man in a bored tone.

"And what's that?" asked Severus.

"They are obscenely obvious." The blond smirked. "My name is Lucius, Lucius Malfoy. I'm in my seventh year." He held his hand out, so Severus hesitantly shook it.

"You aren't going to let them get away with that, are you?" asked Lucius as he began to butter his toast. "As you have probably noticed, the professors here feel that it's best for students to iron out their differences on their own."

"What do you suggest I do then? I can't very well hex them here."

Lucius' eyebrows shot up. "You know how to throw a hex?"

Severus smirked. "Not just any hex, I create my own."

"Well then, I have a free period after my morning class. I read your schedule, you do as well. What say you we show those two what else can be done with oatmeal?"

Severus smiled, and then frowned.

"Why should you care what they do to me?"

"You are a Slytherin, and we defend our own, always."

~*~*~*~*~

"He was like a brother to me that year," said Severus as he looked back to Hermione. "The adjustment is very difficult on some children during their first year. Lucius made it bearable for me. When he left school, we stayed in touch. I wrote to him often when my problems began with those blasted Marauders. He was always there to counsel me. When I graduated it was Lucius who took me to my first Death Eater meeting."

He shook his head. "There were many times when things did not go the way we planned, during raids. We watched out for one another. After I became a spy, I had to tread lightly around him. But I never felt in any danger around him. I believe him to be one of the few true friends I have."

Hermione moved closer to him. "I'm your friend."

He smiled down to her. "You are more than a friend and one day soon, I will show you." He kissed her and held her close to him.

~*~*~*~*~

At the Riddle home Lucius opened the door of the small bedroom and peered outside. There were only a few Death Eaters walking about. He made his way to the foyer, passing Rodolphus on the way. He stopped as the other man looked at him, looking as though he wanted to say something.

Rodolphus approached Lucius and quietly spoke. "I'm sorry for your loss, Lucius. It was her fate to die this day."

Lucius nodded. "The fates have nothing to do with death that is the trade of man. And we are all devoted to a madman."

~*~*~*~*~

The Harry Potter Lexicon has Lucius listed as beginning Hogwarts in 1965 that would have him still there from 1971-1972 as a seventh year. It also lists Severus Snape as beginning Hogwarts in 1971. Going by that timeline Lucius and Severus will have attended one year together.

Also, I know that some of you might be thinking Bellatrix and Rodolphus are acting a bit odd, there is going to be a lot of odd behavior in future chapters not just from them.

Thank you for reading.

Chapter 7 ? Comfort

Chapter 7 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

I wanted to add this chapter before I went off to the movies. Thanks to those of you who have read this and reviewed so far.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

Thanks to June for all of her help and suggestions.

Chapter 7 Comfort

Lucius Apparated from the Riddle home to his own estate. The Dark Lord would contact him there at some point, so it was best to be there when he did so. Voldemort rarely left his own home and had never visited Lucius' home. Had he attempted to, however, he would have found it impossible. Lucius' wards were set specifically to warn him if the dark wizard was trying to gain entrance to his property. The wards would also serve to block Voldemort's entry. As powerful as the Dark Lord was, there was one thing he could not work against, and that was blood magic; it was a form of blood magic that Dumbledore relied on to protect Harry Potter at the Dursleys' home. Almost every form of magic was superseded by blood magic and by magic performed over the dying body of a human being.

Before his death, Lucius' father, Constantine Malfoy, asked him to perform a specific blood magic spell that would lay dormant, until such time when the caster would indicate who it was that was to be kept out of Malfoy Manor. For many years Lucius wondered why his father had made such a morbid request of him as he lay dying. After Draco's near-death experience during a Death Eater raid gone amok, the blond wizard realized that his father had foreseen the events to come. Constantine was not a supporter of Voldemort, whom he saw as a dangerous wizard; while he was not a Muggle sympathizer, he saw Voldemort's ways as too extreme. The elder Malfoy wanted his son to have the ability to protect himself from any future danger.

Lucius Apparated to the gardens that had been a constant source of joy to Narcissa, until she left to become Voldemort's concubine. She'd cultivated every orchid, every rose, and every flower with her own hands, wanting to know that she'd had a hand in the flourishing beauty of the garden. He was still injured, but he felt the need for something that reminded him of Narcissa. He needed to feel close to her. As he sat on a bench near one of the rose bushes, he was noticed by Emil and Dari, his house-elves.

"Master?" asked Emil.

Lucius looked with glittering eyes at his head elf.

"What is the matter? I sense that you are hurt." Emil had a magical bond that only some elves were privileged to have with their masters. He could feel when his master was ill or hurt. He'd also been born with the gift of empathy.

"I am not well, Emil." Lucius tried to stand but fainted on the spot.

The two house-elves levitated their master and took him to his room. They noticed as they were removing his clothes that he'd been beaten and his body was caked with blood.

Dari scowled. "Evil wizard. What has he done to our poor master?"

Emil shook his head and softly brushed Lucius' hair back with his hand. "Much more than physical damage, Dari."

They cleaned his wounds and left him in bed. Elf magic was strong, but they weren't equipped to perform advanced healing spells on humans. They would just have to keep their master comfortable until he awoke and was able to see a healer. Tonight at least Lucius would find comfort in his bed.

~*~*~*~*~

The next day at Hogwarts, Severus paced his study. Albus had taken over his classes after Severus' "death" at Lucius' hands. He knew he should be resting, but found it difficult when he hadn't heard back from Lucius. After the blond wizard left Order headquarters, the members waited there for his return. After three hours with no word, they decided to go to their homes and hope that they hadn't lost their only remaining spy.

Draco refused to go to bed; he'd just lost his mother and feared losing his father in the same night. He was finally able to sleep after Harry slipped him a Dreamless Sleeping Draught.

Hermione had a period between classes and decided to visit Severus. When she walked into his rooms she found him in the study, sitting on his leather wingback chair and staring at the fire.

"No word yet?" she asked, knowing he'd been waiting for word from Lucius since last night, like many of them.

He shook his head. "No, nothing," he said. He stood and walked to the coat rack and took his cloak.

"Where are you going?"

"I'm going to see if he is at his estate."

"Severus, no." Hermione took hold of his arm. "You're supposed to be dead. What if he isn't there alone?"

He gently took her hand and loosened her grip.

"I will Apparate just outside the gardens. I can Disillusion myself until I get close enough to see if there is anyone inside the home with him."

Hermione clung to him nonetheless, despite his assurance he would not be seen.

"Please be careful," she pleaded.

Severus looked down at her, and tilted his head. Ever since she saw him the night he came back beaten and close to death, he'd noticed a change in her as well as himself. The eyes that begged him now to stay were not the eyes of merely a good friend. Her eyes said something else altogether, but he wouldn't dwell on that; for all he knew he might be imagining things.

He kissed her softly at first, but then as her response grew so did his. He wound his fingers through her hair as she ran her hand down his back. After several moments they both needed air, so they parted slightly, their lips still a hair's breadth away from each other. He trailed petal-soft kisses toward her neck and held her tightly against him, feeling her racing heartbeat.

"I will be careful, Hermione." He lifted his head and smiled. "If you promise me one thing."

She smiled in return. "What?"

"That we continue this tonight, here in my quarters."

Hermione kissed his lips and nodded. "I promise we will most certainly continue this tonight."

Severus left his room through an exit unknown to the students and most of the staff. He'd used it often when coming back into the school from meetings or raids he'd been forced to attend. It would not do for a student to see their professor walking down the hall and covered with blood.

As soon as he was outside he walked a short distance to an Apparation point. Once at the Malfoy estate he walked close to the home, making sure he wasn't seen. He was about to Disillusion himself until he felt a tugging on his frock coat.

"Professor, please, you must come quickly. Our master is ill, very ill," said a distressed looking Emil.

Severus and the elf rushed up to Lucius' room and found him tossing in bed, his body covered with a light sheen of sweat as he mumbled something unintelligible.

As Severus approached him and sat on the bed, he used Legilimency to see that Lucius had been thinking of Narcissa. Severus saw what had transpired the evening before, when Lucius had gone back to the Dark Lord. He sighed and shook his head.

"He grieves for the former mistress," said Dari, who had been caring for her master. She looked at Lucius sadly.

Severus looked at Emil. "Is the Floo connection secure?"

The elf nodded. "Yes, sir. Precautions were taken when the young master was sent away."

Severus approached the Floo and threw in a small bit of powder. He was perfectly capable of brewing any healing potion, but he wasn't qualified to make a full diagnosis; he needed a healer.

"Hogwarts hospital wing, Madam Pomfrey's office," he called out. "Poppy! Poppy! Blast it, where are you, woman?"

The Medi-witch took a long minute to appear.

"Severus, what on earth is the matter? Have you finally decided to come and take the Skele-gro?"

"No, I have not! Poppy, I am at Malfoy Manor. Lucius is very ill. I need someone to come and look at him."

Upon their return to Hogwarts, Albus and Minerva had briefed Poppy on what had happened at last night's Order meeting, regarding Lucius' new spy status and return to Voldemort. Poppy had been caring for sick students and couldn't attend.

"This is a bad time for me to leave. Madam Hooch has been practicing the Quidditch teams and I have a ward full of students."

"Poppy, I can't very well take him to St. Mungo's," said Severus. "They would ask him how he was injured. Besides, he could be called by Voldemort at any time."

"I was going to suggest you contact Ginny Weasley. She's recently left her position at St. Mungo's; I think she is staying you-know-where."

Severus nodded and cut the Floo connection. He contacted Albus and asked him to get word to Ginny that she needed to come immediately.

After the Order meeting, Ginny had stayed overnight at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. She was still there when Albus contacted her. Although she agreed to his request, she felt trepidation about going to see Lucius Malfoy. She'd always been a bit wary of him, especially after the incident during her first year, when he'd slipped Tom Riddle's diary into her cauldron when she was at Flourish and Blotts.

For the past three years Ginny had worked at St. Mungo's. It was there that she began seeing Seamus Finnigan. Even though they dated and he even proposed to her, he'd never truly been supportive of her wanting to further herself in her chosen field. Ginny wanted to eventually have her own practice someday. She wanted to offer medical services to witches and wizards who could not afford medical attention or who were so ill that they could not travel to a healing institution. Oddly enough, she thought as she walked up the pathway to Malfoy Manor, the wealthy Lucius would be her first house call.

She knocked on the large wooden doors and waited. After a short wait a small house-elf in what looked like a Medieval servant's uniform answered the door. His eyes were brimming with tears.

"Are you the healer, miss?" he asked.

"Yes, I'm Ginny Weasley."

The small elf smiled and motioned for her to follow him.

As Ginny ascended the large staircase, she noticed groups of worried house-elves standing in the halls. She wondered how badly Lucius must have treated them that they were afraid of any human who entered the house. She walked into a large sedate looking bedroom. It was nothing like she imagined Lucius Malfoy would sleep in. Ginny caught herself; yes, there were times when she did wonder what kind of a bedroom he slept in, among other things.

In the room there were two more elves. One was larger than the others she'd seen in the home, and dressed in much finer clothes; the other was a female elf, crying and standing next to the bed.

Severus approached Ginny.

"Thank you for coming. Poppy couldn't make it, and there was no one else to be trusted."

Ginny furrowed her brow as she approached the bed. "What's wrong with him?" Like her own mother had always done for her sick children, Ginny placed her hand on Lucius' forehead. "He's burning up."

She took off her cloak and pulled down the covers of his bed. When Lucius had arrived at Grimmauld Place, he was beaten but she'd only had time to perform temporary healing spells on him so that he might be more comfortable during his talk with the rest of the Order. Lucius was then Summoned back by Voldemort, before she'd had the opportunity to heal him properly. From what she could tell, he hadn't received any new injuries, but the temporary healing spells had clearly worn off. His wounds had been cleaned but they were now bleeding and no doubt he had developed an infection. Coupled with the high intensity of emotions he'd gone through with his wife's death and with seeing Draco again after seven years, his body was struggling to heal itself, but to no avail.

Ginny looked at Severus. "He'll be fine. I just need to make sure these wounds are healed properly, and if you can get me an extra-strength potion for his infection I think his fever will go down quickly."

Severus nodded. "I have some in my private stores. I'll return shortly." Severus then made his way to Hogwarts, this time via Floo.

Emil took Dari by the shoulders and pulled her away from the bed.

"There now, you see, Dari? Our master will be fine. No need to worry. Go and let the others know, and have some stew made for him when he wakes."

Dari smiled and nodded, then left the room.

Ginny took hold of her wand and began to chant the necessary spells needed to properly heal Lucius' wounds. She put cool wet cloths over him for the fever. As she finished she looked at the elf still standing there.

"You have clothes. Are you all freed elves?" she asked.

"I am the only one. I came to Master Malfoy seven years ago. My previous master and entire family had been killed." Emil looked at Lucius. "He took me in and made me head elf. He supplied me with textiles and instructed me to dress the elves properly and educate them as I was educated."

Ginny was flabbergasted. She remembered the horror stories she'd heard from Lucius' former elf, Dobby.

"He is the best master in the entire wizarding world. We are all very privileged to serve him. He is very good to us."

As she looked back at Lucius, she realized how much the man had truly changed. Perhaps Draco and Snape were right.

He began to stir as the spells were working on his wounds. He opened his eyes and looked around the room, then stopped when he saw Ginny.

"Miss Weasley?" he asked, not knowing if he was dreaming or if his eyes were playing tricks on him. He'd found the young woman attractive when he saw her at Order headquarters.

"How do you feel, Mr. Malfoy?" she asked as she waved her wand over his body. She still read a very high temperature, but she could see the wounds on his chest were now fully healed.

He closed his eyes and turned away from her. "Hopeless, Miss Weasley. I feel hopeless and lost."

She stopped waving her wand and looked at him. Hopeless and lost were the two last words she would have ever thought about the arrogant Lucius Malfoy.

"I'm...I'm sorry about your wife," she said.

Just then Severus came back through the Floo, holding a small gold bottle in his hand.

"This should get rid of his infection."

Ginny allowed Severus to take her place on the edge of the bed and give Lucius a double dose of the potion. After a few minutes, she placed her hand on the blond wizard's forehead to make sure his fever was going down.

"I think you'll be fine for now. You should probably spend the rest of the day quietly in bed. I can write you a prescription scroll for some vitamin potions, or perhaps the professor can supply them to you."

Severus nodded and looked at Ginny. "Leave me a note of what he needs and I will make sure he has it. Thank you for coming so quickly, Ginny."

Ginny smiled and looked at Lucius.

"Yes, thank you for coming here, Miss Weasley. I am in your debt."

Ginny felt herself blush. "It was nothing. I can stop by again tomorrow if you like, just to check on you."

"I would like that, thank you again," added Lucius.

Ginny took her cloak in hand and bid goodbye to the two men, then threw some powder into the Floo and went back to Order headquarters.

Emil, who was still in the room, approached the bed and placed his hand on his master's shoulder.

"Welcome back, Master Malfoy. I will go and make sure your dinner is being prepared. Will you be staying for dinner, Professor?" he asked Severus. The Potions master nodded and the elf left the room.

There was silence for a long time, and then Lucius finally spoke.

"Narcissa is dead," he said plainly, he knew that Severus most probably knew that as the rest of the Order, considering what he'd said the previous night. But he felt he needed to say it out loud, as if it to convince himself it hadn't been a dream.

"I know, I'm sorry."

More silence.

"He will be concentrating his attacks on financial institutions and schools." Lucius sat up slowly and rubbed his face. "I don't know when he will begin. Right now he's deciding who will be told of his plans for the attacks and who will be involved in the actual work." He made to get out of bed when Severus stopped him.

"You should stay in bed a while longer. You were very ill."

Lucius scoffed. "I feel fine. Besides, I can't lay in bed all day." He walked to his wardrobe and pulled out a pair of trousers. He'd been nude when he got out of bed, but neither Lucius or Severus were shy about their bodies. And they had seen each other nude before.

Severus walked up behind Lucius and placed a hand on his friend's shoulder. Lucius turned and they looked into each other's eyes. Lucius cupped Severus' face with his hand and they touched foreheads. Their lips so close that a slight movement from either of them would make contact.

"You have always been here for me, my friend. You are my rock," Lucius said.

"As you were mine when I began Hogwarts. I will always be there for you," Severus said as he patted Lucius on the back and stepped away. "Get dressed; we need to get you fed, and you can rest just as well at the dining table as in bed. Do you expect to be called again today?"

"No, perhaps not for a few days. We are safe here, however. He cannot set foot anywhere near the property or my home, and I have wards set for any other Death Eaters attempting to show up unannounced as well." Lucius told Severus about the blood magic his father had him perform over the property.

"Your father did well making you perform the blood magic on the grounds. He saw what was coming."

"He did. I'll have to thank his picture for that."

They walked out of the bedroom and down the stairs. They would contact Albus after finishing their meal.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Thanks for reading. I'll hopefully have another chapter ready soon. I hope you enjoyed this.

Chapter 8 - Honesty

Chapter 8 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

Hello all. I'd like to thank once again those who have taken the time to read and review this story. I appreciate all of your comments.

I'm loading this on my work computer, and for some reason it won't allow me to do the characters, but this is a Severus/Hermione & Lucius/Ginny story. There will at some point be a slash scene but it will be in a flashback. I won't say anything further, but I think you can all figure out what kind of a relationship Lucius and Severus had at some point and the reason for their closeness.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

Thanks as always to June for all of her input and help in making this all read better.

Chapter 8 - Honesty

After their dinner, Severus and Lucius went into the sitting room and had a glass of brandy. Severus sent word to Hermione using Lucius' owl, Ovid, to let her know that he would be spending a few hours with Lucius and that he would return to Hogwarts to finish what they had started. Severus also used the Floo to call Albus, asking him to stop by Malfoy Manor so he could be told of what Lucius had learned.

It was basically decided among the three wizards that for now all they could do was wait until Voldemort finalized any plans for his attacks on financial institutions and schools. When Lucius left the Riddle house, the Dark Lord had still not decided who would take part in these raids and where they would begin.

Since Lucius' disclosure that he had been the Order's secret spy, Severus' near-death injuries, Lucius' escape from Voldemort's death sentence, and Narcissa's rescue of Lucius and her own death, there had been little time to just sit and talk. Tonight was the first time Lucius could fully explain to Severus and Albus that he'd realized the error of his ways long ago. He also did not want to go to Azkaban once the war ended, but was careful to let them know that his offer to help the Order wasn't because of that reason alone. Albus assured him that if and when the time came, he would vouch for Lucius, just as he had done with Severus so long ago.

After two more rounds of brandy and a round of lemon drop martinis, they all bid goodnight to one another. Albus used the Floo to go back to Hogwarts.

Severus decided to Apparate back, so he could stretch his legs with a short walk; he had to be careful to not be seen, since he was supposedly "dead." Upon reaching the dungeons, he noticed someone was in his rooms. He guessed it was Hermione; only she could figure out the series of complicated wards he had. He took out his wand and slowly walked into his rooms. He set the wards up once more and placed a silencing spell around the premises.

As he approached his bedroom, he could see the amber glow of the fireplace reflecting on the walls. When he walked in, he saw Hermione lying on his bed, wearing a simple satin nightgown.

He smiled. "You look comfortable."

She smiled back. "I am. Your bed is much more comfortable than mine."

Severus approached her, divesting himself of his clothes as he drew nearer to the bed.

"How is Lucius? Ginny said he was very ill," she asked.

"He was, but she is a very talented healer and Lucius will live." Severus had by now removed his cloak, shoes, and socks, and was in the process of unbuttoning his frock coat when Hermione got on her knees and crawled towards him.

As she did, he could see the soft mounds of her breasts as he looked down her nightgown. She then sat up on her haunches. As he finished removing his frock coat, she began unbuttoning his white linen shirt.

"Have you been waiting long?" he asked. He felt himself starting to grow aroused by the soft touches of her fingers against his chest as she worked on removing his shirt.

She looked up into his eyes. "Yes, I have been waiting excruciatingly long, Severus."

"Far be it from me to keep you waiting further," he murmured. He wrapped an arm around her waist and pushed her gently onto her back. With his body lying half on top of hers, he began to nibble at her lips.

Hermione sighed as she felt his hands move beneath the neckline of the satin nightgown to caress her breasts.

Severus' kisses became more insistent, his tongue gaining entrance to her mouth and touching her own lightly.

She ran her hand up his arm and into his hair, as she hooked her leg over his hip.

"Severus, I want you, but I don't want to do this if it's going to ruin the friendship we have," said Hermione, now thinking about all of the other experiences she'd had after graduating from Hogwarts.

"I treasure our friendship, Hermione." He now caressed her face. "But I want to be closer to you. I want to share more than just a friendship. I want you to know everything about my life, share everything in my life. I have been alone for far too long." He then took hold of her waist and rolled them both over, so she now straddled him.

"This war will be over very soon, I think, and I may or may not live through it." Hermione was about to say something, when he placed his fingers on her lips. "If I am to die during the final battle, then I want my last days to be spent with you."

Her eyes filled with tears. "Do you love me, Severus?"

He smiled. "I do, but how I love you at this moment will no doubt change as this night progresses."

Severus, like many people, had always felt that love had different levels. For the past several years he'd grown to love Hermione as a friend and a confidant. He knew that soon, his love for her would deepen and become one of life and death; he would willingly give his life for her, and there would be death to anyone who dared harm her.

Hermione took hold of her nightgown and pulled it off. As she did, her hair fell around her shoulders, and the firelight produced a soft orange glow around her head. She then knelt beside him on the bed and unbuckled his belt, then began to pull down his trousers, taking his underwear with it. He was already fully aroused as Hermione shoved his clothing off of the bed and inched her way back up to him. She licked the head of his penis lightly, but he pulled her up by her shoulders and turned her so that she faced him fully as he continued to lay on his back.

"No, I can feel the warmth of your mouth another time, but right now, I want to feel you here," he said, as he cupped her mound with his hand and slid his fingers slowly into her wetness.

Hermione felt a tingling sensation in her belly. She'd wanted him for so long, and it had been years since a man had touched her in any way especially one who seemed to know what he was doing. As Severus continued to work his fingers into her, she ran her hands down his sides and gently rocked herself against him, feeling his erection prodding at her from behind.

"Please, I'm ready for you, Severus," she panted, "so ready for you." She took his hand away and straddled him again. She lifted herself slightly, giving her enough room to take hold of his penis and place it at her entrance. She slowly sank down onto him and felt his hands tightly grab hold of her hips.

Severus held her still for a moment, feeling her warmth. He pushed himself up into her, then pulled out slowly, wanting to savor the feeling of her body. His hands moved to massage her breasts as she closed her eyes and moaned. Hermione began to move her body in rhythm with his, not too slow not too fast. They both wanted to make this first time last as long as possible. She leaned forward slightly, which allowed Severus to take her nipple into his mouth. He suckled on her until it grew hard and slightly longer. He turned his attention to the next one as Hermione now began to speed her actions. Severus felt her growing wetter and wetter the more he licked and sucked on her nipples; he made a mental note that this was something she found great pleasure in.

"That feels so wonderful," panted Hermione as she looked down at him. Severus' eyes met hers as he gave her nipple one final lick.

"Tell me, what else feels good?" he asked as he continued massaging her breasts. He sat up and bent his knees, allowing her to lay back against his thighs. "Do you like this?" He then began to lightly massage her clitoris as he maintained his slow thrusts.

"Oh, please don't stop," she begged as she threw her head back and closed her eyes.

"I'll take that as a yes." He smiled as he looked down and saw his penis now coated with her wetness. As he pressed down on her clit, he felt Hermione's walls begin to flutter with the signs of her oncoming orgasm.

Hermione took hold of his shoulders and opened her eyes to see him. His eyes were hooded as he watched her reaching her pinnacle.

"I've often wondered what you would look like at this moment," he said, but before Hermione could ask what he meant, he made a sudden movement with his pelvis and she climaxed harder than she could ever remember.

As her walls convulsed around him, he suckled her breast again, adding to her now overwhelming pleasure. Feeling that she was nearing the end of her orgasm, he brought her close to him and rolled over on top of her, holding himself up with his arms so he wouldn't crush her. Her face was flushed, and she had a light sheen of sweat covering her body as Severus thrust harder and faster into her now, reaching out for his own completion.

Hermione wrapped her legs around his waist and grabbed his buttocks with her hands, pulling him closer and closer with each thrust.

"AH," he cried out. "Yes, Hermione." He dropped down onto her and wrapped his arm around her shoulder and waist, wanting to get as close to her as possible. Hermione lifted her hips, allowing him to drive one last deep thrust into her as she felt his own orgasm deep within her.

He held her for several moments, before she realized his full weight was on top of her. As he made to move off of her, she held him against her.

"No, not yet," she said as she tugged lightly on his ear with her teeth.

They both felt their hearts beating in sync. When their breathing finally calmed down and their hearts began beating regularly, Severus lifted himself on his elbows and looked down at her. He kissed her softly, not wanting to end the lovemaking just yet.

"Well, Miss Granger? Was I to your satisfaction?" he asked as his lips now traveled down her neck.

"More than satisfying, but how can I be sure when I have no other experience with you to compare it with?" she answered.

He chuckled and moved off of her and to her side, throwing his leg over hers.

"I see. Perhaps I should keep you here tonight, I am positive I can give you several more experiences for you to use in your comparison."

The next morning, Hermione had plenty of experiences to compare with their first.

~*~*~*~*~

After Severus and Albus had left the night before, Lucius went straight to his own bed. He knew that he was supposed to be resting, and he had to admit that he was feeling very tired. He realized that the last two days had seen too much stress in too little time.

The next morning, Emil woke his master up promptly at nine o'clock. He wanted to make sure Lucius got plenty of sleep, but he'd also known that the young healer who called herself Ginny would be arriving again today to check on his master.

Lucius showered and dressed casually. He had breakfast, and then made his way to the living room. He thought he heard the crack signaling someone had Apparated onto the property. Knowing it would most probably be Miss Weasley, he went to answer the door himself. When he opened the door, he saw it was Draco.

"Draco!" Lucius pulled his son inside and hugged him.

The young man held his father close. Ginny had told him the night before how sick his father had been.

"Are you all right, Father?" he asked.

It was then that Lucius noticed Ginny standing just behind Draco. The two men separated. "I can assure you I am feeling quite well, Draco. Come inside."

Draco smiled and entered the house,

"Miss Weasley." Lucius gestured to her to follow him inside.

"Please, Mr. Malfoy, call me Ginny. Miss Weasley is so formal." She blushed.

"Well, in that case we shall all be informal, and you shall call me Lucius."

They walked into the living room, where Emil and Dari were already setting up tea, fruit, and scones. When Dari saw Draco, her eyes lit up.

"Young Master! You have grown so handsome!" Dari approached him hesitantly. When Draco was younger he was at times abusive with the house-elves, but like his father the young man had changed very much.

Draco smiled and bent down slightly. "And you, Dari, look quite lovely in your dress."

No one in the room had ever seen an elf blush, but Dari did so. Her ears bent slightly, and she laughed giddily.

Emil was pleased that the young master complimented her. The head elf joined the Malfoy household just after the Death Eater attack that had caused Lucius to send his son to Spain, and after Narcissa left Lucius, but Emil had heard stories from the other elves of Draco's cruelty as a youth.

As the two elves left the room after casting a warming spell on the tea, Ginny took out her wand and approached Lucius.

"I'd like to just give you a quick check, to make sure you're healing properly, if you don't mind Mr...I mean Lucius," said Ginny.

Lucius sat and opened his arms wide. "Do what you will, Ginny. I assure you I have been resting, and I feel perfectly fine."

'And you look perfectly fine too,' thought Ginny as she waved her wand over his body.

Lucius looked over at Draco, who had been staring at him.

"Are you really well, Father?" he asked worriedly.

"Yes, Draco." Lucius was touched that his son was so concerned about him. After being separated for seven years, he wondered if Draco even cared what happened to him anymore.

"Everything looks as it should be," stated Ginny. "I should be going, as I promised I'd meet Hermione for lunch." She placed her wand back in her robes and turned to Draco. "Are you coming, Draco?"

Draco looked to Lucius again. "Do you mind if I stay a bit?" he asked.

"Of course not. I was hoping you would; we have quite a bit of catching up to do," said Lucius.

Ginny kissed Draco on the cheek and turned back to Lucius. "It was good seeing you well. I'll see myself out." She blushed as she quickly left the living room.

Lucius noticed the young woman's blush and speedy exit. *'Ginny and Draco?'*, he wondered.

There was silence between father and son for a short while until Draco spoke.

"Is she really dead?" he asked of his mother.

Lucius sighed heavily. "Yes, sadly, she is."

"I hated her for so long, ever since she left us." Neither Draco nor his father wanted to speak directly of her choice to become Voldemort's concubine, although they both now knew she'd loved them to the end.

"I share that guilt with you, Draco. As I told you at Grimmauld Place, it was your mother who kept us both safe through her sacrifice. But for seven years, we did not know that she left us so she could deflect Voldemort's attention from you, and keep me in his good graces. She only told me the truth two nights ago, just before she helped me escape the last time I saw her alive." Lucius' voice broke as he said those last words. He wiped a tear that threatened to fall down his cheek, then he stood resolutely.

"But she wanted us to be happy, and I want to know what you have been up to. After you left Spain I heard little of you. What have you been doing these last two years?" asked Lucius, anxiously wanting to know what his son had been doing with his life.

"Well, when I was in Spain, I ran into Harry and we talked. We both realized we were different from our schooldays together." Draco paused, and looked at his father.

"Yes?"

"We decided to let the past just be that, the past and we struck up a friendship. Two years ago, I wrote to tell you that I would be returning to England. That's when Harry brought me to Order headquarters. I also got back in touch with Severus. Ever since you first sent me to Spain to be safe from Death Eaters, I felt you'd changed in your attitudes, but still I asked Severus not to say anything to you, so please don't blame him for not letting you know how to contact me."

Lucius shook his head.

"Draco, I understand. I'm glad Severus kept your whereabouts secret. He is a much better Occlumens than I. It was better this way, but I'm glad that you had him to go to when you needed anything."

Draco was relieved. He knew that the two men were good friends, and he didn't want their friendship to be broken by the fact that Severus hadn't informed Lucius about him.

"Is there anyone special in your life?" asked Lucius, wondering about the kiss Ginny had just given Draco.

Draco now began fidgeting. "There is someone...um...quite special, actually. I...we love each other."

While he felt happy for his son, Lucius wasn't quite sure why he felt a tad jealous. Intellectually, he knew he shouldn't feel jealous. He hadn't even seen Ginny Weasley in years; he had no claims on her. Also, this was his son's happiness, something he should not envy.

"That's wonderful then. So am I to understand that I will at some point have a wedding to attend?" he asked his son.

"We're waiting until after all of this business with Voldemort is over and done with." Draco now stood and approached his father. "And besides, we can't really get married, not legally that is."

Now Lucius was confused. Perhaps he was wrong about him and Ginny. "Not legally?" *'Good lord, who in the world is he in love with, a Centaur?'* he wondered.

"It's Harry, Father. He's the one I'm in love with."

Lucius eyebrows shot up in surprise. When Draco was in school he'd been so enamored with all of the young women at Hogwarts, even those outside of his house.

Draco took his father's silence to mean disapproval. He immediately regretted saying anything.

"I'm sorry; I know you're disappointed in me. I shouldn't have said anything." The young man turned to leave but was caught by the arm and spun around by his father.

"And what, you would have preferred to live a lie around me? Draco, I am not disappointed in you. I am very proud of the man you have become. I never would have said this to you years ago, but we have both changed." Lucius let go of Draco's arm and stepped back slightly.

"Besides, son, I can't very well be disapproving of what you are doing, as it would be hypocritical of me."

It was Draco's turn to be surprised.

"You?" he asked. "With another man?"

Lucius laughed. "Well, yes, that is generally the way homosexual male relationships work."

Realizing the absurdness of his comment, Draco laughed as well.

"I was around your age, more or less; I can't recall exactly," Lucius said as he sat down on the couch. "It was not long after your mother and I married, but before you were born. The Dark Lord's first war was in

full throttle. I had a friend who had just joined the ranks. We were sent out many times on raids together. One raid in particular stands out in my memory; the two of us almost didn't make it back alive. We took refuge in an abandoned cottage just outside the village that had been raided."

Lucius shook his head as he remembered the carnage, much of it done by him and Severus.

"Did it just happen? I mean, were you always attracted to him? Did you know you were gay?"

"We'd been friends for many years; and no, I was not gay. At least, I can't say that I have ever wanted to be with any other man before or after him. There was always something else there with us. Something..." He looked at Draco straight in the eyes. "Something I'm sure you can understand."

Draco nodded. He'd never felt the need or inclination to be with a man before Harry. And he didn't look at other men with any interest.

"It's Severus, isn't it?"

Lucius was quiet, knowing that it was not his place to give Severus' secret away. Besides, he did not know if Severus had disclosed it to Hermione. Lucius himself never told Narcissa.

Draco tilted his head. "You don't have to tell me, but I think I know."

Lucius poured their tea, thankful that Draco had taken the news well.

"Was it just the one time?" asked Draco, his curiosity getting the better of him.

"No," answered Lucius. "Although we have both moved on in that aspect. But there is and always will be something very special between us."

Knowing that was all his father would say on the subject, Draco asked no further questions. He spent the rest of the afternoon catching up with his father. Then together, they honored Narcissa's life by sharing photos and memories of happier days her years at Hogwarts, courtship and marriage to Lucius, Draco's birth and childhood, family events. The two men would always harbor strong feelings for her. But while she'd only been dead for two days, as far as Lucius was concerned his wife died seven years ago. He had grieved for her then, and had moved on with his life.

When Draco finally left, Lucius walked to his library. Now that he knew that Ginny was not his son's girlfriend, and he was legally free to remarry, he found himself thinking

more and more about Miss Ginevra Weasley. He felt the need to do something for the young woman, to thank her for helping him in his time of need. He realized things might not have been easy for her after the incident with Tom Riddle's diary during her first year at Hogwarts.

Perhaps this time she could appreciate a real book, one that would help her in her chosen career as a healer, instead of the evil object he'd slipped into her cauldron when she was just a child. Yes, that would be a good start.

~*~*~*~*~*~

I hope the lemons were satisfactory. For the first time I felt pretty good about them. I also hope you all enjoyed Lucius' honesty with Draco. I think they needed that talk.

Thank you for reading.

Chapter 9 - New Allies

Chapter 9 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

A/N: Warning, some violence and a minor character death.

All characters belong to JKR.

Thank you to June for all of her help especially in this chapter.

Chapter 9 New Allies

Nearly a week passed before Lucius was finally called by Voldemort. He'd been wrapping a fine silk cloth around his gift for Ginny a rare and expensive book on healing when he felt his Dark Mark burning. He dropped what he was doing to gather his Death Eater robe and mask, and then instructed Emil to contact Severus and inform him that he'd been Summoned.

Once at the Riddle home, it was a study in organization. There were three groups of Death Eaters seated at tables in front of the small stage where the Dark Lord's throne sat. Lucius noticed that two of the three groups had five men, one had four; he had the sinking feeling he'd be the fifth man in that particular group. Voldemort had originally said that he would be discussing his plan with a few Death Eaters, but this looked like he'd already made his plan and Lucius had not been part of the planning.

"Lucius," Voldemort said as he pointed Lucius to the table with the four men, "you will be in charge of Baines, Talbot, Redburn, and Davies."

Lucius approached the table and sat in the empty chair. He noticed a man standing behind Voldemort, but didn't recognize him. He knew it wasn't the Spells Master; this man was someone else. He also noticed that the Dark Lord looked less haggard than he did the last time he saw him. When Lucius had supposedly killed Severus, Voldemort lost his only source for potions and vitamins. Perhaps he'd found himself someone to supply him with what he needed. Lucius turned his attention back to the men at the table and Voldemort.

The Dark Lord began to speak. Originally, he had wanted to only concentrate on financial and educational institutions in the wizarding world. But now, he'd decided that his men needed practice first. Tonight, one group would attack a Muggle school, and the other two groups would go for money. After all, Muggle money could easily be converted into wizarding money. Goblins rarely asked questions as to where or whom money came from; money was money to them.

Lucius' group would attack a bank in Muggle London. Rodolphus was in charge of the group that would hit a bank in Muggle Canada, and his brother Rabastan would attack a Muggle boarding school in America. The Dark Lord wanted his men spread out.

As the meeting progressed, Lucius wondered how he would get word to the Order of the plan. He had the coordinates for each area, but how could he get them to Severus? Voldemort dismissed them, and Lucius realized that this would be his only opportunity.

Just outside the house, Lucius excused himself from his group, telling his men he needed to go back inside to ask the Dark Lord a question, and that he would catch up with them at the Apparation point just beyond the caretaker's house. They obeyed, as they knew Voldemort would be angry if he saw them just standing and waiting for Lucius; better to be far from the house.

Lucius walked back slowly towards the house, waiting until all the teams were far enough away from the house as to not hear him Apparate. Then he disappeared around the corner of the home to Apparate to Malfoy Manor. He knew that Voldemort could not hear him, as he was busy with Bellatrix at the moment, confident in his Death Eaters' success.

In his garden, he found Emil and Dari out for their evening stroll. He then instructed his head elf yet again to serve as his go-between.

The minute his master disappeared, Emil used the Floo to go to Severus' rooms.

"Professor!" he called out as he stepped through the Floo. After several moments, he heard scurrying coming from a back room.

Severus ran out, tying his robes around him.

"Emil?" A cold feeling washed over Severus, as he thought something had happened to Lucius again. "What is it?"

"My master has sent me. There are to be three raids on Muggles this night."

"Come with me." Severus threw powder into the Floo and called out to Albus. When he heard the old wizard answer his call, he took hold of Emil, and they both stepped through the Floo.

In the Headmaster's office, Emil recounted all that Lucius had told him. Albus immediately contacted the rest of the Order.

As a Muggleborn, Hermione would know how Muggle institutions operated. The Order accepted her advice, Arthur sent Aurors to the locations that Lucius had given them,

with instructions to stay hidden and engage the Death Eaters only if necessary to save lives. The Ministry would follow to cast memory charms on Muggles who witnessed anything they shouldn't.

As the hours passed, reports began to pour in from the Aurors. Hermione's advice had been correct. There were two Death Eaters captured during the raids at the Canadian and London banks, and no Muggles came to harm since the raids were held during off-hours. Relatively few funds were stolen, as Muggle banks transferred most funds through electronic means, and regularly sent their cash by armored transport to regional banks.

The school was a different matter. While a few students had been slightly harmed, Voldemort was unfamiliar with American ways and had made a slight miscalculation. He'd decided his first attack on an institution of higher learning would be on a "Muggle boarding school" in a remote part of upstate New York; however, the school in question was West Point, which was conducting a training exercise that night in a field. The Military Academy's students were firing live ammunition at practice targets, but the five Death Eaters had Apparated out of thin air in front of the targets. It only took seconds for the Army cadets to stop firing, but by then they'd unintentionally killed four very surprised Death Eaters.

The only member of this team to return from West Point was Rabastan Lestrage. His first instinct was to hide or kill himself, but he knew that Voldemort always made someone pay for failure. If Rabastan did not return, his brother Rodolphus would pay with his life.

Upon the raiders' return to the Riddle home, Rabastan was the last to arrive. Bedraggled and wary, he approached the ballroom with trepidation. He knew he would pay for his failure; he brought with him no prisoners, and had lost four Death Eaters. The tall man entered the room and looked towards his brother, then Lucius. He quickly saw that there were only two men missing from the bank teams, but he also saw Muggle money scattered on a marble table. It wasn't much, but perhaps these Muggles were poor.

"You failed," said Voldemort.

"My Lord," Rabastan said as he bowed his head. "There were too many. They were not children. They had weapons, Muggle weapons."

"Silence!" yelled Voldemort as he stood. "I am tired of excuses, all the time excuses." His eyes turned red with anger as he looked around the room. It now began to fill with more and more Death Eaters. "I want to make things clear that I will not tolerate any more mistakes."

He pointed his wand towards Rabastan. "*Incarcerus!*" Ropes shot out and bound the Death Eater. The Dark Lord smiled. "*Incendio.*"

Rabastan screamed as his body began to burn like a torch. The rest of the room of Death Eaters looked on, but said nothing. Bellatrix was horrified, yet she knew that she could not look away, as that would be a punishable offense in itself.

As his brother was burned alive, Rodolphus made an involuntary move towards the middle of the room, but was held back by Lucius.

"Don't, be a fool. There is nothing you can do." hissed Lucius.

He was forced to watch his brother die, screaming as he burned to death.

"What is that smell?" asked Voldemort, sounding amused as he looked around the room

Wormtail looked quizzically towards his master. "Burning flesh, master?"

"No!" The Dark Lord looked at the flames still licking the now charred body of Rabastan. "It is incentive! Look at him, all of you. That will easily be you if you disappoint me once again!"

Rodolphus continued to watch, as his brother's body burned down into a pile of bones and ashes.

After the Death Eaters were allowed to leave the ballroom, Rodolphus walked out; his mind was numb, his face void of emotion, his eyes hollow. In the hallway, he was caught again by the arm by Lucius. He turned to the blond.

"I need your help." Lucius knew this was his one opportunity to get through to Rodolphus. He needed allies within the ranks; he had to take this chance.

Rodolphus suspected Lucius was up to something. The blond had been acting oddly for several years, more so in the last few weeks. Bellatrix had once told him that Narcissa believed her husband was morose with disappointment over their son; Rodolphus believed it was because of knowing his wife bedded the Dark Lord. Rodolphus well understood how difficult it was to see your wife used by someone like the Dark Lord, and unable to do anything about it.

"What is it that you want of me, Lucius?"

Lucius knew he was taking a risk, but there was no one else he could ask. He looked towards the throne area, where Voldemort was speaking to the man Lucius had noticed earlier.

"That man," Lucius said as he motioned his head towards the mysterious newcomer. "Who is he?"

Rodolphus laughed bitterly. "He is the Dark Lord's new potions supplier, since you killed Snape."

"I need for him to disappear, so to speak, but..." Lucius hesitated. "I need all of his hair."

There was a long moment of silence. Lucius hoped he hadn't made a terrible error in judgment.

"I don't know why you ask this of me, nor what you are planning, but I don't care to know." Rodolphus looked back through the doorway, at his brother's bones and ashes still smoldering in the middle of the room. "Anything you ask of me, I shall do, Lucius. I know I will never come out of this war alive, and even if by chance I do, I will go to Azkaban. I would rather die on the battlefield while avenging my brother, who was only following orders. I cannot abide by what I see any longer, when I have been forced to allow my wife into sexual slavery and have seen my own brother burned like garbage for all to see."

Lucius was relieved. While he wasn't sure he could exactly call Rodolphus an ally, at least he knew that there was one person among the Death Eaters who was willing to not sit idly by, watching the world rot with evil.

"I will need a Pensieve from him, though; can you manage that?" asked Lucius. He knew that this would be the perfect opportunity of getting Severus back into the Riddle house and perhaps making Voldemort's potions once again. But before Severus could take the man's place, he would need to know every task he'd performed every potion he'd been assigned by Voldemort.

Rodolphus shook his head and held up his hand. "Don't worry. Have you forgotten my skill with the Imperius Curse? He will be Obliviated, and I will leave him like a child on the steps of a Muggle hospital in another country. Once it is all finished, you will receive my owl on where to meet. I will bring you a small Pensieve and a bag filled with his hair." He walked out.

Lucius was left in the hallway, standing alone and feeling exhausted. He backed up and leaned against the wall, taking a deep breath and rubbing his face. He needed to get home and get word to the Order. He doubted there were any casualties on their part; the Order was much too organized, more organized than Voldemort's camp and they actually cared whether their members died.

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At Hogwarts, Severus had been in his rooms, with Hermione. Her rooms were close to his, and they'd asked Albus to make a connecting hallway so they could go to each other's quarters without being seen by students. Albus was only too happy to abide by their request.

As the two lovers sat reading on the rug in front of the fireplace, a note flew through. As Severus read it, Hermione noticed him smirk.

"Good news?" she asked.

"It seems that Lucius has found a way for me to go back."

Hermione frowned. "Go back? How? You're supposed to be dead!"

"I am not going back as myself, but as the Dark Lord's new potions maker."

Her eyes grew wide. "No, you can't go back. Severus, he'll know! He still has that spell to penetrate Occlumency shields!" She moved towards him and wrapped her arms around his neck.

He laughed. "Relax, Hermione. I won't be going back just yet." He used a spell to copy Lucius' note, then sent it through the Floo to Albus' private rooms before he began stroking her hair. "I need to begin brewing some Polyjuice Potion. I have some in my own private stores, but not enough."

"I have some as well, but how are you going to get the hair?"

It was now that Severus became serious. "Lucius has asked Rodolphus Lestrage to help him."

"How can he trust him?" asked Hermione, not believing what she'd heard.

"His brother Rabastan was one of the leaders of tonight's raids. He was not successful, and he paid with his life. It seems that Rodolphus has agreed to help Lucius, no questions asked."

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At the Riddle home, Bellatrix lay in bed, next to the now sleeping Voldemort. Her eyes filled with tears as she stared at the ceiling, reliving over and over again the vision of Rabastan's body burning, his screams echoing in her ears.

She quietly got out of bed and walked to the bathroom, where she looked at herself in the mirror. All she saw was the ghost of the woman she had once been. She used to be beautiful; she'd once rivaled her sister Narcissa in beauty.

"Narcissa," she whispered as she closed her eyes tightly. *'What have we done?'* she wondered. She knew that after the Dark Lord drank his nightly sleeping potion, he would not be awake for hours. She filled a tub with warm water and climbed inside, then methodically began scrubbing her body raw, trying desperately to wash away her past as well as her present. By the time she climbed out, the water was pink, stained with blood from parts of her skin she'd rubbed almost to the point of rawness.

As she tucked herself back into the bed, she caught sight of a key ring hanging on a nail next to the room's large fireplace. She looked towards the sleeping body next to hers, then back to the key ring.

Bellatrix knew that the key to the House of Black was on that ring, and she also knew that she needed to make it disappear. She'd given it to the Dark Lord as a present, just after she'd escaped from Azkaban. She was not in her right mind then, but things were different now. That key would be her salvation, if things got bad; she knew that it was the only way for her and Rodolphus to get to a safe place.

~*~*~*~*~*~

I hope you enjoyed this chapter.

Thank you to those of you who have left me such lovely reviews. I appreciate you all taking the time to do so.

Chapter 10 ? A Talk Amongst Friends

Chapter 10 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

Thank you to those who have left me such wonderful reviews. I appreciate all of your kind words.

Just a small warning, there is a teensy weensy male/male kiss in this chapter.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

Thanks to June for all of her help and suggestions.

Chapter 10 A Talk Amongst Friends

It was Friday, the day after Voldemort's raids on the Muggle banks and "boarding school." Severus went early to Malfoy Manor; one of the house-elves told him Lucius was already up, so Severus was allowed in and directed to the library.

"Wrapping gifts?" said Severus as he approached Lucius from behind.

The blond wizard chuckled and looked over his shoulder. "What do you think?" he asked as he held up his handiwork. Lucius was finally able to finish wrapping his present to Ginny.

Severus raised an eyebrow and smirked. "Not bad, but your bow is crooked." He turned and took several grapes from the fruit bowl and sat on the couch.

Lucius looked at the bow and scoffed. It was perfect.

Severus popped a grape into his mouth as he looked at him. "Lucius, are you certain that you can trust Rodolphus?"

"I believe I can." Lucius set Ginny's gift on the table and sat next to Severus. "Rodolphus is a dead man, Severus. He knows that he will either be killed on the battlefield or in Azkaban. He cares very little of what happens to him anymore."

"All the more reason to wonder if he can be trusted."

Lucius shook his head. "He's been teetering for a long time. I see it in the way he looks at his wife sitting at the feet of Dark Lord. And now, after watching his own brother burned alive, I think something inside of Rodolphus has snapped. There will be no questions from him."

"Hermione doesn't want me to go along with your plan," said Severus. "She reminds me that I'm supposed to be dead, and that I will be truly dead if I am caught."

Lucius smiled. "Things are quite serious between you two then."

"We have been friends for quite some time. It's only recently that we have taken our relationship to the next level."

"Severus, I want to thank you for watching over Draco all these years." Lucius leaned forward. "You knew that he and Harry were together?"

"I did," said Severus quietly.

"I told him, about...about my experience with another man." Lucius looked at Severus now. "I didn't tell him you were the man in question. It isn't my place to tell anyone. But I feel that I should tell you, I am interested in Miss Weasley...Ginny." Lucius looked thoughtful for a moment. "I realize that it has only been a short time since Narcissa's death..."

"There is no need to explain yourself to me. I don't see anything wrong with you wanting to pursue something with Ginny. I'm actually happy for you, to see you taking an interest in someone." Severus moved closer to Lucius. "I'm assuming you are telling me this because at some point you are going to tell Ginny about your past."

"I think she should know," said Lucius, "as I think Hermione should know."

"She will, when the time is right." Severus stood and walked to the window. "I just don't know how she would take something like that. She accepted her best friend having a man as a lover, but how would she feel if she knew her own lover once had a relationship with a man. That he once..." He stopped. He felt Lucius behind him.

"That he once what?" asked his friend.

"Once was in love with a man." Severus turned and looked into Lucius' eyes.

"Was?" asked Lucius.

"Still." Severus kissed Lucius' soft lips as the other man held him tightly against him. There had been too much passion shared between them in their youth for it to have all faded away. But they had grown into men with different pursuits now.

"I've always missed not being able to kiss you," said Lucius softly as they broke apart.

Severus smiled, knowing that there were many a time when he often thought the same thing. Neither had any interest in being together physically again, but they had missed the intimacy of the kiss and there was nothing wrong with a kiss among two friends now and then after all.

"We should start planning," said Severus as he leaned against the window frame. "I still don't know about Rodolphus, but if you trust him, then I suppose I should give him the benefit of the doubt." Severus felt uncomfortable knowing their lives could possibly be in the hands of Rodolphus LeStrange, but they had no choice; the Order needed both spies.

Lucius walked back to his gift and picked up some parchment and a quill to write a short note to place on the package to Ginny. He would send it off to her soon.

"As I said, I do trust him, and I plan on watching the others as well. I saw the look on everyone's faces as Rabastan burned. No one was permitted to leave or turn away, and while they had to keep still, I knew they all wanted to run they did not want to be next. I have never seen Death Eaters with such an expression of horror while watching something like that." Lucius sat at his desk. He looked down at the parchment, then looked back to Severus. "They are afraid, Severus. I think the Dark Lord has truly gone mad. If he was just evil, that would be one thing."

Severus nodded. "But evil and insane make for a very dangerous combination."

Just then, an owl arrived. Lucius read the message. "It's from Rodolphus. He has the items and wants to meet me in Knockturn Alley." He turned to Severus. "Send word to Albus our plan is ready to start. Wait for me here."

Severus nodded. No need to tell Lucius to be careful; he was a Slytherin.

~*~*~*~*~

Back at Hogwarts, Hermione was sitting in the staff lounge reading when she heard the door open behind her. She turned and saw Ginny.

"What brings you here?" Hermione stood and hugged her friend.

"Well, since I know you have the afternoon free, I thought you might feel like to do some shopping with me in Diagon Alley. I'll buy you lunch."

Hermione laughed. She hadn't been on a shopping spree in ages; quite frankly, by the look of her current robes, she needed it.

"You've talked me into it. Let's go to my rooms first and then we can go from there."

They walked to Hermione's rooms, where she left Severus a note. She really had very few expenses, so she had plenty of galleons to spend. She lived at Hogwarts during the school year, and spent most of the summer in a small cottage that overlooked the moors of Scotland. It was owned by her parents, who rarely had time to visit there since summer was their most busy time, so Hermione usually had it all to herself.

Hermione's parents had taught her to save her money, and that she did. The young witch kept herself on a tight budget, but every once in a while like today she was easily persuaded to spend a bit on herself.

The two women walked past the gates of Hogwarts and Apparated away to Diagon Alley.

"I think Madam Malkin's should be our first stop," said Hermione. "These robes have seen better days."

Ginny smirked. "Your entire closet has seen better days."

After spending a hefty amount buying themselves new robes and several mix-and-match skirts and blouses, they decided lunch was in order and headed towards the Leaky Cauldron. They ordered a pint of ale for each of them and sat at a booth, where they unloaded their shopping bags under the table.

"Well, we've shopped, we have some ale, and now," said Ginny as she sipped her drink, "I want all of the details on you and Severus."

Hermione nearly spit out her drink. "I knew you had an ulterior motive, you little gossip monger," she said in jest.

"Oh, come off it, I have to live vicariously through someone, don't I?" Ginny began to pick through the nuts in the bowl in front of her. "It isn't as though my love life will ever amount to anything but a disappointing page in the story of my life."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Ginny, I've heard this a million times from you."

"Yes, but I've never been engaged and then unceremoniously kicked to the proverbial curb." The redhead sulked.

"Seamus did come back," said Hermione lamely.

"Are you saying I should have taken him back?"

"No, not at all, especially since he never really supported your career." Hermione reached across the table and took Ginny's hand. "You just haven't met the right man for you, that's all."

Ginny covered her face with her hands and shook her head.

"Oh, no, don't say what my mum keeps telling me. '*Ginny, when it's the right time the Fates will put him in your path.*'" Ginny took a long swig of her ale. "Bah! The Fates can bloody well go shove a broom up their bums." She rolled her eyes. "Please, as if I'm going to run into the man of my dreams just like that."

"All right, we'll say nothing more about men or fate for the rest of the afternoon," Hermione promised.

As the two women finished their meal, they decided to walk to Flourish and Blotts to have a look at some of the newest books. On their way, Ginny realized she'd left something at the Leaky Cauldron.

"Hermione, you go on ahead, I left one of my bags back there," said Ginny. Hermione nodded and went on ahead. As Ginny turned, she literally bumped into one Lucius Malfoy.

"I'm sorry, sir, I...oh, Lucius." Ginny unconsciously smoothed her hair down and began adjusting her dress.

Lucius smiled, trying to hide the packages he held in his hands.

"Ginny, how lovely to see you. I, um..." For the first time in his life Lucius felt awkward. He'd hoped she didn't see him coming from Knockturn Alley. "I was just doing a bit of shopping."

"So was I. Hermione and I just had lunch and I forgot one of my packages at the Leaky Cauldron," she said nervously.

"Then I won't keep you. I...I wanted to thank you again for coming to my aid. Perhaps you would allow me to take you to dinner some time?" He could have kicked himself. He hadn't even sent her the thank-you gift yet and now he was asking her to dinner. She was a young woman, and most probably wasn't even interested in being seen with a man who was old enough to be her father, on top of the fact that he was still very new to being a Death Eater turned spy instead of a Death Eater. Expecting her to be horrified, he readied himself to just tell her to forget he even mentioned dinner.

But Ginny spoke before he did.

"I'd love to have dinner with you some time." She inwardly cringed, hoping she didn't sound as desperate as she thought she had.

Lucius smiled.

"Ah, well, that's wonderful. I will owl you soon then." He bowed slightly and walked away, making sure to keep his packages hidden from her view.

Ginny retrieved her own package and ran to Flourish and Blotts to tell Hermione the news.

~*~*~*~*~

Lucius went home where Severus as well as Albus were waiting for him. He held packages containing a small Pensieve and a pouch filled with hair.

"We were about to send out a search party," said Severus.

Albus nodded his head. "Yes, we thought Rodolphus might have changed his mind and you ran into some trouble."

"No, everything went as planned. I was slightly detained, however, on my way back. Nothing worth mentioning."

Albus and Severus noticed the blush on the man's cheeks. Deciding that whatever he was blushing about was none of their business, they quickly turned to the task at hand.

Lucius opened the packages and took out the Pensieve with Samuel Higgenbottom's memories, setting it on a table. He then handed Severus the pouch that held the potions maker's hair.

"Was the man staying at the Riddle home, Lucius?" asked Albus.

"No, he was not. From what Rodolphus has told me, Samuel Higgenbottom was a minor Death Eater and did not stay at the home fulltime."

"That's good, I don't know if we could get away with my staying under Riddle's nose. I have a limited amount of Polyjuice ready made and I am currently brewing more. If I have to stay there for longer than a few hours at a time, we may be in trouble," said Severus.

"I doubt you would. The Dark Lord spends much of his time in his rooms, either alone or with Bella or..." Lucius paused, he'd almost said Narcissa. "Well, I suppose with another concubine. Rodolphus did tell me one bit of news, though. This morning, Bella told him the Dark Lord is planning to venture out in the evenings to Muggle towns."

Albus looked thoughtful. "Tom is most likely looking for the weakest spots. After the disappointment of last night's raids on the Muggle banks and West Point, even Tom must admit he needs more research."

Both younger wizards agreed.

"Our only problem is knowing when Voldemort will contact his potions maker. He would contact Higgenbottom directly through his own Mark." Said Albus.

Lucius reached into his pocket and produced a thin piece of what looked like old and worn parchment.

"Rodolphus also gave this to me." He handed it to Severus quickly, as though just touching it was burning his fingers.

Severus took the object and realized it was skin human skin that held the tattooed Dark Mark on it. Severus looked back at Lucius.

"Don't ask. Just put it in your pocket for now. When you have the Polyjuice ready to become Higgenbottom, use a Sticking Charm on this and place it over your own Mark. I don't know how it works, so don't ask me," said Lucius tersely.

Albus and Severus looked at each other. They didn't even want to know what else Rodolphus had done to the Death Eater.

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I wanted to address the issue of the kiss between Severus and Lucius, just in case people had questions. In my story as you may have noticed they have a very special bond. I wanted to show that there was something deeper than just mere friendship. They were very passionate at one point and those still waters are running there, deep, but still there.

While they are moving on with their lives and are pursuing two women, I felt that I still wanted them to have the same feelings for each other that they have always had.

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter.

Chapter 11 ? Reassurance And Dinner

Chapter 11 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

I'd like to thank once again all of those who have taken the time to read this and review. I know that some were a little bothered by the m/m kiss in the last chapter, but this story is mainly about these two men, Severus and Lucius.

I set out to write a story about their past and present relationship.

I will however give plenty of warning next time I plan on a scene like that. There will be more than a kiss from them in a future chapter, but as I stated, I will post a warning for those who want to skip that particular section.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

Thanks as always to June for all of her help and great suggestions.

Chapter 11 Reassurance And Dinner

Before Albus and Severus went back to Hogwarts, they and Lucius all took turns looking into the small Pensieve into which Rodolphus had drained the memories of Samuel Higgenbottom, the minor Death Eater who had made potions for the Dark Lord after Snape's recent "death."

The only foreseeable problem was Antonin Dolohov. The man was a sadist and seemed to be quite fond of abusing Higgenbottom. There were instances in which Dolohov had stood behind the minor Death Eater during an entire evening of potions making, taking time now and then to whip the poor man with a cane.

Severus wasn't very happy with the prospect of having to allow himself to be abused by Dolohov, but there was nothing he could do. He only hoped that the sadistic Death Eater didn't know his wolfsbane from his wormwood. While Severus couldn't outright poison the Dark Lord (it would be too obvious), he could dull Voldemort's magic enough so that once the final battle was in full force, Potter would have a strong advantage.

After Albus left Malfoy Manor, Lucius held Severus back for a most urgent question.

"Do you know where Ginny is staying?"

Severus smiled. "She is spending her time between the Burrow and number twelve, Grimmauld Place. But more than likely she would be spending the weekend at her parents' home."

Lucius groaned. "The last thing I want to do is alert any of the overprotective Weasley clan that I have any interest in the only daughter in the family."

Severus just laughed and bid him goodnight before he returned to Hogwarts.

Lucius looked at the clock on the mantle. It was nearly seven in the evening. He thought for a moment and decided that he would give Ginny her gift in person, so he sat at his desk and wrote her an invitation to dine with him at the restaurant of her choosing. He called for his owl Ovid, and sent the note to the Burrow. He hoped that the two elder Weasleys would not die of shock, or come and hex him into oblivion for asking their only daughter out to dinner. While he'd been accepted into the Order, Lucius knew that not all of the members trusted him entirely; he had too many years of history, and they would not quickly forget that he had once considered them to be "blood traitors."

At the Burrow a large owl arrived and flew through the Weasley kitchen window. Arthur and Molly had just sat down to dinner with Ron and Ginny, as well as Charlie who'd been visiting from Romania.

"What a lovely bird," said Molly.

Arthur was silent for a moment, as he recognized the owl and wondered why it would be there of all places, and with a note on its leg. He reached down and took the note.

"It's for you, Ginny," said Arthur. He handed the note to Ginny, who seemed just as surprised as he did.

"Who would be sending me anything?" Ginny knew it could not have been from Seamus, or any other former boyfriend. The owl was stunning and no one she knew owned one like it.

"That owl belongs to Lucius," answered Arthur.

Now they all looked surprised.

Ginny opened the note and felt her cheeks heating up.

"Well, what does it say?" asked Molly.

"He's thanking me for helping him the other day." Ginny realized she hadn't told anyone about going to help Lucius at his home. "I...well, he was very ill and I went to his home." She looked at her brothers; their mouths were hanging open. Arthur looked concerned and Molly looked excited.

"He did look rather bad when he arrived at Order headquarters," said Molly.

"He was worse when I saw him the next day. But, well, I healed him and he's thanking me and..." Her voice faded out.

"And?" asked Ron.

"And hewantstotakemetodinner," Ginny said quickly as she put the note in her dress pocket.

"Sorry, I didn't quite catch that," said Arthur.

Ginny sighed and rolled her eyes. "He wants to take me to dinner."

"Well, you're not going," said Ron.

Charlie looked at his brother. "Last I heard, Ron, Ginny's already got a father. It's none of your business who she has dinner with."

Ron looked at Charlie as if he'd grown an extra nose on his face.

"What? You're not bothered that Lucius Malfoy, a Death Eater, wants to take our sister to dinner?"

Charlie shook his head. "The man has been feeding the Order information, solid information, for the last three years. He saved Severus from being killed and is spying for us. Give the man the benefit of the doubt, Ron." Charlie turned back to his meal and continued eating.

Arthur was about to forbid his daughter to have dinner with the elder Malfoy, but thought about Charlie's words. It was true that Lucius had put himself in harm's way for three years and was currently playing a dangerous game in order not to get caught. He'd also recently lost his wife, who had given herself to Voldemort in order to keep her son and husband alive and out of the deranged wizard's hands. The Malfoys cared deeply for one another; in this, they were very much like his own family. Thinking he himself should also give Lucius the benefit of the doubt, Arthur kept quiet.

"I think it's very nice of him to ask you to dinner," said Molly. It was only recently that Ginny told her about Seamus and the relationship she'd had with him. Molly had thought they would get married one day, and that the young Mr. Finnegan was the perfect man for her daughter, but then Ginny told her why things between them didn't work out.

Molly began to wonder if perhaps Ginny might not be better off with an older wizard, like Hermione had. She'd seen the relationship between Severus and Hermione grow from a friendship to what seemed like a love match. Like a true meddling mother who wanted grandchildren more than life itself, Molly happily gave her opinion.

"When is he taking you? Does he say where?"

Ginny smiled. "Well, he suggests tomorrow evening. The location is my choice; he wants to take me anywhere I choose."

Arthur frowned. "That might not be a good idea."

"Arthur, there is nothing wrong with our daughter having dinner with Lucius."

"Molly, I'm simply saying it might not be safe for them to be seen together. What if word gets back to you-know-who?"

Molly looked at Ginny. "Your father has a point, dear. Lucius is still supposed to be a faithful Death Eater, and everyone knows we all support Albus."

Ginny looked sadly at her plate.

"Why don't you have him go to headquarters instead? We can all have dinner together; you can make him something. He might enjoy something a bit less formal," suggested her mother.

"I don't know, Mum." Ginny looked at Ron, who was shaking his head.

"Oh, don't worry, dear. Just write him a note back; he'll understand."

They finished their dinner, and Ginny noticed Lucius' owl still sitting on the window ledge. She quickly wrote a note and attached it to Ovid's leg, then gave him a piece of chicken from the dinner table.

"There you go, take this back to your master." As he flew away, she wondered if giving chicken to an owl was considered cannibalism, since they were both birds. *'Stop that, Ginny,'* she scolded herself. *'Only a silly little girl would think of those things. Lucius is an adult; he's not attracted to little girls. Act like a grown-up!'*

When Lucius read Ginny's note, he smiled. She'd suggested they have dinner at Grimmauld Place, stating that her father thought it might be dangerous for them to be seen together. Arthur was a smart man; Lucius hadn't thought of the possibility of being seen with Ginny as something dangerous, but it was. Lucius wondered if the two elder Weasleys would be joining them for dinner; perhaps it would be best if they did. If he was thinking of courting her, it would help if her parents supported the idea. He only hoped that the youngest Weasley son wasn't there. He knew that Ronald Weasley wasn't one of his supporters. He didn't need to be sabotaged so soon into the game.

He looked at his reflection in the mirror above the mantle.

"Well, you're a fearsome Death Eater. Surely you can get through an evening with more than one Weasley." He smiled, and then sighed. All he could do is just get through it. He would have dinner with multiple Weasleys, and hopefully he and Ginny would have a moment alone when he could give her the gift he'd chosen.

~*~*~*

At Hogwarts, Severus sat on his favorite chair, wearing a new velvet robe Hermione had purchased for him, and sipping a bit of his favorite brandy. When he entered his rooms after returning from Malfoy Manor, she'd practically tackled him and immediately led him into the bedroom.

After several very intense hours of making love, Hermione presented him with a very large box.

"What is this?" he asked, not used to getting gifts.

"Open it." Hermione smiled as he ripped the plain wrapping and opened the box. His eyes lit up with he looked at the sage green velvet robe.

"Hermione, this is wonderful." Severus practically jumped out of bed and wrapped himself in the lush velvet robe. "It fits perfectly."

"Of course it does, I know your body," she said as she leered at him.

"You didn't have to do this, but thank you." He lay back down next to her and kissed her. "I am so lucky to have you in my life."

Hermione ran her hand down his chest, feeling the lush material of the velvet. "I think I'm the lucky one."

They took a shower together and then ordered some food delivered to Severus' rooms. They ate and then sat in the living room, he in his chair and Hermione on the couch.

"I'd like to think I am the reason you have been smiling all evening, but I get the feeling there is more on your mind," he said. "You have told me little of your day. Obviously you went shopping, but what else did you do today?"

"I spent most of the afternoon in Diagon Alley, with Ginny. We shopped and had some lunch, and then shopped a bit more."

Severus looked at her, knowing there was an "and" coming.

"And, Ginny ran into Lucius, she was so excited."

"Aha." He sipped more of his brandy. "So that's what held him up."

"What was he doing in Diagon Alley?" asked Hermione.

"He went to pick up the things I need to enter the Riddle home again."

Severus noticed the worried look now on Hermione's face.

"Hermione," he said as he stood and walked to her and kneeled in front of her. "I will be careful, I promise."

"I'm just so worried, Severus. This is a huge risk," she said, unable to look at him.

Severus sat next to her and wrapped his arms around her.

"It is risky, but I will be careful." He thought that if he told her of his plan to begin feeding the Dark Lord a potion that would weaken his magic, she might at least focus on something other than his safety. "I do need your help with something. I think if we prepare a potion that would erode the Dark Lord's magic. I could slowly feed it to him and then he will be weak by the time the final battle begins. He will be venturing out into Muggle towns in the evenings. We think he will be ready to strike within the next two or three months."

Severus and Hermione spent the rest of their evening and most of the night discussing the possible potions they could either adapt or create, in order to begin their own plan of lessening Voldemort's magic.

~*~*~*~

The following day went by fairly quickly for both men.

At Hogwarts, Severus began to transfer his already made Polyjuice into small flasks. The good thing was you didn't need to drink much of the potion for it to have the full effect. He would be able to keep enough on him at all times without being too obvious. He just didn't look forward to any of this plan, especially having to stick Higgenbottom's Dark Mark and skin over his own Mark.

At Malfoy Manor, Lucius spent most of his day wondering what he would wear that evening on his "date" with Ginny. He knew that dinner would most likely be an informal affair, so he didn't want to look too...well, too rich.

Wanting to help his master, Emil stepped in and picked out a simple pair of black trousers and a light gray mandarin-collar long-sleeved shirt.

"You will look more relaxed if your shirt is not buttoned to the top, master," explained Dari, as she stopped him from fastening the top buttons. She tied his hair with a black velvet ribbon.

Lucius looked at himself and nodded. He made sure to take with him Ginny's gift, and Apparated to number twelve, Grimmauld Place. As Secret-Keeper, Albus had told him the location, so he no longer needed a Portkey.

When he arrived, the door opened before he even knocked. Arthur had apparently been waiting for him to arrive.

"Lucius," said the Weasley patriarch.

"Arthur, good evening." Lucius smiled and walked past Arthur, who noticed he held something in his hands.

"Is that something for Ginny?" asked Arthur.

"A thank-you gift, for her help." Lucius hoped he wouldn't have to show the man what he was giving her; after all, it wasn't for him and was really none of his business. But, he kept himself calm.

Knowing it really was none of his business; Arthur merely smiled and walked into the living room with Lucius.

"I'll let Ginny know you're here. She's in the kitchen with Molly. I hope you like Italian."

"I do," affirmed Lucius as he set the gift down on the coffee table. He loved Italian food; he also had a warm feeling knowing that Ginny was helping prepare his meal. Narcissa was once a good mother and wife, but she couldn't boil an egg to save her life. As he sat down he didn't notice Ron walk into the room.

"I don't know what you're up to with my sister, but I'm going to be watching you," said Ron. He remembered Ginny's first year at Hogwarts and Tom Riddle's diary.

Lucius turned around and looked at the younger man. He had his rejoinder all ready, but was interrupted as Ginny came into the room.

"Ron! What are you doing here?" Ginny was visibly agitated. She'd hoped her brother hadn't just said something stupid, but well, she knew her brother.

"I left my Quidditch Weekly upstairs the last time I was here, so I had to come and get it." It was dumb, but that was all Ron could think of.

Ginny narrowed her eyes, and then looked at Lucius.

"Hello, Lucius." She smiled and extended her hand. "Don't mind Ron, he's not staying anyway." She then turned towards Ron and gave him a menacing look.

Ron knew he'd better get out of there before his sister castrated him, but he wanted to stick around and watch Lucius. He walked to the door slowly, and watched as Ginny guided Lucius into the kitchen.

"I hope you don't mind having dinner in the kitchen," was the last thing Ron heard Ginny say.

When he was sure they'd gone, Ron walked quietly to the dining room. There was a very old butler's pantry between the kitchen and dining room. It was rarely used as a pantry anymore, and would make a good spot for him to watch all of the action in the kitchen without being seen. Ron crept into the pantry and carefully opened the door that led to the kitchen, being very careful not to be heard.

Lucius greeted Molly cordially, and pulled out both her seat and Ginny's before sitting down himself. Arthur sat directly across from him, Ginny sat to his right and Molly to his left.

"Ginny made the entire meal by herself and without magic, Lucius," boasted Molly, who was very proud that her daughter was such a good cook.

"Really?" Lucius looked at Ginny, who was blushing.

"It isn't that difficult," Ginny said.

"And she's a wonderful cook too," added Arthur proudly.

Ron was in the pantry rolling his eyes.

Lucius took a bite of the lasagna and smiled. It was delicious.

"My compliments to the chef. This is spectacular," said the blond wizard. He had never had a home-cooked meal like this. The house-elves usually employed magic in preparing meals for the household, and eating at a restaurant usually meant the same unless one ventured out into the Muggle world. Even then the cooking wasn't really personalized.

The conversation was kept mainly to news topics of the day, articles from the Daily Prophet, and now and then talk of days spent as students at Hogwarts. After eating their dinner and having dessert, they all decided to go into the living room. Ginny excused herself and went to the bathroom as Arthur declared he would go into the living room to pour them all an after-dinner drink. Lucius stayed behind and helped Molly put the dishes into the sink, where she would use a use a cleaning charm.

Ron now noticed his mother growing nervous. He readied himself to come to her rescue.

"Lucius, no one will tell me what happened to my Percy. I know they all know. It was Bill, my eldest, who found his brother's body. You know, don't you? Were you there when it happened?"

Lucius had been picking up some of the cutlery on the table to bring to the sink. His actions slowed as he thought about what he'd been asked.

What Lucius did not know was that those who'd found Percy's body and readied it for burial had decided that Molly should never find out what a mangled broken mess it had been. Now, Ron held himself ready to burst in if Lucius upset his mother.

"Yes, Molly, I was there," affirmed Lucius.

"Then you can tell me. Please, Lucius, I need to know."

Lucius put the last of the used cutlery into the sink, and looked at Molly.

"Don't ask me to tell you that. He died under the most unpleasant of circumstances, as many Death Eaters have died as of late."

"Please tell me," she pleaded.

"Why, Molly? Will it hurt any less if I told you? It would not bring your son back. Why do you want your last memory of your son to be one of horror and tragedy?"

Molly's eyes glittered with unshed tears, "Did he suffer?"

Lucius closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "He died bravely and with dignity. He was defiant in the end, Molly, and fought for his life. You would have been proud of your boy. Please, ask me no more; I cannot bring myself to tell you of the details. I have told you all you need to know. Let it go and enjoy the memories you have of your son before he was lost to you." Lucius then went back to the table to continue picking up the dishes.

"Don't bother with that," Molly stood. "That's my job after all, to take care of everyone here." She wiped a tear that escaped and smiled at Lucius. "You go on into the living room. Arthur and I will be leaving soon."

Lucius nodded and smiled as he went to join Arthur, leaving Molly alone with her thoughts.

Ron leaned back against the wall of the pantry. It bothered him that his mother was still so upset about Percy, but the git had been her son after all. Even if Percy had not spoken to any of them in years, at least in the end he seemed to have regretted his decision. Ron also realized that he owed a bit of thanks to Lucius. The blond could have very well told her everything, but he didn't. Perhaps Charlie was right and the man deserved a second chance.

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I hope you all enjoyed this chapter.

Thank you for reading this.

Chapter 12 ? A Slight Miscalculation

Chapter 12 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

I'd like to thank everyone who has taken the time to read this story and leave me a review. Thanks for all of your support.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

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Chapter 12 A Slight Miscalculation

After dinner Arthur, Molly, Ginny and Lucius retired to the living room of number twelve, Grimmauld Place. They had one drink together before Arthur and Molly bid the two goodbye. Ron had managed to sneak out of the butler's pantry and into the kitchen, where he made sure to take the rest of the lasagna with him before he left the house via the back door. After all, why let good food go to waste?

In the living room, Ginny and Lucius sat on opposite ends of the couch. Lucius looked at his gift on the table and realized this was the perfect moment to give it to her.

"I have something for you." Lucius reached to the table and grabbed the gift. He moved towards Ginny on the couch, yet keeping his distance slightly.

"A gift, for me? Whatever for?" Ginny asked wonderingly.

"I realize that in the past our families have been at odds; you didn't have to help me, yet you did. I also thought this might be something useful to you." he said, hoping she would like what he'd chosen for her. It came from his library, the private one that wasn't seen by most visitors to the Malfoy home.

Ginny took hold of the gift and began ripping the wrappings. As the object started to become visible, she felt her blood run cold, and she began to visibly shake.

Lucius frowned. "What's wrong?" he asked with concern.

Ginny opened the large book on her lap. She turned the pages: they were all blank.

"Are you trying to finish what you started in my first year? How could you give me something like this?" She looked at him with disgust, and her eyes filled with tears.

Lucius looked on in horror; he hadn't meant to insult her. He honestly thought it was the perfect gift for her.

"Ginny, I thought ..." He then realized what he'd done. *'You imbecile, Lucius,'* he scolded himself. He'd been so excited at finding the book in his collection that he never once thought it would remind her of Tom Riddle's diary.

Ginny shoved the book off of her lap and moved away from him. She stood and walked to the fireplace, turning her back to him.

He could see her shaking and he wanted to comfort her, but Lucius knew that she would only push him away. He stood and slowly walked towards her.

"How utterly insensitive of me of me. I am truly sorry. I...I should go. Please, forgive me." He turned and walked out.

Ginny heard the front door close and then the pop of his Apparation. She quickly wiped her tears and turned back around, now that she knew he was no longer there. Deciding to destroy the book, she began to retrieve it when Ron came into the room.

"I thought you went home," she said, turning again and pretending to be fixing the cushions on the chair behind her.

"I did, but I thought I'd come back and see if there was any food left." Ron had reached the Burrow when he realized he hadn't brought any dessert with him. When he returned to Grimmauld Place, entering through the back door, he heard the front door close and someone Apparating.

"There's some food left." Ginny made sure to stay near the darker side of the room, not wanting her brother to see she'd been crying.

"What's that?" asked Ron as he walked towards the book. He picked it up and read the cover, then opened it. "What kind of book is this? How do you use this?"

"Did he give this to you?"

Ginny cringed. Knowing Ron, she guessed he would want to chase Lucius down and duel with him for upsetting her so.

"Ron," she started.

"Ginny, this is amazing." Ron sat with the book on his lap, admiring the cover.

Ginny frowned; this wasn't the reaction she thought she would get from her overprotective brother. She came closer to the couch and looked over his shoulder, now actually taking a moment to read the cover of the book. She gasped in shock as she read the title, which she recognized from one of her classes.

Das Buch von Beschwerden und Heilmitteln (The Book of Ailments and Cures), written by Klaus Nagel in 1510 AD.

"Remember when we were small and Dad took us on that tour of the Ministry? He showed us one of these and said that there were only five known to have been made. The Ministry had one, St. Mungo's had another, I think one is in North America, and another is somewhere in China or India, I can't remember which. The location of the fifth one has never been known."

Ginny now realized why Lucius had given her the book. It was incredibly rare and something that any healer would give their right arm to have.

The book was blank until you asked it a question. If a patient came to you with symptoms you could not readily identify, all you needed to do was place your hand on the book and recite the symptoms. Once you opened the book it was filled with information of every ailment that had similar symptoms. You could also ask for different cures for an ailment. If you had a patient with a simple cold, it would give you every known option for cure and treatment, including Muggle and magical means. It was charmed to always update itself with new discoveries. The book was connected to the earth and all of the living beings on it. It was made using the darkest as well as the most pure forms of magic, two things which were difficult to accomplish at the same time. No one had ever been able to replicate the book's charms. Nagel had not left notes as to how he'd accomplished the task; he merely stated what kinds of magic had been used. While the book wasn't an absolute cure-all, a trained healer could take full advantage of the book; it was incredibly helpful for the most difficult cases.

She was a healer, and Lucius knew that the book would be precious to her in her field. He could have sold it for hundreds of galleons, but he'd given to her in gratitude. And she'd rejected him for it.

She felt like an absolute arse.

Ron turned and looked at Ginny. "What's wrong?"

"Oh, Ron, I...I've made a terrible mistake." Ginny came around the couch and sat down next to Ron. She took the book and ran her fingers across the cover. She sighed heavily. "I saw the book and thought about what happened in my first year."

Ron put his hand on hers. "If it's any consolation, I probably would have thought the same thing if I were you."

Ginny smiled, Ron might sometimes fly off the handle, but he was understanding of mistakes, since he made so many himself.

"I need to apologize to him. He must feel horrible after how I treated him."

"Well, you do what you need to do, Gin." With nothing more to say, Ron kissed her on the forehead and went back into the kitchen, now finding the dessert and exiting the same way he came. He decided a long time ago that relationships were too difficult to bother with. He'd dated Susan Bones for a while after they graduated from Hogwarts, but he found it was easier dealing with dragons; that's why he'd spent his summers for several years as an intern with his brother Charlie. Maybe one day he would find a woman who didn't drive him to the brink of insanity, but in the meantime he lived his life day by day, seeing a witch here and there. He'd also decided to stay out of Ginny's personal life. It was probably the safest thing to do knowing his sister.

Ginny looked at Lucius' present lovingly now. She smiled as she thought of him picking it out for her, and how happy he must have felt to have chosen something he knew she would appreciate.

"I really need to go see him," she said aloud to herself.

At Malfoy Manor, Lucius arrived home feeling like he'd been speared straight through his chest. This had to have been one of his greatest miscalculations.

"Master, you are home so soon," said Emil. He'd come from the kitchen to the living room after hearing the pop of his Apparition.

"Things didn't go exactly as I had hoped, Emil," Lucius said as he dropped heavily onto a burgundy chaise next to the French doors. He sighed.

"Did the young miss not like her gift?" asked the elf, his ears perking up. He felt his master's sadness.

Lucius looked at Emil. "Let me just say, I'm lucky to have arrived home with both of my testicles intact."

Emil shuddered. The young healer sounded like quite the fiery one.

Dari walked into living room. "Master, Miss Weasley has come to see you."

Lucius looked at Emil, then back to Dari. "She's here? Is she alone?" he asked.

"Yes, master," confirmed Dari

Lucius stood and readied himself. *'I'm surprised all the Weasleys aren't here. I may as well get it over with; I just hope her aim is bad,'* he thought as he walked towards the door. He opened the door and looked at Ginny, who much to his surprise didn't greet him with a wand to the face.

"I'm sorry to come so late. May I speak with you?" Ginny asked quietly.

Lucius nodded and allowed her entry. Ginny followed him into the living room.

"Would you care for a drink?" he asked, hoping if he gave her something to drink she might forget about hexing him.

"Yes, thank you, I'll have a brandy."

Emil and Dari excused themselves, and the two were left alone. Lucius poured her drink and handed it to her, then poured himself a glass.

"I want to apologize for earlier," she said.

"I'm the one who should be apologizing. First, for what I did to you in your first year." Lucius approached Ginny. "You were a little girl, and I should not have placed you in such a dangerous position."

"You were a different person then. I accept your apology," whispered Ginny. "But, I'm not a little girl anymore. And I should have acted like an adult earlier. I should have at least looked at the book; I would have recognized the title. What you gave me is incredible. I...I don't deserve anything that priceless."

Lucius set down his glass, and stood in front of her. He stared into her eyes. "I know you are not a little girl anymore. Believe me; Ginny I am very much aware of that."

Ginny began to shake, but now it wasn't because she was angry or upset, Ginny was trembling now for an altogether different reason. She looked into Lucius' eyes; she'd never really noticed how impossibly gray they were.

"As for being deserving of anything priceless, I think you are wrong. You deserve that book and more, and I find myself wanting to give it all to you, everything you have ever wanted."

He inched closer to her. Lucius hadn't been that close to a woman in a very long time. When he had informed Voldemort that it had been a little over a year since he'd been "properly" fucked, he wasn't exaggerating. Thinking on it while he'd been resting, he realized it had actually been nearly two years since he'd been with a woman. Not wanting to scare Ginny away after all, he realized he was much older than her, and she was still relatively young he stopped moving towards her.

"I have what I need to make me happy," Ginny answered shakily.

"Do you?" Lucius reached out and took hold of a lock of her hair draped over her shoulder. Her hair was soft, and its color intense, like the colors of a sunset.

"Maybe not everything." Ginny felt herself leaning towards Lucius. Her lips were inches from his, and just as she could feel his breath against hers. . .

Lucius' Dark Mark began to burn.

"Damn!" said Lucius as he moved away from her and grabbed his arm.

Back at Hogwarts, Severus felt a burning sensation against his hip. He'd been keeping Higgenbottom's skin in his trousers pocket. Just as he suspected, the Mark on his own arm had not been Summoned, since Voldemort thought him to be dead.

Hermione noticed Severus squirm uncomfortably.

"What is it, Severus?" she asked.

"He is calling Higgenbottom," said Severus as he looked at her frightened face. He approached her. "Please, Hermione, don't worry so."

She knew that she shouldn't at once think the worst, but she couldn't help it. Every thought she'd had that day concerned Severus. He was so much a part of her life now that it was difficult to imagine him not being with her forever.

Severus kissed her, and then gathered several bottles of Polyjuice and some strands of hair from Voldemort's former potions maker. He also gathered the robes he'd prepared earlier. Since Samuel Higgenbottom had been a minor Death Eater, his robes were not as elaborate as other more high-ranking Death Eaters, so Severus had transformed one of his older robes into something that he'd seen Higgenbottom wear in the Pensieve.

"Let Albus know I've been called," he said as he walked through the tunnels he'd always used while spying.

As he readied himself to Apparate, he took out the first bottle of Polyjuice and added the hair and drank it down. He then Apparated away with the help of the Dark Mark, now securely attached over his own Dark Mark by way of a Sticking Charm.

When he arrived at the Riddle home he immediately sought out Lucius. Once he spotted the blond man, he began to slowly make his way towards him. As he was doing so, he noticed he was being watched by two other men. One was Antonin Dolohov; the other was Rodolphus Lestrange, who was now staring at him in wonder.

Rodolphus looked from "Higgenbottom" to Lucius. While he'd guessed that the Pensieve and hair Lucius had asked for were maybe to be used as a means to impersonate the former potions maker, he now wondered who it was taking the man's place, and why that person was here.

'What are you up to, Lucius?' wondered Rodolphus to himself.

The meeting began and much to Severus' displeasure it was as if he'd never left. Other than a few new odds and ends, nothing had changed. Watching the grass grow was more exciting.

At the end of the meeting, Voldemort motioned towards him, calling his potions maker "Higgenbottom" to his side.

As Severus approached to stand next to the Dark Lord, he made sure to keep his distance, as the other man had done.

Voldemort leaned close to his ear. "You need to strengthen my stamina potion. I need to prepare for the final battle, and what you have given me so far lasts for too short a time," hissed the wizard.

"Yes, my lord." Severus had spent hours with Hermione and the Pensieve, learning to imitate Higgenbottom's voice.

"You can develop something stronger, can't you?" asked the Dark Lord. He knew full well that his current potions maker was not even the shadow of what he'd once had. Severus was one of the top potions makers in the world. Of the twenty some odd potions makers scattered around the world, Severus was one of the top three. Voldemort knew that Higgenbottom was just a regular potions maker, more an assistant than an actual developer of potions. But he'd needed someone after Snape's death, and the man was already a Death Eater. As long as Higgenbottom could follow instructions found in the potions books in the Dark Lord's extensive library, Voldemort would have to make do with the man.

"I can work on developing something stronger from the current potion. I...have read several articles as of late and believe something can be made."

"Then do it." Voldemort then turned and walked away. Before he left the room, he grabbed hold of Dolohov by the neck. "I want you to leave him be until he finishes developing that potion. Do you understand?"

Dolohov nodded. "Yes my Lord."

Voldemort pushed him away roughly. "You can torment him once he is finished." He then left the room.

Dolohov looked towards the potions maker and smiled.

Severus noticed the other man smiling at him and briefly used Legilimency. *'Ah, so Dolohov has been told by Voldemort to leave me alone until the stronger stamina potion is developed.'* He thought to himself. It would take Severus very little time to make the potion stronger, it was very elementary for him. But he and Hermione had already discussed ideas for a potion that would erode the Dark Lord's magic in time for the final battle. Severus now wondered if that idea could be combined with this stamina potion perhaps create a new potion that only gave a false sense of strength. He would have to talk to Hermione about it.

As Dolohov left the room, Severus turned towards the potions lab. He would make a slightly altered version of the current stamina potion to give the Dark Lord tonight, and then work on a new potion with Hermione once he arrived back at Hogwarts. Just as he entered the hallway that led to the potions lab he looked back at Lucius, who had been watching him. They nodded towards one another ever so slightly; no one else noticed.

Lucius stood in his usual spot, knowing he was to wait for the Dark Lord's shopping list of "necessities." As he waited he was approached by Rodolphus.

"I said I would ask no questions, but I find myself wondering just what you are up to, Lucius," said Rodolphus.

Lucius looked at him, his face emotionless. "Don't bother yourself with what I am up to, Rodolphus. It is best for all of us that you know nothing more than what you already do."

"Bellatrix has told me that he plans on invading one of the major wizarding institutions before the end of the month. I know not if it is educational or financial. But he plans on taking prisoners." Rodolphus walked away, leaving Lucius in shock.

Again the Lestranges had surprised him.

~*~*~*~*~*~*

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. I'd like to move things along so I may skip ahead a couple of weeks.

Also, I used an on-line translator for the title of the book. If it is incorrect, I had no other resource and welcome any corrections from those who speak German.

I also got the idea for the book from the final season of Angel. Wesley had access to a library of books that would answer his questions in much the same fashion. I thought it would be something interesting to have Lucius give Ginny a book like that.

Thank you for reading.

Chapter 13 ? A Manual, An Offer And A Bamboo Rod

Chapter 13 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

Thank you once again to those of you who have taken the time to read this story and leave me such lovely reviews.

As you will notice in this chapter, I have moved things along a bit.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

Thanks as always to June for all of her help and suggestions.

Chapter 13 A Manual, An Offer And A Bamboo Rod

Three weeks passed and all seemed well.

Severus and Hermione found a way to slowly infuse Voldemort's stamina potions with a special additional mixture that kept him strong, yet would enable the Order at the proper moment to cast a simple spell that would deplete him of half his magical power. It would allow Harry to meet him on a more even keel as well as keep the Dark Lord's possible victims on the battlefield safe from his full power.

While the potion modification was developed fairly quickly by Severus and Hermione, Severus' time at the Riddle home seemed to go as slow as pouring honey. After "Higgenbottom" began giving Voldemort the "new and improved" potion, Dolohov was allowed to once again torment the hapless minor Death Eater. The Dark Lord's meetings were now being held twice a week, and Severus would usually arrive in his rooms with welts on his back from the caning he'd taken at the hands of Dolohov.

Hermione was incensed every time he returned, but there was nothing either of them could do; Severus had to play the part of the docile potions maker. However, with the help of the book Lucius had given her, Ginny was able to prescribe a fast acting balm, which promoted quick healing and left no scarring. It was usually after she'd healed Severus that Hermione and her own potions maker had their most heated lovemaking sessions.

After Lucius informed Albus of the information Rodolphus had given him, the Order members readied themselves. As Minister of Magic, Arthur had the authority to post Aurors wherever he saw fit without having to explain his actions. By his instructions, St. Mungo's was watched day and night, as were all of the wizarding schools in the world.

Lucius continued to court Ginny, much to her immense pleasure. She'd never imagined dating an older man would be such a different experience than all the younger men she'd gone out with.

He was patient, and always seemed genuinely interested in listening to her ideas and views when they were together. Lucius never embarrassed Ginny by making her feel she was less intelligent than him. He'd also made only a few subtle flirtatious remarks about attempting to bed her, which made her wonder if he was even remotely interested in her that way. She worried that he only wanted to be her "friend" or "uncle" which was not what she wanted.

One evening, Ginny decided to ask her mother if all wizards Lucius' age were like that.

"Ginny, dear Lucius is just more experienced. Older men don't like to rush into things; they've been taught to act like gentlemen and treat women with respect," said Molly as she tried to comfort her daughter. "Besides, he would have to be blind not to think you were the loveliest young woman in the world."

Still, Ginny wondered how Lucius really felt about her. She would learn soon enough this very evening, in fact but the news would make her more nervous than happy.

That evening, Hermione was in Severus' rooms looking for an old manual he'd told her she could use for her class, when she thought she heard someone knocking at her own door. She ran down the hallway that connected both their rooms and opened her front door.

"Ginny!" Hermione was out of breath from running. "I didn't expect you here tonight. I thought you and Lucius would be doing something together, since it's Friday evening."

The young healer walked into the room. "I'm seeing him later. He's having dinner with Draco. He wants to tell him about us."

"I thought Draco already knew you were seeing each other," said Hermione.

Ginny shook her head.

"No, Lucius has been afraid to say anything. It hasn't been long since...since Narcissa's death," Ginny whispered. She and Draco had been friends for several years, having buried the hatchet long ago. She knew how hurt he'd been to know his mother was a concubine to Voldemort; however, the loss of his mother still haunted him. Ginny hoped that Draco would accept her in his father's life, despite her being a year younger than Draco.

Hermione wrapped her arm around her friend's shoulder and guided her into Severus' rooms.

"I'm sure there's nothing to worry about. Now, why don't you help me look for the manual I need for my class next week. I've been looking for the bloody thing for over half an hour."

They chatted together as they searched Severus' small library, distracting each other from their fears. Ginny was nervous about Lucius' dinner with his son; Hermione was tense because Severus had been Summoned to Voldemort's side this afternoon. Two women in love with two Death Eater spies, yet neither realized that they would soon learn something the men had kept a secret for many years. But that would come later.

~*~*~*~

At Malfoy Manor Lucius, Draco and Harry were sitting in the study and having drinks while waiting for Emil to usher them to the dining room. Lucius had asked Emil and Dari to make sure that all of Draco's favorite foods be served.

"I've missed this place," said Draco as he looked around the room.

"This is your home, Draco; it will always be your home. You are more than welcome to live here." Lucius looked towards Harry. "Harry, you are welcome here as well."

"We wouldn't want to intrude on you," said Harry. Truth be told, he and Draco had been looking for a larger place to live. While number twelve, Grimmauld Place belonged to Harry, he'd decided long ago to allow all Order members to stay in the home whenever they needed. At first Harry lived there fulltime, but he quickly found that privacy was an issue. When he and Draco became lovers, they moved into a small flat in Godric's Hollow, "small" being the operative word. After nearly three years together, they felt that more space was needed.

"You wouldn't be intruding," Lucius reassured him. "As you can see there is ample room, but you could always move into the guest house across the gardens." Lucius knew that the young men lived in a very small flat, as Ginny had mentioned it on several occasions. He didn't like knowing his son was living in such a small home.

Draco and Harry looked at one another, both knowing what the other was thinking. Draco voiced their concerns.

"What if Voldemort finds out we're living here?" said Draco.

Lucius shook his head.

"Draco, your grandfather warded this property with impenetrable magic. You are probably safer here than anywhere else in the wizarding world."

Emil walked into the study. "Dinner is ready."

The three wizards stood and followed the small elf to the door.

"Just think about it; you don't have to answer me now. But, before we go to dinner, there is something I need to speak with you about." Lucius stopped and looked at Harry. "Harry, I need to speak with Draco in private. We'll join you in a moment."

Harry smiled at Draco and nodded, then walked to the dining room with Emil.

"Is something wrong?" asked Draco, wondering why his father had sent Harry away. Could it be that his father wanted to tell him that he really didn't approve of his and Harry's relationship?

"Nothing is wrong, quite the opposite." Lucius smiled sadly. "I hope that you can understand me, Draco. I don't know what I would do at this point if you were to become angry or disappointed in me."

Draco frowned. "Father, I could never be angry at you. You've done so much to keep me out of danger. You and mother."

Lucius sighed heavily. "Draco, I need to tell you something. I've..." Lucius took a huge gulp of his drink and set the glass heavily on the table next to him. "I've been seeing someone."

Draco looked stunned.

"Please understand, son, I know the death of your mother is still weighing heavily on the both of us, but..."

Draco approached Lucius and placed his hand on his father's shoulder.

"It's all right, Father. I understand, I really do. She left us seven years ago."

Lucius looked at Draco and felt relief wash over his entire body.

"I loved your mother; despite all she did, I loved her." Lucius' eyes glittered with tears. While he knew his feelings for Ginny were growing, his heart would never completely let go of Narcissa; they'd had a child together.

"She would understand." Draco now began to lead Lucius out of the study and both men walked to the dining room.

"So, who's the lucky woman?" he asked, wanting to lighten the mood.

Lucius smirked. "One Miss Ginevra Weasley."

Draco's jaw dropped. Not only had his father found a woman who was intelligent and beautiful, but he'd found one half his age. He started laughing. "Father, you are a lecherous old man."

Lucius arched his perfect brow. "Not yet, son, but I hope to be soon."

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Severus had been called to the Riddle home alone. Voldemort wanted to have extra stamina potion for the weekend, and Severus guessed this meant that this was the weekend Rodolphus had warned them about.

He was almost finished making the extra doses of stamina potion Voldemort had requested of him. It was quite simple for him to add in the mixture he and Hermione made in order to weaken the Dark Lord's power during the final battle. The only problem Severus had was that, for the last two weeks, Antonin Dolohov had been given the nod by Voldemort to continue torturing "Higgenbottom."

Much to his dismay Dolohov was almost always there in the potions lab, watching him. Severus came to realize that it wasn't so much that Dolohov just wanted to cause him pain or rattle him, but that Voldemort didn't completely trust Higgenbottom. Dolohov was there to watch him on behalf of the Dark Lord, and the fact that he could annoy and hurt "Higgenbottom" while doing so, made things more pleasant for the sadistic wizard. The only glitch in that plan was that Dolohov was and had always been horrible at potions; he could watch Severus day and night without noticing anything wrong. The man couldn't tell water from urine, he was that bad. Whenever Dolohov asked what an ingredient was and why it was necessary, Severus very smoothly gave his answer.

But Severus was quickly growing tired of the wizard.

That evening, when he arrived, Dolohov decided to push the potions maker to the limit. Little did he know that Voldemort's potions maker was the "deceased" Severus Snape.

Dolohov held a thin rod of bamboo in his hand. He began hitting it against the table, each time getting nearer and near Severus' workstation.

"If you continue making those noises, I will not be able to concentrate," said Severus in the weak tone of the wizard he'd been impersonating.

"Then finish quickly so that I can use the rod on you and not the table," laughed Dolohov, who then began poking Severus in the back with the rod.

Severus held himself back. He had to restrain his temper not only because he needed to finish the potion for Voldemort, but because he could not give himself away. The Pensieve of Higgenbottom's memories clearly showed that the wizard was afraid of Dolohov, but Severus was growing weary of the act. He wasn't used to allowing someone else to abuse him in such a way. While he'd taken many a beating at the hands of Voldemort, he'd never allowed another Death Eater to so much as lift a finger against him. But this same routine went on every time he visited the Riddle home to make the Dark Lord's potions.

Just as he put his final ingredients in the potion, Severus heard the telltale whooshing sound of the rod coming at him and quickly felt the shooting pain on his back from the strike. Then he heard laughter.

Severus took a deep breath. He finished the potion, but he was also losing time. He needed to take another dose of Polyjuice Potion soon, yet he could not until Dolohov left the room.

Another hit came from Dolohov.

Severus was not only growing agitated but he felt himself changing to his own form.

"Stop hitting me and please allow me to finish the Dark Lord's potion. Leave," said Severus-as-Higgenbottom.

Again Dolohov laughed. "You've finished. I have watched you make this potion before. All you need to do now is allow it to settle, and it can do that on its own. Now it's my turn to have a bit of fun." He swung his arm hard, and again the bamboo rod connected with Severus' back.

Severus held himself against the table, his hands gripping the edge; he felt his body now begin to morph back to himself. Something unpleasant was about to happen.

"I am asking you one more time, don't do this. Please leave," said Severus as he kept his back to Dolohov.

Dolohov stepped forward and ripped the back of the thin robes Severus wore as Higgenbottom. He swung again and this time hitting Severus' bare back drew blood.

"I'm in the mood to see blood. I don't want to leave."

Severus, who had now finished morphing back to his own body, turned so quickly that to Dolohov, he was a mere blur of motion. He grabbed Dolohov by the throat and shoved him roughly against the wall.

Dolohov's eyes grew wide at the sight of a man who was supposed to be dead.

Severus narrowed his eyes and smiled. "That's too bad, Dolohov. Because now you can't leave."

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I hope you enjoyed this chapter. I'm building up to a few things so I thank you all for your patience.

Chapter 14 ? The Past Always Comes Back

Chapter 14 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

This chapter has a slightly slashy scene, not graphic or detailed. If you don't want to read it, skip from where Hermione and Ginny enter the italicized Pensieve scene, and go to the part where Severus takes another dose of Polyjuice Potion.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

A huge thanks to June for all of her suggestions in this chapter.

Chapter 14 The Past Always Comes Back

Dolohov had received Voldemort's permission to torment Samuel Higgenbottom, the minor Death Eater who had been making potions for the Dark Lord after Snape's death. He enjoyed beating the potions maker; in fact, Dolohov enjoyed torturing and killing anyone. He had almost killed Hermione then just a schoolgirl in the Department of Mysteries battle.

But right now, Antonin Dolohov was shaking. He'd always been afraid of Severus, and now the man had seemingly come back from the dead. The now very scared Death Eater wondered if it had been Severus all along as "Higgenbottom."

Severus kneed Dolohov in the scrotum, yet still held him by the throat and against the wall. The wandless Death Eater was now struggling for breath and in pain, but he could do little to fight back; his hands were scrabbling to try to pull Severus' hands from his throat.

"Surprised that I am here?" hissed Severus. "I take it you are. You realize of course that you really can't be allowed to leave here, don't you?"

Dolohov felt a warm liquid trickling down his leg and realized he'd just urinated all over himself.

Severus looked down and saw the large wet spot on the man's robes and smiled. He'd always known Dolohov to be a coward. "Due to the fact that we are in the Riddle home, I am afraid I will not be able cast the Killing Curse on your miserable self. You have left me with no other alternative than to come up with something a bit more... creative to rid the world of your presence."

Severus hit Dolohov in the jaw and allowed the man's now semi-conscious body to slide down the wall. He stepped back and crossed his arms. "Whatever will I do?"

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At Hogwarts, Hermione and Ginny were in the middle of their search for the manual Severus had allowed Hermione to use for her class, when Hermione noticed something on the very top shelf of the bookcase she'd already looked through.

"Did you find it?" asked Ginny as she noticed her friend make a beeline towards the corner of the room.

"No, but I'm wondering what this is doing up here." Hermione used a stepladder and climbed up to retrieve the object that caught her attention. She brought it down and placed it on the table.

"Is that a Pensieve?" asked Ginny. The small thinly carved bowl appeared to have been made of alabaster. Upon looking inside they could see the telltale liquid swirls that told them they had indeed found a Pensieve.

Hermione and Ginny looked at each other.

"I didn't know Severus had a Pensieve," said Hermione. "I wonder why he has it all the way up there."

Ginny cocked her head. "Probably because his girlfriend is a curious Gryffindor."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "We trust each other, Ginny. If he told me he had one I would respect that. But..."

"But what? He's got one and he had it up there for a reason," argued Ginny. "It might not even hold his memories maybe he's keeping it safe for someone else."

Hermione shook her head. "I know, but...we promised we would always be honest with each other. Why is this hidden away like that? Wouldn't you wonder?"

Ginny was silent. Truth be told, there were so many things about Lucius' past she wanted to know. If she had the opportunity to look through a Pensieve she would, if it

helped her to better understand the man she was growing deep feelings for.

"Hermione, Severus has been a spy for years. He's seen atrocities. Maybe that's what he's got hidden away."

Hermione looked down at the bowl, then up at the shelf she'd taken it from.

"I know you're right, Ginny. But I've just got to see. Maybe if I know what he's gone through, what he's seen, I can understand him better."

Ginny sighed. "Well, if you're going to look, I will too."

They both nodded and looked into the bowl, allowing themselves to be taken into the memories now coming to life.

They found themselves standing in the corner of a bedroom. In front of them they saw two figures now becoming clearer. The figures were Severus and Lucius, but they both looked younger than they did now. Hermione and Ginny looked at one another and then began to watch the two men.

"I can't do this," said Lucius as he turned away from Severus and leaned his head against the cold stone wall.

"Your wife is pregnant, and we both know that if the Dark Lord ever found out about what we've been doing he would kill us both with no hesitation." Severus stood behind Lucius and placed his hand on his friend's shoulder.

Lucius turned, his eyes filled with tears.

"We have no choice, Lucius," whispered Severus as he caressed Lucius' cheek. "Do you think it's so easy for me to walk away from this? From you?"

Hermione's jaw dropped, and Ginny's eyes were about to pop out of their sockets. They both held on to each other's hands tightly.

"You have been my only comfort all of these years throughout this madness," Severus said softly.

Lucius leaned his forehead against Severus' and sighed.

"And you mine," Lucius said as he placed his hand on Severus' neck and pulled his head away slightly. "I love Narcissa, but...you know that I love..."

Severus closed his eyes and nodded. "I know, I know, don't say it. I feel the same way, but there is no use saying it."

Lucius nodded. "You are right. Voldemort despises the thought of any kind of same sex relations. We've both heard him say it before: 'Being gay is almost as bad as being a Muggle.' If he knew that any of his Death Eaters had been engaging in that kind of activity he would not hesitate to kill them, even us."

As Severus made to leave, Lucius grabbed him by the arm and spun him around.

"No, I can't leave it like this." He pulled Severus close to him and kissed his lips roughly.

Ginny wasn't sure if the gasp she'd heard came from her own mouth or from Hermione's. Both women continued to look on as the men in their lives kissed each other passionately.

Severus unhooked Lucius' cloak as well as his own. They both began to tear away at each other's clothing. For a time they were clawing at each other, kissing, biting, and scratching. When they were both wearing only their undergarments, Severus stopped and held Lucius back. They were both breathing heavily, and looking deeply into each other's eyes.

"No, not like this. I don't want to remember it like this," Severus said.

Lucius smiled sadly, and guided Severus to the bed.

Both men quietly climbed into the bed and lay next to each other, caressing one another and kissing each other. Their actions were not rushed; it was as if they were memorizing every second of what was happening.

"We shouldn't be here," said Ginny quietly, yet she made no effort to move.

"Look at them, Ginny. Look at how beautiful they are." Hermione knew that what she was witnessing was something no one was ever meant to see, but she couldn't turn away.

Ginny had never seen Lucius naked; he'd been nothing but an absolute gentleman during their time together. His face hadn't changed much in appearance over the years, and she couldn't help but wonder if his body still looked as he did now in front of her.

The friends watched as the Pensieve-Severus and Pensieve-Lucius took hold of each other's undergarments and slid them off.

"Oh my," said Ginny, as she saw both men's jutting erections.

"Goodness, Ginny. Lucius is just as...umm...talented as Severus." Hermione noticed that both men were quite well endowed. She knew Severus was a healthy eight, maybe nine inches, and seeing the looks of Lucius' own equipment, she guessed he was about the same.

They watched as both men took turns caressing and licking the other. Neither one seemed to ever dominate the other, both always seeming to surrender to the moment.

"Hermione, is Severus like that with you?" asked Ginny. She'd never thought that her former professor could be so gentle and sexy.

Hermione smiled. "Yes, he is." She saw Severus using Lucius' body much in the same way he used hers. She also noticed the way the blond wizard made Severus smile and moan with pleasure.

"You have quite a bit to look forward to yourself," said Hermione as she looked at Ginny. But she noticed her friend looking worried. Thinking they'd best get out now, Hermione took Ginny by the hand. Ginny looked to her, then suddenly they were both back in Severus' rooms at Hogwarts.

"Are you all right?" asked Hermione, now worried that Ginny might have been given too much of a shock. She knew that her friend had feelings for Lucius. She also knew Ginny's heart had been broken many times before, and she now wondered if seeing the newest man in her life in the arms of another was more than Ginny could bear.

Ginny smiled. "I'm fine. I should go." She walked towards the hallway that led back to Hermione's room.

Hermione came after her and stopped her before she reached the front door.

"Ginny, what we saw happened a long time ago, before they ever met us. And, well...I suspect that they still might feel close towards one another, but I don't think you have to worry about anything like that happening between them. After all, they're pursuing us now, not each other."

The redhead was silent as she reached out to hold onto the doorknob.

"Ginny," Hermione said as she placed her hand on her friend's wrist.

Ginny looked at her. "It's all right, Hermione. I've always felt there was something between them, from the way they look and talk to one another. Look at Severus the next time you mention Lucius; his eyes light up. It's the same way with Lucius."

Hermione knew just what Ginny was talking about. She'd suspected something herself, but the two men had known each other for years and she knew they had been close friends when they were younger.

"I know, I've noticed. But I also know that Severus loves me. And that same light I saw in his eyes in the Pensieve when he looked at Lucius, I see when he looks at me now. He doesn't love Lucius now the same way he loves me."

Ginny shook her head. "I don't doubt that Severus loves you."

"Are you bothered by the fact that Lucius had sex with another man? Would it have been easier to see Lucius have sex with another woman instead?"

"No, of course not, Hermione. It doesn't matter to me about his past lovers as long as he doesn't expect me to share him with anyone now."

"Are you jealous of Severus because he and Lucius spend time together?"

"No, I know Severus is committed to you. Still, I just wonder."

"What do you wonder, Ginny?" asked Hermione gently.

"I wonder if Lucius has any more love to give." Ginny opened the door and left. As she walked up out of the cold dungeons she wrapped her arms around herself. She knew deep down in her heart, now after having watched the two men in the Pensieve, that while their sexual relationship was a thing of the past, Lucius and Severus still had a deep love for each other. She also knew that Lucius had always loved Narcissa as well, even after they had stopped having sex. Sadly, she wondered if there was any room in Lucius' heart for her. How many lovers could a man love deeply and uniquely? And for how long? Ginny wanted a "forever" love, not just for a few months or years.

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After taking another dose of Polyjuice Potion, Severus was readying himself to leave the Riddle home when he heard a knock on his door. It was Wormtail.

"Master says he will need his potion soon." Peter was still a young wizard, but he looked three days older than dirt. The years spent serving the Dark Lord so closely on top of the guilt he began to feel several years ago for all he'd done against Harry's parents and even his own friends were just too much for him.

"I have it ready." Severus-as-Higgenbottom took the potion from the table and handed it to the short and rotund wizard. He noticed Peter looking at the chair in the corner.

"I don't remember seeing that chair in here before." Peter was the one who often set up and cleaned the potions lab. He knew that there was only one stool in the room. He also knew every bit of furniture in the Riddle home, and this chair didn't look like anything he'd seen before. It had odd markings on it. As he approached the chair he noticed the wood grain seemed to have some sort of drawing on it, a face.

"Perhaps you forgot about it. It's not a very noteworthy or useful chair, but it's been here ever since I began working in this room," said Severus as the meek Higgenbottom.

Peter nodded; he knew that sometimes his memory failed him. It was more than likely he'd simply forgotten about the chair, what with all the important details he needed to remember. Knowing he needed to take the potion to Voldemort quickly, he decided to leave things be.

"Give me the potion. The Dark Lord will be finished washing himself soon. He will want this waiting for him. I must also get him some wood for his fire."

Severus smiled. "It is quite cold outside and this chair is of no use to me. Far better to use this to warm the Master's room." He waved his wand and the chair was thrown against the wall and broke easily.

Peter turned and began looking around the room.

"What is it?" asked Severus.

"Did you hear that?" said Peter as he felt his body shiver. "It sounded like..."

"Like what?" asked Severus, but he knew full well what Peter was talking about. He'd discreetly cast a Muffliato on Pettigrew, but that only filled the rat's ears with an unidentifiable buzzing, so that he couldn't understand what Dolohov was saying.

Peter laughed nervously. "It sounded like a man groaning in pain, a sort of muffled groan."

Severus picked up the scattered pieces of wood and placed them in Peter's arms.

"Nonsense, there is no one else here but you...and me." Severus coldly looked at the pieces of wood, one of which had an etching of an eye that seemed to be staring straight at him.

As Peter left, Severus took one final look around the lab. He picked up a set of robes he'd moved under the table, as well as the bamboo rod and a wand. Severus threw them all into the fire and watched them burn. He thought about the Muggles and wizards Dolohov had tortured, and Molly Weasley's two brothers who had been killed by Dolohov in the first war. They were now avenged.

Tonight, Severus would go home to Hermione and celebrate. After Wormtail finished putting the last of the pieces of broken "chair" into Voldemort's fire, there would be no trace left of him; no one would ever hear of Antonin Dolohov again.

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I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Thank you for reading.

I'd also like to thank harrypotterfan2005 for her idea regarding the pensieve. I had wanted to do a flashback scene between the men and her suggestion worked very well and allowed Hermione and Ginny to witness their past relationship.

Chapter 15 - Confessions - Part One

Chapter 15 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

This chapter as you can see is part one of two so there will be more of the two couple in the next chapter.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

Thanks as always to June for all of her help and suggestions.

Chapter 15 Confessions - Part 1

Lucius managed to convince Draco and Harry to stay the night. He told them Emil had already prepared the guesthouse for the two young wizards, and then he bid them both good evening.

The guesthouse was four times the size of Draco and Harry's tiny flat. It had a spacious living area, a gourmet kitchen, a small bedroom with a bathroom next to it, and a master bedroom that had its own master bath. There was even a small private patio in the rear.

When Draco and Harry walked into the small house, they looked at each other and knew that when they returned to their flat, it would be to pack up their belongings, because this was their new home.

Back at the main house, Lucius wondered why Ginny hadn't shown up yet. She promised to stop by earlier that evening, but it was nearly eleven and he hadn't heard from her.

"Master, is there anything more you wish from us this evening?" asked Emil.

"No, Emil. I think I will just stay up a while longer. You may all retire." Lucius smiled at the small elf as he left the room. Lucius briefly thought to go into the study and have a glass of brandy, but decided against it and started to walk up the stairs to his room. Before he could take even walk up two steps he heard a loud knocking on the front door. He furrowed his brow and walked towards the door. It was late, and people rarely just showed up at his door. While he wasn't worried that it might be anyone dangerous, he was curious as to whom it might be.

"Ginny," he said in surprise. Ginny usually arrived by Floo. "I'd almost given up hope that you would come by." Lucius leaned forward to kiss her mouth, as he usually did, but Ginny moved so his kiss caught her cheek.

"I'm sorry, I lost track of time." Ginny walked inside, her eyes averted from him.

Lucius looked after her. She'd thrown him slightly off-kilter with her demeanor. Usually she greeted him with a smile and a bit more enthusiasm.

"Well, the important thing is you are here now." Lucius approached her. "I've been thinking about you all day." He reached out to touch her cheek, but Ginny turned away from him. Now Lucius was worried. He thought quickly about their last conversation. He didn't recall saying anything to make her angry.

"Lucius, I need to speak with you about something." Ginny's fingers were twisting the bottom of her blouse. Lucius noticed and knew it was a sign of her being nervous.

"All right." He followed her into the living room where they both sat and remained silent for several minutes.

Ginny now began to now iron her twisted section of blouse with her hands. She took a deep breath and looked at Lucius.

"I went to Hogwarts earlier. Hermione and I were searching for a manual Severus was going to let her use for a class." Ginny wondered if she sounded as nervous as she felt. "We found...a...a Pensieve."

Lucius' entire body immediately stiffened. Ginny noticed.

"She... we...um...we looked inside." Ginny looked at him, wondering how he would react.

"And what did you see?" asked Lucius, knowing full well she'd seen the Pensieve that Severus kept of their last time together, a Pensieve that he himself had a duplicate of.

Ginny swallowed hard. "You were with Severus, and you were kissing and touching each other."

"Is that all you saw?" he asked softly.

"Yes, we didn't see anymore. We left just before... you did anything else."

Lucius was silent. Just hours ago, he'd told Draco about Ginny, and he expected to share the good news with her tonight; the last thing he ever thought he would be discussing with Ginny was his past relationship with Severus. While she and Hermione had both invaded their privacy, Lucius realized it was only a matter of time before the women found out; he and Severus had both expected that the explanation would come later, or "when the time is right" as Severus described it. Lucius knew he needed to explain his relationship with Severus to her carefully so that she understood the complexity of it all.

Ginny mistook Lucius' silence for anger. Feeling she'd ruined any possible future she could have had with him by allowing her curiosity to get the better of her, she decided to leave.

"I'm sorry. We shouldn't have looked; it was wrong of us." Ginny stood. "I should go." Before she made it to the hallway Lucius stood and grabbed her by the arm, spinning her around.

"How did you feel when you saw us?" he asked gently, not wanting to frighten her.

"I...I don't know," stammered Ginny.

Lucius raised his brows. "I don't believe you." Lucius pulled her towards the corner and blocked her path. "How did you feel?" he repeated.

"Shocked, angry, sad," said Ginny as she felt tears filling her eyes.

"Shocked?"

Ginny nodded. "I've never seen two men doing what you were doing. The most I've ever seen Harry and Draco do is peck each other on the cheek or hold hands."

"Angry?"

"About what you were doing to Severus." Ginny felt her cheeks growing warm. She was both embarrassed, yet turned on when she thought of the things she'd seen in the Pensieve. "I've imagined you doing those things to me, and I was angry to see you with him. I wanted it to be me."

Lucius felt relieved. At least he knew that she didn't hate him. The very fact that she wished she'd been in Severus' place told him she felt something for him. The last item still worried him, though.

"Why did you feel sad?" he asked.

Ginny sobbed, and wiped her eyes.

"You loved him. You probably still do to a degree. I could see in your eyes how much you both cared for one another. I've never been loved like that." Ginny bowed her head, ashamed that she was so envious of the two men, and ashamed that not even her ex-fiance had loved her like that. Then she looked at Lucius and sobbed. "And then there is your wife."

Ginny rushed past him, trying to get away. Lucius caught her and wrapped his arm around her waist, keeping her from going any further.

"My wife is gone, Ginny. I loved her and will always hold a place in my heart for her, but I am not now consumed by love for her or by grief, guilt, or regret," he said, feeling his own emotions now making their way to the surface. He held Ginny close to him. "And Severus well, Severus and I are... complicated."

"And Draco? Did you tell him tonight about me?"

"He's fine with the news. Draco thinks you are intelligent and beautiful, and he is happy for the both of us." Lucius knew this was not the time to tell her that Harry and Draco would likely be moving into the guesthouse.

Ginny felt her legs give away slightly as Lucius held her. She felt his warm breath against her cheek as he held her. His strong arms tightened around her.

They stood in the same spot for almost five minutes, until Lucius loosened his grip around her waist.

She turned and looked at him. There had been so much sadness in his life as of late, and she could see all of it reflected in his eyes.

"Tell me that you are not leaving me," said Lucius. "Tell me what you want of me, Ginny, and I will endeavor to give it to you." He wiped her tears away with the pad of his thumb.

Ginny placed her hand on his chest. His heart was beating so hard she felt as though she held his life in her hand.

"I just want to know that you have room for me in here," she said, as she looked down at her hand covering his heart. "Not just for a week, or a month, or even a year or two."

Lucius took her hand and held it against his lips. Severus had told him about Ginny's recent broken engagement with Seamus Finnigan, and he guessed her insecurity had something to do with that. Later, he would have to thank his fellow Slytherin for that bit of information. Now, it was time for Lucius to concentrate on his beautiful redhead.

"There is an infinite amount of room for you in my heart, Ginny." He kissed her lips lightly, then pulled back and whispered in her ear. "And I will not allow you to think that I cannot love you."

He picked her up and walked with her up the staircase, fully prepared to show the young witch how he truly felt about her.

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Severus was still elated over the death of Antonin Dolohov. Before he entered his rooms, he'd taken a moment to go into a small wine cellar Albus had set up for him a few years ago; he picked out a Shiraz that he wanted to share with Hermione.

As soon as he walked into his study, he noticed something out of the corner of his eye. His Pensieve was visible. It was normally pushed further back on the very top shelf of the bookcase, but now it was almost to the edge. He looked around the room, and noticed it was in slight disarray. Severus remembered he'd given Hermione permission to use a manual she'd needed for her class, but... he looked up at the Pensieve again. He approached the bookcase and reached his arm up, then carefully pushed the shallow stone basin towards the back of the bookcase, no longer visible to anyone who entered.

Holding the bottle of wine in his hand, he walked out of the study and wandered up the hallway connecting his and Hermione's rooms.

When he reached her rooms, he noticed light streaming from the bottom of the door to her bedroom.

After Ginny had left, Hermione sat in her room for the rest of that evening, staring into the fire. As she sat, she played the scene of Severus and Lucius over and over in her mind and smiled. All of these years, she'd felt sorry for Severus, thinking he'd never known love, thinking he'd never been shown even the slightest bit of compassion or tenderness but now she knew she'd been wrong. He had been loved; it was evident in the scene she and Ginny witnessed in the Pensieve.

Hours later, she took a long shower and prepared herself for bed. Hermione

had almost dozed off when she heard the bedroom door opening. She turned her head to see Severus standing at the doorway, holding a bottle of wine.

"Severus." Hermione got out of bed and walked towards her wizard. She stopped as she noticed the serious look on his face. "Is there something wrong? Did everything go well tonight?"

Severus walked past her and placed the bottle on the night table, and then turned back to her.

"Everything went well," he said quietly. "There was an...incident, but it was taken care of."

Hermione was beginning to feel uneasy. He wasn't his usual self. Normally he would have greeted her with a kiss, and describe what he'd done that evening.

Severus strode to the fireplace and stood in front of it, staring into the flames.

"What did you do this evening?" Severus looked at her, and Hermione instantly knew that she'd been found out.

"What gave me away?" she asked. It was enough she had invaded his privacy, the last thing she was going to do now was add to the pile of deceit by denying she had even done anything wrong.

Severus smirked. "You didn't push the Pensieve far enough to the back of the bookcase. It's not usually visible, which makes me wonder how you saw it in the first place."

"I was looking for the manual you said you would lend me. I had the room lit more than it usually is so I could search better, and I was across the room. I looked up and thought I saw something and went to see what it was."

"Ah yes." Severus now moved to the chair next to the fireplace and sat down. "The ever present Gryffindor curiosity."

Hermione was silent as he stared at her.

"I take it you looked into my Pensieve?"

Hermione now felt a tightening in her belly as she readied herself for the next part of her confession.

"Ginny was here also; we both looked."

Severus rose quickly from his chair and walked around the chair, turning his back to her. Not only had Hermione broken his trust and invaded his privacy, but she had an accomplice; Lucius' privacy had also been breached. Severus was not only mortified but angry beyond belief.

"Severus, please. I'm sorry. I know we shouldn't have looked, but..."

"But what?" he yelled as he turned quickly.

Hermione jumped and took a step back. He was angry, and he had every reason to be.

"I just...Severus, I just wanted to understand you better." Hermione felt desperate. "I know you still suffer from what you did in the past. I hear you talking in your sleep." She felt tears welling in her eyes. They'd been friends for several years now, but this romantic stage of their relationship was still so new. It was still in a fragile state, where one wrong move could end it all in a split second. Hermione was afraid she'd made that move by looking into the Pensieve.

Severus sighed and ran his hand over his face. He looked at his lover and knew that what she'd done, while invasive, was done because of her desire to understand him better. It wasn't the same as when the fifth-year Harry Potter had invaded his Pensieve memory solely out of curiosity, with no affection.

"Hermione, if you felt that you needed to know more about me, then why didn't you simply ask?"

"You're a private man, Severus. I know you don't like talking about the things in your past."

"That's true, but you and I are together. There are things that you know about me no one else is privy to." He approached Hermione and took her hand. "If there is something I do not wish to tell you, it's for a reason. There are things in my past, Hermione, things that no one with a weak stomach should ever know of."

Hermione shivered. She realized that what she had seen in the Pensieve could have been much more disturbing than watching her lover with another man.

"I realize that now. Please forgive me." She looked into his dark eyes.

Severus held her hand and brought it to his lips to kiss, and raised his other hand to touch her cheek.

"You meant well, I know you did. But next time, just ask me if there is something you feel that you need to know."

Hermione nodded and smiled. He'd forgiven her; however, there was still the matter of what she'd seen in the Pensieve. She bit her lip and bowed her head.

"I gather you have questions for me about what you saw?" Severus lifted her head. He didn't sense that she was bothered by what she'd seen, but knowing Hermione, she was bound to have questions.

"You loved each other?" asked Hermione.

Severus nodded. "Yes, but the physical part of our relationship is far in the past."

"Do you both still feel that way?"

Severus held on to her hands and led her towards the bed. He sat on the edge of the bed and pulled her to sit on his lap.

"Lucius and I," he said as he kissed her cheek and wrapped his arms around her waist. "Well, we're complicated."

Hermione ran her fingers through his hair. What she'd seen in the Pensieve was two people with deep feelings for each other the kind of feelings that didn't just go away. Severus loved her, but she felt that deep down in his heart, he still loved the blond wizard.

"Yes, what I saw looked quite complicated." She caressed his cheek as she smiled at him. "Severus, I don't need to know about every single moment you and Lucius spent together. What I saw was enough to tell me all I need to know."

Hermione twisted herself so that she was straddling him, and then pushed him back onto the bed.

"You didn't tell me what happened to you this evening. What was the bottle of wine for?" she asked, wanting to change the subject now that they seemed to have both accepted the past.

"Just the usual. I brewed some potions, with our addition of course, before I received my usual whipping from Dolohov..."

Hermione crinkled her brows. "That bastard. Oh, I wish I could give him a taste of his own medicine."

Severus ran his hands up her thighs.

"He won't be bothering anyone again, don't worry," he said.

Hermione cocked her head. "Severus, what did you do?"

"I made him disappear."

Now Hermione was worried. She knew that the Riddle home was warded to make Voldemort aware of most dangerous magic done in the house, which made it impossible for anyone to cast any Unforgivable in the home.

"Severus, you didn't kill him, did you?" asked Hermione.

He shook his head. "Not exactly."

Now Hermione was confused. "Not exactly? Then what happened to him?"

Severus smiled. "Let's just say he went out in a blaze...of glory?"

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Don't worry, Severus won't let Hermione get away with changing the subject. They still have a bit more of the past to address, but I promise no angst.

Chapter 16 ? Confessions ? Part Two

Chapter 16 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

Thanks to all of the readers who have taken the time to continue to read this story, and many thanks to those of you who have taken a moment out of your day to leave me a review.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

Many thanks to June for all of her help with this chapter. Your suggestions and additions are always helpful.

Chapter 16 Confessions Part Two

Severus positioned himself between Hermione's thighs. He kissed her lips lightly as she moaned with pleasure. While his romantic actions proved he'd forgiven her for what she'd done, he felt that she at least owed Lucius and Ginny an apology. Her curiosity could very well have ruined their new relationship. So, because she had tried to change the subject from the Pensieve to Dolohov, Severus decided she needed a reminder.

"You know," he said as he kissed her, "that you owe Lucius an apology, don't you?"

Hermione grabbed his shoulders and pushed him away from her.

"Oh, no!" She sat up and looked at him. "Severus, I hadn't even thought about Lucius and Ginny." Hermione fell heavily back onto the bed and covered her face with her hands. "She said she was fine, but I know Ginny left here feeling so unsure of everything." Hermione looked at Severus now staring down at her. "I shouldn't have let her leave here like that."

He sighed. "Hermione, I do understand why you felt you needed to look into my Pensieve, I honestly do. But, it was irresponsible of you to do so as well as allow Ginny to also view. You had no idea what was in the Pensieve; it could have been a cherished personal memory of you and me together."

Hermione had the sense to look as ashamed as she felt, every bit of it.

Severus smoothed her hair back and continued to look at her. She hadn't really told him how she felt seeing him with Lucius, and now he wondered.

"How much of us did you see?" he asked.

Hermione shifted her gaze and looked at the fire across the room.

"Enough to know you were both very comfortable with one another and that you cared deeply for each other as well," she said, still looking into the fire. Truth be told, she felt no jealousy towards the two men. She could have, but Hermione rarely gave in to feelings of jealousy because it wasn't logical to her. You either trusted the person you were with or you didn't. Besides, Lucius and Severus clearly weren't pursuing each other, so she had no reason to be jealous of Lucius, she reminded herself. It was illogical.

"Did that bother you? Seeing me like that with a man?"

"It was odd seeing you like that with someone who wasn't me. I'd always wondered if you had ever been involved with anyone in the past, but I never thought it would be a man," she confessed. "Have you been with many men, Severus?"

Severus laughed and shook his head. "I told you, it's complicated with Lucius and me. I've never been attracted to men, before or after him. I can't explain what brought us together exactly. I suppose we both needed something at the time we couldn't find outside of each other."

"What?" asked Hermione.

"Understanding, comfort, patience, acceptance, love." Severus played with the ribbon on her gown as he named his reasons for being with Lucius. "We first made our relationship a physical one when I was a new Death Eater, on a night when he and I had just barely escaped with our lives from a raid. We were hiding in an abandoned cottage, just the two of us, and things just happened; we hadn't been looking for anything. Lucius was already married to Narcissa at the time. He really wasn't in love with her at the beginning of their marriage. By the time she became pregnant with Draco, he was very much in love with her."

"And with you as well," added Hermione.

Severus smiled sadly.

"Yes, and me." He saw tears forming in her eyes, and wondered if perhaps she felt his relationship with Lucius was a threat to them now. He kissed her softly, to reassure her. "That was a very long time ago, Hermione. We were never together that way again, not after what you saw in the Pensieve. I will confess to having kissed him recently, but our feelings for each other have gone beyond the need of anything physical. Lucius and I have moved on. We are both happy with the decision we made. I love you, Hermione; please don't think that I don't."

"I know you love me. I'm not worried about your feelings for Lucius. I can't help but feel sad for you both, though." Hermione felt a tear escape her eye. While she had willed herself to not allow feelings of jealousy to overcome her, she couldn't help but feel sadness for the two men. "You and Lucius were so much in love in the Pensieve memory, and to have been in love and driven apart due to Voldemort's prejudice is unimaginable to me. But, I'm also glad things happened the way they did, or you wouldn't be here with me."

Hermione felt herself blush now, as she remembered the image of her lover together in bed with Lucius.

"Things happen for a reason. We needed each other during those times; we were each other's support. Lucius has always been there for me and always will be, as I am for him. But now, I have you, and you are so important to me, Hermione. I can't imagine myself without you." He kissed her, and then realized that even in the dimly lit room he could see a slight blush to her skin. He wondered if there was something else she wasn't telling him. He chuckled as he realized why she blushed.

"You haven't told me what you thought about seeing Lucius naked," he purred.

Hermione gasped.

"Severus, what makes you think I was staring at Lucius?" she said, trying her best to look appalled.

Severus knew his lover by now; she was curious in all facets. He arched his eyebrow, which was a sign to her that he didn't believe her.

"Well, I might have taken a peek."

He scoffed.

"All right, I took more than a peek." She laughed. "I don't know how I'll be able to face him again now that I've seen his...um..."

"Cock?" added Severus.

Hermione rolled her eyes, knowing she would probably see Lucius' dick in her head every time she saw him now.

"Oh, stop, unless you want me to be thinking of Lucius' cock while you're making love to me," she said, knowing that would get more than a rise out of him.

"Don't worry, by the time I get through with you this evening, the only cock you'll be thinking about for some time to come is the one attached to me."

They then resumed their previous intimate activity in bed, but Severus being a thorough and meticulous person just before he positioned himself at her entrance, he stopped.

"You do realize you are going to apologize to Lucius and Ginny for your irresponsible behavior, don't you?"

Hermione sighed in defeat, knowing she owed the other wizard and her friend an apology. Severus would have eventually told Hermione about his relationship with Lucius, of that she was sure of. She only hoped she hadn't ruined things for her friend.

"I know I do. I promise I'll talk to Ginny in the morning and then see if Lucius will see me. I just hope they can work things out."

Neither of them knew that Lucius and Ginny were at that moment trying to get past the issue of the former relationship the men had shared.

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Lucius had taken Ginny to his bedroom, not to seduce her but to emphasize that he wanted a closer relationship with her not with Severus. They needed to talk about so many things. He now wished he'd told her sooner about what he and Severus had shared, but their romantic relationship was still so new. He wasn't sure how or if she would even accept the revelation about Severus.

Not wanting to crowd her or frighten her, Lucius stood several feet apart from Ginny.

"I know you have questions and concerns, so whatever you wish to ask of me, I will answer honestly." He knew he was leaving himself open to just about anything, but he felt that it was the only way to assure Ginny that his feelings for her were genuine and that he wanted to be honest with her.

Ginny sat on the edge of the chaise next to Lucius' bed. This was a good sign; it told Lucius that she still wanted him, but she needed to know more before she'd be willing to go to the next step with him.

"I want to be clear on one thing though, Ginny. I will answer your questions about my relationship with Severus this one time. I have always planned on telling you about my past with him, but that is what it is, my past. If you and I are to have any kind of a future together, if that is what you wish to have with me, I need to know that we can both trust one another. As a Death Eater spy, I am distrusted by many and on both sides, so your trust is important to me. When I say my physical relationship with Severus is in the past, you must believe me; I will not have you doubting me each time I am away from you."

Ginny knew that what she and Hermione had done was an invasion of both men's privacy. She believed that, in time, Lucius would have been honest with her regarding his past and now he was opening himself up to her questions. He also made it clear that there was to be no rehashing of old events in the future. He was a Slytherin after all, so it was no surprise to her that he would want to be done with this now and move on. She didn't mind that. There was no point in dwelling in the past; after all, no good ever comes from it. Besides, she wouldn't want Lucius to ask her about her past boyfriends.

"You were married while you and Severus were together," said Ginny.

"Yes, I was. I wasn't in love with Narcissa when we married. We grew to love each other, though, and after I ended things with Severus, I was faithful to her until she chose to become the Dark Lord's concubine," answered Lucius, still standing in front of her and not moving to sit next to her.

"What I saw in the Pensieve, was that the last time you and Severus were together?" continued Ginny.

"Yes, in that way it was."

"Do you...do you ever feel that you want to be with him like that again?"

Lucius approached her slowly, then stopped. "No...we have both moved on. You know that he loves your friend Hermione, and I am happy for them both. My feelings for Severus have not changed, Ginny. I love him deeply. He was my lover for several years; I cannot stop feeling what I felt. But those feelings are different now. Now, he is one of my few true friends. There is no need for the physical aspect of what we used to have. I no longer seek comfort in his arms as I once did."

He knelt down in front of Ginny, but still did not touch her. "I seek comfort in your arms, Ginny. I wish to offer you the same. I ache for you, Ginny, to feel your warmth surround me, to have you by my side for as long as you will allow it." He did not mention marriage; it was too premature for that subject. But he hoped that his words "for as long as you will allow it" were enough to hint of his intent.

Ginny caressed his cheek and kissed his lips. After viewing the Pensieve, she initially thought Lucius was merely using her as a distraction, as someone to lessen the loneliness he felt at not having the two people he loved in his life Severus and Narcissa as they used to be. But his words now served to quell her fears. Understanding his past and present relationship with Severus helped allay the hesitation she'd felt in her heart upon entering the home earlier that evening.

"Do you love me, Lucius? Can you love me?" she asked.

"I can, and I do, Ginny. You have no idea how precious you are to me," Lucius brushed her long hair from her shoulders, then embraced her and held her tightly. He felt her heart beating against his chest.

"You won't change your mind?" asked Ginny, knowing she sounded like a foolish little girl, but she couldn't help it. So many times before she'd been told the same thing, and still she was alone.

Lucius stood and made her to stand with him, still holding her chastely. Once more, he was thankful Severus had told him about Ginny's recent broken engagement; of course she was fearful.

"I do not use words like that lightly," he reassured her as he ran his fingers through her long red hair. "Young men often believe that they can get what they want from a woman by saying things like that, and then brush themselves off when they have broken a woman's heart. They think that words are just that, words; and that as long as you don't feel them then it's all right to say them."

She leaned into his embrace. After a few minutes, she began rubbing his back gently, moving her hands down toward his waist. Slowly, she began pulling his shirt up. When she put her hands on his bare skin, Lucius knew she trusted him. Now they could move on.

Lucius guided Ginny to stand with him next to the bed, and he began to trace the neckline of her blouse lightly with his fingers. "I would never say something I did not feel, or mean. Rest assured, Ginny, if I tell you something, you will never have to wonder if there is a hidden meaning behind it."

Both Severus and Lucius were brutally honest at all times in their private lives. It was this honesty that made them such good friends from the beginning.

Lucius despised playing games. Because Narcissa had played a dangerous game for seven years as Voldemort's concubine, Lucius and Draco had both been robbed of the knowledge that she had never stopped loving them. Lucius had to play life-or-death games with Death Eaters, not trusting anyone; he did not want games with Ginny.

Ginny smiled, relationships were often so complicated, as oftentimes one person held back from the other for fear of being misunderstood. She doubted that she would ever misunderstand Lucius; he'd just proven tonight that he would answer openly. But he would not answer the same question again and again.

"Is there anything else you want to ask me about what you saw in the Pensieve?" asked Lucius, as he began to unbutton her blouse.

Ginny looked at his fingers as they moved from button to button.

"I did see you and Severus naked." She smiled as Lucius stopped and looked at her, his eyebrows raised in mock surprise.

"Goodness, what a shock that must have been." He kissed her neck. "How will she ever look at her former professor in the eye again."

Ginny gasped. "I hadn't thought it that way! I've seen Professor Severus Snape naked!"

Lucius laughed. "Come now, don't tell me that the young women of Hogwarts never wondered what their professor was hiding under those teaching robes."

"I was too busy trying to get Harry to notice me." Ginny blushed. "I must say, though, it was quite an erotic scene now that I think about it. You," Ginny said as she pushed Lucius onto the bed and straddled him. "And Severus, both naked." She tore his shirt open and began to kiss his chest. "Kissing each other, touching each other."

Lucius realized she was aroused by the thought of his and Severus' last night together.

"You know, I have my own Pensieve of that night. Perhaps if you are a good girl I will allow you to have a peek all the way." He rolled her over onto her back, and he lay on top of her as she wrapped her legs around his waist.

Soon they would both be naked themselves, and all talk of Pensieves would be left for another time. This was their time.

~*~*~*~*~

Early the following day, Rodolphus had managed to send Lucius an owl with further information, which confirmed Severus' belief that Voldemort's attack would be this weekend. Severus and Lucius contacted the Order and informed them of the news. Thanks to Rodolphus' message, it was relatively easy for the Order to narrow down the places they needed to guard. It was clear that Voldemort would be attacking at least one Muggle town and perhaps go as far as attacking St. Mungo's.

Neither "Higgenbottom" or Lucius was called. Voldemort decided to leave the grunt work to several new Death Eaters who were eager to prove themselves to the Dark Lord, who would remain at his estate.

Still, Severus and Lucius remained on the alert. Hermione did not contact Lucius to apologize for the Pensieve incident, as Severus assured her that the upcoming attack had higher priority.

On Sunday evening, Lucius was having dinner with Ginny at his home. He'd informed her that Draco and Harry were moving into the guesthouse. He assured Ginny that Draco had no problem with their relationship, and was actually quite pleased that they were together.

During dinner Hermione Flooed Lucius and apologized for the Pensieve incident. Lucius thought it amusing that she wouldn't look him in the eye and blushed the entire time. He was even more amused when he invited Hermione and Severus to come through and have some drinks with him and Ginny, to celebrate the start of their officially becoming a couple. Ginny had much the same reaction to Severus. Neither woman could look at either man without blushing.

As the evening wore on, they wondered if perhaps Voldemort had changed his plans for the weekend. Things took their normal path and all thoughts of naked men in Pensieves were left behind as the four friends enjoyed a night of conversation.

"After all," whispered Ginny to Hermione, "we're grown women now; a penis is a penis."

On the other side of the room, Lucius whispered to Severus, "Would it bother you if I allowed Ginny to view the rest of the Pensieve memory? I think she would enjoy it as part of foreplay!" The men chuckled, although Severus asked for time to consider the request, as Hermione now considered his penis as her "property."

"Pudding!" Eli announced as he brought in a tray of dessert. "Custard and spotted dick!"

The men laughed heartily as the women gasped and turned red.

Later that evening, Voldemort's forces only attacked St. Mungo's. There were few injuries, thanks in part to the Aurors stationed throughout the hospital, but the Death Eaters had taken hostages with them.

Voldemort was ecstatic upon their return. A raid had actually gone well, and now in front of him he had prisoners. As he stared out into the crowd of unfortunate people, he noticed a young man who looked very familiar. He smiled and called Bellatrix.

"Yes, Master?" said Bella as she approached the throne.

"I have noticed you a bit listless lately," he said as he looked at the young man. "I have something for you."

Voldemort pointed to the brown-haired young wizard, and his Death Eaters immediately took him from the crowd and dragged him to the Dark Lord's feet.

Bellatrix looked down confusedly at the young man.

"My lord? What would you have me do to him?" she asked, not wanting to hear the answer.

Voldemort smiled and looked down at the young man.

"What is your name, boy?"

The young wizard shivered and looked up. "Neville, Neville Longbottom."

Bellatrix tried to hide her shock, but Voldemort knew her too well.

"I see you are surprised, Bella. I was too when I saw him. What a treat this is, no?" asked Voldemort, who was now quite pleased with himself. He would soon have a show. It had been a long time since Bellatrix had amused him by killing someone with her ability to cause pain.

"Yes, my lord, a treat," said Bella numbly. It was true that she had enjoyed torturing Neville's parents, but that was years ago. Now, she was the woman who still grieved for her dead sister and brother-in-law, both killed by the Dark Lord. Bellatrix was a woman who now constantly wondered when it would be her turn to die at the hands of the Dark Lord.

As the rest of the prisoners were herded to the rear of the room, Neville was left at Voldemort's feet.

"Well, woman? What are you waiting for?" Voldemort sat on his throne. "Entertain me!" he demanded.

Bella held up her wand and looked sadly at Neville.

"Crucio!"

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Thanks for reading.

And thanks to June once again, especially for the "spotted dick" line.

Chapter 17 ? Redemption

Chapter 17 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

I'd like to thank everyone who is keeping up with this story. I appreciate your reviews and your kind words.

I have included at the bottom a lovely drawing that Lady Talon made of Ginny, as she had been perusing through a magazine one day and was thinking of my story when she felt inspired to draw it.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

Thanks as always to June for all of her help and suggestions.

Chapter 17 Redemption

The Dark Lord had ordered Bellatrix to entertain him by torturing Neville, but he was preoccupied by talking to Death Eaters about tonight's successful raid, so he failed to notice that his concubine's torture of the young man was done half-heartedly.

After about twenty minutes, Voldemort caught sight of an attractive woman in the back of the room who was part of the captured group of hostages from the St. Mungo's attack. He waved Bellatrix off, and ordered Neville and the other hostages to be taken to the cellar. As the captives were dragged away, the woman was singled out, tied up, and taken to the Dark Lord's room.

"Occupy yourself for a few hours," said Voldemort to Bella, as he was walking to his room.

Bellatrix could hear the woman hostage screaming as the door was closed. She stood there, looking lost.

Most of the other Death Eaters in the room had shuffled away. The eager new Death Eaters felt they had proven themselves, but were disappointed that the Dark Lord hadn't been more appreciative of their efforts. The older Death Eaters were talking amongst themselves in hushed tones; they knew Voldemort did not always call the same men on raids, but they always wondered if it meant a sign of approval or disapproval. Had they been called on the raid because the Dark Lord was suspicious of their loyalty? They also noticed that Lucius was not part of the group and wondered if he'd lost the Dark Lord's favor ever since the death of his wife.

Rodolphus had been observing his wife from across the ballroom all evening. Instead of joining in conversation with the older Death Eaters, who had been in the Dark Lord's service as long as the Lestranges had been, he now approached his wife.

"Come, Bella." Rodolphus took his wife's hand and looked into her sad eyes. "Lay with me for a while; we have been apart much too long."

Bellatrix nodded and allowed her husband to lead her away. Voldemort would be occupied for most of the evening and she wanted to feel the caresses of her husband once again. They would not speak of the future. It was enough for now that they were together tonight alive.

The days passed, and it was now midweek. As Lucius and Severus expected, they did not hear from Rodolphus, who would only risk sending an owl if he had information they could not obtain any other way. Neither the Order or the Ministry were able to trace any of the hostages through locator spells, which told Lucius and Severus the hostages were most likely at the Riddle estate.

The Ministry had finally been able to make a list of those suspected to have been taken from St. Mungo's. On that list was Neville Longbottom's name.

Ginny had been called in by one of her old colleagues, to help on a particularly difficult case. She was very happy to now be in the position of working to build her own

private practice, and she was consulted by several of her old friends at St. Mungo's. Ginny loved doing what she did and she strived to be the best healer possible. After examining the patient and suggesting a treatment that would help the man on his road to recovery (the book Lucius had given her helped greatly), she took her leave.

She walked down the hallway towards the exit, when her eye caught sight of a notice posted on the bulletin board. It was the names of the missing. She drew a deep breath when she saw Neville's name on the list. Once outside she immediately Apparated to Malfoy Manor.

She ran up the path towards the front door. Just before she reached the door, it opened. Draco and Harry had been in the front sitting room and had seen her running across the grounds.

"Ginny, are you all right?" asked a concerned Draco.

Harry took hold of her hand and led her inside. Tears were streaming down her face, and the two young men wondered what might have upset her so.

"It's horrible!" she cried.

"What is? Ginny, what's happened to you?" asked Harry.

"Neville, he's one of the missing from the attack at St. Mungo's. I saw his name on a hospital bulletin board as I was leaving my consultation," said Ginny, now hysterical.

"Oh, no." Harry looked at Draco.

"Emil," called Draco. Emil popped into the room. "Please, bring Ginny some water and a calming draught."

They took her into the sitting room and sat her on the couch. As Emil came back with her water and draught, Lucius stepped through the Floo. He'd been at the Ministry all morning, as he too as a Board member and major hospital donor had been given a list of the missing from St. Mungo's.

"Ginny, love. What's happened?" He approached Ginny, and kneeled down in front of her. He looked at her to make sure she wasn't physically harmed.

"Our friend Neville is one of the missing," said Harry.

Ginny drank the calming draught Emil handed her and then the water.

"I'm sorry," said Lucius. He caressed her hand as the draught served to calm her nerves. Lucius sat next to her and put his arm around her shoulder.

"Isn't there anything you can do?" asked Draco as he looked at his father.

Lucius shook his head. "Unfortunately, I cannot approach the Riddle home unless I am called. I suspect that is where all of the captured are being held."

"What about Lestrage?" asked Harry. "Can't you owl him?" A few Order members had been informed that Rodolphus was supplying extra information in order to help their cause.

Again Lucius shook his head. "No, I can't risk that owl being intercepted." He rubbed Ginny's back. "I'm going to go have a talk with Severus. He and Albus were alerted by Arthur via Floo from his office. If Severus is called he can also look for your friend."

Ginny and the boys nodded. All they could do was wait.

That very afternoon, the Order had called an impromptu meeting at number twelve, Grimmauld Place. At the same time, Severus rather, Higgenbottom was called back to the Riddle home. Severus suggested to Hermione that she wait for him at Grimmauld Place, so she would at least be kept company by her friends. He knew that she was upset about Neville and he didn't want her to be alone.

Albus, Arthur and Lucius would also be at the old Black house. Lucius had been assisting the Headmaster with a small model he was making of the Riddle home. Knowing its vulnerable spots, as well as the grounds surrounding the home, would help the Order when they were ready to attack. They only hoped that Voldemort wouldn't make his own move before then. Lucius suspected that he hadn't been called as much lately due to the fact that Voldemort no longer had Narcissa to flaunt in his face. The extra time however helped him assist the order more.

Severus-as-Higgenbottom walked into the Riddle home and immediately approached the Dark Lord as he sat on his throne.

"Higgenbottom, I need a sleeping draught. What I have been taking is no longer sufficient. Make me something stronger. I need my sleep in the coming days."

Severus bowed and walked to the lab. He suspected more attacks, yet he had an ill feeling in the pit of his stomach that Voldemort meant much more. For a long time he had expected that there would be an attack on Hogwarts, and he knew that time was quickly approaching.

While Severus-as-Higgenbottom worked in the lab, Death Eaters were filling the ballroom. Bellatrix had spent one night with her husband several days prior and she lamented having to leave him to return to Voldemort. After the loss of her sister, she began a downward spiral of deep regret regret that she'd never told Narcissa how much she'd meant to her, regret for having allowed herself to be seduced by the Dark Lord into this world of hate and prejudice. But most of all, Bella felt regret that she would never be with her husband again. She'd made the best of her night with Rodolphus, even whispering words of love that had never come easy for her in the past.

Bellatrix was tired, and all she wanted now was peace. She was readying herself to join the others in the ballroom, but she needed one more thing. She walked to the fireplace mantle and took hold of the key ring she'd given Voldemort many years ago. She took the key to the Black home and tucked it into her robe pocket, then walked out the door.

The ballroom was brimming with activity. There were three groups of Death Eaters, all having their own victims to torture. Directly in front of Voldemort stood one woman and two men; Neville was one of the men.

Bellatrix stood just to the right of Voldemort. She looked around the room, hoping to spot Rodolphus. She spotted Higgenbottom, Voldemort's new potions maker, standing in the dark corridor that led to the potions lab. Briefly she thought back on Severus and felt another regret; she had always liked Severus even though she thought him a bit off-putting at times. As she continued to scan the room, Bella finally saw Rodolphus. He was at the far end of the room, standing next to Thomas Nott. She waited for him to look her way, and when he did she smiled. He nodded slightly and touched his hand to his chest, a sign that he saw her and that he loved her.

Her attention was taken away as she heard a scream of pain that she recognized. Voldemort had now chosen Neville as his victim.

"Did you ever think you would meet the same fate as your parents?" mocked Voldemort.

Neville felt every single nerve in his body as though it were on fire. He felt the burning of his tears as they fell down the sensitive skin of his cheeks. He lifted his head and looked at the wizard who was the cause of so much pain and despair. Neville would die today, he was sure of it. His parents died three years ago, following the death of his grandmother. At the very least, wherever he wound up, he hoped to be reunited with the parents he had never had an opportunity to really know.

Voldemort cast hex upon hex on the young man, continually alternating between Slicing Hex and Cruciatus Curse, back and forth. So entrenched was he in his torture of the young man, he never realized the woman standing next to him was growing weary of watching the young wizard suffer. Her mind was replaying her own torture of his parents.

"No," whispered Bellatrix, as she shook her head and reached into her pocket. "No, no, no, no! Stop it!" she screamed. Bellatrix rushed Voldemort and shoved him away.

Voldemort lost his balance and fell to the ground, as Death Eaters gasped in shock. No one expected a concubine to show disrespect to the Dark Lord, not if she wanted to live.

Rodolphus saw his wife from across the room and rushed forward.

"Bella, no!" he cried as he made his way through the crowd.

But it was too late. Bellatrix ran to Neville, who hardly believed what he was seeing. She took hold of the key and embraced Neville.

"I'm sorry, please forgive me!" she cried. As she said the word that would activate the Portkey in her hand, Voldemort stood behind her, enraged.

"*Avada Kedavra!*" he said, just as both Bellatrix and Neville disappeared.

Rodolphus stopped dead in his tracks, his body paralyzed, his eyes looking on in disbelief. How could she Apparate from within the Dark Lord's wards?

In a fury Voldemort turned his wand on Rodolphus, taking out his frustration on the man whose wife had just been the cause of his embarrassing fall.

The group looked on, as once again one of their own was targeted by their master. Rodolphus' body twisted as the Dark Lord held the Cruciatus Curse on his Death Eater longer than he ever had in the past.

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At number twelve, Grimmauld Place, Hermione, Ginny, Tonks and Molly were in the kitchen, busying themselves with dinner. The rest of the Order members, including Lucius, Arthur and Albus, were in the living room looking at the small model Albus was creating of the Riddle home. Minerva had stayed behind at Hogwarts to handle any emergencies, especially if Severus returned wounded.

Ginny and Hermione decided to bring in some pumpkin juice to the group, when a loud thump was heard outside the front door.

"What was that?" asked Ron as he looked towards the door. They all approached, and heard crying.

Cautiously Lucius opened the door and saw a young man cradling the body of his sister-in-law.

"Bella!" yelled Lucius, as he ran out the door, followed by the rest of the group. Lucius bent down and looked at the still open eyes of Bellatrix.

Neville cried as he looked at the face of his tormentor and savior. She'd taken his parents away from him when he was a child. Her laughter fueled nightmares he'd never stopped having. Many a time Neville wondered what would happen if he ever had the chance to meet her head-on. He'd missed his chance during the fight at the Department of Mysteries, but still he wondered. When he was kidnapped from St. Mungo's and he saw her again, he thought his life was finally over. She tortured him with the same curse she had used on his parents, but this time there was no laughter.

Tonight, Bellatrix Lestrange had held him and begged him to forgive her, before she gave her life to save him. And for that, he was grateful.

"Voldemort killed her," sobbed Neville. "She'd just asked me to forgive her, then she...she brought me here." Neville looked at the others who were now standing behind Lucius. "All she said was...'home' and we were here."

Lucius placed his hand over her eyes and closed them.

"Oh, Bella." He wiped his own tear from his eye. "How late you came to realize the meaning of compassion."

~*~*~*~

When he drew his wand back from hexing Rodolphus, Voldemort looked around the room. "I will not tolerate this kind of behavior! Let this be a lesson to you all. Get out of here, all of you! I am sick to death of looking at you all!" he shouted, then looked down at Rodolphus, "Next time I won't be so charitable. First your brother, and now your wife. I am not pleased Rodolphus." Voldemort spun on his heels and went to his room.

From across the room, the frail, and timid-looking Higgenbottom approached Rodolphus. As he walked past some of the older Death Eaters, he heard them whispering amongst themselves as they hurried out of the room. While he could not make out exactly what they were saying, Severus knew that there was now even more dissension among the ranks.

He leaned down and lightly touched Rodolphus on the shoulder.

"Relax, sir, it's only me." Severus-as-Higgenbottom waved his wand over Rodolphus and whispered a spell which would give the man only slight relief. "Come, I can make you a potion to help you with the tremors."

The other Death Eaters barely noticed as the two men walked out of the ballroom. Many were too busy now wondering just what kind of a man they were following. They could not leave the house fast enough.

In the potions lab, Severus-as-Higgenbottom Transfigured the wood stool into a more comfortable chair and then helped Rodolphus sit down.

Severus turned his back to Rodolphus, who was now having strong muscle spasms. He tried to ignore the sobbing coming from his former comrade, but he knew the pain that the man was going through must have been beyond what he himself could imagine or wanted to imagine.

"I'm sorry about your wife," said Severus as he worked.

Rodolphus willed himself to relax, hoping that his nerves and muscles would return to normal. He looked at the potions maker. He'd personally kidnapped Samuel Higgenbottom, held him under the Imperius Curse, made the man shave his own head, and then removed his memories of many years. Just before he dropped him off at the gates of a Muggle hospital, Rodolphus carefully peeled off the top layer of skin on Higgenbottom's left arm that held the Dark Mark. Five years ago, Rodolphus might have simply killed the man, but he'd just seen his brother Rabastan burned alive by Voldemort. That and many other atrocities had changed Rodolphus, and he could no longer bring himself to kill someone for no reason.

Rodolphus took a deep breath and wrapped his arms around himself.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Severus slowed his work, then turned his head slightly.

"Someone who should not be here," he said, only this time, Severus used his own voice.

Rodolphus now took hold of the arms of the chair, and pushed himself up. With great difficulty he walked to the table, and looked at Higgenbottom.

"Severus?" he asked in wonder, scarcely believing what he'd just heard.

"Sit down, Rodolphus. This will take a few minutes to brew. I will tell you everything after it is finished and you have drunk it." There was no need for Severus to fear that

Rodolphus would turn him in to the Dark Lord. While Severus was helping Rodolphus into the potions lab, he'd discreetly used Legilimency on him. Rodolphus was no longer loyal to Voldemort.

Severus finished the potion and gave it to Rodolphus who drank it down immediately. He instantly felt relief. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back against the wall. His face twisted with the emotions he felt.

"How is it that you are here, Severus?" he asked as he opened his red tear-rimmed eyes. "Lucius was to have killed you."

"Obviously, he did not," said Severus.

"Were you ever loyal to the Dark Lord?" asked Rodolphus, now wondering how long Severus had been playing his game of espionage.

"I was once." Severus leaned against the table and crossed his arms. He looked at the clock on the mantle. He had another half-hour before he would need to either leave or take more Polyjuice. He then looked back at Rodolphus and continued talking.

"You know that after I graduated from Hogwarts, I became a Death Eater. I believed in the...organization at the time. I also thought it was a way for me to move myself up in life."

"What made you turn from this?" asked Rodolphus.

It was now Severus' turn to rekindle bad memories and regrets.

"During my years at Hogwarts, I had very few friends. Lucius had left after my first year, and after that I was mostly alone. But, I soon became friendly with Lily Evans, a Muggle-born. She and I were paired in Potions class. I found her to be an intelligent young woman, and she was kind to me. I'd had very little kindness shown to me before and when she befriended me, it was nice. We were friends for several years, until she became involved with James Potter." Severus bowed his head, remembering the day he'd severed his relationship with Lily.

~*~*~*~

They stood across from each other. Both their faces were riddled with emotions.

"I was trying to help you!" yelled Lily, "How could you have called me a Mudblood. That's the most horrible thing anyone has ever said to me. I thought you were my friend, Severus."

"I'm supposed to believe you're my friend after you betrayed me the way you did?" returned Severus.

Lily looked at him in confusion. "How did I betray you? I've never told anyone any of the things you've told me."

Severus shook his head. "You know how much I hate James Potter and those idiots he hangs around with. Their life's purpose is to make me miserable at every turn. You know they hate me and yet I saw you with Potter last week!"

"Oh, Severus, he's just a friend. You can't possibly think he is anything more than that." Lily defended herself, but to no avail.

"No, Lily, there is more. I know there is." Severus looked at her sadly. "I've seen it in your mind. I know how you feel about him, even if you can't bring yourself to admit it yet."

"Severus..." Lily approached him, and tried to touch him, but he backed away.

"No, don't. Please, just leave me alone, Lily. I can't look at you, I...I can't be around you if that's what you want." Severus turned his back on his friend, heartbroken that he'd lost another person in his life who meant anything to him, and worse, he'd lost her to his worst enemy.

~*~*~*~

"After that day, I became more involved with the Dark Lord's movement. After I graduated I took the Mark. It was not long afterwards that I heard of the Dark Lord's plan to kill her family. I tried to save her, but I was too late. She was dead by the time I learned Voldemort had gone to her house. It was then that my loyalties changed. I became a member of the Order of the Phoenix and I have been a spy ever since. Lucius, he's only recently turned. He saved my life, and he is now working along with the rest of us to bring him down, Rodolphus."

Rodolphus rubbed his face tiredly.

"My brother is gone. My Bella is gone. I have nothing more in this world that means anything to me, Severus. I am glad I will not live beyond this war."

Severus shook his head. "Why do you believe that? There is no reason for you to give up now. If anything you must fight." Severus leaned down and placed his hand on Rodolphus' shoulder.

"Your wife was not a weak woman, and she proved that this evening. She would not have wanted you to just give up hope."

Rodolphus stood and walked to the fireplace.

"Hope? What hope is there for me, Severus? If I don't die on the battlefield I will be taken to Azkaban for my crimes. And well-deserved that sentence would be." He turned and looked into the fire. "I should not be allowed to live. But I will tell you this, I may not come out of this war with my life, but neither will he."

Severus smiled and walked towards Rodolphus.

"Then you are with us?"

Rodolphus nodded. "Yes, I am with you."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

I've been wanting to write the Bella/Neville scene for a while. I thought it would be interesting to have her be the one to save him.

I hope you enjoyed this.

Here is the lovely drawing Lady Talon made:



Chapter 18 ? Burials, Plans, and Wizardopoly

Chapter 18 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

Thank you to those of you who have taken the time to leave me such lovely reviews. I am very happy you are enjoying this tale.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

Thanks as always to the wonderful June for all of her help and suggestions.

Chapter 18 Burials, Plans, and Wizardopoly

Neville was moved inside number twelve, Grimmauld Place where he was examined by Ginny in the study. Bellatrix's body was taken to the bedroom nearest to the top of the stairs; Lucius asked Hermione, Tonks, and Molly to prepare her body for burial.

Ginny determined that Neville had suffered little damage to his nervous system, thanks mainly in part to the fact that Bellatrix hadn't applied the Cruciatus Curse on him with the same passion and hatred she'd used on his parents. Also, she'd stopped Voldemort from doing more harm to Neville by pushing the Dark Lord away and making him lose his balance. Neville suffered few bruises, and for the most part was lucky compared to the others who were now most probably suffering for his escape. After about an hour, Ginny told him to rest in the living room.

As Neville sat on the couch, he noticed those around him staring, almost waiting for him to say something. He saw Lucius Malfoy across from him, talking to Headmaster Dumbledore and Ginny and Ron's father, Arthur Weasley.

"Neville," said Hermione as she sat next to him. "What were you doing at St. Mungo's?"

Neville drank a bit of lemonade that Molly had handed to him, and then cleared his throat, which was still sore after screaming from the torture.

"I've been making some herbal teas and elixirs. St. Mungo's buys them from me," he said. "After my Gran and parents died, the house was mine, so I decided to use my knowledge of plants to do something useful. I grow the plants and herbs in my own garden."

He looked nervously around the room, as if he was looking for someone. "After I graduated from Hogwarts, I took my knowledge of plants and herbs and realized I was actually a very good botanist."

Everyone in the room guessed he always had a difficult time with potions in school because he was scared shitless of Professor Snape.

"I was able to put that knowledge together with the bit of potions knowledge I had," Neville said. "I am now able to make a good living for myself selling herbal elixirs, which serve as substitutes for people who are allergic to certain potions as well as for people who don't like going to see healers."

"I never knew you did that, Neville," said Ginny, who smiled as she sat on his other side.

Neville blushed; he'd never quite grown out of the crush he had on Ginny.

This, of course, was noticed by Lucius. He approached the couch, where Neville was flanked by Hermione and Ginny.

"How are you feeling now, Mr. Longbottom?" Lucius asked as he placed his hand on Ginny's shoulder.

Hermione and Ginny looked at one another and rolled their eyes.

"Fine, sir," answered Neville, realizing that something was going on between his friend and the elder Malfoy, who was a major donor at St. Mungo's. Thinking it best to move away from Ginny, he moved slightly towards Hermione.

As Neville did so, Severus now looking like himself again, instead of as "Higgenbottom" stepped through the Floo. Hermione immediately went to him and hugged him.

Now Neville was truly confused. He'd read the newspaper; wasn't Professor Snape supposed to be dead? He looked at Ginny and Lucius, then to Hermione and Severus.

Severus and Hermione spoke in hushed tones, then Severus moved towards his former student.

"Mr. Longbottom. I'm glad you see you are out of danger," said Severus, as he wrapped his arm around Hermione's waist.

Neville swallowed hard and simply nodded.

Severus looked down at Hermione and smiled at her. "You continue attending to Mr. Longbottom, I need to speak with Lucius."

Hermione nodded and sat down next to Neville, as Severus and Lucius walked away and moved towards the corner of the room.

"Her...Hermione, you and Snape?" asked Neville. He then turned to Ginny. "And you and Draco's father?"

Both young women nodded.

"You had better check me for a concussion, Ginny, I have to be imagining things. I swear I just saw Professor Snape's ghost, and it talked to me. But shouldn't his ghost be at Hogwarts?"

Hermione and Ginny sighed. They would have to convince Neville that he neither had a head injury or was seeing things, and that his old Potions master was truly alive.

In the corner of the room, Severus and Lucius began to speak of Bellatrix.

"I know I probably don't need to ask, but she didn't make it back here alive, did she?" Severus asked.

Lucius shook his head. "No, she didn't. The women prepared her body, which I just moved into the library." He motioned towards the door just behind him. "Did you speak with Rodolphus? Was he there?"

Severus nodded. "Yes, he was. He saw everything. He was also punished for his wife's insolence."

"The Dark Lord is digging his own grave," hissed Lucius.

"There is dissension, and it is growing every day. I revealed my true self to Rodolphus, and he is now on our side completely. He is willing to do more. Anything we ask of him, he is prepared to do." Severus looked ran his fingers through his hair, clearly bothered by all that had gone on that evening. "He asked me to bring her body to his home. I gather he wishes to bury his wife in his family's cemetery."

Lucius nodded, "That is understandable. She was his wife, and there was nothing left of his brother's body to bury."

The two men joined Albus and Arthur, and informed the two other men that they would be taking Bellatrix back to her husband. Lucius went ahead, to make sure that Rodolphus was alone at his home. Then Lucius went back to Grimmauld Place. He and Severus took Bellatrix's body and returned to the Lestrangle home. As they floated her body through the house and out to the garden, where Rodolphus stood, a storm beginning to form. The two wizards reached the somber man at the farthest end of the garden, and placed the body of his wife gently on the ground.

Rodolphus fell to his knees and took hold of his wife's cold limp body. He caressed her cheek softly, and kissed her forehead as he sobbed.

"My girl, my sweet sweet girl." He rocked her lifeless body as he whispered words in her ear, that neither Severus or Lucius could make out. Rodolphus then looked at both of them. "I know what she became, but there was a time when she was so gentle and caring." He then looked at Bellatrix's face and smiled. "But you showed us all, didn't you, love. I knew that beautiful girl I married was still in there."

Severus and Lucius let him grieve over his wife's body, until the rain started to fall. The rain began slowly, but by the time the three wizards finished burying Bellatrix Lestrangle, it was an all-out downpour.

"How many more will he kill before he is satisfied?" shouted Rodolphus.

"He will never be satisfied," answered Severus.

"Come, we need to get inside. The winds are getting stronger; we need to discuss some things before Severus and I leave here, Rodolphus." Lucius motioned for the other two to follow him indoors. Upon entering the Lestrangle home, Rodolphus instructed Geddy, one of his house-elves, to bring them some tea.

They all dried themselves quickly and sat around the fire. After the house-elf set the tea before them and left, they began to speak.

"I can't take much more of this. It's just...too much," said a weary Rodolphus. "How can I avenge my brother and wife? Where do I start?"

"We can finish this soon, but we need to prepare properly." Severus drank his tea and looked at the others. "I will not go into a battle unprepared. But I don't want to spend the next ten years of my life waiting for it to occur."

Lucius smiled. "I have an idea. I believe we have a better chance of winning this war quickly, if we catch the Dark Lord off-guard." Lucius looked at Rodolphus. "Using our knowledge, Albus Dumbledore is making a model of Riddle's home and surrounding grounds vulnerable spots, layout, his rooms, that sort of thing to help the Order when they are ready to attack."

Rodolphus nodded. "A training and planning tool. Makes sense."

"Yes, but not only that. What if we can somehow enter the home through the model? There is no way anyone will be able to Apparate there, but..."

"Perhaps we can use the model as a sort of Floo type device," added Severus.

"I will be there again tomorrow," said Rodolphus. "He is having me move some of the prisoners. I can send you a piece of the home's structure. Would that help? To have something connected to the house structurally?"

Severus smiled. "We can use that. A spell must be created to activate the model, and I know just the person to create it."

Hermione was an accomplished spells maker. Severus knew that she could create a spell using what Rodolphus sent them.

"He has been lax in calling his weekly meetings. Do you know the reason for this?" asked Lucius, wondering why Voldemort was no longer calling their meetings as regularly as he once did.

"As I told you, he has been venturing out in the evenings, to the Muggle world," said Rodolphus as he stood and walked to a desk that was against the wall. "Bella used to tell me that he would be exhausted whenever he came back from his outings. I began going to Muggle London a few times a week myself to see if I could find any news of strange things happening. I found these." Rodolphus opened the drawers of the desk and took out several Muggle newspapers, dropping them on the coffee table in front of his guests.

"These are all his doing?" asked Lucius.

Severus sighed and shook his head.

Rodolphus nodded. "Yes. I followed him one night. I lost him at one point, and was unable to save the woman." He turned and sat heavily on the couch. "He is responsible for every one of those murders, and I am sure there are others."

In the past weeks, while out on his travels to the Muggle world, Voldemort had been responsible for at least eighteen brutal murders. The police had dubbed him "the Mutilator." It was a ridiculous thing to call him, but sadly, very descriptive. The Dark Lord was so meticulous in his work, that the bodies of three of his victims still remained unidentified.

"May I keep these? I would like to show them to Albus," said Severus.

Rodolphus nodded and put the rest of the papers into the desk drawer.

The men spoke for another hour, discussing Voldemort's activities and also remembering Bellatrix. When they noticed Rodolphus' exhaustion, Severus told him to sleep, as his body needed more time to recover from Voldemort's Cruciatus Curse.

Then Lucius and Severus Apparated back to Malfoy Manor. The two men stood in the living room silently for a few moments.

"I am so tired, Lucius. I'm tired of all of this death that surrounds us. Not long ago, I felt as though there was no future for me." Severus turned to Lucius. "But now, I truly have something to live for."

Lucius smiled. "I know how you feel. Go to your lady, Severus. I shall go upstairs to mine. And we will both make our plans. This war will end soon, and we can get on with our lives."

Severus used the Floo to go directly to his chambers, where he immediately noticed a light streaming through the closed door of his bedroom. He knew it would be Hermione waiting up for him.

When he walked into his bedroom, she was sitting up in his bed reading. She placed her book on the nightstand and looked at him.

"How did it go?" she asked, knowing that he and Lucius were at Rodolphus' home helping the other Death Eater bury his wife.

Severus walked towards her and sat on the bed, then took her hand. He caressed it gently as he spoke to her.

"I never realized how much he loved her." He looked into Hermione's eyes. "You should have seen the way he held her body, as though she was a delicate china doll that could break at the slightest touch. He cried against her cheek, knowing he would never see her face again."

Hermione felt her eyes begin to tear.

"I don't ever want to be in a situation where I would hold you like that, Hermione. I would die if anything ever happened to you." Severus pulled Hermione towards him and held her tightly against him.

"Severus, nothing is going to happen to me," said Hermione, trying to reassure him as she stroked his hair.

"Promise me." He pushed himself away from her slightly and held her by the shoulders. "Promise me, Hermione, that when the battle begins you will be far away, perhaps in the Muggle world."

"Severus, I can't promise you that. I could never leave knowing you are still here and will probably be in the middle of it all." Hermione's parents knew of the danger now unfolding in the wizarding world, and often tried to convince her to come back and live with them. As many times as she had explained it to them, they refused to understand or perhaps just didn't want to understand that when Voldemort finished taking over the wizarding world, he would turn his attention to the Muggle world, and *that* war would be won much more easily.

"Don't be stubborn with me, Hermione," said Severus in his best Potions master voice.

Hermione chuckled and placed her hand on his cheek. "You don't scare me anymore, Severus Snape." Her voice now took on a serious tone. "I am not going anywhere, do you hear me? You are stuck with me, like it or not."

"I don't deserve you," he said quietly.

"You probably don't, but you have me regardless." She kissed his nose. "Now, take your clothes off and make love to me."

Doing what every man in love does, he listened to his lover.

Upon Severus' leaving, Lucius walked to the window. He noticed soft lights on in the guesthouse across the gardens. He smiled, knowing that his son was safe and loved. After burying Bellatrix tonight and seeing Rodolphus' grief at being alone, he suddenly felt a need to see Draco and reassure himself all was well in the guesthouse.

He walked to his son's home and knocked on the door. "Draco? Harry?" he called out. No answer. Worriedly, Lucius returned to the main house.

As Lucius walked up the garden path, he saw Ginny from the window. She was laughing and talking to someone. As he drew closer, Lucius noticed that there were other people in the family room with her. The family room no one had been in there for years; after he sent Draco to Spain and Narcissa went to Voldemort, he'd had no family left. He hurried over to the house and stood at the family room doorway, and smiled at what he saw.

Ginny was sitting on the floor, playing a board game with Emil, Dari, Draco and Harry. The boys weren't in the guesthouse after all.

Lucius stood outside for several moments, watching everyone play their game. There was so much laughter and happiness in the family room, just like a real family. There were times in the past when he'd wondered if there would ever be joy in Malfoy Manor again. He then decided that he'd been standing on the outside of happiness far too long, and walked in.

Ginny immediately looked up

"Lucius!" she called as she walked to him. "I've been wondering if you would be home early. Was everything all right? How is Rodolphus?"

Lucius kissed her on the cheek. "Yes, everything is fine." He smiled and looked at the others sitting on the floor. "Well, it looks like you have a very interesting game of Wizardopoly going on." Lucius looked at the game board and noticed there were six players on the board, but only five in the room. As he wondered who the sixth person might be, a newcomer walked into the room.

"Here's my special hot cocoa. I've added a bit..." Neville, who was carrying a tray of mugs filled to the brim with hot cocoa, stopped dead in his tracks. He was so surprised at seeing Lucius, he lost his balance and the tray flew from his hands, heading straight towards Lucius.

Thankfully, Lucius had always been quick on the draw. The tray, mugs and hot cocoa all landed quite comfortably on the floor. Not one mug lost a drop.

"Mr. Longbottom," Lucius said as he nodded slightly, and looked at Draco and Harry.

"We asked Neville to stay with us for a while. He told us what happened with Aunt Bella after we arrived at Order headquarters earlier," said Draco. "It's all right, isn't it, Father? He can't go back to his house alone; it might not be safe for him there."

"And he's not completely recovered," added Harry.

"You are correct, it would not be safe for him. The Dark Lord doesn't like to lose prisoners. No doubt he would search Mr. Longbottom out and finish the job. It's perfectly fine with me if your friend stays with you for a time." Lucius knew too well what it was like to be alone and without family, and Bellatrix had just died saving this young man. He looked back to Neville who was standing as stiff as a board. "Oh for goodness sake, do loosen up, Mr. Longbottom. I'm not a real Death Eater, you know."

Lucius took off his cloak and took a place next to Ginny on the floor. "Emil, I see you have quite a stack of Galleons there," Lucius said amusedly.

Emil smiled proudly. "Yes, sir, one more house, and I will own all of Hogsmeade."

Emil as banker gave Lucius his starting Galleons. The seven of them spent the next two hours playing. Draco and Harry lost most of their Galleons. Emil continued racking up real estate, while Dari, Ginny and Neville barely kept themselves afloat. Lucius, of course, kept winding up in jail.

"Damn," he said, as his carriage piece landed in the small Azkaban. "Not again."

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. I'll be moving things along a bit in the next chapter. I'll see you then.

Chapter 19 ? The End Draws Near

Chapter 19 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

There is quite a bit going on here and its mostly a transition chapter. I'm getting things ready for the final few chapters.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

As always thanks to June for all of her help.

Chapter 19 The End Draws Near

The weeks passed. With Rodolphus' help, Hermione was able to use several pieces of the Riddle estate to incorporate into the model of the Riddle home now being kept in Albus' office. Every room in Voldemort's ancestral home had been reproduced exactly to scale, and every single room in the model had a piece of the original room set into it. Hermione created a spell that enabled anyone to enter the home through the model, which was now a direct connection to the home. This was tested by Lucius when he was Summoned, as well as Severus disguised as Higgenbottom. The Dark Lord was none the wiser. He was always waiting for his Death Eaters in his large ballroom; therefore he had no way of knowing exactly which way they had come in from. He was also less wary, because he was so preoccupied and entrenched in his outings to the Muggle world.

The time came, however, when Voldemort finally reached a decision about his coup de grace that would bring the wizarding world to its knees and rid it of all who are not worthy. He kept the date of his invasion to himself for a time, not wanting to reveal it to any of his Death Eaters, simply because he never truly trusted any of them. He had no idea that many of his own were having second thoughts about their master.

While he'd originally thought about beginning his attack at Hogwarts, the Dark Lord decided it would be best if he first sent waves of Death Eaters to two of the central hubs of the wizarding world, Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. With those two locations under attack, the Ministry would no doubt send Aurors, thus leaving little manpower for any attack on Hogwarts. Voldemort thought this was the perfect plan. What he didn't realize was that he had three Death Eaters who were now actively working against him; he would have no element of surprise.

On the third of December, Voldemort had called all of his high-ranking Death Eaters to his home for the announcement. Higgenbottom was not a high-ranking follower, but he was brewing several batches of Voldemort's stamina potion. The Dark Lord felt stronger than ever. He had no clue that what he felt was in illusion. Severus and Hermione had reworked the potion so that with one word, during the final battle, Voldemort's power would begin to decrease significantly. It would allow Harry to meet him on a more even plane.

As the ballroom of the Riddle home filled to capacity, the Dark Lord walked to his throne. Along with him he dragged a woman on a leash. She was the only prisoner alive from the St. Mungo's attack, other than the escaped Neville, and he was looking forward to new prisoners soon.

"We are close, my followers, very close," he said. "In three weeks we will be hailed as conquerors. I have decided to send groups of attackers to Hogsmeade and Diagon Alley on Sunday morning, December twenty-third. The rest of you will form the third group, to accompany me to Hogwarts a few hours later, while the Aurors are busy with the other two groups. The school will by that time be almost empty during winter break. We must take Hogwarts. It will serve as my new home and the central location for the new order of the wizarding world. No one can stop us, no one."

Lucius looked towards the potions laboratory entrance; he noticed a shadow and knew it was Severus listening. He then scanned the room and caught sight of Rodolphus who looked on with a blank expression.

As they all listened on, Voldemort began to separate those in attendance into three groups. The group going to Hogwarts included Lucius, Rodolphus, Goyle senior and his son, and Crabbe senior. Crabbe's son had been Voldemort's most recent victim several days prior; his crime was that he'd arrived five minutes late.

As Voldemort dismissed those in attendance, leaving them with the task of gathering those lesser Death Eaters that had been assigned to them, Lucius and Severus nodded towards each other, their signal that they would speak of this at an Order meeting that evening. Rodolphus was in a small group of Death Eaters speaking in hushed tones. Lucius noticed they seemed nervous, and decided to ask Rodolphus about the gathering at a later time. Right now he needed to get back home and tell Albus to call the Order members for the impromptu meeting.

After Lucius left, Severus finished his final potions and delivered them to Voldemort. While he knew the Dark Lord would summon him one more time before the battle,

Severus decided he would not come. This would be the last time anyone would see "Higgenbottom" at the Riddle home. The potion was doing its job, Lucius and Rodolphus were gathering information, and there was little more he could do at this point. The rest would be up to Harry.

He returned to Hogwarts. Slowly and deep in thought, Severus walked to his rooms. The time was drawing near, and he wondered now if he would make it through the battle with his life. A year ago he really wouldn't have cared what happened to him. Living or dying, it made no difference to him. But now, things were different. He had Hermione to think about.

"Hermione," he whispered to himself as he stopped and leaned against the wall. What would she do if anything happened to him? Worse, what if something happened to her during the battle? She'd made it abundantly clear to him that she wasn't going anywhere. While he did make her promise to stay away from the inner core of the battle, she would still be there, and anything could happen. He knew that if Hermione died during the battle, he would soon follow her; there was no life for him if she were not there to share his joys. He also decided that should he die, she would be provided for.

He'd sold his small home at Spinner's End years ago and purchased a two-story Victorian near Hogwarts. Severus spent most of the year at Hogwarts, and had managed to save a good amount of money for what he'd hoped to be his future after all of this Voldemort business was over and done with. There was a small shop space he'd had his eye on for a while in London. He lived in the Wizarding world, but more and more he wanted to open a small shop in Muggle London. It would be something small where people could come and read a book, or have a cup of tea or coffee, perhaps with something to eat. During his time with Hermione, he'd often thought of asking her to venture into this new life with him, but if it happened that he didn't make it through the war, he wanted Hermione to have the opportunity to carry the dream for both of them.

As he reached his room, he heard soft music playing on the other side of the door. Hermione loved her music, and he found that he had also grown to like some of her music tastes. Gripping the knob, he opened the door and found her grading papers while sitting on his favorite chair, next to the fire.

"Hello, love." Hermione smiled and set her work down, and crossed the room. She noticed a worried look on his face. "What's wrong, Severus? Did something happen this evening?"

Severus kissed her and held her tightly.

"He's set a date." Severus pulled back from her and looked into her eyes. "December twenty-third."

"That's only three weeks from today," said Hermione in shock.

The Order had hoped to have more time to prepare. They both knew that if the battle was to begin three weeks from that day, it would make sense to attack Voldemort before then and try to catch him off guard.

"Severus, do you think we have enough time to plan a first strike in such short time? There are just so many things that need to be done."

He took Hermione by the hand and walked to the chair she'd risen from earlier. He sat down and moved her to sit on his lap.

"I don't know, Hermione. At this point, I think our greatest advantage is knowing where and when he will attack. We may as well wait for him to come to us."

Hermione looked at the clock on the mantle. "Come, we are to meet Albus and some of the others in Albus' office."

He kissed her again, and they both Flooed to the Headmasters office.

After leaving the Riddle mansion, Lucius stopped by Hogwarts to set up tonight's Order meeting with Albus, and to give him a report of what Voldemort had announced. He then arrived back at Malfoy Manor in much the same condition as Severus had, deep in thought. When he walked into the house, he heard the others coming from the dining room.

"Lucius, you've just missed dinner," said Ginny as she approached him. Ginny had been living fulltime at Malfoy Manor now for two weeks, and at least once a week everyone ate together.

Draco and Harry stood hand-in-hand, as Neville stood behind them with a young woman at his side. Neville had stayed in the guesthouse with Draco and Harry for a week after his rescue from Voldemort, but then moved back to his home. New wards surrounding his property allowed him to feel safe and know when any intruders were about the grounds. But Neville was alone, and often was a guest at the Malfoy home.

"I'm sorry, but..." Lucius noticed the young woman and knew to keep his words vague. "My business meeting ran a bit late."

"Is everything all right, Father?" asked Draco.

Lucius nodded. "Yes, we can speak more on it in a bit. Neville, who is this lovely young lady?" asked Lucius. He knew that Draco and Harry must have made it possible for the young lady to enter the warded home, so they had some trust in her.

Neville nervously approached Lucius with his friend. Lynnette was aware that she was in a different world, but she did not realize she was in the presence of a man who had at one point made it his life's mission to assist the Dark Lord in his extermination of Muggles.

"This is Lynnette Wilkins, sir. She's a Muggle from America. She's now living in Britain. We've recently met. Um..." Neville nervously looked from the young lady to Lucius. "She's...she's my girlfriend."

Lucius smirked; he was quite amused. His feelings towards Muggles had changed, but he realized that the young Longbottom was clearly afraid of what his reaction might be. It also gave Lucius a warm feeling in his heart knowing that the young man might have brought the woman here for his approval; it was much like a child would wish for the approval of a parent. Lucius knew that Neville was a good man, whose life had changed at such a young age. Much of that was due in part to his own deeds. Bella gave her life to save the boy, to make up for her taking his parents from him. It was now Lucius' task to continue what his sister-in-law had begun.

Like the perfect gentleman that he was, Lucius took hold of Lynnette's hand and bowed gracefully, and kissed the back of her hand.

"I am quite please to meet you, Ms. Wilkins. Welcome to my home."

Lynnette smiled. "Thank you, Mr. Malfoy. You have a lovely home."

"You are welcome here anytime." Lucius stepped back and began to take off his cloak. "Now, if you will excuse me, I need to change. Draco, Harry, I need to speak with you regarding my meeting."

Draco and Harry nodded, knowing this was their cue to ready themselves to meet with the rest of the Order tonight.

Lucius took Ginny by the hand and they both walked up to their room.

"We should be getting along. Lynnette has an early day tomorrow," said Neville.

"All right, mate. Thanks for stopping by," said Harry as he and Draco accompanied the two to the edge of the property.

"You see, Lynn, I told you Mr. Malfoy would like you," said Neville quietly as they reached the point of Apparition.

"He looks quite nice," Lynnette said, smiling.

They waved goodbye to Harry and Draco before Neville Apparated with her.

Draco and Harry held hands as they walked back towards the house.

"Lucius looked a bit worried," said Harry.

Draco squeezed his hand.

"Dad has been telling me we're getting closer and closer to all of this ending." Draco stopped and turned to Harry. "I'm afraid, Harry. I don't want anything to happen to you."

Harry shook his head. "Nothing is going to happen to me. For the first time in my life I really think that I can beat him."

"You'd better, because I'll never forgive you if you go and die on me, Harry Potter."

As the two young men embraced each other, Lucius watched from his bedroom window. He felt Ginny's hand on his shoulder and turned.

"Ready?" he asked.

Ginny nodded and they walked down to the entrance hall. Once Harry and Draco joined them, they all Apparated to Hogwarts.

When they arrived in Albus' office, they were in time to hear Ron in mid-rant.

"It doesn't make any sense," stated the youngest Weasley son. "By catching them off-guard we'd lose the opportunity to capture a good many of his Death Eaters. We could spend the next ten years trying to track them down."

Lucius, Ginny, Draco and Harry entered and sat near the rest of the Weasley clan. Arthur quietly told the newcomers what they had missed.

"Ron is right, Albus," chimed Remus. "I understand that this is the best way of keeping our losses down, but in the long run, think of how many people could die at the hands of rough Death Eaters."

Severus stood and walked towards Albus' desk. "Albus, they all make good points. And I have to say, I agree. I want this to end once and for all. I don't want to spend my entire life looking over my shoulder."

Albus rubbed his face. He'd begun the meeting with a plan of early attack, yet the younger wizards made a good point. They wanted to sit back and let Voldemort bring the fight to them. It made sense.

"We have the date, Albus, so we are more prepared than they are. We know what is coming, they do not," offered Lucius from the back of the room.

Albus nodded.

"Very well, then we shall wait and we shall prepare." The old wizard stood and walked around his desk. "Arthur, we need every Auror from every point on this earth to be here and ready. Above all, it is imperative that the school not be breached."

Before everyone left, Albus and Arthur assigned everyone to a different group. Bill and Charlie would accompany Moody to Hogsmeade, where they would meet with other Order members and one hundred Aurors in different locations throughout the town. Remus, Tonks and Kingsley would join Arthur and the Weasley twins at Diagon Alley.

Albus, Minerva and the rest of the teachers would keep the school from being entered. Molly, Ginny and Hermione would also be inside the school. Severus and Lucius would be in charge of the grounds. It was important to make sure the fighting was kept outside the castle. Draco and Ron would protect Harry, to make sure that nothing got in the way of him reaching Voldemort.

Albus approached Lucius as Order members began to leave. "I had hoped to use the model of the Riddle house, but our work seems to have been for naught."

"Not necessarily," said Severus from behind them. "The Riddle home is his sanctuary. If he does survive the battle but we destroy his home, he cannot have anything to go back to."

Lucius smiled. "He will have nowhere to hide, nowhere to regenerate."

Albus nodded and looked at the small model of the Riddle home on the table next to his desk. "I will destroy the house then, when the fighting begins. We must make sure that Nagini is also destroyed." Albus walked away and left Severus and Lucius to themselves.

"Lucius, I need a favor."

"You need only ask, Severus."

"I need to speak to your solicitor. There are a few things I would like to..."Severus looked around, making sure Hermione and Ginny were still on the other side of the room talking to Minerva and Molly. "I need to make some arrangements."

Giving him a knowing look, Lucius nodded.

"I understand. I will have him contact you tomorrow."

The following day, Severus received an owl from Maximilian Oberon, Lucius' solicitor. Maximilian was paid to keep secrets, therefore Lucius made it very clear that no one was to know of his contact with Severus, who was still believed dead. Severus communicated his needs to the solicitor, who prepared the documents and met him at Malfoy Manor. There, Oberon and Lucius witnessed his signature on the documents.]

Severus felt relief wash over him as he Apparated back to Hogwarts. If he died during the final battle, he knew that Hermione would be taken care of. He would now be able to concentrate on the task at hand, and ready himself for the defeat of the Dark Lord.

For his part, Lucius had already met with Mr. Oberon. The majority of his properties and wealth would be distributed between Draco and Ginny, with a small portion going also to Neville. He hadn't said anything to Ginny about what he'd done, as he felt she would worry if he thought he was going to die during the battle. But the fact was he did feel his own mortality more and more in these days leading up to the planned date of Voldemort's attack.

The hours passed, and so did the days. Before they all realized, the eve of battle was finally upon them

~*~*~*~*~*~*~

I still have a few more chapters, so this isn't quite going to finish in the next chapter.

I hope you enjoyed this, thanks for reading.

Chapter 20 - Preparations And Revelations

Chapter 20 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

I'd like to thank everyone who has taken the time to read this story and leave me a review.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

Thanks as always to June for all of her help and suggestions.

Chapter 20 - Preparations And Revelations

The morning of December twenty-second was full of both activity and much retrospection. Lucius woke up only to find his Dark Mark burning. He kissed a worried Ginny and assured her that it was most likely Voldemort wanting to give some last-minute instructions regarding tomorrow's planned attacks on Diagon Alley, Hogsmeade, and Hogwarts. He dressed and walked to the edge of his property and Apparated to the Riddle home.

Severus, who had also woken up early, was having breakfast with Hermione in their study, when he noticed the skin of Higgenbottom's Dark Mark vibrating.

"Do you think he's calling?" asked Hermione.

Severus nodded. "I have no doubt."

Hermione now looked worried. "You said you weren't going back. You're not going back, are you? Please say you aren't?" she asked as she took hold of his hand.

"Calm down, Hermione." He kissed her trembling hand and soothed back the hair that had fallen against her cheek. "There is no reason for me to return again, even as Higgenbottom. It is likely that he is giving final instructions for tomorrow, but Lucius and Rodolphus will be there to hear them. Today is just for you and me."

Severus wanted to spend as much time as possible with Hermione alone. He didn't know if these would be the final hours he would spend alive on earth, and he wanted to take the memories with him wherever he wound up.

At the Riddle home, Lucius stood next to Rodolphus. They, along with the other Death Eaters summoned, waited for their master.

When he emerged, Voldemort had the female prisoner from St. Mungo's once again dragging behind him, but he also had someone else.

Lucius strained to get a good look at the new prisoner who was obscured by the shadows. When she finally emerged from the darkened corner, Lucius realized it was Lynnette, Neville's new girlfriend.

Rodolphus noticed the color drain from Lucius' face, and immediately grabbed his arm.

"What is it?" Rodolphus looked back at the woman. "Do you know her?"

Lucius nodded slightly. "Yes, she is Neville Longbottom's girlfriend."

Rodolphus' eyes grew wide. He knew Neville was the young man who Bellatrix had died to protect. He knew what the young man had lost in his past, and now it seemed Longbottom was about to lose his future.

"She looks unharmed. I do not think he has physically assaulted either of them, at least not today," assured Rodolphus.

Lucius noticed the same the few times he'd seen this particular female prisoner. Perhaps the Dark Lord was sparing these two until he had more prisoners from tomorrow's attacks.

"I need to speak with you after the meeting," whispered Lucius.

Rodolphus nodded. He was about to speak when Voldemort clapped his hands, calling the room to order.

"Tomorrow is the day, my followers. We will begin when the morning sun begins to rise over the horizon." Voldemort looked around the room now. "I fully expect to be victorious. But, I must be prepared for the possibility that this fight may last more than a day. You are to transfer all of your property, investments, and funds to me. There is an account at Gringotts, under the name of Jack Whitechapel. I expect it to be full by tomorrow morning."

Lucius watched Lynnette closely. She was clearly frightened. She could not recognize him in the crowd as they were all dressed in their Death Eater masks and robes. He hoped to be able to get a message to her to remain calm, but it would be difficult. Both women prisoners had chains around their necks, and it was clear that they were being held in the Dark Lord's room.

After giving out the final assignments to the roomful of Death Eaters, Voldemort went back to his room, followed not only by his prisoners, but by Wormtail.

Lucius looked to his side, but Rodolphus was already walking away. The last living Lestrangle briefly turned his head and, with a subtle glance, nodded for Lucius to follow him.

Many of the other men were leaving, while others were quietly discussing the plan in small clusters. Rodolphus used this opportunity to duck through a dark narrow hallway unseen.

Lucius looked around to make sure the others weren't paying attention to his actions, and then followed Rodolphus. He quickly walked down the hallway, following the sound of Rodolphus' footsteps, until they stopped. He continued on for several feet, and then felt a tug on his arm.

"Stop, we're safe here. No one comes this way other than Wormtail when he feeds Nagini, and she has already been fed today."

Lucius shivered, knowing how close he was to the serpent.

"Why have you not contacted me?" asked Lucius, after casting a silencing spell around them as a precaution.

"It has been difficult. I have been here much of the time. He is having me prepare the home for the battle."

"Why is he protecting his home so intently, if Voldemort is planning on taking the fight to the wizarding world in general?" Lucius wondered.

"He has not said outright, but I suspect that this home has regenerative qualities for him. There is something here that he fears losing. He comes here every night after his outings. He spends much of his time with Nagini before he goes to his room." Rodolphus sighed heavily. "The two are connected in a far more intricate way than any of us ever realized, I'm sure of it."

"Then what I am about to ask of you will be of the utmost importance." Lucius looked down the hallway, thinking he'd heard something move.

"She's in her room. What you heard was most likely rats; this place is infested with them," spat Rodolphus. He did not like Nagini either.

"We will not be attacking the home. It's been decided that we will wait for him in the designated attack locations. Everyone is prepared. But, the model of this house will be used to raze it."

"How?" asked Rodolphus.

"Albus will burn it when the fighting begins. Instead of your going to Hogwarts with the rest, we need for you to make sure Nagini is here when the house burns. We also need to get those women prisoners out of here," said Lucius.

"Nagini will be easy enough, but the women will most likely be taken with him to Hogwarts in the morning, if he doesn't kill them tonight."

"I can't allow that," said Lucius.

"Don't you think I've tried to get that woman out of here?" answered Rodolphus, clearly agitated. "He's always in his room with her, and the times when he is not, he has that idiot Wormtail in there. I am not beyond suspicion, Lucius. I can't just walk in there!"

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to imply that you hadn't tried," said Lucius, hoping to calm the other man down. He should have realized his friend was fearful of the madman's temper; he and Severus had Ginny and Hermione to comfort them, but Rodolphus had no one left in the world.

"I will do my best to get past Wormtail tonight. At the very least I can try to prevent anything happening to them," promised Rodolphus. "I will stay behind tomorrow, and make sure that Wormtail and Nagini are both taken care of. Rest assured, when this house comes down, they will both go down with it."

"Good enough then. I will ask Dumbledore to send you a signal before he starts burning the house." Lucius bid goodbye to Rodolphus and left. He could do no more. He hoped that nothing would happen to either woman today or tonight. If Voldemort took them with him to Hogwarts tomorrow, then their chances of being rescued were good. He did regret having to tell Neville that his girlfriend was now a prisoner of Voldemort. As he carefully walked out of the hallway and back into the ballroom, he briefly wondered if Neville was all right. He knew that Lynnette lived in a flat just outside of Yorkshire, but he wondered if Neville had been with her when she was taken. Now even more worried about the young man, he started walking faster.

Once safely away from the Riddle home and curious eyes, Lucius Apparated to Neville's home. He knocked on the door but there was no answer. He then walked around to the garden, and heard the voices of his son and Harry.

"Neville, are you sure she didn't have some appointment this morning you might have forgotten about?" asked Harry.

"No, I told her to come here after she woke up. I don't want her alone. Even though the attacks won't be in Muggle areas, I know tomorrow is going to be hard because she might worry about us, but I thought she would be safe here."

Just then, they noticed Lucius coming in through the French doors.

"Father? What are you doing here?" asked Draco.

Lucius looked somberly at Neville. "I need to speak with you."

Neville immediately stiffened. He hadn't heard from his girlfriend since he dropped her off at home the night before. And now, Lucius was at his home.

"Something's happened to Lynnette, hasn't it?" asked Neville as he stood and approached Lucius.

Lucius sighed and nodded. "I don't know how it happened, but...she's a prisoner of the Dark Lord."

Neville stood in shock, as did Harry and Draco.

"No," whispered Neville in disbelief. "She's all I have. Not my Lynn...not my Lynn too." Neville fell into Lucius' arms and began to cry.

Lucius held the inconsolable young wizard, as he felt his own tears forming. He'd grown fond of the young man that Bellatrix had died to save, and he felt his pain.

"It's all right, son," Lucius said softly as he patted Neville on the back. "She is being held in the same house as you were, with the last remaining prisoner from your group. She has not been harmed; at least she didn't appear to be. There is a very good chance that we can get to her before anything happens."

Neville continued to cry, not hearing Lucius' words of consolation. Lucius took hold of his shoulders and shook him slightly.

"Neville, listen to me. Must I remind you of that Gryffindor bravery your house boasts of? You need to be strong. You'll do her no good losing control of yourself. I know this is difficult, but you need to remain calm. Tomorrow is the day we have all been dreading. There will be many who will not come out of that fight with their lives."

Neville wiped the tears from his eyes. "What can I do? I can't go on without her...she's my life."

"Do not mourn her, Neville. She is not dead," said Lucius.

Harry placed his hand on Neville's shoulder.

"Come on, Neville. You can't stay here alone tonight."

Draco nodded. "You can stay with us this evening."

Neville walked outside with Draco, while Harry looked over to Lucius.

"Was she really all right?" he asked.

"From what I could tell, yes. She was frightened, but I truly don't believe he's harmed her. There wasn't anything Rodolphus or I could do, Harry. Not without compromising our position."

"I know," said Harry, knowing that if either man had done anything to try to save Lynnette, he would most probably have paid with his life and hers.

They all Apparated back to Malfoy Manor, where Lucius immediately called both Albus and Severus with the details of the meeting. Severus did not respond to his Floo-

call, so Lucius ended up writing him a note.

When Severus received the note from Lucius, he was visibly upset. While Neville had been the bane of his existence during the years he taught the young wizard, he couldn't help but feel for him. Like Neville, he had thought himself alone in the world until a certain woman came along; if Hermione had been captured, Severus would feel bereft just as Neville did. Hermione had happily told him about the new young woman in her friend's life. Even though she was a Muggle, Lynnette seemed to be very interested and accepting of their world and in love with Neville.

"Hermione," called Severus. Hermione was dressing in the bedroom. They'd spent their morning in bed making love, and decided to have a walk around the school before lunch.

Hermione walked out of the bedroom, with her cloak draped on her arm.

"I'm coming, Severus. I wasn't taking that long." Thinking he was rushing her, she now looked at the concerned look on his face. "What is it?" she asked.

Severus handed her Lucius' note.

Hermione gasped. "This is terrible!"

Severus took the note from her and threw it into the fire.

"It is, but I don't want you to be upset. There is still hope; we should be able to help her and the other woman prisoner. I don't want this to affect you, Hermione. Tomorrow is going to be difficult enough without me worrying over you," said Severus as he held her face in his hands. He kissed her lightly on her lips and leaned his forehead against hers. "How I wish you would listen to me and leave."

Hermione took hold of his wrists and kissed each pulse point. "I've told you, I'm not going anywhere. Besides, I'll be in the castle with some of the others."

He sighed heavily, knowing that even though she said she would be inside the castle, it was very probable she would at some point make her way onto the battlefield. He would need to keep a lookout for her.

"Let's take our walk," said Severus as he kissed her cheek.

They put on their traveling cloaks, which were thick and warm, and walked out onto the snowy grounds. Severus was still officially "dead," but covered by his cloak and its hood, it was almost impossible for anyone to know it was him. They stepped outside, and looked at the newly fallen snow. It was midday and both knew that by this time tomorrow, the snow would be tinted red with the blood of the injured and dying.

When Lucius arrived home at Malfoy Manor, Ginny was taking a nap. Not wanting to disturb her, he decided to spend some time in his study. Lucius was now standing at the window, staring out into the white snow-covered gardens. He heard a sound behind him and turned.

"Master, are there any instructions you have for me?" Emil asked.

Emil knew about the impending war. Many of the house-elves at the manor did. They also knew that there was a possibility that their master would not live past tomorrow.

Lucius approached Emil and looked down at him. He'd truly regretted treating house-elves so badly in the past. During the seven years he'd known the small elf, Emil had proven to be a great friend to him, always understanding and never judgmental. Lucius bent down on one knee and put his hand on Emil's small shoulder.

"You have been a great friend to me these years, Emil. You have taken care of my home as though it were your own, and you have kept me company. If I am to die tomorrow I want you to know that this is your home, to stay in for as long as you wish. You are a free elf still, but I would like for you to remain here, and take care of Ginny."

Lucius knew that Draco had Harry; his son would be taken care of emotionally if anything were to happen to him. But Ginny she'd been hurt many times in the past. She loved him, and he wondered how strong she would be if died.

Emil placed his hand on Lucius' and smiled.

"I will, Master. I will take care of the Mistress, and your child."

Lucius smiled. "Draco will be all right, Emil. He has Harry to turn to."

Emil shook his head. "No, sir, I meant your child with Mistress Ginny."

Lucius lost his balance and fall back against the edge of the couch. He looked at Emil in shock. "How do you know this, Emil?"

Emil smiled sadly. "I have felt his presence within her for several weeks now. Mistress doesn't know herself yet."

Lucius felt the burning of the tears now filling his eyes. He covered his face with his hands and fought to hold back the emotion that now filled his entire body. Ginny was pregnant with his child, and tomorrow he would be in the middle of the battle of his life. Finally, he allowed his emotions the upper hand; he felt defeated, as if he had no fight left.

He cried because he might never see Ginny again after tomorrow. He cried because he might never see their unborn child. He cried because after seven years he was finally starting to feel alive, and now he felt as though Voldemort were walking over his grave.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. I should have more by this coming weekend.

Thanks for reading.

Chapter 21 - Let Us Remember Tonight, For Tomorrow We May Die

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

I'd like to thank once again all of those who have taken the time to read this story and leave a review.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

Many thanks to June, my wonderful beta. All of your hard work and wonderful suggestions are greatly appreciated.

Chapter 21 - Let Us Remember Tonight, For Tomorrow We May Die

Emil walked to his master and placed his hand on Lucius' shoulder.

Lucius looked at the house-elf, as his eyes glittered with tears.

"Do not burden your mind with thoughts of doom. You must live, Lucius Malfoy, you must live."

Lucius wiped his tears and nodded. He had cried enough, and now he was done feeling sorry for himself. Emil was right; it would do him no good going into the battle already dead in his own mind. He needed to keep his mind sharp so he could live to come home to Ginny and the new baby.

"You are quite right, my little friend. I can't give up just yet." Lucius stood and began walking towards the staircase. He looked back at the elf. "Thank you."

Emil smiled. "You are most welcome."

The sky had grown darker as the afternoon made its change to evening. Lucius quietly entered the bedroom, careful not to wake Ginny. He undressed himself, and then used his wand to undress Ginny. He pulled a thick blanket up over their bodies and held her tightly.

Ginny stirred slightly as Lucius began to stroke her stomach. She had been in between being completely awake and still asleep. She felt a warm body behind him and smiled.

"Mmm...you're back." Ginny turned her body to face her lover. She opened her eyes sleepily and looked into Lucius' now red-rimmed eyes, and she suddenly became wide awake. "Have you been crying? Did Voldemort do something to you at the meeting?"

"No, I'm just tired. I had very little sleep last night," he lied, not wanting Ginny to worry. Instead he smiled and kissed her. "I have a secret," he said teasingly.

Ginny sat up. "Oh, I love secrets. Tell me what it is."

"Manners, Miss Weasley. I haven't heard 'please' from you yet." Lucius moved back away from her, but Ginny stopped his movements by straddling him.

"Oh, you are such a brat, Lucius Malfoy. Tell me." Ginny took both of Lucius' hands and attempted her best to pin the man to the bed. "I've got you now, so you have no choice. Now, what's the secret?"

Lucius sighed. "First a kiss, and I will tell you."

Ginny leaned down and began nibbling on his lips until he opened his mouth. Taking full advantage, she slipped her tongue into his warm mouth. Now letting go of his hands, she allowed him to roll her over as he deepened their kiss.

Lucius then nipped and licked his way to her neck.

"Did you know that Emil can apparently feel when a woman is pregnant, even before the woman herself knows?" asked Lucius

Ginny furrowed her brow. "No, I didn't know that at all; my family did not have house-elves. Is that the big secret?"

"It's part of it." Lucius' hand traveled down her chest and stopped at her soft belly. His hand began to make circular movements as he kissed her cheek.

Ginny stopped his hand and looked at him.

"Do you mean he's felt...?" Her voice trailed off in wonder and amazement.

"Yes."

They spoke no more; there was no need for words between them at that moment. Ginny had known something had been affecting her health as of late. She'd been very tired and was several days late with her cycle. Knowing stress can sometimes cause these things, she thought nothing more of it. She had been taking a contraceptive potion, but admittedly missed a few days here and there. When she had laid down for her nap earlier, Ginny decided to give herself a pregnancy test when she woke up, but now there was no need.

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Severus and Hermione made their way back to the school after finishing their walk. Before going back to their rooms, Severus insisted on going to visit Albus and Minerva in the Headmaster's office. Severus recited the password and they both stepped into the staircase.

Their approach was heard, and the older wizard and his Deputy Headmistress were waiting for them at the top and welcomed them into the office.

"I didn't expect to see either of you two today," said Albus as he held Minerva's hand. It was the first time they had done so in the presence of other people.

"I'm sorry for the interruption, but Albus, I was hoping you would do something for us."

Albus and Minerva looked at one another.

"Of course, Severus. What is it you wish?"

Severus reached into his pocket, and pulled out a small box. He turned to Hermione and opened the lid of the box. Nestled within the velvet was a platinum band with a single olive green diamond, surrounded by smaller pale yellow diamonds.

"I was hoping you would perform a marriage ceremony for Hermione and me."

Hermione was speechless. She couldn't take her eyes off the ring. It was the most beautiful ring she'd ever seen. She took the box in her shaking hands and looked at Severus.

"Severus," she whispered.

"I was going to ask you on Christmas morning," he chuckled, "but that day seems so very far away at this moment." Severus caressed her cheek. If he were to die the following day, at least he wanted her as his wife for the few short hours he had left.

Albus clapped his hand and laughed as Minerva now lunged forward to hug Hermione.

"Congratulations, the both of you," cried Minerva. She moved to Severus and then turned and began swirling her wand. Instantly the room was filled with flowers and sparkling snow falling from the ceiling.

"Shall we, then?" asked Albus as he motioned for Severus and Hermione to hold hands.

Hermione smiled and grabbed hold of Severus proffered forearm.

The ceremony was simple and quick. As Albus and Minerva waved goodbye from the top of the stairs, Hermione wondered briefly if she should write her parents a note, but then decided to wait. She would break the news to her parents in person along with her husband, at least that's what she hoped; she did not allow herself to think that she might be a widow the next day.

In their room, both were quiet. Severus sent a note to the kitchens to send champagne and chocolate truffles for his new bride, who liked both. He stood in the doorway of the bathroom, watching Hermione as she brushed her hair.

When she put her brush down, she reached for her bottle of contraceptive potion. The monthly potions didn't set well with her stomach, so she opted for the nightly doses instead. She held the small bottle in her hand, and then caught sight of Severus over her shoulder in the mirror. She looked at the bottle again, and set it back down as she turned to Severus.

"I've always hoped that if we were ever were to marry, I would conceive our first child on our wedding night," she laughed nervously as he approached her. "I know, it's a silly fantasy, something only a silly little girl would think about."

Severus placed his fingers lightly on her lips and shushed her.

"It's not silly at all, Hermione. I can't think of a better way to start our life together." He held her tightly against him. Gone were his thoughts of dying the following day. No, he'd worked too hard and suffered too long to just give up now. So many years of sacrifice, of hiding his duplicity, and not to mention the beatings he'd withstood so that there could be a better world for all of them. There was no way he wasn't going to be a part of it now.

Their night was spent in the pursuit of showing one another how much they loved each other. The following day would be difficult, and the important thing now was to hold one another for as long as possible.

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At the Riddle mansion, things were much different. Voldemort had sent Rodolphus home; after his job of warding the estate was finished, there was no need for him to hang about.

However, Rodolphus did not go home. Instead he spent the evening there in the shadows. Thinking that the Dark Lord would venture out once again to the Muggle world, he wanted to try and get into his bedroom to help the two women escape.

But this night Voldemort decided to stay at his home. He'd been angry earlier when Higgenbottom failed to show up. He no longer needed the stamina potion, as he felt strong enough for the next day's fight. What he wanted from the potions maker was a healing potion. If he were to be hit with any debilitating curses, he would need a potion to heal him quickly. For this reason he'd taken Lynnette prisoner. She was a virgin Muggle, and her blood would be most powerful; he'd wanted Higgenbottom to make a healing potion tonight with her blood as the main ingredient. Now, because of old Higgenbottom's absence, Voldemort had to change his plans. Instead of taking the prisoner from St. Mungo's with him in the morning to Hogwarts, he would take the Muggle girl.

Knowing that there was an elaborate and fully stocked potions lab at Hogwarts, it would be easy enough for Voldemort to make the potion himself. The library was stocked with dark arts books in the Restricted Section, this much he knew from his own years as a student. Voldemort was confident that his Death Eaters would breach the castle within minutes of arriving. He laughed as he thought about using the Imperius Curse on the old fool Dumbledore. Perhaps he would force the soon-to-be former Headmaster of Hogwarts into make the healing potion for him, and watch the head of the Order of the Phoenix slit the young girl's throat to bleed her dry.

Voldemort's plans for the St. Mungo's prisoner would now come after the victory. The first night he had the witch in his bedroom, he learned that she was a virgin and a Muggle-born. Her name was Isabella Ortiz. She was from Spain, and had been betrothed to a young man of noble birth before she'd even been born. Through Legilimency he found out that she had been at St. Mungo's on a consultation. Apparently his prize was a highly regarded expert on Muggle diseases. She was also the daughter of a wealthy land owner from just outside of Barcelona. Her father had ties to the Spanish throne as well as many properties in France and Germany.

While he kept her on a leash at all times to keep her from escaping, Voldemort held off from harming her, or doing anything else to her for that matter. After the war was over, he planned on taking her as his wife and impregnating her. He would then use her and her child as leverage for her father's power and wealth. This would be his first step in expanding his influence beyond Britain. Normally he would not soil himself with a Muggle-born, but for power beyond anything he'd ever imagined, he would deal with the Mudblood for a while longer.

Rodolphus knew nothing of these plans. Tonight, he held his position within the shadows quietly, waiting for Wormtail to appear. After nearly twenty minutes the scraggly rodent-like wizard came out of his master's bedroom, holding an empty tray. As Wormtail made his way back towards Nagini's holding cell, Rodolphus jumped at him.

Rodolphus grabbed Wormtail by his coat and shoved him against the wall hard. He held his wand at the wizard's throat now. "If you scream I will kill you with my bare hands, do you understand?" whispered Rodolphus.

"Please, don't hurt me." In the darkness, Wormtail didn't see who held him against the wall at that moment. "I...I'll do anything you ask."

Rodolphus kept his wand at Peter's throat, but now backed away from him slightly.

"Are the women harmed?" he asked.

"Nn...no. The Master has given me strict instructions; they are to be kept comfortable at all times."

Rodolphus found this rather odd. Bella had on many occasions told him how brutish Voldemort could be towards woman. The Dark Lord cared nothing for others' comfort, and certainly not the comfort of prisoners.

"Why? What does he plan for them?"

"I can't say. He's forbidden me to speak of them. He's made me take an oath." Wormtail began to shake. He could now make out the outline of the man holding him at wand-point. He also now recognized the voice as well. Pettigrew had always been afraid of the Lestranges. Rodolphus always seemed to be the more even tempered of the three, but he was also the most ruthless; a truer Slytherin there never was, in Wormtail's mind.

Rodolphus now approached him and held him by the neck. He could see well enough in the dark to look into Wormtail's eyes, and he whispered a spell. It was a well-kept secret on his part that Rodolphus was quite a good Legilimens. If Wormtail would not speak of Voldemort's plans, then Bella's widower would search his mind and see it for

himself.

After several minutes he saw all he needed to see. He quickly pushed himself away from Wormtail and pointed his wand towards him one final time that evening.

"Obliviate." With his spell now working its way through Wormtail's memories, Rodolphus quickly made his way out of the Riddle home through the darkened hallway. Once outside he Apparated to his own home.

Rodolphus entered the library of his lonely house. Still, knowing that the two women prisoners would not be harmed that night, he felt relief wash over him.

He quickly wrote a note to Lucius telling him all he'd seen in Wormtail's mind. Rodolphus had already told Lucius that when all of the other Death Eaters Apparated to Hogwarts, he would stay behind. He now instructed Lucius to tell Albus to send his signal fifteen minutes before burning Riddle's house to the ground. In those fifteen minutes, Rodolphus would dispose of Wormtail and make sure Nagini was immobilized. He would then find the prisoner and get her out of the home.

Rodolphus sent his owl to Lucius and then poured himself a drink. He sat alone in his library and stared into the fire. He thought of the young woman, Isabella. How odd that she would have a name so similar to his own wife's. 'No,' he thought, '*not anymore*.' He covered his face with his palm and cried. He saw the image of Bella in his mind, her face young and beautiful. How he'd loved her, even though at times he did not show his love, but he loved her nonetheless. He thought of his brother Rabastan, burned alive by Voldemort. Rodolphus felt so alone now. There was no one to hear his cries of despair, no one to give him comfort.

He had made a decision that afternoon while warding the Riddle estate. He took all of his galleons from Gringotts and deposited them into an old family account in France. He was not going to give Voldemort the satisfaction of using his money for any demented purposes, if the Dark Lord should come out of this war victorious.

Rodolphus also held on to the ever so small hope he had of surviving. If he made it past the Aurors, and was able to thwart any attempt by anyone to send him to Azkaban, he would disappear and start over again.

He emptied his brandy and walked to his room, memorizing every wall, every picture, every tapestry. By this time tomorrow, he would be elsewhere, never to see his home again. It was up to the gods now, if they even existed, as to where exactly he would up.

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The next chapter will involve the final battle.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Thank you for reading.

Chapter 22 ? The Beginning

Chapter 22 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

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Thanks as always to June, for all of her help and suggestions.

Chapter 22 The Beginning

The morning of December twenty-third was dark and cold. The previous night had blanketed the grounds of Hogwarts with a heavy layer of crisp white snow. Albus stood in the Astronomy Tower, high above everything as he surveyed the school grounds. There were no more meetings or reminders. Everyone knew what to do and where they should be.

The war had begun. Already that morning, he had received reports that the attacks on Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade were in full force. Soon the newly fallen snow here at Hogwarts would also be stained red with blood.

Albus closed his eyes and filled his lungs with the cold morning air. He then walked to his office and prepared for the coming invasion.

In the dungeons, Severus had woken up early to mentally prepare himself for his tasks. He allowed Hermione to sleep in. As he was fastening his heavy winter frock coat and cloak, he heard a faint familiar voice coming from the Floo in the living room. Immediately he walked over, knelt down, and saw Lucius' face.

"Severus," said Lucius.

"Lucius."

"He has called for me," Lucius said somberly.

Severus felt a tightening in his chest and a lump growing in his throat. The attack on Hogwarts would start soon, and his friend would be standing with the enemy, looking just like every other Death Eater.

"Be careful, Lucius," begged Severus.

"I will."

Before Lucius disappeared, Severus called him again. "Lucius."

"Yes?" answered Lucius.

"You are not allowed to die today," whispered Severus, as he felt his voice leave him.

Lucius smiled.

"I do not plan to." His face grew serious now. "Be careful, Severus," said Lucius as a tear fell down his cheek. "If I should never see you again, know that you have been the greatest friend I have ever had. I love you."

Before Severus could answer, Lucius cut the connection.

"I love you as well, Lucius," whispered Severus as he reached his hand out towards the ashes.

Hermione watched from the hallway. She wiped her tears away and slowly approached her husband. Leaning down, she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and held him close.

Severus felt his wife's arms around him now and leaned back into her embrace. He turned and stood, her arms still holding him by the shoulders and his arms now wrapped around her waist.

"I need to go, love. I have to take my position," he said softly.

Hermione held him tighter, not wanting to let him go.

"I...I'll be watching from the Headmaster's office." Her voice trembled with emotion.

Severus pulled back and kissed her deeply, as though it were the last time he would ever feel her lips against his. He touched her cheek lightly and smiled.

"Do you have your watch set?" he asked.

Hermione nodded. "Yes. Fifteen minutes after they arrive, I say the word and release the sparrow."

Severus nodded and gave her one final kiss. "I love you, Hermione." He then walked out of the room, not daring to look back.

Hermione watched his retreat and wrapped her arms around herself.

"I love you too, Severus," she said to the empty room.

After Lucius closed his Floo connection with Severus, he walked to the guest house. Everyone at Malfoy Manor had awakened early this Sunday, unable to stay in bed with the knowledge that today was the day of battle. Instead of wasting time with maudlin sentiment, he had wanted a bit of normalcy; besides, they all needed to eat. He and Ginny had been having breakfast in the guest house with Draco, Harry, and Neville when he'd felt his Dark Mark burning and left to notify Severus. He now returned to the guest house, where he walked inside and found everyone readying themselves for the trip to Hogwarts.

"We're ready, Father," said Draco. He held Harry's hand as Neville stood behind them. Neville was now involved with the Order because his girlfriend would be at Hogwarts as Voldemort's prisoner; although her rescue was not his assignment, he could not stay away while she was in danger.

Lucius closed the distance between Ginny and himself. He held her tightly and kissed her. His Mark now felt as though it was burning a hole through his skin, but he didn't care. This could be the last time he held her.

"Ginny, promise me that you will not leave the castle until the fighting is over," begged Lucius. He felt her shake her head.

"No. Please don't ask me that. I can't just stay inside and watch. If I see you in trouble, I have to help you. What if you need healing?"

Lucius grabbed her shoulders and shook her slightly.

"Please, Ginny, do not leave the castle. You must stay at your post with Minerva, your mother, and Hermione; that is your assignment. There will be others who will need healing after the fighting is finished." He leaned his forehead against hers and took a deep breath. "If something happens...if things do not go as planned, I cannot bear the thought of you there...of you, of you watching me die."

Ginny sobbed and cupped his face. "Don't say that. You are not going to die."

He smiled sadly at her. "I have served death far too long, Ginny, for it to just leave me be this time. If I know you are there, I will not be able to think of anything else but your safety. If I see you in any danger, I will defend you with my last breath."

Lucius placed his hand on her stomach, and looked into Ginny's eyes one final time. He then turned to the others. "Make sure she is in the castle when the attack begins." He could not ask them to stay with her, as the boys would be leaving the castle themselves to join in the fighting. Emil and the other house-elves had to stay at Malfoy Manor. House elves were not permitted to take sides during any kind of battle concerning wizards. Free or not, they were forbidden. However, they were not under any such obligation to anyone who came onto the property for harm. If any Death Eater made their way to Malfoy Manor, they would get a lesson in hospitality, house elf style.

Lucius then turned and walked outside then Apparated to the grounds of the Riddle home.

When Lucius arrived at the estate, he was amongst several hundred Death Eaters. He quickly secured his mask and pulled his hood over his head, making sure that for the moment, he looked like every other Death Eater there in attendance.

After waiting five minutes, Voldemort finally came outside, dragging Lynnette behind him. The Dark Lord raised his arms and looked across the lawn, now crowded with his followers.

"It is time!" The crowd roared in response. "To Hogwarts!" yelled the Dark Lord.

Every Death Eater Apparated following Voldemort, except for one, Rodolphus. He looked around and made sure he was the only one left. He took his wand from his robes and held it tightly as he looked to the sky. At nine o'clock in the morning, he saw the signal in the sky he waited for. As soon as the Phoenix appeared in the sky he ran into the Riddle home.

His first stop was Nagini's cell. It was her feeding time, and Wormtail would be there as well. Quickly, Rodolphus ran down the hallway. When he found the door he was looking for, he opened it with little trouble.

Nagini was held by a large magical chain around her head. Before Wormtail had a chance to take it off for her feeding, Rodolphus burst into the room.

"What are you doing here?" Wormtail questioned.

Rodolphus said nothing; he pointed his wand and aimed at Wormtail's chest.

"*Petrificus Totalis!*" shouted Rodolphus.

Wormtail's body stiffened and fell to the ground, although he was fully conscious and could hear and see.

Nagini's tail flailed as she hissed.

Rodolphus turned and held the door open for himself; he was now ready for his next step.

"*Alohomora*." Rodolphus aimed his wand at Nagini's chain and watched it fall to the ground.

The large snake then attacked Wormtail's prone body.

Rodolphus closed the door and ran down the hall to Voldemort's room, assured that both Wormtail and Nagini would be detained.

He opened the bedroom door easily, as it had been left unlocked. He looked around the room and noticed the young Isabella sitting in the corner with a chain also around her neck. She backed away in horror, as she looked at the masked man before her.

Rodolphus pointed his wand towards her and whispered the spell to release her. He ripped the mask off of his face and pulled back the hood. He lowered his wand and held his hand out to her.

Not knowing if Isabella spoke English well, he had studied a few words the previous night to put her at ease.

"Por favor, no tengas miedo. Vine para ayudarle." Rodolphus noticed her calm as he spoke to her in her native tongue. "Confie en mí."

Isabella relaxed and slowly approached the handsome man.

"I speak English," said Isabella. "Are...they all gone?" she asked, as Rodolphus noticed her lovely Spanish accent. She felt oddly comforted having heard the man speak to her in Spanish when he entered.

"Yes, but please, we must leave now. There isn't much time left." Rodolphus now took her hand, and they both ran out of the room and toward the front door. As they approached the door, the walls began to burn.

"What is happening?" asked Isabella as she clung to her rescuer now.

"The house is being destroyed. We must hurry!" yelled Rodolphus as they ran toward the front door. Knowing that by now all doors had been locked down by the spell Albus had placed to burn the house, Rodolphus blasted a hole in the door. They ran out just as some of the old timbers began to fall into the foyer.

After running several yards they stopped to catch their breaths. Isabella had also grown weaker from lack of exercise during her captivity.

Rodolphus looked back at the burning home, satisfied that Voldemort would have nothing to come back to if he was victorious. He then turned to Isabella.

"Where is your home?" he asked.

"I live at 42 San Martino Avenida, in Barcelona," she answered, as he used Legilimency to see the house in her mind.

Rodolphus wrapped his arm around her waist and he Apparated with her.

They appeared in the living room of a richly decorated home. Their appearance drew surprised gasps from Isabella's mother and father.

Her parents were both Muggles, and had been contacted by a Ministry of Magic official just after Isabella had been taken captive from St. Mungo's. They knew there was nothing the police could do, so they decided to stay in Isabella's home, hoping their daughter would eventually return.

"Hija!" yelled Isabella's mother.

Rodolphus released the young woman as her mother ran and hugged her. Her father followed.

"Mama, papa, please, I am fine." Isabella moved back slightly and looked at Rodolphus. "This man, he saved me."

Before he could receive thanks from her parents, Rodolphus took one final look at Isabella.

"I must leave," he said.

Isabella rushed to him. "Please, stay just a little while."

Rodolphus shook his head. "The war has begun."

Now Isabella grabbed his arm. "All the more reason to stay with us."

"I am involved with a group that has worked tirelessly to make sure Lord Voldemort is not triumphant. I cannot stay." Rodolphus backed away from her and looked into her dark brown eyes. "Take care of yourself. Goodbye...Bella."

He was then gone.

Isabella's father placed his hands on her shoulders. "Isa, who was that man?"

She turned and looked at her father with sad eyes. "I fear that I may never know, papa."

The fight at Hogwarts was not yet in full swing. There were heavy concentrations of Death Eaters entering through the front gates, never thinking why it had been so easy to get through the property wards. Voldemort himself was so overconfident that he believed his great powers had easily overcome "the old man's wards."

As the Death Eaters now ran towards the castle doors, they literally rammed into an invisible barrier. Those on the front line felt the full brunt of the shock, but recovered quickly. They immediately spread out and formed into their assigned attack groups.

Severus watched from the edge of the Forbidden Forest.

"Not yet!" he yelled to the others. He watched the Death Eater groups forming, readying themselves to raise their wands and break the shield surrounding the castle.

"Now!" Severus and fifty Aurors mounted their brooms and rushed down the short hill towards the Death Eaters. Severus yelled at the top of his lungs. "Hold the line! Follow me!"

They swooped over the heads of the Death Eaters and released an invisible net, capturing several groups at once. As soon as the net fell upon them, those Death Eaters disappeared. The net was a Portkey that would take them directly to Azkaban. While there were still many Death Eaters left at Hogwarts, their numbers were now greatly reduced. The Portkey net was a one-time use, since it took time to make sure the spell was entwined within the net and did not go through the holes. It was one of Hermione's brilliant ideas for the battle.

After the captured Death Eaters disappeared, Severus and the rest of the Aurors took their place on the field.

Voldemort moved close to the shield and began working to bring it down, as Albus and several Order members watched from the Headmaster's office.

Minerva and Molly held their positions, Minerva to the east and Molly to the west, as they both kept the shield up; Hermione and Ginny were there to take over when they grew tired. Hermione stood next to Ginny as both women struggled to keep an eye on their wizards. Hermione spotted Severus on his broom, and was able to keep an eye on him for several minutes before she lost him. She'd taken her eyes off of him to look at her watch; she had five minutes left before she would whisper the spell that she and Severus had created, to send the sparrow off in the direction of the Dark Lord to deliver its "message."

Ginny had a more difficult time spotting Lucius. He still had his mask and hood on. She hoped that he hadn't been in the group Portkeyed to Azkaban.

Draco, Harry and Neville met up with Ron and began their fight through the crowd. Off in the distance Charlie led an assault of dragons.

Voldemort looked up towards the sky over the southern edge of the castle. He took out a two-way mirror from his pocket and spoke.

"Now, you fools!" Voldemort yelled. The ground began to tremble slightly as an army of trolls came running from the south. He smiled as he saw the terror in the Aurors' eyes, but his smile was too soon wiped from his lips, when from the corner of his eye he noticed large hairy creatures coming from the forest. The giants had joined the fight and were now making their way towards the trolls.

The Dark Lord cursed the sky as he looked towards the Headmaster's office, knowing the old fool Dumbledore had managed to create a truce between the giants. He held Lynnette against him tightly by her neck. The shield was proving difficult to bring down.

Severus had been flying over the field, taking out Death Eaters one by one, first making sure none of them were Lucius or Rodolphus. He then landed just next to Hagrid's hut and placed his broom against the steps. Hagrid was already in the battlefield with his brother Grawp. Severus looked around and took off his cloak, then rejoined the battle.

Lucius spotted Severus and saw that he was safe. He then looked for Draco and the others, seeing that they were holding their own. Then took off his mask and pulled his hood back. It was time to get Lynnette away from Voldemort.

Up in Albus' office, Hermione looked at her watch one last time and took the sparrow in her hand. It was time.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Translations:

Hija Daughter

Por favor, no tengas miedo Please do not be afraid.

Vine para ayudarle I came to help you.

Confíe en mí Trust me.

I'll begin the next chapter at some point this week. I hope you all enjoyed this one. Thanks for reading.

Chapter 23 ? The Middle

Chapter 23 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

I was going to post this tomorrow, but since its ready, I thought I might as well get it up here. There is quite a lot going on in this chapter and I hope you don't find it too difficult to follow.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

Thanks to June for getting this back to me so fast. She did a wonderful job, as this chapter was quite a pain in the butt.

Chapter 23 The Middle

In the Headmaster's office, Hermione held the small "sparrow" to her lips and whispered the one word that would activate the spell. *"Esaurisca."*

The small bird was but a creation she and Severus had labored over these long weeks leading to the war. For weeks, Severus-as-Higgenbottom had made Voldemort doses and doses of a specially designed stamina potion. Today, this sparrow's delivery would be the final potion Voldemort would ever receive, only this time the potion would come to him by way of wings instead of from a vial, Hermione's spell had formed a dose of potion into a realistic looking sparrow. As the sparrow flew out of her hands and through a window, she watched it as it soared into the sky, found its target, and then swooped straight down on Voldemort like a missile. Then the potion-as-bird did what it was created for, to be absorbed into the Dark Lord's body and weaken him.

Albus watched from another window; this tower was not as tall as the Astronomy Tower, but he still had an excellent view of the battlefield. He saw Harry in the distance, surrounded by Draco, Ron and Neville, all making their way together into the battle. He knew that he needed to allow Harry to finish this fight on his own. The most important thing Albus needed to do was to make sure no one entered the castle, where there were too many places to hide; the Death Eaters had to be kept outside where they could be more easily seen.

Minerva and Molly were still keeping up the shield that protected the castle but they were tiring, and soon they would need to be relieved. Albus looked to Hermione and Ginny, who were supposed to take over when Minerva and Molly grew tired. Knowing that they would be worried about Severus and Lucius, he began silently warding the castle heavily. He feared that the two younger women might try to make their way to the battlefield; if they did so, he could not run after them. He needed to stay put.

On the battlefield, Lucius was surrounded by Death Eaters. He spotted Voldemort, who was now losing his grip on Neville's girlfriend, Lynnette, despite the magical chain around her neck. Lucius ran faster, knowing that if she were to run away now, she would most assuredly be killed. As a Muggle, she had no wand to protect her from spells, or any knowledge of what to do at this moment.

Charlie Weasley had led several handlers and dragons in Hogsmeade. After that situation was under control, Charlie and his colleagues made their way to Hogwarts. The dragon handlers were keeping most of the trolls at bay, while the giants were taking care of the rest.

Severus joined a small group of Aurors who were battling two trolls. In the end they managed to bind one of the trolls and knock out the other with his own club. Severus then ran towards the north, where he thought he'd seen Charlie in trouble. Severus had seen Charlie fall early on, and he feared this Weasley had been caught by a Death Eater in his vulnerable state. As he searched for Charlie, he caught sight of Lucius now making his way to Voldemort; Severus also saw the sparrow shooting towards its intended target.

Rodolphus arrived on the chaotic scene and began making his way towards a small group of Death Eaters, all of them classmates from their Hogwarts years. Goyle, Crabbe and Boot along with several others were protecting themselves, but not mounting much of an offensive.

"Where have you been?" asked Boot.

"Tying up loose ends," answered Rodolphus. He held his place amongst the small group and waited for the right opportunity to make his move.

Voldemort was alone with his Muggle prisoner. Many of the Death Eaters who should have stood with him had been captured by the Portkey net. He'd been forced to send the others to assist the teams who were now outnumbered. He had expected no opposition at Hogwarts, with the Aurors busy at Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. And where had those dragons come from?

He backed away from the shield; his wand was useless against it. He now took out a knife, the same knife he'd used to kill Narcissa. He knew that Albus was looking down upon him from the safety of the Headmaster's office above the battlefield, and he would now use his prisoner to get the old wizard to lower the shields. Voldemort believed Dumbledore would do anything to rescue a Muggle hostage. But before he could take Lynnette once again, he felt something hit him in the middle of his back. For a moment he lost his breath. He grabbed Lynnette and turned; there was nothing immediately behind him. He focused his eyes and saw Lucius coming towards him.

"Lucius, where have you been?" Voldemort asked angrily as he felt his body tingling.

Lucius smiled, he'd seen the sparrow hit Voldemort straight in the middle of his back. He knew Hermione and Severus' spell was now working its way through the Dark Lord's system, weakening his power.

"I have been here, waiting for this." Lucius lunged forward, took Lynnette by the waist, and pulled her towards him. He released the chain from her neck, never taking his eyes off his enemy.

Voldemort stumbled but quickly regained his balance. He held his wand tightly and pointed it at Lucius, who was now shielding Lynnette and had his own wand pointed at Voldemort.

"I should have known not to trust you, Lucius. Strange, I don't seem to have as many galleons in my account as I should. You did not transfer your assets to my account at Gringotts, as I instructed you to. What is it with your family as of late, Lucius, that you cannot follow simple instructions? Are you all fools?"

Lucius narrowed his eyes. "My son was almost killed during a botched raid, which you orchestrated. My wife was your whore for seven years, in the hopes of diverting your interest away from our son. You tortured my greatest friend in the world within an inch of his life, and after you were finished with him you ordered me to kill him at Hogwarts. You ordered my own wife to kill me when I didn't return quickly enough for you. In the end, you killed Narcissa anyway. You want *me* to pay you for all of that?" Lucius laughed. "Who's the real fool here?"

Voldemort twisted his face in disgust and screamed the first curse that came to his mind.

"Crucio!"

Lucius held Lynnette behind him, expecting the worst. He felt the curse hit him, and realized that Hermione's spell was now fully effective. The curse was nowhere near as powerful as what the Dark Lord had used in the past.

From her viewing place in the Headmaster's tower, Ginny saw Lucius fall to his knees on the battlefield, with Lynnette behind him.

"Lucius!" Ginny turned and ran out of the office.

Molly looked to her daughter and called out to her. "Ginny, no!"

"Molly, I'll go after her!" yelled Hermione. In truth, Hermione had no intention of retrieving Ginny; her husband was out there too.

Albus started to run after the two young women, but was stopped by Minerva.

"Albus, we need you here. I can't keep this shield up much longer, and Molly is exhausted."

Albus came back to the window and looked down. He held his wand out and overlapped the spell, allowing Minerva and Molly to pull away and rest.

Ginny and Hermione ran down the stairwell. Pulling out their wands, they knew that they would have to come out of the castle ready to defend themselves. The castle's main entrance had been warded, so they had to exit through the door behind the staff table in the Great Hall. Minerva and Molly's shield barrier was meant to keep people from coming into the castle; they would have no problem crossing it to go out of the castle and into the battlefield.

Once outside, Ginny spotted Lucius who was not defending himself, even though Voldemort was right there.

As Ginny and Hermione crossed the shield they became separated. A large group of Death Eaters and Aurors were fighting bare-fisted, and Hermione was shoved further into the grounds.

Ginny now lost sight of both her friend and Lucius. Ginny continued to walk deeper into the battlefield, not realizing that instead of going towards Lucius, she was moving away from him. She managed to block every curse sent her way while still trying to find Lucius.

Hermione looked frantically for Ginny, but couldn't find the redhead. As she turned towards the Forbidden Forest she caught sight of Severus being knocked back against a tree by a Death Eater's hex. She ran as fast as she could, hoping he hadn't been hurt badly. Hermione raised her wand before the Death Eater could do anything else to Severus. She hit him with a slicing hex, then a binding spell to fell him to the ground. She rushed towards Severus, and was now panicking because he was unconscious.

On the battlefield, Draco was the first to spot Ginny.

"Oh no, she's supposed to be inside!" Draco yelled.

"Ginny!" Ron was frantic as he saw his little sister now unknowingly rushing towards several groups of Death Eaters. Ron began to run towards her.

"Draco, you have to go with him," said Harry.

Draco looked at his boyfriend. "I can't leave you, Harry."

Harry shook his head. "You have to. Ron can't handle all of those Death Eaters alone, you have to protect Ginny, and besides I've got Neville with me." Draco hesitated.

"Draco, remember what we talked about last night. Whatever happens today, it was meant to be. If I have to face him alone, then so be it."

"If you die on me, Harry Potter, I'll never forgive you!" Draco embraced Harry and kissed him.

Harry smiled. "I love you, Ferret Boy." Harry quickly turned and ran to where he last spotted Voldemort. Neville followed Harry, as Draco now went after Ron and Ginny.

Lucius managed to overcome the curse and knock Voldemort back against the shield. While the weakened Dark Lord fought to get up again, Lucius took this opportunity to turn and run with Lynnette.

When he recovered, Voldemort shook his head and looked out into the battle. He lost sight of Lucius but noticed the trolls were now being confined by the giants near the southern edge of the field. Several dragons were also surrounding groups of his Death Eaters. Spotting a red-haired young woman that he recognized as Ginny Weasley, he now set his sights on her and ran in her direction. As he ran, he felt himself tire. Something was wrong; his body should have felt strong and invincible, not weak and tired. His magic felt weaker. He shook his head, not having time to think on why he wasn't feeling up to par; he needed to get to Ginny.

Draco and Ron reached Ginny first and grabbed her from behind.

"It's all right, it's just Draco and me," said Ron as he calmed his struggling sister.

"Ginny, what the bloody hell are you doing here? You are supposed to be inside, helping with the shield," said Draco.

"I saw Lucius. He looked like he was hurt," answered Ginny.

"Ginny, you shouldn't be here!" said Ron as he shoved his sister to the ground after narrowly being hit by a hex.

As Ron and Draco talked to Ginny, Voldemort neared. His eyes widened as he saw Draco Malfoy. He smiled and took the knife from his robe, preparing to throw it into the young man's back. The knife that had killed Narcissa Malfoy would now kill her son.

Ron looked over Draco's shoulder and saw Voldemort. "Draco, watch out!"

Draco followed Ron's eyes and turned. He saw Voldemort throw a knife at him. Draco blocked Ginny and backed away slightly. Before he could raise his wand and before the knife made contact, it stopped in mid-air just inches from Draco's chest, and then fell to the ground.

A disembodied voice whispered into Draco's ear. *"Run, my little snowflake, run."*

Draco looked around frantically as tears formed in his eyes.

"What happened?" asked Ron in wonder as Voldemort screamed at the top of his lungs.

Draco shook his head. "I'll tell you later. We need to get out of here!" Draco took hold of Ginny and they all began to run.

Voldemort was frustrated beyond belief. He rushed to pick up the knife from where it had fallen, when suddenly it flew towards him and into his own shoulder.

"Ahhh!!" The Dark Lord fell on one knee and grasped the knife with one hand, struggling to pull it out.

Harry and Neville saw Voldemort from a distance. Neville also saw that Lucius had Lynnette, and was dragging her to safety.

"Harry, there's Lynnette!" Neville pointed towards his girlfriend and her rescuer.

Harry turned and saw them, then looked at Neville.

"You go to her, get her out of here, Neville. It's time for me to do this. Voldemort's weak enough." Harry shoved Neville in the direction of his girlfriend and Lucius, and ran towards Voldemort.

Along the way Harry fell and dislocated his own shoulder, and twisted his ankle while dodging hexes. He also stopped a few times to assist an Auror or Order member in dispatching a Death Eater. Slowly Harry made his way towards the kneeling and injured Voldemort.

Near the Forbidden Forest, Hermione checked Severus for injuries, then revived him and helped him to his feet.

"You broke your promise, you should not be here! I told you to stay in the castle!" he yelled.

"Albus, Molly, and Minerva are protecting the castle. Ginny ran outside to Lucius and I couldn't let her go by herself. We were separated, and then I saw you. I thought they'd killed you!"

"Ginny is out here as well?" He asked in disbelief. "Hermione, you need to get to Hagrid's hut. Please, I can't focus while knowing you are out here in danger."

As he spoke, he saw Draco, Ron and Ginny coming towards him.

"Severus, we need to get them out of here," said Draco, still holding Ginny's hand.

"Take them to Hagrid's hut, ward it!" Severus ordered Draco and Ron. He then kissed Hermione and ran back onto the battlefield.

Hermione made to run after him but was held back by Ron.

"No, Hermione. Am I going to have to tie you two up? Severus will have my balls on a plate if he sees either of you out there again." Ron took hold of Hermione, and the group made their way to Hagrid's hut.

On the field Neville reached Lucius and Lynnette. He hugged his girlfriend.

"Thank you, sir. I owe you a wizard's debt for saving my love," Neville said.

Lucius shrugged it off. "Don't concern yourself with that, Neville. Take Lynnette to your home. It's too dangerous for her here."

Neville held on to Lynnette and Apparated with her to his home.

Lucius now made his way back into the battle. He saw Severus and began running to him.

Up in Albus' office, reports continued to come in from Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. The fighting in the two locations for the most part was over. There were small cells of Death Eaters that tried to escape, but were soon captured by Aurors, who'd traced their magical signatures. Mad-Eye Moody had been killed shortly after the battle in Hogsmeade began. Remus had been taken to St. Mungo's for an injured leg. Fred and George Weasley had also been taken to St. Mungo's; having been caught in a melting hex, they were now stuck together, literally. There were relatively few losses suffered by the Ministry and the Order. The fact that they were prepared for the onslaught had helped keep the number of injured and killed down.

Albus looked down on the scene, realizing that the fighting would soon be over here at Hogwarts. He'd seen Tom Riddle move away from the castle, after ending his efforts to take down the shield. The main focus would soon be Harry and Tom, not storming the castle. The shield was no longer needed, and he now felt he could join the fighting below.

"Minerva, Molly, I'm dropping the shield. The injured will be coming in soon, and Madam Pomfrey will need all the help she can get. Please go to the hospital wing to help her ready the ward and assist in the minor healing." The trio walked out of his office together, parting ways on the third floor when Minerva and Molly headed to their new assignment.

As he stepped outside, Albus surveyed the battlefield. The fight could still go either way. There seemed to be more Death Eaters than what he'd seen from above at the beginning. He guessed that these must have Apparated from the other two locations once they'd realized their fights there were lost. Fortunately, the Death Eaters were busy fighting for their lives; it would be best if Voldemort and Harry fought alone.

Unable to find Harry, Albus entered the battle and began placing binding hexes on every Death Eater who ran in his way. It would have been easy enough to kill them, but there would be little justice in that.

Rodolphus and his friends watched with keen interest as the two men approached each other. Rodolphus saw that Voldemort was hurt; his shoulder was bleeding and he seemed off his game. He guessed the spell Lucius had mentioned must have been placed on him near the beginning of the battle. The Dark Lord's hexes didn't seem to pack their usual punch, and he'd failed to bring down the castle's shield.

As for Harry Potter, the young man was inching his way closer and closer to the Dark Lord. He too seemed injured.

Rodolphus looked at the other Death Eaters in his group.

"We need to make our way down there," he said as he inclined his head slightly towards Voldemort and Harry. "Potter is almost to the Dark Lord."

"We need to finish this," said Goyle senior.

The group, including Rodolphus, began walking towards Voldemort.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. I have the next one all written. I just need to go through it a couple more times before I have it ready for June to look over.

Thanks for reading.

Esaurisca Deplete. I took this from an online Italian translator. I liked the sound of the word deplete in Italian.

Chapter 24 ? The End

Chapter 24 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

I'd like to thank those who have continued to read this story and taken the time to leave me a review.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

Thanks as always to my beta June for all of her help and suggestions.

Chapter 24 The End

Harry was now but a few yards away from Voldemort. Despite his injuries, he kept going, fueled by adrenaline and anger at the man who had killed so many

The Dark Lord turned, sensing that his young enemy was close. He laughed mockingly. "You look like hell, Harry. Do you really expect to beat me like that?"

Harry sneered. "You should talk. Look at yourself. Your shoulder is bleeding; you can barely hold your wand. I've been watching you. Hasn't it occurred to you that your spells haven't quite had their usual kick?"

"I'm perfectly capable of blowing you to smithereens if that's what you're worried about, Harry." The Dark Lord pointed his wand towards the shoulder Harry seemed to be favoring. *"Diffindo!"*

Harry first felt a sharp shooting pain, then felt the blood trickle down his shoulder as Voldemort's spell hit him. He knew it could have been worse. Had the Dark Lord's magical abilities been working at their usual level, his entire arm would have been severed, instead of the deep cut he now sported.

This detail was not lost to Voldemort, who now realized that his spell had not caused the outcome he'd intended.

"Very good." Voldemort smiled eerily. "I commend you and your friends. You have obviously done something to me, temporarily... incapacitated me to a degree. No matter, I can still kill you."

Both Harry and Voldemort stood eyeing one another, oblivious to the fighting around them, and ignored by the Death Eaters, Aurors, and Order members who were fighting for their own lives.

"I am curious, though, Harry. I know the old fool Dumbledore is not to be scoffed at for his abilities to create a spell, but such a spell as this had to require something more. A potion married to it, perhaps. I know that creating a spell along with a potion of this caliber is far beyond the skill of that old codger. Tell me, just how did he do it?" Voldemort kept his wand aimed at Harry, just as Harry kept his aimed at Voldemort.

Harry looked around the field, trying to catch sight of Severus. When he did so, he noticed both his old Potions master and Lucius were fighting back-to-back, surrounded

by a circle of Death Eaters.

"It was easy, really. We simply found ourselves a Potions master."

Voldemort laughed. "There isn't a potions maker left alive with that kind of knowledge and skill."

"Oh, really?" Harry smiled and once again looked toward Severus.

Voldemort followed Harry's eyes. He saw the dark-haired man he'd tortured in his home the same man Lucius had been ordered to kill. He looked quickly to Harry, his face twisted in anger.

"Didn't you wonder how a low-level potions maker like Samuel Higgenbottom could develop a stamina potion that made you feel better than you had ever felt in your entire life?"

The realization hit the Dark Lord that Severus Snape had fooled him all along.

"Higgenbottom!" spat Voldemort. "The entire time it was a masquerade by Snape!"

"No...not the entire time. The real Higgenbottom is somewhere safe. A little Polyjuice goes a long way, wouldn't you say?" said Harry, trying to keep himself from fainting. The adrenaline had kept him going for a while, but now that he was only standing and talking, his injuries had caught up with him. There was no need to quickly kill Voldemort, who was too weak to be an urgent threat. Still, between the pain Harry felt in his shoulder and ankle, and now the blood he was losing, he felt he would fall to the ground at any moment out of sheer weakness.

"You little fuck! You think you have everything figured out, don't you? You and all of your idiot friends." Voldemort saw a group of Death Eaters coming towards them, and Rodolphus and Goyle senior were leading the pack. He knew now he had the upper hand; his loyal servants would protect him.

The group of Death Eaters stood in a half-circle behind Voldemort, with their wands lifted and pointing at Harry.

"Where are your friends now, Harry?" Voldemort began to laugh, as he felt his own painful shoulder injury resonate throughout his entire body. "Go on, Harry, kill me. Try it and you die within seconds."

Harry's hand shook. He looked at the Death Eaters; some had their masks and hoods still covering their identities, while others could be seen and identified. He saw his old classmate Gregory Goyle and his father. He also noticed Terry Boot and his father, and another man who looked like Vincent Crabbe, but since he knew Vincent was dead, it must be his father. Harry then looked at Rodolphus, wondering if he was still on the side of the Order.

Slowly, from behind Voldemort, Rodolphus approached Harry. He looked down at Harry impassively, and then turned towards Voldemort. In the blink of an eye, Rodolphus raised his wand and screamed:

"Incarcerous!"

Thick ropes appeared and began to wind their way around Voldemort, then dug themselves into the ground.

"What are you doing, Rodolphus?" demanded Voldemort as he began pulling at his restraints. He looked around him and noticed the group of Death Eaters surrounding him. "Have you all gone mad? You cannot kill me! I am your master! I am the Dark Lord! You cannot kill me! This won't keep you from Azkaban. They will kill you. I can help you, we can all leave now, we can fight another day!" yelled Voldemort frantically.

Off to his side, the Dark Lord could see the movement of light-colored fabric. He looked up and gasped. Narcissa and Bellatrix were looking down at him.

"You see, Tom. I told you I would watch you die," said Narcissa as Bellatrix laughed next to her.

Now Voldemort began to struggle harder.

"No, we will not fight another day," said Rodolphus. The apparition of Bellatrix moved to his side. She looked at her husband sadly and caressed his face lightly; she could not show herself to him and distract him now, when his life was still in danger. Rodolphus felt coolness on his cheek and a shiver down his spine. He heard a whisper in his ear and knew his wife was with him saying goodbye.

"Live for me, my love," whispered Bellatrix as she moved back to Narcissa's side. She'd come back with her sister because she never had the opportunity to say goodbye to her husband.

The two women now stood side-by-side and watched, prepared to intervene if necessary.

Voldemort looked around at the group surrounding him.

"Free me!" He looked at the two ghostly women. "You bitches. What have you done? You've cast a spell on them!"

Harry and Rodolphus looked at one another, then back at Voldemort. The others did the same. They looked at the spot Voldemort was talking to, and saw nothing.

"We have done nothing. You have done this, Tom," answered Narcissa. "All of this, the war, the bloodshed, the betrayal. This is all your doing. You are now beginning to reap your rewards. You have one foot in the grave, and death is waiting impatiently for you."

His patience running thin, Rodolphus approached the Dark Lord.

"This ends right here, right now. We have served you long enough, and have lost far too much in doing so. Perhaps we should all die, I don't know. What I do know is that you killed my Bella, and you burned my brother alive. Let us now see how you like it. *Incendio!*"

Voldemort began to burn.

The Death Eaters who had come with Rodolphus were surrounding the Dark Lord and keeping loyal Death Eaters at bay those who'd heard the Dark Lord's cries for mercy.

"Goodbye, Tom. We won't be seeing you again. You're not going to the same place where we are," said Narcissa and Bellatrix in unison, and then faded away.

Rodolphus looked at Harry. "Go on, boy, do what you must, and finish it. Free us all of this pestilence," he said as a lone tear fell down his cheek.

Harry's eyes went wide in horror. He'd expected to kill Voldemort, but the man's body was already in flames. He reminded himself that everyone once thought the Dark Lord died the night James and Lily Potter had died. Perhaps Rodolphus was right; Voldemort had to be killed properly, flames or no flames.

All around them, the fighting had slowed as onlookers noticed the group of men surrounding what looked to be a bonfire.

Harry stepped forward and pointed his wand. Sibyll Trelawney's prophecy had been made before he had been born. His parents had died in the war against Voldemort, as had many others. Their sacrifices were now going to be paid back.

Harry let all of the anger and hatred he'd felt over the years wash over him, and when he felt he would burst with fury, he released it to the one man who had caused it all.
"Avada Kedavra!"

The streaming green glow shot out of Harry's wand and hit Voldemort's burning body square in the chest. The sudden burst of energy threw everyone standing around that circle back several feet.

Across the field, the sudden blast also knocked Severus and Lucius to the ground as well as the Death Eaters they'd been fighting.

Albus Apparated next to Harry. He bent down and helped Harry, who was coughing and holding his shoulder, as he tried to sit up.

Draco and Ron had argued with Hermione and Ginny, made promises to look out for Severus and Lucius, and then warded them into Hagrid's hut. Then they headed back to the battlefield. From a distance, Draco and Ron saw Harry and began running as fast as their legs could carry them.

Draco practically slid next to Harry. He took hold of his lover and held him tightly.

"You're alive, you're alive." Draco shook as he felt Harry's tears against his cheek. Draco pulled away and noticed the blood on Harry's shoulder. "You're bleeding, he's bleeding!"

"Draco, calm down," said Albus.

"You did it, mate!" said Ron, who now kneeled down next to them.

Harry smiled. "I had help. I could never have done this without everyone's help." He looked to the pile of bones and ashes across from him. "He's finally gone. After all of these years." Harry lifted his hand to feel for his scar, and it was gone. He looked at Albus who smiled.

"Yes, he is gone, Harry. He truly is."

Across the field, Rodolphus sat up slowly, having been knocked unconscious against a tree. He had been standing with the other Death Eaters, who had been thrown back several feet by the energy blast from Harry's Killing Curse. How did he get thrown all the way here?

"Bella.," he whispered, as he felt a sudden gust of air across his face. He looked up and noticed the other Death Eaters now being gathered up by the Aurors. He quickly pulled his Death Eater robes over his head and tossed them to one side as he struggled to stand.

He held his wand tightly in his hand, and looked around. In the distance he saw Severus and Lucius.

Severus helped Lucius to his feet. Rodolphus had earlier told Lucius the names of the Death Eaters who would help on the battlefield, but were too afraid to help the Order any sooner. Severus and Lucius began instructing some of the Aurors on which Death Eaters to take to the Ministry (including those recruited by Rodolphus), and which to take straight to Azkaban. They waved off the rest of the Aurors and finally were able to take a satisfying breath.

"We're still here," said Lucius.

Severus looked at his friend. "That we are, my friend that we are!"

Both men hugged one another and laughed.

Lucius spotted Rodolphus over Severus' shoulder. He patted Severus on the back and nodded towards the other man. Both stared at Rodolphus, who stood at the edge of the forest. Without speaking, they knew what he was going to do. They smiled at him and inclined their heads towards the forest, giving Rodolphus their blessing on his plan to escape. Then they turned their backs to him and began to walk away. For anyone who inquired about Rodolphus Lestrage, they would be told that he died on the battlefield that afternoon, but that he was a hero.

"Where are we going, Severus?"

"To Hagrid's hut. Ginny and Hermione are both there."

Lucius stopped, "They were supposed to stay in the castle!"

"I know, Lucius, I know. Hermione said Ginny ran outside to find you, so of course she had to go with her. I asked your son and Ron to ward them into Hagrid's. Shall we see how strong their wards are?"

"Bloody Gryffindors," mumbled Lucius as Severus chuckled and nodded his head in agreement.

Rodolphus felt his body shake and he started to cry with relief. He looked around once more and slowly backed his way into the forest. He would leave the celebrations to those who survived. Rodolphus Lestrage would never be heard from again.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

The battle is over as you have read. Next chapter will have the aftermath. I think I've got one or two more chapters left here.

I hope you enjoyed this one, thank you for reading.

Chapter 25 ? Aftermath

Chapter 25 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

I'd like to thank once again those who have taken the time to read this and review.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

A huge thanks to June, for all of her help and suggestions, especially the last few paragraphs here.

Chapter 25 Aftermath

After the battle ended, volunteers stayed on the battlefield to identify the dead. Albus was amongst those volunteers, so he was able to point out the body of "Rodolphus Lestrange." The body actually belonged to a minor Death Eater whose face had been deformed by hexes, and Albus simply added a beard and lengthened the man's hair. Rodolphus was not a public person; few people in the wizarding world actually knew what he looked like in recent years, and most of those people were Death Eaters themselves. The fact that he'd been a private man most of his adult life, now worked in his extreme favor.

Albus knew from speaking with Lucius by Floo the previous night that Rodolphus might take the opportunity to flee after the battle, if he were to survive. His disappearance into the forest did not go past the all-knowing and sometimes all-seeing Headmaster, who had been helping Harry to his feet when he saw Rodolphus leave. While Rodolphus had murdered many people in the past, Albus knew that without the help that the Death Eater had given the Order, things might have ended differently, and many more innocent people may have died. The least Albus could do was allow him a new start, for it was clear that Rodolphus wanted to redeem himself.

Severus and Lucius made their way to Hagrid's Hut, only to find Hermione and Ginny outside sitting on the steps. They both stopped and looked at each other.

"Why am I not surprised," said Severus as he caught Hermione, who had flung herself at him. "I should have known no wards Draco or Weasley could set up would keep you in there."

While Hermione bathed Severus with kisses, Lucius held Ginny tightly.

"I was so scared," said Ginny as she trembled. "I saw you fall, and I thought..."

"You thought that you would risk your life and our child's life to come and save me." Lucius held Ginny back slightly. "Ginny, what if something would have happened to you?"

Severus and Hermione now stopped and looked at the other couple.

"You didn't tell me you were pregnant!" said Hermione as she now happily hugged her friend.

"Well, congratulations are in order then for the both of us," said Severus.

Lucius looked puzzled. "You two are having a baby as well?"

"No, we were married yesterday," said Hermione as she showed off her ring.

"Oh, Hermione, I didn't even notice that!" said Ginny.

For a brief moment they all forgot about the world around them.

It was only when Severus saw a dragon land nearby that he remembered. He slowly approached Ginny and took her hand. "Ginny, I need to tell you something."

All laughing ceased. Ginny now looked towards Lucius and then Severus again. Lucius also looked at Severus, not knowing what he was about to say.

"What is it, Severus?" asked Ginny nervously, as she noted the serious look on her ex-professor's face.

"When Hermione saw me earlier, I was fighting with a Death Eater, who..." Severus faltered slightly. "Ginny, I saw your brother Charlie fall from the dragon he was on. By the time I reached him, he'd been killed by a Death Eater, the one I was fighting."

Ginny felt her knees grow weak and she leaned against Lucius.

"I'm sorry, I...I just couldn't get to your brother fast enough."

"Charlie," whispered Ginny as she felt her body grow numb.

Hermione buried her face in Severus' chest. She felt the sting of tears in her eyes as she watched Lucius hold Ginny. She grieved for Charlie and felt badly for Ginny, but she was glad she'd hexed the Death Eater before he was able to kill Severus.

"Come, we should get to the Headmaster's office." Lucius led the way as they walked back towards the castle.

From the outside, they entered the castle through the Great Hall, where there was a flurry of activity. Aurors and Order members who were slightly injured were treated at Hogwarts' infirmary, and those who were in need of critical medical help went to St. Mungo's.

While Severus and Lucius had earlier helped sort Death Eaters, there were now more prisoners to be processed. Aurors held uninjured Death Eaters in conjured holding cages; Ministry officials were taking notes and questioning some, to determine whether to send them to the Ministry or Azkaban. The critically wounded were being taken to St. Mungo's, which had a separate secure ward for injured Death Eaters, while others who had minor injuries were being attended to on the spot, not taken to the Hogwarts infirmary.

Everything looked to be proceeding well, so the four of them went up to the Headmaster's office, which was the base of operations.

Upon entering, Ginny spotted Ron. He was standing next to Draco and Harry, whose arm was in a sling. She rushed to her brother and held him tightly and cried. Ron was shocked for a moment, never having his sister cling to him so.

"It's all right, Ginny. I'm fine, we're all fine. Well, Fred and George are still at St. Mungo's, where they have to wait for several days until they can be separated. They're low priority for now." Ron patted her back as Ginny held him tighter.

By this time Arthur and Molly approached the two siblings.

"Ginny, that was very foolish of you to run off into the battle the way you did," admonished Arthur.

Severus placed his hand on Arthur's shoulder. "Arthur, I'm sorry but I have some bad news."

Molly nervously held Arthur's arm, as Bill now came up behind his mother. Arthur looked around the room; he realized now that Charlie was missing. He looked into Severus' eyes and knew.

"Did...did you see it happen?" he asked.

Severus shook his head and took a deep breath. "No, I only saw him fall. I tried Apparating to him, but there was just too much conflicting magic on the field and I couldn't get my bearings straight. By the time I reached him he had been killed by a Death Eater, who should be among the prisoners. I'm sorry."

Bill stepped forward. "It's not your fault, Severus. You tried to go to him."

Arthur, being Minister of Magic, needed to stay at the castle until all the prisoners were dealt with, and from there he'd need to go the Ministry. He asked Bill to take his mother home and care for her, as Ron continued holding their sister.

Lucius began to walk away, but was held back by Arthur. "You're part of this family now, Lucius. Please, Ginny needs you." Lucius nodded and went to Ginny. Arthur looked at his wife. "I'll bring our son home, Molly."

Harry and Draco stayed behind at the castle. Harry needed to give his final statement before he could leave, but promised he would get to the Burrow the moment he finished.

Molly, Bill, Ron, Ginny, and Lucius then left the Headmaster's office and walked outside to Apparate to the Burrow. Severus and Hermione stayed behind helping with the rest of the identifications. They also took the burden of readying Charlie's body for the trip back to the Burrow, not wanting Arthur to be the one to do this. After all was in order at Hogwarts and the Ministry, Arthur, Severus, Hermione and took Charlie's body to the Burrow, where he would be remembered and grieved.

In the days after the battle was over, lives went on and the living adjusted to the new world that had emerged. Muggleborns were most relieved, no longer needing to fear the coming of the Dark Lord and the prejudices that would have accompanied him.

When Lucius sent Neville home with Lynnette from the battlefield, the young wizard found something waiting for him at his home. There was an owl perched just beneath the veranda. When he opened the French doors, the owl swooped inside and dropped a package on the coffee table, then flew out the same way it had entered.

Knowing that there were battles happening in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade as well as Hogwarts, Neville wondered if the package was something more than it seemed. He moved a still shaking Lynnette to stand behind him as he held out his wand towards the package.

Slowly, it began to unwrap itself, and the box opened.

"Wh...what is it?" asked Lynnette nervously. She'd known that falling in love with a wizard would be an adventure, but she'd never planned on anything the likes of what she'd already experienced.

"I'm not sure really," answered Neveille as he craned his neck up to see if he could see what was inside the box. Slowly, so that neither of them became frightened, a pale mist formed just above the box, and the form of a man began to evolve. It was Rodolphus Lestrangle.

"Mr. Longbottom, by the time you receive this, I will most likely be dead. I do not expect to live beyond the battle that has taken place today. For this reason I am leaving you my family home. I know this in no way absolves me or mine for the wrong we have committed against you and your family, but this is my way to at least, in some small way, try to pay you back for our misdeeds. You will find the magical deed included in this package. It is quite legal and binding, I assure you. I have very few house-elves, but they have been instructed to follow your every command, and understand that you are their new master.

"Take my home, Mr. Longbottom, do with it what you will. Please bring to it the happiness that should have always existed inside of its walls."

With those final words, the figure of Rodolphus Lestrangle disappeared.

Neville and Lynnette approached the package and peered inside. There was a thick parchment, and several very old keys. Neville picked up the parchment and unfolded it. It was the deed to the Lestrangle property.

"He's given you his home, Neville," said Lynnette in awe as she looked at the deed's drawing of the large home. To her eyes, it was similar to Mr. Malfoy's, only this home, even though a drawing, looked abandoned,

Neville felt his eyes tear, and a large lump formed in his throat. He too looked at the drawing, and noticed there was an "L" on the property's front gate. It was likely he wouldn't have to change much at all. He then looked at Lynnette.

"What do you think, Lynn? Should we?"

Lynnette was taken aback, not expecting to be included in such an important decision.

"I...I don't know, Neville. It seems he had no family left and wanted you to have his home very much. It's your decision, though. It would ultimately be your home."

"You mean our home," said Neville. "You are going to marry me, aren't you?"

Lynnette smiled. "Well, I suppose after a proposal like that, I'll have to." She kissed him, and then looked once more at the drawing of the house. "His wife died to save your life and now he is most probably also dead. He wanted you to have this, to make it a happy place. I think we can make it a happy place."

They moved into the newly renamed Longbottom Manor on the day of their wedding, a week later.

Neville set up a room in his new home for his herbal remedies. He had to think ahead; he now had a wife to support and maybe children one day.

Six months after the battle...

Molly had some difficult months after the death of Charlie, the second son she had buried in this war. But she knew that her other children needed her and it was no use living life mourning the dead. She would instead cherish the memories of her lost sons, and looked forward to her first grandchild from Ginny and Lucius.

Ron, who had been training on and off with his brother in Romania, decided to become a dragon handler. He'd found that it was something he actually enjoyed and was very good at. He stayed at the Burrow for two months after Charlie died, then decided it was time to go off on his own. He'd also decided he wanted to settle down. Seeing his friends happily ensconced in their relationships, Ron wanted his own partner to share his life with. He would eventually meet a woman who'd come in as a trainee from Germany. Ron finally met his match in wizard chess. The two dated for two months before they married.

Ginny finished her healer training. After talking with Neville one day during a visit to Longbottom Manor, they decided to open a small practice together in Hogsmeade. Ginny would use her ability as a healer, and Neville would make and distribute any prescribed herbal remedies for maledictions.

Ten months after the battle...

Draco and Harry purchased Neville's old home. They liked the old feel of it, and it suited their needs and had plenty of room for the two of them. After finally marrying in a small ceremony, they adopted two children from one of the many wizarding orphanages that were created after the war. Their new son and daughter's parents were Death Eaters killed in the war. The children would be brought up knowing what their biological parents' beliefs were, as well as being taught that it was wrong to judge someone based on their blood. Whether persons were pureblood, halfblood, or even from Muggle parents didn't mean they weren't as good as everyone else. It was what you were in your heart that mattered.

After she gave birth to their son, Orion, Lucius presented Ginny with a two-carat sparkling yellow diamond and asked her to be his wife. They'd always both known they would marry, but waited until after the baby's birth just to be different from the norm. Besides, Ginny had been too busy for wedding preparations; she and Neville spent hours readying their new practice in Hogsmeade.

Lucius continued his work at the Ministry of Magic, and would one day become the Minister of Magic after Arthur retired.

Severus and Hermione did indeed conceive their first child on their wedding night. Olivia Snape, Hermione decided, would be just like her father. The new mother already noted what would soon be a temper to be wary of, although it seemed that Severus was the only one who could calm the month-old Olivia when she was in a rage.

Severus would go on to become the Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, while Hermione stayed home raising their children and writing research papers on the benefits of combining potions with spells and charms.

As for Rodolphus Lestrage, according to all official records, he died on the battlefield, his body hexed almost beyond recognition. In the months after the war and for years to come, he would be praised publicly by Albus Dumbledore, Arthur Weasley, Lucius, Severus, and other Order members. In a special interview with the Daily Prophet, Harry Potter himself told of how Rodolphus had placed Voldemort in a body-bind so that Harry could kill him. In an interview with Witch Weekly, Neville spoke openly of how Bellatrix Lestrage had died to save his life, and how she and Rodolphus regretted their actions; as proof, he showed them the deed to the Lestrage property that Rodolphus had given him. The Lestrages once feared as loyal Death Eaters had become tragic heroes, destined to be studied by generations of History of Magic students at Hogwarts.

Miles away from Britain, a man sat overlooking fields of ripening grapes and smelling the scent of newly blossoming roses. Dante Monte Cristo would soon have a new destiny.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

I have just a short epilogue which is basically all Rodolphus. If you are interested, then I should have it up on a couple of days, if you wish to skip it, then this is the end of this story. I thank you for reading it.

Chapter 26 - Epilogue - Starting Anew

Chapter 26 of 26

****COMPLETE**** *Not HBP Compliant* Lucius Malfoy has been a Death Eater most of his adult life. A near tragic event involving his son causes him to rethink his beliefs, and he changes his status with the Order, including his friendship with a certain Potions master and a Weasley female. SS-HG LM-GW.

We have come to the end of this story. I began with a tale of two men, but I think I ended with a tale of three.

I hope those who have read this have been entertained if only for a short while. Thank you for reading and leaving me such wonderful reviews.

All canon characters belong to JKR.

As always, a huge thanks to June. Without her help and suggestions, this would probably have run on sentences and missing commas galore.

Chapter 26 - Epilogue Starting Anew

Ten months after the battle, in the Tuscany region of Italy...

The dark-haired man with a well manicured beard sat in his villa, overlooking the vineyard he'd purchased with the money he'd taken from Gringotts.

Even though he lived in Italy, he'd taken to reading El Pais, a Spanish newspaper, which had both Muggle and magical editions. He would read the papers regularly, looking for any bit of information on Isabella Ortiz. Immediately after the war, she was a popular news subject because she was the longest-held prisoner from the St. Mungo's attack, led on a magical chain by Voldemort himself. She had been rescued by Rodolphus Lestrage, the tragic hero who had snatched her out of the Dark Lord's burning lair. She refused media interviews, but facts had leaked out from her Ministry interviews.

Months later, he read of her work as a highly regarded expert on Muggle diseases. She was consulted by Muggle and magical authorities, and he read her professional articles.

Today he noticed her mentioned in the Muggle society page; the formal engagement photo showed her with a young man. He noted there was a caption, but didn't bother to read it. Today he would see her. He'd waited long enough and hoped he hadn't waited too long.

Rodolphus had truly started over. He was a very successful man. He had taken what was once a decrepit home and made it into a small palatial estate, and had worked its dry lands until they produced some of the finest wine grapes in Europe. All of this would normally take years, but he and all his workers were wizards. Also, he had ordered some herbal plant remedies and fertilizers from Longbottom's. He could sell his wine only to wizarding customers for now, since Muggles would be suspicious of good wine grapes grown in less than a year.

He was now called Dante Monte Cristo. His name was taken from a book he'd read just after purchasing the villa and its vineyard. The book's hero was a man who had been blessed with a great future, only to have it taken away by greedy and power-hungry men, who were envious of him. But in the end he became a great man, never forgetting his past, but living his life to the fullest after avenging himself.

"Alejandro!" he called his servant as he prepared to leave.

"I am here, sir." Alejandro, a short stout older man, walked into the study from the kitchens.

Rodolphus had hired the old wizard shortly after buying the property. Alejandro was Spanish but his family had emigrated to Britain years ago; at Rodolphus' request, Alejandro had taught him to speak and read Spanish. Most of Rodolphus' workers had fought in the war as Order members or sympathizers, as Alejandro had. All his workers had lost their homes and livelihood, and many had lost family members, such as the Aurors' widows he'd hired. Now they all lived in the workers' residential housing surrounding the main villa, enjoying their life in the sunny countryside of Italy, raising grapes, making wine, and working for a patron who was kind and shared the profits of his business.

"I need to go out for a while, Alejandro. Cancel my afternoon appointment, please, and reschedule it."

"Yes sir. Is there anything wrong?"

"No, I just need to finish something," Rodolphus never revealed to anyone his true identity, but many of his workers had guessed who he was, who he'd been. They shared their copies of the Daily Prophet and Witch Weekly, and had read the stories of who he used to be, but they also knew that without his help, their world would have been a darker place. Besides, all of them wanted to forget the war, so no one mentioned Death Eaters or Voldemort. Alejandro knew that his patron was making up for past deeds, and everyone deserved a second chance.

Rodolphus walked outside his villa and Apparated to the home he knew to be Isabella's. After he rescued her from Voldemort's mansion, he'd taken her back to her own home in Barcelona. Since the final battle, he'd often come here to watch her from a hidden spot behind the large stone fence. He knew she had been betrothed to a young Muggle man of noble birth before she'd even been born, but he could not stop himself from thinking of her and her dark brown eyes.

Today, when he Apparated to Isabella's home, he noticed people in the garden. Placing a *Disillusionment* charm on himself, he made his way into the home, walking past guests laughing and talking about the "young couple."

He easily walked to her room, having seen it from the outside many times.

"No more visitors, Isabella. Your hair is done, you are dressed, and you are alone now, so get some rest, and I will go to the kitchen to check on the food," her mother said.

Rodolphus mentally thanked Alejandro for teaching him Spanish. He watched her mother leave the room and shut the door, before she headed for the kitchen. He looked around to make sure no one else was coming, and made himself visible before he Apparated into the room.

Isabella was there, looking out the window. She was wearing a wedding dress. Slowly she turned and looked at him.

"Am I to dream of you my entire life?" she whispered. "How cruel this vision of you is to me." Isabella turned away from him and continued looking out the window.

"I am no vision, I am real."

Quickly she turned back to him, her breathing now coming in gasps.

"I...I thought you had died. You never came back." Isabella approached him.

"I'm sorry, I...I didn't think it would matter," he said.

"Not matter? You risked your life to take me away from that beast, to keep me from burning in that prison he held me in. You were safe here, but instead of staying with me, you left me to fight in the war against...against Voldemort, and you didn't think it would matter to me if I never saw you again?"

"Isabella, I once followed him. You are a Muggle-born witch. I did not think you would ever want to have anything to do with me beyond that moment when I brought you home."

Isabella now wiped her tears, and raised her head.

"I know who you are. I have read the papers, I have asked questions. I have spoken to Neville Longbottom; you know he and I were prisoners together. A Death Eater does not help a Mudblood live, and does not give away their family home to a friend of Harry Potter's."

He winced at her using the word Mudblood. It had always been such a harsh word, especially now that he'd changed his views on so many things.

"I don't care what you were in some other life. I am interested in who are you now; that is what matters."

From the day he'd Apparated away into the battle, Isabella had done nothing but think of the man who'd rescued her. His face was engraved in her mind; his scent was everywhere she went. He had become an obsession to her, so much that she now dreaded her impending marriage more than ever.

Two days after the war ended, she'd received an invitation to Neville Longbottom's wedding. During the reception, she spoke with Neville, telling him about the unknown man who had saved her. When Neville told her how the Lestranges had given their lives to help him and that she was now standing in their old house, she'd asked about the man, Rodolphus. Neville showed her the only painting there was of him, a small one at that; she realized he had been her rescuer. When Neville said he had died on the battlefield, she was devastated, but by that time it was already too late. She'd fallen in love with a ghost.

"For the past ten months, your specter has followed me everywhere and there were days when I would be looking outside and see your face in the gardens," she said. "I thought it was a ghost, but seeing you now, I realize it was not a ghost. It was you, but you never spoke to me. Why did you come here today?"

"I came because I needed to see you, one final time. And...to congratulate you on your marriage." He shook his head. "Were I not such a coward, I would have come long before now." He bowed his head and turned away from her.

Isabella walked to him and placed her hand on his shoulder. "I am not married, not yet."

He turned to her now. But before he could say a word, there was a knock on the door and an older man walked inside.

"Isa, it is..." Isabella's father, Hernan, stopped and looked at the two standing next to each other. "Who is this stranger?" he asked as he quickly approached, only to realize it was the same man who had rescued his daughter.

"Papa, this is..." Isabella looked uncertainly at Rodolphus, as he held his hand out.

"Dante Monte Cristo, sir."

Isabella's father looked to her, then back at the man standing next to his daughter. Hernan shook the man's hand but said nothing. Being a Muggle, it had been difficult to do his own research in the wizarding world, but Hernan had a contact there, a man by the name of Albus Dumbledore. When Isabella had her eleventh birthday, the old wizard had visited him about his daughter having a place at Hogwarts if he chose to send her there. While Isabella went to a wizarding school in the Americas, Hernan often kept in contact with the wizard. And Dumbledore had been very informative about this man, who now called himself Dante Monte Cristo.

"Monte Cristo," said Hernan. "Do you have any connection with the Monte Cristo family, the wine makers in Tuscany?"

"Those are my vineyards, yes," said Rodolphus proudly. His vineyards produced some of the highest regarded wines in the wizarding world.

"I first tasted your wine at a reception held by the Spanish Ministry of Magic. I have a few friends who are high ranking wizards in the Ministry here. I enjoy your wine very much, Mr. Monte Cristo. I should also thank you for saving my daughter. You left before I had the opportunity to do so the last time I saw you."

Rodolphus looked back to Isabella, who was now nervously twisting the handkerchief she held in her hand.

"I was just leaving. I came to congratulate Isabella on her marriage, and to wish her well." Rodolphus turned to leave, but was held back by Hernan.

"Wait." Hernan looked at his daughter and stood next to her. "Before my daughter was born, my family and another decided that our children would someday marry."

Isabella and Arturo have known one another since they were children. I know it is an archaic practice, to choose your children's partner, but I know a bit of your world, so I think you will understand this."

Rodolphus nodded and sadly looked to Isabella, whose tears were flowing freely down her cheeks.

"Arturo is not a wizard, like you are. You and my daughter, I imagine, would have much in common. I also know that my daughter will live far longer than any non-magical man she could ever marry. This is something her mother has not wanted to understand, but I do."

Hernan now turned to Isabella, and lifted his hands to caress his daughter's cheeks. "She is a treasure, my Isabella. A treasure I am entrusting to you now, Mr. Lestranger."

Both Rodolphus and Isabella now took a deep breath, not believing what they'd heard.

"Papa, how did you know?" asked Isabella in wonder.

"I cannot tell you all of my secrets, Isa. Go, take your wizard and make your life. I know you will never truly be happy with Arturo." Hernan placed Isabella's hand in Rodolphus' and smiled. "Don't worry about your mother. She will be upset, but I am sure she will eventually overcome her anger. Perhaps a grandchild or two will ease her pain slightly."

Rodolphus was speechless. He pulled Isabella close to him and looked at Hernan.

"Thank you." He took a card from his pocket and handed it to the man who would soon be his father-in-law. "My home is your home, sir."

"Goodbye, Isa, I expect to see you soon. And remember, take care of my daughter."

Rodolphus nodded and Apparated out of the room, with Isabella in tow.

When they were gone, Hernan shook his head and sighed heavily.

"Mi esposa me va a matar."

In Tuscany, Rodolphus and Isabella arrived outside the gates of his home. Here they would live and be happy as Dante and Isabella Monte Cristo.

In the coming years, they would have four children, all magical, and all would attend Hogwarts. Their children would often invite their schoolfriends to their villa for the holidays. There were many Christmas parties at the Monte Cristo home, and they would all include Snapes, Malfoys, and even Longbottoms.

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Translation: Mi esposa me va a matar. = My wife is going to kill me.

There you have it. I had originally thought, when I wrote him into this, that Rodolphus would be his end very quickly, but I soon grew to really enjoy writing him this way. I think in the end he deserved to start over, even though he'd been a Death Eater, he risked his life and lost those he loved to rid the world of Voldemort. He saw the error of his ways, and in some small way tried to repay Neville for all that he'd suffered at the hands of the Lestranges.

I also thought that the use of Dante Monte Cristo, would be a way for him to remember his past as well. If any of you have read the Count of Monte Cristo you will note that I have taken the last name of Edmund Dantes, and the name Monte Cristo, thus his past and present. I think that is something Rodolphus would want to never forget, both his past and present.

I thank you all for reading this story. I hope you enjoyed it.