

The Warriors' Plague

by WickedlyWanton

****HBP Spoilers****--Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy are on the run, Hogwarts is no more, and the Order of the Phoenix is in chaos. Things are looking pretty bleak for the side of light. How are they to save the Wizarding World, and where will everyone fit in? HG/SS, RL/OC, with a little bit of every one else. No smut yet, although that could change.

Prologue

Chapter 1 of 5

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***WARNING*: HBP SPOILERS**

A/N: I took my story, "Have Faith in Me," off Ashwinder for several different reasons, mainly because it just wasn't working for me anymore. I had a good time writing it, but after going back and reading it again each time, it made it seem more and more juvenile to me. I wanted to write something with substance and something that would seem a little more realistic--well, as realistic as writing about magic could be. So I decided to wait until after HBP came out and I had read it. This story is the result of the plot bunny that began jumping up and down and multiplying by osmosis. By the way, since many of you reviewed that my OC, Danae, was a likeable character and found her interesting, she will be in this one. The basic principles of my other fic are the same; Danae's heritage, her occupation, etc. For those of you who didn't read "Have Faith in Me," Danae will be explained. I hope that if you didn't read the other one, you will give this one a chance, and I hope that this story will garner a bit more attention than "Have Faith in Me" did.

Disclaimer: The goddess of all creation in the Harry Potter world is J.K. Rowling. I did not help her in any way to create any of this, nor am I actually her (darn it).

A/N #2: This is an eventual HG/SS, btw. I can't seem to want to write anything else. However, it may take a while to get that way. I think Hermione is going to need some convincing.

Prologue

It was with great relief when the two dark figures moving swiftly through the forest found the tiny cabin. They had been running for three weeks, seldom stopping for food or sleep. They came upon the cabin in the middle of the night, having little light to see by from the thumbnail moon shining down through the canopy of leaves above. It had done nothing to help them find their way, hampering them mostly, as roots and animals had hidden themselves away in the shadows. Had there been more light, the two figures in dark cloaks would probably have been less exhausted, therefore more likely to be wary coming upon the cabin, but with their flight, along with the fight against the underbrush, weariness had set in, causing an unguarded relief.

It was not long before they realised their mistake. They had become too unguarded, and the realisation that they had made it so far without letting their fear and fatigue take over, only to be captured as soon as they had let it down, brought a new irony to their hearts. A voice had rung through the night, echoing off the trunks of the trees, and a bright, unnatural light lit up the area they were in just before complete and utter darkness invaded their sight.

Severus Snape awoke to the nickering and whinnying of horses and the doleful cry of mourning doves. He did not move as he woke, but remained absolutely still as all his senses came back to him. First was his sense of smell. Earthy aromas filled the air around his nostrils, a mixture of soil, decaying leaves, and even a slight hint of manure, followed by the scent of fresh cut grass, heady flowers, and pine sap. His sense of hearing had come next, the horses and birds sounding as though they were right next to his head. Next came his sense of taste, the inside of his mouth like that of a Muggle cat's litter pan, 'Which,' he thought, 'isn't unusual.' The sense of touch came next, and with it the thought that his sense of taste was much more pleasant. Opening his eyes made the reality of his situation that much worse.

Unfortunately for him, he had been sleeping rather well under the spell that had taken Draco and him out the night before. At least, he thought it was the night before. It had allowed their captor to put them in the state that they were in. Severus blinked several times, trying to clear the magically induced sleep from his eyes, only somewhat successfully. He could not see much of Draco, but what he could see made his blood run cold. When he realised he was in a similar state, he wished he would pass out again and never awaken.

Both Severus and Draco were positioned on their backs on a magical cushion of air that might have been comfortable if it had not been for the way their limbs were arranged. A thick rawhide strap tied around their wrists and ankles connected them to a separate winged unicorn, so that there were four unicorns facing opposite directions away from the person they were tied to. In fact, the more Severus thought about it, the more worried he became. The longer he lay there, the longer he became convinced through the pain in his arms and legs that there was no magic cushion below him, but he was being kept from the ground by the goodness of his shoulder and hip bones staying inside their sockets.

It was also quite humiliating. 'Not such a great spy, after all, old boy,' he thought to himself. 'First time out without any support from either side and you go and muck it up.'

Draco chose that time to moan loudly and move slightly in his pained slumber. The sudden sound and movement from behind them caused a near panic to ripple through the unicorns, or at least it felt like it to Severus. While they had only shifted restlessly, the pain was so excruciating that it took all Severus had not to scream. Ribbons of pain and fire lashed at his tightly controlled emotions, causing a tear to leak out of his right eye, but he swore to himself that whoever had captured him would not hear a single sound come from him.

Draco, however, had no such qualms. With the shifting of the small herd, Draco came immediately awake, screaming in such agony that Severus was not quite prepared. It made no difference to the unicorns, who continued to stand there passively, tails and ears twitching. The longer Draco screamed, the louder he became, until all Severus could hear was a ringing in his ears. Each scream undulated around them, echoing off the trees, off the cabin, and even off the unicorns, reverberating so that Severus could not tell the beginning from the end.

He wanted to scream himself, at least to yell at Draco to stop; it was driving him mad! The pain he knew he was feeling was equal to that of Draco's, but he swore to himself that he would not give anyone else the satisfaction, ever again, of hearing him cry out. He knew that if he opened his mouth at all, even to try to calm his ward down, he would end up doing the same thing.

Finally, when Draco had cried himself hoarse, Severus sighed his relief. He tried to relax minutely, a little at a time so that his muscles had time to stretch with the weight of his body. Briefly he wondered where their captor was, if he or she would return either before the unicorns decided that they needed to be drawn and quartered, or before the mourning doves turned into vultures. It occurred to him also that he needed not only food and water, but he also needed to relieve himself. He quickly suppressed his thoughts about all three of those things. It would do no good to dwell on what he knew he would not be receiving any time soon.

So he ignored Draco's harsh breathing, struck down the thought that Draco was hyperventilating and would soon pass out, and began to distance his mind from his body. He slowly fell into another deep sleep, this time induced by his own psyche.

When Severus next awoke, it was to the feeling that his bones in his arms and legs were breaking. 'They are finally taking off,' he thought, and prepared himself for his demise. It wasn't to be, however, and a strange sensation touched his back, worming its way through the pain he felt in other parts of his body, and realised he was now lying prone on the ground. His further amazement came when he realised that the pain was only that, pain, and no pressure from gravity to pull at his joints. Although he couldn't move without wanting to black out, he was grateful that there were no more bonds at the ends of his limbs. The fact that he could no longer feel his hands or feet only gave him slight concern, the easing of the pull on his joints overwhelming his thoughts.

Not realising how terrified he had been, Severus' head lolled around in relief, but stopped when it came to rest on the figure that he had just noticed standing above him. It wasn't until the figure spoke that Severus understood what was about to happen.

"Hello, Severus."

And with that, Severus did scream.

"Severus, would you hold still, please?" came a frustrated voice from beside his right ear. He grimaced; he was trying to stay still but could only writhe with pain. His arms still ached and his legs felt like they had been detached from his body and then shoved back into place. Every muscle in his body felt as though it had been ripped out and the Cruciatus Curse placed on each individual section of flesh. His hands and feet were curled in upon themselves, feeling as though needles were puncturing his flesh continuously. His skin burned, and he knew that he had to have been exposed to the sun for at least two days.

"If you will keep quiet and let me put this potion on you, I guarantee that you will feel better," the voice came again, more softly than before. "Just relax and try to breathe through your nose."

Severus tried to do as told, in too much pain not to trust the soothing voice, too tired to try to make his body react to what his mind was screaming at him to do. So he relaxed as much as possible, and when the light touches of potion to his sore muscles and burned skin began to relieve him of his pain, he was able to completely quiet the voice telling him to hex whoever was touching him.

Not long after the soft touches came water, to dry, cracked, and bleeding lips. He assumed that he was dehydrated and opened his mouth greedily. The pins and needles in his hands had lessened their assault somewhat and he reached blindly for the vessel that the sweetest water he had ever tasted came from. The muscles in his arms were stiff, but they did not scream at him, which was another thing he was grateful for.

"If you would open your eyes and try to sit up, I will give you the cup," said the voice. He slowly let his hands fall to his sides, and taking a deep breath, cracked his eyes open.

What he saw was definitely not what he expected. This person was not the figure that had spoken to him outside, it couldn't be! Outside had been a horrible creature, a cross between a hag and an erklings, short with green skin, long pointed face and nose, and short pudgy fingers. Its teeth had appeared as many points in a blood red mouth, and its hair had the appearance of mud covered hanks that were matted to its head. Its eyes and tongue had been black as death, and the scream it had torn from him was evidence of how hideous he thought it to be.

This person was beautiful, at least to his mind. She had long hair the color of a raven's wing, eyes that glowed silver, and a smile that infused comfort into his heart. She smirked when she noticed his eyes opening in surprise.

"Ah, I see you were not impressed with my glamour from earlier," she laughed. "It is a necessary charm. Keeps out the unwanted guests." Here she frowned. "Normally."

He looked at her uncomprehendingly. He felt that he should know her, know her very well, and even after his horrendous experience, he knew that he could trust her. That trust ran very deep, something he felt in his bones, and he wondered at this. Who was she?

"In case you were wondering, Draco is fine." She smiled at him again as she helped him sit up. "In fact, he is in better shape than you are. He is already up and walking around." She pushed a pillow behind his back and handed him the cup of water. It wasn't until then that he noticed he was in a large down-filled bed in a room filled with books and parchments. His eyes roamed the room, trying to get a feel for who this person was.

Noticing his gaze, the woman tending him sighed. "You never stop, do you?"

This surprised him again, and he swallowed a small amount of the water before trying to speak. He was pleased to hear the words issue from his mouth, and although they were hoarse and sounded rusty, he knew they got the point across.

"Madam, I have no idea who you are, but I need to know. I also respectfully request you tell me why you are here and who gave you permission to use this cabin, which has been in my family for centuries?"

The governors had closed Hogwarts. They had known it was coming, but it was still a shock when the hope of keeping it open was completely shot down. Many thought that with the threat of teachers being under the influence of You Know Who, it was a good thing to close the school. Some thought that home-schooling their children would be a much better thing to do, that they could do it just as well. A few would be hiring tutors to help them with their children's magical education. All of these, however, would be those with pureblood or half-blood families.

Hermione thought that the governors had played right into You Know Who's plans. They had done exactly what he wanted them to do. She was staying with Harry and many of the remnants of the Order of the Phoenix at Number 12 Grimmauld Place. She, Ron, and Harry had lived at Hogwarts for a couple of weeks until word had come to them that they had to leave. It had not been decided exactly where they needed to go, but they knew that the only place for them at the moment was Grimmauld Place.

The question that had been plaguing them was: what to do now? They knew what they needed to do, or more specifically, what Harry needed to do, but how would they go about doing it? The school was closed down, meaning that no Muggle-born wizards or witches would be able to be trained at Hogwarts. That left the other magical schools to take up the slack. Durmstrang could not be depended upon to teach them, and Beauxbatons did not have the ability to house so many. Not only that, it was just a matter of time before You Know Who would focus his evil on them, also.

It had left the Order with too few people to help in the fight. Where would their help come from? No, they could not use children, and with fewer Muggle-borns, there would be fewer people to fight for. After all, the purebloods and the half-bloods were not in any danger unless they openly defied You Know Who. This fact was brought up again and again at the table, both while they were still at Hogwarts and at Grimmauld Place, and no one had any answers.

Hermione, of course, was doing what she did best. The Black family library was a wealth of information, and she studiously researched all the information on horcruxes, objects of the founders that had either never been recovered or had been stolen, and soul rendering. There were times, though, when she became depressed about the repetition of knowledge within the books, and let her mind wander to Professor Snape. During those times she would look up information on Unbreakable Vows, finding information on those who had broken them and those who had kept them. She had come to a conclusion that no one in the house would like that, especially Harry, and continuously beat herself up about it. No, she didn't think that he was innocent, but that he had had no choice, and therefore his intentions could not be speculated upon as evil.

She never voiced this to anyone, guilt taking over every time someone said something bad about Snape. She may have agreed with them, but there was still a little nagging doubt in the back of her mind that told her he may not be as guilty as everyone thought. There was also the guilt from her loyalty to Dumbledore. Here she was, defending his murderer, if only in her own mind.

She had been in the library for several hours, and had been reading a book on the horcrux of Osiris, when she had decided to call it a day. There were few things that she found to parallel the life of You Know Who to that of Osiris, with one exception. They each wished for immortality. She found it fascinating that legend vilified Osiris' brother Seth for killing him, when all he really did was help rend Osiris' soul, not his body. It was Isis who brought all the pieces of his soul back together, and banished it to the underworld. Hermione figured the legend had to have been written by a woman, possibly a priestess of Isis as the true story did not make either deity look good. Making a concerted effort to think about Osiris and not Snape, she had walked out of the library and, literally, into Ron.

"Hermione! You have got to come to the kitchen, quickly!" Ron said, excitement and tension lighting up his face. "Remus just called in and said that there is to be a meeting in a few minutes, and we all need to be there."

Ron leaned down closer to her, his eyes wide. Quietly he whispered in her ear, as though he did not want anyone to hear. "Rumour has it that Snape and Malfoy have both been found!"

Stunned, all Hermione could do was look at him. Finally, after a few moments of looking into Ron's expectant face, she shook herself mentally, grabbed his hand, and began pulling on him.

"Well, what are you just standing there for? Let's get in there."

As she led him down the stairs to the kitchen, she grimly hoped that whoever had found Snape had not killed him before he was questioned.

Within moments of Ron's and Hermione's entrance into the kitchen, it was filled to overflowing with those sympathetic to the Order. Some had come from as far away as France and Germany to attend. It wasn't until then that Hermione realized that the information that was to be distributed was so strong a lead. While there had been rumours of sightings of both Snape and Malfoy, they usually did not pan out, or were so obviously wrong that they were not even followed up on.

This was different. The Order was by no means organized -that had gone with the death of its leader- nor did it support as many members as was rumoured in Voldemort's ranks. However, there were enough to make this show of support extremely impressive, having gotten the word out to so many of its members in so short a time. It had to be big news.

All the Weasleys were there, including Fleur, along with Remus and Tonks, most of the Hogwarts staff, Mad-Eye Moody and some Order-loyal Ministry Aurors and officials, and others who had been inducted at unknown times throughout the past few years. They were those who no one would guess would be working as spies or fighting against evil. They were the mothers who stayed at home and took care of the kids, the fathers who worked at dead-end jobs, and the orphans from the first war. They were all there in support of the light, and it made Hermione proud to be part of something good.

Until organisation could be brought back to the Order, it was decided that Minerva McGonagall would preside over Order meetings and be their unofficial leader. She had access to all that Dumbledore had had, all his thoughts, memoirs, and all the information that had been gathered previously. When she arrived, the room hushed immediately.

"My friends," she said, looking around. "I have some good news for us, and some bad news. The good news is that we have found both Severus Snape and Draco Malfoy. The bad news is, so has Voldemort."

There was a slight gasp when she said his name, but after the initial shock, confused murmurings could be heard.

Hermione frowned. What did that mean, so had Voldemort? Someone from the back stood up and addressed the professor.

"Wait a moment. I thought that Snape and Malfoy were working for Voldemort. Why would they be running from him? If they are not aligned with him, who are they with? If they aren't with him, why should we be concerned if Voldemort captures them?"

McGonagall sat down tiredly. Hermione thought that she was looking older every day, aging almost as quickly as Dumbledore had in his last few months.

"Before I answer your questions, I do have to say that there is more. While they are protected at this moment, Voldemort can not get to them. Unfortunately, neither can we. We will have to wait for the person protecting them to deem them able to come out of hiding."

A round of protests began until the professor held up her hand. "We must all abide by this. Their protection stems from someone who is loyal to Dumbledore and has been since birth. When she feels they are ready to return, she will bring them to us. There will be no fighting with them or her, and there will be no dissention. I will vouch for her myself when the time comes."

Some of the members appeared mutinous, but none vocalised any concerns they had with McGonagall. All were quiet as she spoke.

"To answer your question of whose side they are on, I can say that I do not know about Mr. Malfoy. I do know that what he did was follow an order from Voldemort," she said, looking around. Her voice grew stern on her next words.

"As for Severus Snape, we have evidence that he may be innocent."

There was so much noise from the protests that Hermione was sure that the Muggles on the other side of London could hear them.

A/N: I hope that you liked the little introduction to this story. Yes, it is going to be a little dark, nothing fluffy here. However, there will be great romance in this story, much like the great romances of old movies and great novels. I don't know yet if I will do any smut, I want a seriously challenging story without the clutter of having to devote a chapter to sex. However, you never know.

Don't forget to let me know what you think! Please review!

By the way, the bit about Osiris I made up. It is based on the legend that his brother Seth had killed him, put him in a box, and built a temple around him. Later, his wife Isis found him. Before she could do anything with his body, Seth dismembered it and flung his parts away. Isis gathered them together, reformed the body with wax, then breathed life into him. Unfortunately, the gods would not allow him to stay on earth, but gave him rule over the underworld. I thought it would be kind of neat to make him out to be a little like Voldemort.

Also, thanks go out to my beta Vaughn. Poor thing had to look at this with half the commas missing!

Chapter One

Chapter 2 of 5

****HBP Spoilers****-Questions arise, but little information is gained for the light, yet. HG/SS, RL/NT, RL/OC.

Chapter One

Hermione's tea had gone cold as she sat thinking about all that had happened the past week. It seemed as though Voldemort and his supporters had become even more blatant in their quest for world domination. A swarm of locusts and rivers running red were causing Muggle religious leaders to preach of the end of days. Fire and brimstone raining down on cities deemed "dens of iniquity" only helped to perpetuate that view. Muggles and magic folk alike were putting their personal effects in order. Muggles swarmed to churches, cathedrals and temples. Witches and wizards went into hiding, either in mountains or jungles.

Sitting in front of the fireplace in the library, Hermione hypothesised that they just might be right. It was certainly going to be the end of the world as they knew it, one way or another. No one was safe, not that they ever had been, and the fact that she was one of those hiding out was not sitting well with her. Sure, she wasn't freezing to death in an igloo in Alaska, but neither did she feel as though she was doing anything to help with the war effort. She had exhausted her references in the library at Grimmauld Place, Hogwarts' library would not be opened for her again for a long time, and there were no magical libraries that she could gain entrance to for fear they would be monitored by Voldemort's minions.

All in all, it was very frustrating. She couldn't even commiserate with her friends. Harry, as promised, had gone back to the Dursleys' for a week. The Weasleys had taken off, splitting up to try to gain support for the Order in five different countries. Mr. Weasley had stayed, his job at the Ministry not allowing him to be away for any major length of time. Besides, had he gone missing, it would have looked suspicious. Not only that, but there were still those in the Ministry who were, as of yet, straddling the fence. There was also the extra bonus of being able to keep up with exactly what the Minister for Magic was doing.

Day after day, Hermione sat in her favourite chair, mulling over what seemed a hopeless cause. The Order was still in quiet chaos, no leader having been elected yet. It seemed that the Order was not to be trusted, to many people, because of this one contingency. They needed to find someone who could make decisions, to strategise, and to unite them. But who could do this? Who had the strength of character to replace Dumbledore? Hermione was afraid of the answer: No one.

In the middle of the next week, Hermione walked in on a discussion between Remus and Tonks that greatly disturbed her. Tonks had come to the house to speak with Remus, pulling him out from the library where he and Hermione had been trying to bounce theories off each other. She had excused them by saying to Hermione that she couldn't stay long, but there was some private business that she had to discuss with Remus. She had followed them after a few minutes, knowing Tonks had to have been there for an important reason and guessing that it wasn't about their love life. They had been speaking quietly in the front hall, but not so quietly that she couldn't hear them from the stairs.

"Don't worry about what Severus will do," Remus had said. "I don't think that he will be in any condition to cause any problems."

"But Remus, you and I both know how he felt about her. When he finds out..."

Remus had cut Tonks off with a kiss. When he lifted his head, she breathed in deeply, then sighed.

"You are right, of course. It's not that he would have been able to expect anything different, really. I don't know if whoever has him has told him of Narcissa's death, but we can always hope. If she has, then she would have to deal with it, not us."

Hermione had been horrified. No one had said anything about Narcissa dying, not to her at least. It had probably been brought up in a secret Order meeting that only a few

of the original members had been privy to. That being Professor McGonagall, Remus, Mad-Eye Moody, and Kingsley Shacklebolt, just to name a few. She knew that not everyone was getting all the information, but this was something that she thought everyone should know. If Voldemort was killing off the Malfoys, he was taking the risk of alienating many pureblood families. The Malfoys may not be the most ethical of people, but they were very well-respected. And what was this about how Snape felt about Narcissa? She knew of the Vow that he had made to her, but was it because he had had feelings for her, or some other reason entirely? The thought that he might have loved Narcissa gave her a nauseous feeling in her stomach.

She was about to go back upstairs when something else they were saying caught her attention. They had continued their little make-out session in front of the doors, but pulled away quite suddenly.

"Oh!" Tonks had gasped.

"What is it?" asked Remus.

"I just remembered! The school governors have sold Hogwarts! I came here specifically to tell you that. I forgot."

Remus had backed away from her, a look of shock on his face. "Why did they sell it? Who to? And how in the hell did you forget something that important?"

Severus slowly recovered over the next week. His age, combined with the fatigue of running for so long and the stress on it from being captured, had caused his body to nearly shut down. The potions that had been given to him helped, but rest and good food had gone a long way to speed up his recovery.

Today he was able to get out of bed for more than a couple of hours. It was near nightfall, and he had seen neither his ward nor his elusive hostess all day. House-elves had brought him his breakfast and lunch, but they had not been forthcoming with information as to their whereabouts.

As darkness began to engulf the small cabin and surrounding forest, he walked out of the back door and into a small vegetable garden, a cup of tea in his hand. A small path wound around the side of the garden, and he could see it disappearing through the trees. He did not remember this path, and he had spent many summers at the cabin. His parents used to bring him here before he had started Hogwarts. That was when everything was good. Back before his father knew his mother was a witch, before his father started drinking.

Severus sighed and began a slow walk down the path. His memories of this place were all good memories. No one had known of this place, except for Dumbledore, and even he had not known exactly where it was. It was Severus' haven, a place for him to be when he was troubled, where he came to think and be at peace. It was a Muggle house, with no electricity but plenty of running water in a well. After his parents died, he had warded the place so well that no one, Muggle or wizard, could come near the place without him or his Secret Keeper. Along with the wards, he had also charmed the place to appear as though it ran off electricity, just in case his wards failed and someone came around. It had been many years since he had come to this place, twenty, in fact, and he was glad that his friend had kept it up for him.

Before walking into the woods, Severus turned and looked at the house that had sheltered him from his sorrow and fear. Although it was magically enhanced with several rooms on the inside, it appeared to be a one-room log cabin that belonged in America during the pioneer days. Rustic in appearance, the rough-hewn logs had greyed, the mortar between them yellowed with age. Vines had grown up on three sides, honeysuckle, so that every breath of air that flowed inside from the open windows was sweet and intoxicating. He remembered lying in bed late at night, the breeze blowing in through the window next to him. He remembered watching the summer storms beginning, lightning flashing in the distance above the treetops, thunder echoing off the hills. His favorite had been when the wind picked up and the trees swayed and bent, the sound of the leaves rustling loud in his ears. It appeared that something was moving, some big invisible something was walking through the trees, entire herds of magical beasts, giant warriors, or ghosts who had come to tell him stories of their lives.

Severus shook his head at his reminiscing. The wonder of childhood had disappeared the day he had gotten his Hogwarts letter. That was the day that his world had fallen apart. He had been at home with his mother, here at the cabin, readying it for the rest of the summer. His mother had wanted his help in tending the herbs she had planted outside of her and his father's bedroom window. It had been a happy time; he, filled with wonder that he would be able to do all the things that his imagination told him was a right that he had. His mother had smiled, then told him her secret. She was a witch! Born of an entire family of magical people! He was so excited that he never even questioned why he had never met any of her family.

They had had a celebratory lunch. Afterwards they had decided that they would surprise his father with the letter along with his favorite meal. The market had been busy, and they very nearly did not make it back to their house in the city in time to cook it. Severus was so eager, however, that they got the meal prepared in record time. When his father came home from work, it was one of the best times that the family had ever had, laughing, joking and having a generally spirited time.

It was afterwards, when his father and mother were having their last glass of wine, that things went to hell.

"Severus has something for you," his mother had said.

Excitedly, Severus had handed his father the envelope. Smiling, his father had taken it, and after looking at the seal then reading the letter twice, he had gotten up and walked into his bedroom. Severus and his mother had looked at each other, confused, then she had gotten up and followed him.

It had been obvious from the fight that they had had that night that his father had not known that his mother was a witch. The fact that she had kept that from him, along with the knowledge that his son would be forever different from him, drove the man to drink.

Severus sighed. He always thought of that night when he came to the cabin. It was the beginning of the end for him. His father had gone on to yell at his mother that if Severus went to Hogwarts, then he would disown him and divorce his mother. Although his father had calmed somewhat the next day, he had soon begun to stay out longer and come home drunk. His mother was never truly happy, afterward. The night before he left for Hogwarts was the first time his father had hit his mother.

Severus had been so angry that he would do that to her, he had run in to protect her. His father, surprised by what he had done, yet angered that Severus had had the audacity to come in and try to rescue his mother, did the only thing that he could do at the time.

"You will never amount to anything, you little shit," his father had whispered at him furiously. "You will get to your precious little wizarding school, yet you will learn nothing! You are not good enough to go there, and everyone will see you for what you are: an insignificant little monstrosity!"

Severus turned away from the cabin, lost in his memories, and wandered down the path. That was the day he decided he would prove his father wrong. That was what sent him down to the darkness, to Slytherin House.

He was still thinking when he came upon the paddock. It was the first time he had been able to come out here to see what his guest had done to the surrounding land. He gazed upon the small house, barn, and huge stables. She had not lived in the main cabin, but had built herself her own space and oversaw the maintenance on the house. Seeing all that she had done, he found himself deep in thought, again.

He had not recognised her. She had been sixteen when he last saw her, and now, nearly twenty years later, he had noticed that she had grown up. No longer was she the fearful yet confident child he had saved from certain death. No, Andromeda Danae Riddle-Black was an extremely powerful, courageous, and confident witch. The fact that she had a herd of winged unicorns, the only winged unicorns on the earth, that she had bred herself was testament to her power. The control she had over them spoke of her confidence, and her courageousness was made obvious by the sight of Draco Malfoy mucking out stalls. Had she been anyone less brave, he was sure Draco would have bitten her head off, literally.

Severus laughed when he saw Draco covered in sweat and dung. He had taken his shirt off, and the pants he wore were the kind that Severus' father used to wear when he had gone fly fishing, held up by bright orange suspenders. Draco glared at him. "What is so funny? Haven't you ever seen someone work before?" He leaned against the

pitchfork he had been using.

Severus got control of himself and smirked. This was going to be fun.

"I have never seen a Malfoy work a day in his life. At least, not at manual labor. And in such natty attire. So, tell me Draco, how are the blisters going?"

Draco just turned away, grumbling. Both he and Severus had talked quite a bit during their recovery times, and the new respect he had found for his ex-professor kept him from saying anything that might possibly be construed as derogatory. He also had to thank Severus, as he had been asked to call him, for saving his life. It didn't help much that he had probably sentenced his father and mother both to death, but he felt that no matter what, he would still have family. He had the feeling that his parents were already lost to him, and he had, in some ways, adopted Severus and Danae as surrogates.

Severus, not knowing the extent of Draco's feelings, continued to smirk until he felt hot, steamy breath on the back of his neck.

Turning quickly, he came eye to eye with one of the most beautiful unicorns he had ever seen. It was white, with gold horn, mane, tail, and wings. Its eyes glowed, as if a thousand sunbeams radiated from them. As close as he was, he could see threads of golden hair spread throughout its coat. On its back sat Danae, seated in a saddle of gold fibers weaved together that gave the appearance of silk. She jumped down, swooping to him, and gave him a hug so tight that he thought he would suffocate.

When Danae released him, she smiled and winked. "Severus, it's really not nice to tease the help that way! Make him mad and he might sit down to supper without taking a bath first."

"Oh, ha, ha. Very funny," Draco said, sarcastically. "In case you haven't noticed, I have worked like a slave here, cleaning out the stalls, oiling the tack, making sure all the thousands of unicorns you have here are fed and watered. How do you repay me? By making wisecracks about my smell and insulting my family." He sniffed, once. "Just so you know, I have kind of gotten used to it."

Danae and Severus laughed at the lack of humility that Draco showed. Severus knew that that night at the top of the Astronomy tower had changed Draco, along with the short time here with Danae, but he had not realized how much. He was proud of him and made a subconscious note to himself to find a way to show him that.

But before that, Danae was looking at him as though there was something that she needed to say. She jerked her head to one of the clean stalls some distance away from Draco and motioned for him to follow her. Leading the unicorn inside, she took off the saddle and began brushing it down.

"We are going to have to leave here soon," she said quietly.

Severus frowned at her. "Why would we leave here? We are safe here. You know what has happened. Either side would find us in a matter of minutes were we to leave."

"Both sides have already found you. I spoke with Minerva the day I knew it was you that had been caught by the house-elves. Had I not been so quick in moving you, I am afraid your wards would not have been able to stop my father from feeling you out and getting to you. He knows the general vicinity you are in, and it is just a matter of time before he finds you. Here, you have my protection, but if we remain too far away from others, I won't have the strength to continue that protection."

Severus slumped against the door of the stall. "But where are we to go?" he whispered.

"Minerva knows what happened, Severus, and she knows why." Danae put aside the brush and moved closer to him. "She understands, and she has offered you safety from anyone who would do you harm. When we leave here, we will be going somewhere safe for both you and Draco."

Danae ran her hand up his arm, resting it against his cheek. "You saved my life once, kept me away from father, and gave me a place to stay. You, my best friend, my true friend, will have the understanding and loyalty that you deserve. In three days, when you are completely well enough to travel, we leave for Hogwarts."

A/N: I know! Such cliffs here, and really no explanations! I truly am a horrible, terrible author. Next chapter will have MUCH more information for you, I promise. I kind of wanted this to be a teaser, though. Yep, I did it on purpose. Don't hate me! Also, Danae's full name will seem familiar to you. The reason for this will be explained in future chapters.

Great big thanks should go out to my beta, Vaughn. I could not have posted this without her input.

Chapter Two

Chapter 3 of 5

****HBP Spoilers****-Getting ready to return to Hogwarts is a trial in itself, at least to some.

Chapter Two

Two days after Tonks' revelation, everyone in the house was hurriedly packing to leave. Tonks and Remus had not been able to finish their conversation; Kingsley and Arthur had come in about that time and Tonks had shaken her head at Remus to keep him quiet. She had whispered something in his ear as the other two had moved off towards the kitchen. Hermione had been forced to move quickly to keep from getting caught eavesdropping.

The next day had been another lonely day with no company other than Remus. Unfortunately, he had been there only a couple of hours before he had gone out, claiming he needed to get ingredients for his potion. Hermione could believe that, but wondered who he had gotten to make it for him. She knew he couldn't do it, and didn't know if he was in contact with Professor Slughorn. According to Harry, Professor Slughorn had been a loner, quite paranoid like Moody. She thought about this for a little while, trying to keep her mind off what she had heard. She couldn't ask Remus about it, couldn't let him know that she had overheard. After all, no matter how intelligent they were or what the age of majority was, they were still kept out of the loop.

Hermione had become more resentful as the day had progressed. God forbid they give them any information or something to do. What good was it for her to do research when all they had was a little bit of information that repeated itself over and over? She could be useful in other areas. She could make potions. She could help with the Muggles who were injured or who were in a position to provide help to the wizarding world. At the very least she could go and find out what others were saying on the streets, figure out what the people said in the pubs and sort through the B.S. that the Ministry obviously couldn't.

That was another bone of contention for all of them. Stan Shunpike was still in Azkaban. Minister Scrimgeour still had not let him out. Unfortunately, there were still others who were either part of the Order or who were sympathetic to the cause who had been placed there. He had even tried to claim that Fred and George Weasley were in the

employ of Voldemort. Unfortunately for him, that didn't sit well with the public, especially when Harry had let "The Quibbler" print a small story letting the public know that Harry had funded their success and, technically, they were in HIS employ. That had given Hermione a small boost a few days ago, knowing that Harry would have had to sneak Hedwig out to send that letter to Luna.

Harry had come to Grimmauld Place that night, escorted by no fewer than eight Order members. Since Dumbledore's murder, aspects of security for Harry had been put on the back burner. Not that most didn't think that Harry needed the security more than anyone else, but it had not seemed to be a problem that needed to be fixed. As long as they continued doing what had been done before, the Order had figured that all was fine. They had not taken into consideration that maybe the protections that Dumbledore had pressed upon the Order, headquarters, the Dursleys' residence, and Harry himself might be compromised by his death.

It was a week before Harry had planned on coming back, and although no one had told them the reason, Harry's arrival in the dead of night was precipitous to what was to come. Harry and Hermione had been woken up early by Remus. She had not even known that he was there until walking into the kitchen. When they were both seated after exuberant hellos and welcoming, they had been told they were to begin packing, and that it had to be done quickly. Remus had appeared nervous when asked why, and had avoided answering, just telling them to get anything that might be useful to the Order later. They had not been able to ask anymore questions. It was then that the Weasleys had made a hurried entrance.

Hermione had been decidedly put out, and fumed over the lack of information from anyone. Even Ron and Ginny, who had been with their mother, wherever she had been sent, had been decidedly close-mouthed. She knew that something had happened, and whatever it was had to have been bad if Harry was back early and they were leaving. It was disconcerting also, as no one seemed to know where they were going. At least, no one was telling her or Harry.

Everything was coming to a head, and no one seemed willing to talk about it, as if speaking of a problem would cause it to happen. Hermione thought they were acting like children by not talking about what was going on. She figured it was the childish mentality of, 'If I don't see you, you can't see me,' and hiding their eyes from the truth.

Hermione was packing up the library when Harry came rushing in, a wild look in his eyes. She glanced at him, then looked back, alarmed at his appearance. His hair was in more of a disarray than ever, his clothing was askew, his shirt was buttoned wrong, and his shoelaces were untied.

She moved to touch him, reaching out, disturbed by the quick shifting of his eyes and the tensing of muscles in his face. Just before she got to him, however, he grabbed her wrist, turned, and began pulling her along behind him to the kitchen.

"Harry, what are you doing?" she asked, alarmed. This was not the Harry that she knew. He was afraid of something and she didn't know how to handle him, other than to go along with him.

He did not acknowledge her, just kept pulling her along towards the front door. It wasn't until then that she realised that it was quiet in the house; no one was rushing around as they had been earlier in the day, getting things ready to leave. It was darker than it had been in the house, and she couldn't believe that she had taken so long in the library, thinking more about what she didn't know was happening than what she did. With Harry pulling her behind him, she understood how selfish she had been, and felt properly ashamed. How could she not have noticed what was going on around her? Had she been sulking so much that she had not seen how depressed and useless she was, or if anyone else had felt the same way? What was happening to her? Where was everyone else?

In her woebegone state, Hermione's thoughts were turned inward, and she didn't see the shadow that moved to the side of the front door, nor did she see Harry pull his wand. Her emotional status being what it was, she didn't realise that Harry kept her from the line of fire. She would later reflect that it might have been a good thing that she didn't see what was coming before everything went completely black, and she stopped feeling sorry for herself, although not by choice.

The night after Hermione was packing the library, Severus, Draco, and Danae donned dark travelling cloaks, mounted three winged unicorns, and rode away from the safe haven that both Severus and Danae had found so comforting. Their hearts were filled with trepidation, fear, and even a sort of horrified excitement that one gets when leaving for an uncertain future.

Draco had not wanted to go. His Slytherin tendencies had made themselves vociferously known. He had refused, at first. It had then been explained to him just what price they would have to pay if they stayed. It took some convincing, and only after images of what Death Eaters did to those who betrayed them were placed in his head did he decide that Severus and Danae were right about taking their chances with Minerva and the light.

Draco had also been worried about his mother, not letting them know that for days he had been seeing her eviscerated body splayed out like a Muggle biology lab experiment in his nightmares late at night. When he had told Severus about this, after agreeing to leave with them, Severus had paled and told him to make sure to do Occlumency exercises, and not to worry. He said he was sure that it was just the Dark Lord trying to lure them out of hiding. Fears laid to rest, Draco had tried, but they kept coming back, and now it was even more grotesque as her body was starting to rot.

Draco's fears had been Severus', also. Danae had wanted to leave within three days of speaking with him, and it was all he could do not to run the opposite direction. He was sure that he could spend the rest of his life flitting from here to there, staying on the run. However, he knew that he could not subject Draco to that. He had thought of giving him what he needed here at the cabin, a home that was filled with at least respect, if not love. Severus was tired of the way he had been living his life, and with Draco, he figured that they could be the family that he had never had. Draco was as close to a son as he was going to get, and he knew it. Besides, his vow was not over yet. He had to protect Draco, make sure that he didn't die, and the best way for him to do that was to go to those who would not immediately kill them on sight (he hoped), rather than let themselves be sitting ducks for the Dark Lord and his followers.

There really had not been much to pack for their return trip to Scotland. They had not stopped to get anything from his or Draco's home, but had immediately begun making preparations to disappear. They had Apparated to different parts of the country, then moved by Muggle means to different places, staying in Britain. After almost a week of sleeping in barns, caves, and abandoned houses, they had moved again, this time to other countries. In France, they were able to get new wands, their old ones kept safe on their persons. In Africa, they had joined a herding community with carefully placed Glamour Charms on them to blend in with the native peoples. Then they had slowly worked their way to the cabin, back in Great Britain. After three weeks of running, they had wanted to get settled. It was a push to go back to their homeland, but neither was comfortable anywhere else.

To keep from having to lug packages with sentimental objects with them, they had carried only a change of clothing, food, and water wherever they had gone. Because they had so few belongings, Danae had sent the herd ahead of them, along with the house-elves. They had been under strict instructions to make a place for them, using any means possible. Severus had no idea where they would put them; they would probably have to make use of the Forbidden Forest.

Danae herself had had a sentimental goodbye from the home that she had lived in for so long. Her small house would remain as is, she only taking a few clothes with her. Severus thought that she didn't think that she would ever return and wanted to leave emotional attachments in the place she had been happiest at. He could definitely empathise with her.

All in all, it was a morose threesome that entered the Hogwarts grounds a few hours later, flying low so as not to be obviously highlighted against the night sky. They had flown around Hogsmeade; had they been spotted, an alarm would have gone up, and they didn't want to alert the authorities to Severus' and Draco's return. It was all well and good for Minerva and the Order to know about them, but the Ministry was still looking for them. Plus, there was always the danger that someone from town would overcome his or her fear and resort to vigilantism.

They landed in the open courtyard in front of Hagrid's house. It appeared that he had been waiting for them to arrive. The door opened as they were dismounting, and the large man filled the doorway before barreling down the few steps, yelling, "Danni!" at the top of his lungs. He swept her into a great bear hug, twirling her around before squeezing so hard that Severus thought she would asphyxiate before she had a chance to return the greeting.

"Hagrid!" Danae wheezed. Although she couldn't breathe, there was a large smile on her face as she returned his hug as best she could. Hagrid must have realised that

she was having a little trouble, and so put her down. He had tears in his eyes, and they rolled down his cheeks while he looked her over.

"Yer lookin' a mite better than we all though' yeh would. Wher'er yer bin all this time?" he asked her, wiping his cheeks and then blowing his nose on a great big, red polka dotted handkerchief.

Danae patted him on the arm, her fondness for him showing on her face and in the gentle way she touched him. "I will come down tomorrow to talk to you, Hagrid," she said. "I'll tell you all about it then. Did my unicorns get here all right?"

Hagrid beamed at her. "Sure thin', firs' thin' this mornin'. I never seen nothin' like all them beautiful flyin' unicorns comin' on to the groun's. I he'ped the elves put 'em up, if tha's all right." He looked around sheepishly, then frowned. "They didn' wan' much he'p."

Danae smiled at him reassuringly, then squeezed his hand. "I'll have to get you to show me where you put them tomorrow when we talk. In the meantime, we have to get up to the castle."

It was then that Hagrid noticed Severus standing by their three mounts, Draco hiding behind him. With mixed emotions crossing his face, Hagrid stared at them for a moment before slowly lumbering toward them. Draco flinched and tried to hide more behind Severus than he already was, trying to make himself a smaller target. Severus was also very nervous with having to face Hagrid. After all, there was no greater supporter of Albus Dumbledore than Hagrid, who would have protected him with his life. It would not be a good thing for Hagrid to get hold of them if he harboured any unkind thoughts towards them. Danae was obviously thinking the same thing, for she followed only a short way behind Hagrid, wand gripped firmly in her hand.

Hagrid finally stood before Severus, breathing coming harshly. Severus met his eyes, allowing a look of sorrow into them. After standing there, hovering over the shorter man and cringing ex-student as if to intimidate them, Hagrid seemed to deflate and hung his head.

"I know yeh didn' wan' to do it, Professor. An', I know wha' the Headmaster had told yeh to do. It don' make it any easier, but I do wan' to say tha' I don' blame yeh. Besides, he alwa's trusted yeh, an' I figured tha's gotta accoun' fer somethin'."

After his speech, everyone relaxed, and Severus and Hagrid shook hands, although Severus was soon pulled into a bear hug much like Danae had been, without being twirled around. Draco was still cowering slightly, but to his credit, he said nothing. Hagrid ignored Draco, although there was a fire in his eyes when he looked at him, anger mixed with sympathy roiling away. To say Draco was confused by the look and Hagrid's subsequent silence in his direction was an understatement. He did not question his good fortune, however, and remained quietly standing, not looking up until Danae asked if Hagrid would mind tending the unicorns.

Hagrid enthusiastically took the unicorns off their hands. Severus, Draco, and Danae stood there for a few minutes, getting their bearings. For Danae, it had been a while since she had been at Hogwarts, and to Severus and Draco, it felt as though it had been as long for them. Finally, with a look back at the other two, Danae began making her way to the front of the castle. Severus and Draco slowly followed.

There were at least three hundred people milling around the Great Hall when the doors banged open and three black cloaked people strode in. The one in front was much smaller than the other two, but exuded an air of confidence and power. The two behind the one appeared more hesitant, but no less powerful. Their cloaks covered them from head to foot, not allowing their faces to be seen. With all that had happened the last couple of days, it was not unexpected that nearly all the three hundred people there grasped their wands and pointed them at the three.

Seemingly unconcerned, the three did not falter at all, but continued up the middle of the hall, and those standing in front of them parted to make way. All talking had stopped as everyone stared, and when they had made their way to the front where the High Table was located, covered in parchments, maps, quills, and other debris, whispering began. It started out as a low murmur, then swelled so that it was soon a quietly deafening roar.

Seated around the High Table were those professors who had decided to come back to the castle on Minerva's request after the sale had been made known. Many Order members were there also, taking on roles that Minerva had told them would be explained after the owner arrived. Although they did not know who their benefactor was, it was understood that he or she had wanted Hogwarts to remain like a school. Only Minerva was privy to who that person was and what they wanted to do at the school, and she had decided that it would be best all the way around if the owner told everyone when they were all together. She had been the only one in the hall to not stand up and remained unconcerned with the three people walking toward her.

When they reached the High Table, Minerva looked up and smiled at them. "Welcome back, my dears," she said, then stood and walked around the table, stopping once only slightly to push Remus back into his seat. When she stood in front of the shorter, obvious leader, the hood of the cloak was pushed back. Minerva embraced Danae then turned her to introduce her to the entire Hall.

"For many years now, we have been lost to a great friend, someone who was taken from us at an early age, before her education here at Hogwarts was finished. Although unfortunate for her, it was a godsend for the light. Where she was taken to allowed her to gain information that was vital to our cause during the first rising of Voldemort." She paused here while several people gasped and shuddered, then continued. "She was discovered by Voldemort himself, and barely escaped death at the hands of one of his Death Eaters. Since then, she has been in hiding. I myself only recently learned of her continued existence. It was fortunate for us that I was able to locate her, and she was able to help. I would like to introduce to you the new owner of Hogwarts Castle, Andromeda Danae Riddle-Black."

After this announcement, several things happened. Remus fainted, Tonks screamed, Molly Weasley burst into tears, and several people began yelling. Chaos was total, some of the older wizards and witches storming around yelling questions angrily while the younger ones were looking around confusedly. The only calm ones were Minerva, Danae, Severus, and Draco, the last two who had not yet been identified.

As they looked around the room, Severus leaned down to loudly whisper a question in Danae's ear. "So, castle owner, how did you get enough money to pay for it?"

Danae turned to meet his surprised look with a mischievous grin. "Let's just say," she replied, "that I am a firm believer that fathers should support their children in all their endeavors."

A/N: Well, next chapter should be up soon. I know, transitional chapters suck when there is not much going on. I was planning on explaining a lot more, but that would leave me with an extra long chapter. I am trying to keep my chapters down to about 3,000 words, give or take a couple hundred.

So, what happened to Hermione and Harry? Any ideas? That will be in the next chapter, and I bet no one knows. If you do, will someone let me know? ;)

Anyway, I will have the next chapter sent to my beta this week. I start back to classes on Wednesday, so after the next chapter I'll only be updating twice a month until December, when I will hopefully get one a week done. I also am planning another Christmas fic, but want to get some ideas from all of my readers. You can send me an email by going to my bio on Ashwinder or The Petulant Poetess.

Thank you to my reviewers, and a great big smacking snog goes to my beta, Vaughn. Without you, dear, I would not have been able to get this out.

Chapter Three

Chapter 4 of 5

Explanations for what has happened to Harry and Hermione and what is happening at Hogwarts. It's not MA yet, but I am going to put it on there for later chapters.

Chapter three

Harry and Hermione awakened from their spell-induced slumber to find themselves lying on sofas placed in front of a roaring fire. Blinking to clear the fog from their eyes, they soon realized that they were still at Grimmauld Place, and more specifically, in the study. With the fire and the heavy blankets they had been covered with, they were oppressively hot, and Hermione felt as though she had sweated out all the water in her body. Her throat was parched, and not thinking about what had happened before and that she could be in danger, she tried to get up so that she could find a bit of water. It was when she tried to throw the blanket off that she realized that she could not move.

"Hermione?" Her name came as a whisper from the other side of the fireplace. She could see a little over the arms of the two sofas and saw that Harry was placed in much the same position that she was, as her mirror image.

"Yeah, Harry?" she asked.

"Are you all right? Only, you don't look overly concerned with our situation," he stated calmly.

Hermione thought for a moment. What situation? Then it all came back to her. Being the only two left at Grimmauld Place, Harry hurrying her to run out, the dark cloaked figure, and the incredibly powerful hex that seemed to have taken them both out at once. She suddenly felt panic rising swiftly in her throat, but willed herself to calm down and began to try to be rational and figure out who had them.

She looked sharply at Harry, who appeared serene; although, he should have been more concerned than she. He was the person who would bring prestige to the Death Eater who brought him to Voldemort, and he was acting as though this sort of thing happened every day.

Harry smiled at her. "It's fine, Hermione. Let's just go with it."

It was then she realized that Harry must have been given something, like a calming potion. She could not, for the life of her, think of what could cause him to react this way. Even a calming potion would have allowed him to be lucid enough to believe that their positions were precarious.

"What is going on, Harry?" she asked. He had looked away from her and rolled his head back as she spoke. "Are you ok? Who hexed us? What did they give you?"

Harry was quiet for a moment; then he opened his mouth to speak. Before he could utter a sound, however, a voice from the end of her sofa spoke softly.

"Me."

Hermione swiveled her head to look at the person standing at her feet. Her eyes narrowed as she tried to get beyond the blurriness that was still plaguing her eyesight. The person stepped forward, better illuminated by the firelight, and Hermione gasped. Standing before her was Lucius Malfoy.

"What are you doing here?"

Lucius came closer, and as he did so, she took in his appearance. His robes were worn and tattered, and there was dirt, leaves, and twigs clinging to them. His face was deeply lined, with grime ground into them, making him appear older and more menacing, his eyes holding the haunted look that she had seen in Sirius' so many years before. His hands, and especially his nails, were also deeply embedded with dirt. What struck her the most was his hair. That beautiful, long, white-blond hair had obviously fallen out in clumps; the scalp where the clumps had been was red with sores. What hair he had left was still long, but there was no luster left, just a dingy yellow hue with large flakes of skin clinging to the shafts, where he had obviously scratched at the sores.

All in all, it was a horrifying sight, one that Hermione would be haunted by for a long time to come. If he had not been so evil, she would have felt pity for him. Now, all she felt was revulsion.

Lucius sank down onto his knees by her head, joints popping and a slightly guttural groan coming from his throat. He closed his eyes against the obvious pain and then looked closely at her. "I know that you won't believe this, and I am not going to try to convince you to believe me, but I wish you no harm. I have given Potter a Calming Draught mixed with a little Veritaserum to keep him from yelling anymore. He was terribly loud."

Hermione stared at him with wide, fearful eyes. "You don't intend to harm us, yet you gave something to Harry that will cause him to go into a coma within the next few hours?" Hermione began struggling within her confines. "Tell me what you want and then let us go so that I can get him the antidote!"

"Hush, Miss Granger. I have the antidote, but I will need you to listen carefully before I administer it. You will tell me what I want to hear or your precious Harry will not get what he needs. Do I make myself clear?"

Hermione could only nod her head, tears forming in her eyes when she would have thought that she had no liquid left in her body to create any.

"Good," said Lucius, leaning in close to her face. Hermione grimaced through her tears as his rancid breath washed over her, adding moist heat to her already over-heated skin. He was so close that she could see his chipped and rotten teeth between his slightly parted lips, and she had to force back a wave of nausea.

"What do you want from us?" whispered Hermione as she tried to turn her face away.

Lucius grabbed her chin with his grubby fingers, forcing her to look at him.

"I want to know where my son is."

At the time that Lucius was administering his potion to Harry and Minerva McGonagall was announcing Hogwarts' new owner, Ginny Weasley was waiting patiently with Ron by the fireplace in the Gryffindor common room. Ron, however, was not being patient. They had been waiting for Harry and Hermione to come through for about half an hour, and there was no sign of them.

"Ginny, they should have been here by now! What else did they have to pack? You know it isn't safe there anymore! What if something has happened to them? I'm going back to get them!"

Ron had been ranting for about ten minutes before this last proclamation, so it had surprised the calmly complacent Ginny when he had reached for the Floo powder and actually had some in hand before she could get to him. Just as he was about to throw the Floo powder in, she clutched at his arm and pulled him back.

"No, Ron!" she yelled. "I am sure that they are fine. Remus said that Hermione was still packing up the library and that it might take a little while. Besides, Grimmauld Place is still safe for a couple of hours yet. The protections have not worn off completely."

Ron frowned at her for a moment, then put the Floo powder down on the mantle. "All right, Ginny. I'll give them thirty more minutes; then I am going back to get them."

Down in the Great Hall, voices of protest were still ringing out when there was suddenly a loud crash of thunder. The magical ceiling had come back to life, having seemingly lost all its magical properties after Dumbledore's death. Dark clouds swirled together in small cyclones, and the wind whipped through the Hall, tearing at clothing and tapestries. A cry was heard from several people in the crowd and everyone looked up to see what was going to happen. Lightening flashed and more loud booms could be heard, shaking the floor and reverberating through the entire castle. As the chaos subsided into a fearful silence, so did the storm inside the building.

Minerva turned to look at Danae. "Did you do that?" she asked in a whisper.

Danae turned shocked eyes from the ceiling to her old head of house. "I think. . . that was the castle," she whispered back.

At the thunder, Draco had cowered down slightly beside Severus, who had barely acknowledged the booming noise and was scanning the people in the Hall. The silence had allowed Draco to hear the whispers between the two women, and he'd had an epiphany. He moved toward them, and in a surprising show of courage, lifted the hood on his cloak and said in a quietly penetrating voice, "The castle is protecting its new owner, and you would all do well in accepting her."

Draco revealing himself did not create the disorder that Severus had thought it would. There were several gasps, much mumbling, and murderous looks from the people who had not fallen or sat down due to the surprising display of the castle's sentience. This shock allowed him to feel safe enough to lower the hood of his cloak also, which he did amidst louder, but not as vicious, murmurs.

Severus had had his fill of looking at those amongst the house tables and turned his attention to those behind him while Minerva and Danae were discussing how to explain Danae's presence. Many, he knew, had known Danae while she had been a student here and thus knew her parentage. Most, however, did not. What concerned him was not their reaction, but the reaction of Remus.

Tonks had been trying to help Remus up off the floor after she'd screamed, and Molly Weasley, still in tears, had helped. They had gotten Remus to sit up, and he was slowly coming to, the thunder of the last five minutes or so helping that along. Severus, mindful of the reaction he might get from any of the three, cautiously moved toward Remus and held out his hand. Remus looked at it, then at him. After a moment, Severus had begun to think he would be rejected yet again, but Remus seemed to make up his mind, squared his shoulders, and took the proffered hand.

Gratefully, Severus helped Remus up. When he was able to stand without losing his balance, Remus gazed at Severus with sorrow, pity, and a little anger in his eyes. Severus met his look steadily for a few moments, then flinched slightly when Remus raised his arm.

Remus grimaced at Severus' reaction, but slowly followed through with his action and placed his hand on Severus' shoulder and squeezed. This show of support from Remus caused a ripple effect, a release of tension for those who had been at the High Table, namely the main members of the Order. In her relief, Tonks went to Remus' side and took his free hand in hers.

Severus smirked at Remus, who smirked back, then motioned over his shoulder to Danae. "I think that someone would probably like to know that you don't plan on being mad at her."

Remus looked at Danae, then back at Severus. "I don't know if I can do this," he said. "It's been a long time."

Tonks looked between them in confusion and reluctantly let go of Remus' hand as he pulled away from her, saying, "I guess it's better late than never, though."

Remus slowly made his way to where Minerva and Danae were still debating. As he reached them, he slowly stretched out his hand and lightly tugged on a lock of Danae's hair.

"Danni," he said as she turned to him. Time seemed to stop for just a moment as she took in his countenance and appeared to hold her breath. Finally, tears formed in her eyes and spilled down her cheeks as she gave a cry and launched herself at him.

Remus gripped her tightly, having thought he'd never feel her that close again. She still seemed to fit just right in his arms, and her scent had not really changed; she just now had an underlying smell of earth and animal that appealed to his baser instincts. He did not have long to revel in her, though, because just a few moments later, the doors to the Great Hall burst open again and Ginny came running through.

"Harry and Hermione have been captured!"

A/N: Nope, not going to apologize. I will give excuses, though. I am majoring in history and anthropology and have been extremely busy, not only with school, but some real-life problems as well. I know it has been almost a year since I updated, but things are looking better for me in all ways. I have no classes this summer (this means more time to write!) and just knowing that I will be graduating next semester is a load off my mind. I will try to update two more times after this, but I can't make any promises. Although I have the summer off, I do go back to school in the fall and from then on will be starting graduate school. In the meantime, I am also studying for my GREs, which I will take in July, and will have little free time as I am also helping my parents remodel a house. However, what little free time I will have, I plan on using to write and beta-read for a friend of mine (whose story is really good, and I am trying to convince her to post). Wish me luck in cranking out as many chapters as possible!

A/N 2: I really have to give props to Vaughn, my beta, who read and corrected my most atrocious spelling, grammar, punctuation, and canon mistakes. You are the best-thanks for your help and continuing to beta for me after all this time.

A/N 3: I know it isn't very long, but the action will really start picking up in the next chapter. I want to thank all of you who have reviewed this and my other fics, and want to send a message out to Sandra, who sent me an email a while back in reference to another story I had. I just want to say that I am working on it, although it is slow going. Thanks for asking.

Disclaimer: Although a poor imitation, and the fact that I am obviously not the writer of such wonderful works of literature, I must plead with all of you not to think that I am the brilliantly awesome J. K. Rowling, nor do I wish to do anything but emulate her. Imitation is the highest form of flattery, and if that is my intent (to flatter), then criminal and civil crimes are not committed. Please do not utilize various attorneys to prosecute me for my obsession.

P. S. Don't you just love the word, flatter? I wonder who first came up with the meaning "to compliment" for it and why they would use it when it clearly means that something is more flat than something else?

Chapter Four

Chapter 5 of 5

Is Lucius crazy, or is he on the fringe?

Chapter Four

At Ginny's outburst, there was a general shifting of attention from the front of the Great Hall to the out of breath red-head. Gasping, she struggled to remain upright after her seemingly long flight from Gryffindor Tower and subsequent immediate stop. When she regained her balance, she noticed that no one had moved, save to stare at her. Extremely frustrated at the lack of any emotion except blank surprise on the faces of those gathered there, she yelled again, hoping to incite a reaction out of those who could help (and at the least, to do something to alleviate the guilt she felt for not letting Ron go to Grimmauld Place sooner).

"What the hell are all of you standing around for? I said that Harry and Hermione have been captured!"

'*There. That got them going.*' she thought as people began moving as one toward her.

Bill and Fleur, who had settled themselves toward the back of the Hall, surreptitiously to argue about what Fleur was to do when the time came to fight, were the first ones to Ginny.

"How do you know this?" asked Bill, grabbing Ginny's arm. Fleur looked at her with frightened eyes from over Bill's shoulder.

"I'll explain everything later," Ginny replied as she pried Bill's fingers from her upper arm. "Just get as many people as possible to Grimmauld Place as you can. Ron has already Flooded there."

Bill, who had been looking at Ginny intently, raised his eyebrows at her statement about Ron. After searching her eyes, he nodded at her grimly then looked around at those who had gathered closer. "All right. Anyone who has access to headquarters! Let's go!"

Ron, for all his apparent lack of intelligence, had the foresight to Floo into one of the least used rooms at Grimmauld Place. With the feeling that something was wrong, which he had repeatedly and with much frustration tried to explain to Ginny, he decided that utilizing the Floo in the kitchen would have alerted whoever (or whatever) was causing Harry and Hermione to be late. Luckily, the Floo he used was the one near the door to Buckbeak's old room, which also happened to be furthest from the study. This enabled him to stealthily find his way through the house, looking for his best friends.

The five minutes it took him to creep down the stairs, wand out and ready, gave him the time to think about what he needed to do. Because of the location of the attic, he was able to check every room of every floor for intruders. Finding none, yet still wary as there were no sounds at all coming from the lower floors, gave him a sense of hope that there were not many enemies there.

When he arrived at the study, he was able to see a flickering light and movement from a crack in the doorway. Cautiously, he crept to the door and nudged it open a little more, just in time to see a dark form hovering menacingly over one of the sofas. On the other one, he could see that there was something lying on it, which he assumed to be either Harry or Hermione, as there was a little movement. He backed slowly away from the door as Lucius bent down next to the sofa he had been standing over. Then Ron, continuing to use (what was thought by some to be) his limited intelligence, turned to quickly check the other rooms on the floor then scurried silently back to the fireplace he had come from to alert Ginny.

"Ginny," he said after thrusting his head in activated the Floo connection. "Get the Order! Someone has them!"

"What ...?" Ginny began, but Ron cut her off.

"Just do it. I don't have time to explain. I don't know who it is yet and there is only one, but you can bet that if it is a Death Eater, there will probably more here soon. I got lucky in getting down there and back up again. Just get someone over here!"

He pulled his head out of the fireplace before Ginny could ask any questions and hoped that she would be able to get someone there in a few minutes. Otherwise, he would have to do whatever it took himself.

Lucius Malfoy's putrid breath washed over Hermione's face as he asked her again, "Where is my son?"

Hermione was scared, even more so than she had been at the Ministry of Magic over a year before. Malfoy's hideous countenance would be enough to strike fear into the heart of the bravest Gryffindor, and she knew she was by far nowhere near the bravest. She tried to speak. She really did. Not to tell him anything, but to reply that she didn't know. However, all that came out was a small squeak.

Malfoy's fingers tightened around her chin and jaw, but seeing that she could not answer him, relaxed and finally fell away. With an air of defeat, he sighed and completely sat on the floor near her head, leaning tiredly against the front of the sofa near her shoulder.

"You have no reason to trust me. I know that. My family and I have been terribly rude to you and your kind for centuries. Not that you would know what we have done." He looked at her with a kind of sadness in his eyes, something that she would have never thought possible coming from a Malfoy. "I need to find my son," he said earnestly. "I need to know that he is alive. I need to know that he is safe and will remain so."

Hermione's eyes widened in surprise, and although her fear abated somewhat, she still did not want to speak. Malfoy appeared not to care as he continued talking; this time, his voice was harsh.

"He killed my wife. The Dark Lord killed Narcissa. My beautiful Narcissa. Because of me. Because I couldn't do what he needed me to do." Malfoy was staring through Hermione, his eyes taking on an emptiness that forced the fear she had lost back to the forefront of her mind. Insanity was a hair's breadth away from controlling him, and Hermione was sure that no matter what he had said, Malfoy would not be able to help himself when it happened.

As it was, very few people were to converge upon Grimmauld Place. Bill Weasley, along with Fred and George, who had been spoiling for a fight, Neville Longbottom, and Kingsley Shacklebolt were the only ones who still retained access to the house. They had been among the last to leave, and while the wards were weakening, they were still strong enough to keep out anyone whose magical signature they did not recognize.

Because they did not know what they would find when entering through the Floo, they used one of the teacher's offices closest to the Great Hall. They had not wanted to Floo from the Great Hall because of the noise from inside; Ginny's screeching had caused a near panic before they left, and they did not want any of the noise to come over

through it.

"Be as quiet as you can going in," said Kingsley. "We don't know where Ron is, how many there are, or where exactly they are in the building. Let's Floo to different parts of the house and meet up on the ground floor. Fred and George, you Floo to your old room. Neville, you go with Bill to the second floor. I will Floo to the kitchen. Keep quiet, keep it slow going, and try not to get hurt."

All four had been staring at him, nervous yet excited to get into some action. One by one they threw Floo powder into the fireplace, called out their destinations, and disappeared.

A/N: It isn't long, I know. I am not truly happy with this chapter, but it was a necessary one. I am in the planning process for the next chapter, and I hope to get it to you in the next week or so, but I may have to put it off for a while. Thanks for sticking with me!

Many thanks go out to Vaughn who took time out of her extremely busy schedule to look over this for me.