

After Rain

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Summary: The Dark Lord has fallen, but there are still a few Death Eaters around, and one of them wants revenge. Professor Snape falls mysteriously ill, and Harry Potter is attacked.

Warning: Slash

Beta: [Anne](#)

Author's Notes: I started this back in 2002. It was the first Harry Potter fanfic I ever wrote, and I abandoned it when I was almost finished with it. Since then, it's been sitting on my hard drive, and it's been joined by a bunch of other fics that I started on but never finished. About a month ago, I started going through all my old fics, and this one caught my interest. I have since revised it quite a bit, though the story stayed about the same. Since I started this in 2002, it doesn't follow canon after the Goblet of Fire, but I have edited in some canon that fit well with the story.

Oh, and there's a short dream sequence in one of the chapters that I found quite funny, in terms of predicting what canon would bring. I swear, I haven't changed anything in that.

Thank you very much to Anne who took the time to beta the whole thing. Any and all remaining mistakes are mine and mine alone.

After Rain

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By Cosmic

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Chapter one

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It rained outside.

It seemed as though the heavens were crying, for some odd reason. Yet those billions of tears, falling down on the soft earth, made the grass green and gave the flowers their beautiful colours.

Harry sighed. He felt like crying – but seventeen-year-old boys did not cry.

In his hand, he held an invitation. He watched the rain for a moment longer, before turning his attention to the piece of parchment.

'Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry welcomes all parents to come and see their children in action. For three days, the school will be open for all parents to visit the students' classes, and meet with their teachers.'

More text followed, concerning when the parents would be picked up, how they were going to live, and other stuff that Harry did not care about. He put the letter away.

He sighed once more.

The letters had been sent out a month before. Dumbledore had given a short speech about the wonderful idea of parents visiting Hogwarts.

“Now that we can finally rejoice in our freedom, perhaps it is time to allow our families to visit, to see you more often than the holidays,” Dumbledore had said. “For three days, you will be able to show your parents around – those of you with Muggle parents, I’m sure you have a lot to tell, and they will get to see your everyday lives. I hope you’ll enjoy the time you can spend with them.”

Ron Weasley had bitten back a groan. “I love my mum, but I don’t want her in school.”

After Rain

“I’m sure my parents will be thrilled,” Ron’s girlfriend and Harry’s best friend, Hermione Granger, had answered. “I’ve told them so much about Hogwarts, and it will be wonderful to show them around.”

Harry had stayed silent, trying to make himself as small as possible. He did not need his friends’ pity simply because he did not have any parents who could come visit. It was a fact, one he had to accept.

Once, he had had a godfather who could have come, but the man had died, and Harry had been left alone to mourn. More than two years had passed since, though it still hurt Harry to think about.

The Dursleys would never even dream of coming to Hogwarts, and Harry felt quite certain that he did not want his wizard-hating Muggle relatives running around Hogwarts unattended.

"Harry!" He turned around at the sound of his friend's voice. Ron stood in the doorway, watching him. "Are you coming?"

Oh, right. Harry had promised to come with Ron to the try-outs for a new Keeper for the Gryffindor Quidditch team. He suddenly realised that he should probably have been down on the pitch already, seeing as he was on the team and should be part of deciding who the new members would be. He hoped Ron would make it; he deserved it. He had become very good, especially after training with Harry. The rain would make try-outs a very wet affair, however, and Harry quickly gathered his Quidditch robes and placed a rain repellent charm on them. He took his broomstick and followed Ron down the stairs, through the Gryffindor common room and down through the portrait hole. He was glad to have something other than the parent-week to think about.

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“I made it!”

Hermione looked up from her book when Harry and Ron burst into the common room, Ron boasting immediately about how well the Quidditch try-outs had gone. Hermione, as always, had her nose in a book – today’s title being, *'Cooking food with magic – Elves tell their secrets'*.

After Rain

"Never knew you were interested in cooking, Hermione," Harry said, dropping down next to her.

"Oh, one can never know too much," Hermione said.

Ron groaned, but kissed her cheek.

"Couldn't you have come out to watch the try-outs instead?" he asked, sitting down on Hermione's other side. "I was fantastic – bloody fantastic."

"If he might say so himself," Harry chuckled.

"You know what I think about Harry being on the team," Hermione said. "It's not a sport I like; Harry's been injured way too many times. Having you *both* on there? What if something happens?"

"Well, you're going to have to deal with it – I made it!" Ron said happily, ignoring Hermione's glare.

"Hermione, it's not that dangerous," Harry said. "It's not like I've ever gotten badly injured during one of the normal games."

"Oh? So what happened that time when you were hit by that Bludger? If the twins hadn't been so quick, you'd be flat as a pancake now."

"Nothing happened!" Harry exclaimed. "They helped me back onto the broom, and we won the game!"

Hermione glared at him. Harry glared back, but Hermione had always been more stubborn than him and he decided to leave the rather sore subject alone. Harry sat back on the couch, and looked about the common room. A few students littered the room, but most had retired to their dorms already. It was getting late.

Ron yawned, and said, "I'm gonna turn in. You coming, Harry?"

Harry nodded to the redhead. "Yeah. Good night, Hermione."

"Night, Harry," she said. Ron gave her a brief kiss goodnight, and Harry caught the soft smile the two lovebirds shared.

After Rain

Hermione was now Head Girl. Harry had actually been offered the title of Head Boy, but he had not accepted. Being 'The Famous Harry Potter', he felt he had had more than his fair share of responsibilities, and there he had felt no need to add any more. Instead, Malfoy had been chosen.

I wonder if he knows that they wanted me first, Harry wondered to himself as he made his way up the stairs. Doubt it. He rubs it in my face too often to know.

Draco Malfoy had for the last six years and three months taken every possible chance to make Harry's life as miserable as he could. Their verbal fights were getting worse and worse this term though, Harry had noticed. Draco seemed to be doing everything he could to have a chance to crack down on Harry, or his friends.

Though he seems to focus more on me nowadays, Harry thought.

Ron – ever the hothead – would always defend Harry when Malfoy started, though Harry tried to hold him back these days. He did not think it was worth losing so many points just because Malfoy was being his evil self. If they had given in each time Malfoy baited him, Gryffindor would already be in negative points. Snape loved taking points whenever he had the chance, and giving them to the Slytherins.

Malfoy and Snape – two peas in a nasty pod.

It was a long time before Harry fell asleep that night.

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Draco Malfoy did not want his father to come to Hogwarts. He knew that the other students already thought of him as the Death Eater's son, and he *really* did not need more ammunition for that theory.

It was really a wonder that Lucius had survived Voldemort's downfall at all. When Voldemort had been defeated the year before, thanks to the Order of the Phoenix with Dumbledore and Potter in the lead, almost all the Death Eaters still alive had been sentenced to Azkaban. Lucius Malfoy, however, had managed to not only stay alive, but with the help of the Wizarding World's best lawyers, he had been able to stay out of the dreaded prison as well.

After Rain

Draco could not help but wonder if his life would be easier – better – if his father was dead. Then he would be free – and he and his mother could leave the Malfoy name behind. He would no longer have his father's heritage to live up to, or anyone to impress or bow down to. He would be free to be with and love whoever he wanted to.

He made his way down to breakfast a few minutes later, dread filling his stomach. Crabbe and Goyle lumbered next to him, barely speaking because it was far too early in the morning. Dumbledore sat in his seat at the front, with the teachers on both sides. A few minutes passed, before Dumbledore called for everyone's attention.

"As you all know, your parents will be arriving shortly," the Headmaster said. "To make this as calm and ordered as possible, I want all of you back in your dorms after breakfast. All of your classes before lunch have been cancelled so that you can be with your parents. Head Boy, Head Girl, Prefects and of course the Heads of the Houses will be meeting with the parents, seeing to it that they get to the right dorms and that everyone will have somewhere to sleep. Until then, please enjoy your breakfasts."

All the plates filled with food, and the students began eating hungrily. Draco watched as Crabbe and Goyle threw pancakes, toast, jelly and – surprisingly – some fruit on their plates, all in one big gross mess. Draco, who had watched the disgusting ritual for six years, took a piece of toast with some butter on it, barely managing to get it down at all. The knots in his stomach would not allow food.

Perhaps his father had something better to do? He still had ties in the Ministry – Draco wished fervently for something of great importance to come up, to give his father a reason not to come to Hogwarts. Draco's mother could come alone – Draco loved her and she would not embarrass Draco, as he was sure his father would do.

"Give me the butter, Draco," Goyle demanded, and with a look of revulsion, Draco did. Goyle, of course, failed to notice the look.

When the meal was over, Draco felt a short bout of gratitude that he had been elected Head Boy – it meant he would have a few more precious minutes before he would have to face his father alone. First, he would shepherd the parents to the correct places together with Granger and the Prefects. Hopefully, some of them would get lost and Draco would have to go search for them.

~*~

After Rain

“Mr. Potter – will you be all right?”

Minerva McGonagall came up to him as he stayed back when Ron and Hermione rushed off to greet their parents. Despite Ron’s initial unhappiness, he seemed rather glad now.

“What are you talking about?” Harry asked. “Of course I’m all right.”

“Well, I thought perhaps it’d be hard for you—” Professor McGonagall started.

“With all due respect, Professor,” Harry said, “I’m hardly the only one without a full set of parents. Neville doesn’t have his parents here either, and there are lots of others. I’ll be fine.”

He saw something rather like pity in her eyes and he felt a flare of resentment. He did not want her pity.

“If you say so, Mr. Potter.”

She turned and left. Harry glanced at the doors to the Great Hall. He could hear the parents on the other side, as well as the voices of the other students.

Neville Longbottom did not have his parents either. But, Harry thought, pitying himself for a moment, he did have his grandmother. She had come, he knew – Neville had been happy to share this with his roommates when he had received her letter.

Harry took a deep breath and walked into the crowd of parents and children, plastering a smile upon his face. He had gotten quite good at faking smiles in the last few years.

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“Mother!”

Narcissa Malfoy turned towards Draco, and a gentle smile graced her features. Draco had inherited her pointed chin, but not the soft curve of her lips. She would always be the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

“Draco, my son,” she said, hugging him.

After Rain

It took but a second, then Draco felt the hard metal in the shape of a snake's head against his shoulders, pulling him away.

"Is that a Malfoy way?" sneered his father. "Public displays of affection are for Mudbloods and other lowlife."

"I was simply greeting her," Draco said, keeping his eyes trained on the ground.

"A Malfoy doesn't hug," Lucius said.

Draco bowed his head. He could not make himself snap back at his father – he knew the repercussions if he did. It was never worth it.

"Better," Lucius said. "Now, tell me – the Headmaster's golden children – what are the ways to punish them for their impertinence?"

Draco held back a snort – *impertinence*. Killing the Dark Lord was impertinent. He could come up with so many other words for it – brave, heroic, wonderful. He could come up with a whole book of words to describe the Boy Who Lived too, but if he uttered so much as a single word about that, his father would kill him. They were not words he would agree with.

He kept his head down, his eyes on his father's shoes, and told him about the lives the Gryffindors led.

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The school filled with people, even more so than usual. No corridor, no classroom – not even the Quidditch field – was without people. The dungeons, where the seventh-year Slytherins and Gryffindors had Potions at the moment, were no exception. Grown-ups lined up against the walls, or sat next to their children while Professor Severus Snape tried his best to keep the class in check.

However, with parents who did not think the rules of Hogwarts applied to them any longer and therefore walked around the room, looking and talking amongst themselves, and students who would rather speak to the aforementioned parents, this was not an easy task. Professor Snape looked like he would rather have faced off with Voldemort again than be

After Rain

present in this hellish classroom. His face was, as always, set in a scowl. Harry – who, along with Hermione, was one of the only two students listening to the lecture – thought he looked nastier than normal. Still, the professor had yet to do or say anything directed to Harry alone.

I wonder if... Harry's thoughts began, but he stopped himself. No, Snape will never feel bad for me, even if I'm the only student without a parent here. It's probably just because he doesn't want to be an evil git in front of the parents. Wouldn't sit well with the board, I guess.

"Potter?"

Oh, what did I miss this time? He had been doing so well throughout the class, busying himself with actually listening to Snape for a change, rather than daydreaming through the class – anything to avoid looking at the happy families surrounding him.

"Five points from Gryffindor for Potter's inattention," Snape snapped, shooting Harry an evil glare.

Nope, no pitying there, Harry thought. Oddly, the thought made him almost pleased.

"What did he do?" asked Mrs. Brown suddenly. "Are you really as unfair as Lavender's been telling me?"

Snape levelled a dark, menacing glare on the woman, but she did not cower as the students usually did.

"He did not pay attention," Snape said.

"Well, neither does that boy, even now," Mrs Brown said, motioning towards Crabbe, who sat doodling stick figures on his parchment, with his father right next to him, looking equally uninterested. "Aren't you going to take points?"

"No," Snape said. "I decide who loses points and who does not. Now, let's continue with this—"

He stopped, mid-sentence, when the door opened. A slender woman, clad in dark, expensive robes, walked into the room. Harry had seen her before – Narcissa Malfoy, Draco's mother. Her blonde hair was the exact same colour as Draco's, but long and flowing down her back.

After Rain

“Please, excuse my lateness,” she said.

Snape stared at her. “Of course, Mrs. Malfoy.”

Mrs. Malfoy glanced around the room and found her husband, and quickly made her way to his side. Harry looked at Snape, who seemed completely lost as he stared at Mrs. Malfoy. Harry nearly smiled – Snape almost looked... *smitten*. Though Harry was unsure, because he did not think Snape could be smitten.

Harry saw Lucius Malfoy’s eyes, going from his wife to Snape. He had eyes so cold they seemed to freeze everything they looked upon. The mere image of the tall man, dressed all in black, was enough to send chills down Harry's spine. Other than Voldemort, Harry could not remember ever meeting a more unpleasant man. He had a hand on his son's shoulder and for a second, he met Harry's eyes.

Such coldness... Like father, like son, Harry thought.

His gaze lingered for a moment on the younger Malfoy, and at once, he had to rethink his statement – Draco did not look like his father. Though the features were much the same, Draco’s eyes were not cold, nor his pose threatening. He did not seem to appreciate his father’s presence. Although he sat perfectly upright, he kept his eyes cast downwards, and Harry thought he looked almost sad.

He turned back. Snape finally regained his bearings – perhaps thirty seconds had passed. His scowl returned.

"Seeing as no one here is truly listening," Snape sneered, "You may leave now."

The class would have cheered, had they not known Snape all too well. Leaving early once meant Snape would double the workload during the next week, when the parents were nowhere in sight. Harry sighed, grabbed his things and followed Hermione, Ron and their respective parents out the door. The three friends huddled closer in front as the parents began speaking among themselves.

"Snape's really on edge with all the parents here," Hermione said.

“But did you see the look he gave Mrs. Malfoy?” Ron asked. “He was almost drooling. D’ya think there’s any history there?”

“Ron!” Hermione exclaimed. “That’s really none of our business.”

After Rain

Ron grinned. "He looked like he'd been struck by lightning. Snape! Can you imagine anyone wanting him?"

Harry was rather surprised Ron had noticed at all – Ron had always been a great best friend, but feelings had never been his forte. Neither was sensitivity, as he displayed rather frequently.

Hermione glared at him. "He's a hero. He risked everything during the war. His morals must be good – he fought for the right side, after all."

"Doesn't mean he's any better looking," Ron said. "Besides, he's still evil – even with the parents here, he just had to take five points from Harry."

Harry shrugged; he was used to it. "I think he does it more out of habit now rather than me doing something wrong."

"Like you ever do anything wrong," Hermione said, then she realised what she had just said. "Well, okay, anything that's worth as many points as he's taken."

Ron shook his head. "Since that was our last class for the day, we should go prepare for dinner. I'm betting Dumbledore has made the house elves outdo themselves again!"

Hermione nodded. "I'm gonna go make myself ready. I'll see you in the common room in an hour?"

Ron and Harry nodded in agreement, and Hermione walked off after telling her parents. Both her parents and Ron's agreed they should go get ready as well. They walked away, and Harry could hear Arthur Weasley going off asking Hermione's parents how cameras worked – the photos produced did not move and that was obviously terribly strange.

Ron, who heard as well, shrugged at his father, and the boys headed for the Gryffindor common room.

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A gust of wind swept into the kitchens, where house elves scurried back and forth, back and forth, trying to get everything ready for the big feast. Each and every one of them had a task

After Rain

to complete. When that one was done, another one followed, and another, and another... The elves did not mind though. They never had, and here at the castle, they were treated well.

Something watched them, though they did not notice. That something made its way through the small creatures, wary not to bump into anything. It would be all too odd for a plate, or a goblet or a bowl, to move all on its own suddenly.

It could see the goblet it was looking for a few feet away, and it held the vial in its hands tighter.

So easy...

It was lucky; the elves never changed routine, which meant the goblet stood exactly where it should. When the elves moved away for a moment, it took the opportunity and quickly emptied the vial's contents into the goblet. It faded within a second, and no one would be able to tell that there was anything but the original drink in the goblet.

Happy that everything had run so smoothly, it was possible it became too sure, for suddenly, the cloak it was wearing slipped down and uncovered its face. Quickly, it pulled it up again, and almost ran out of the kitchen.

It did not hear the gasp of the one elf who *had* seen the intruder.

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After Rain

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Chapter two

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Hermione met up with the boys in the common room, as she had said. She saw Ron's appreciative gaze lingering on the fine cut of her robes – she knew she had never been the most beautiful of women, nor would she ever be, but she did know how to accentuate what she had. She smiled widely. Ron held out his arm to her, and she chuckled at his chivalry.

“Don't you two look quite the couple,” Molly Weasley said, coming up to them with a rather great smile.

Hermione and Ron blushed slightly, but Ginny entered the room and saved them from having to answer. The youngest Weasley looked vibrantly beautiful, her red hair flaring and her eyes sparkling. Neville met her at the base of the stairs, taking her hand and kissing her cheek.

“You look lovely,” Neville whispered to Ginny, who smiled more widely.

When Arthur Weasley arrived, with Hermione's parents in tow, the company of people made their way downstairs for dinner. Her mum and dad looked rather wide-eyed still, and Hermione placed herself between Arthur and her parents, to give them some room to breathe. Arthur took his place by Molly's side, and they spoke and laughed with their children as they descended the stairs.

Hermione glanced back at Harry.

He looks so lonely, she thought. With the parents at Hogwarts, Harry probably felt like a third wheel. She would have talked to him, had she thought he would want to talk about it, but he did not seem to want anyone mentioning it. He might mistake her questions for pity, although it was not. She was simply sad for him, that he did not have family the way she and Ron both did. Mrs. Weasley did her best to include him, but it seemed that it was not enough. Hermione could not imagine being in his place – her parents had always been there for her, a quiet support, even as she spent nine months a year away at a magical school.

After Rain

"Come on Harry," she said, holding her hand out. Harry took it, without hesitation, and she wondered if she had imagined the look of loneliness as his face once more settled into a small smile.

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Severus Snape sat in his seat at the High Table, watching the chaos before him. Parents, students, and the occasional teacher who had yet to sit down mingled together. They were loud. Very loud. Laughter and talk mingled, each person trying to make themselves heard, making the volume grow. Severus wondered for a moment how angry the Headmaster would be with him, if he cast a Silencing Charm over the entire Hall.

It would probably not go over too well.

He sighed and shot another nasty scowl at some random student – he did not care much which student, nor whether they were doing anything in particular wrong; he just felt they all deserved it at the moment.

I feel a headache coming on.

His gaze landed upon the Gryffindor table. It seemed like a small sea of red in the middle of the table, with the Weasley parents visiting their children. Next to them sat a man and a woman, both obviously Muggle from their clothing, and both with brown hair. The Granger parents, Snape decided. Xenophilius Lovegood sat with his daughter, speaking to Augusta Longbottom.

Potter sat and played with his goblet, tipping it this way and that, not quite seeming to participate in the lively conversations going on around him.

Pitying himself for sure, Snape thought nastily. No parents to love him – poor Potter! As though he's the only one who's lost loved ones.

He gripped the goblet filled with water standing before him, and took several deep gulps. There was a slightly sweet taste to it, Snape noted, before going back to watch the scene before him.

Severus tried to avoid looking at the table of his own house, but his eyes were drawn there. Lucius Malfoy sat by his son's side, looking like royalty. By his side, *she* sat silently, not

After Rain

speaking. Her hair fell gently down her back, like liquid, pale gold, and she kept her grey eyes cast downwards in submission. Graceful fingers wrapped around a goblet, bringing it up to her pale, full lips.

Severus tore his eyes away, busying himself once more with his drink, and he felt the eyes of Lucius on him, cold and harsh. He looked up, meeting the man's eyes briefly in a challenge. The two had history, more than Severus cared to remember. Who knew what his life would have been like, had Lucius Malfoy never entered it, with promises of gold and power?

Dumbledore stood up just then, and as always when he did so, the room quieted down.

"Welcome to Hogwarts," Dumbledore said, smiling to the crowd. "I hope you have all enjoyed your first day here with your children, and that they have behaved themselves. We will soon be enjoying dinner, but first I would like to tell you what will be happening afterwards. The tables will be moved to the sides, and there will be some music. Not a dance per se, but still some time to enjoy with your children, unless you would rather take a walk through the castle with your children.

"Tomorrow, the afternoon classes have been cancelled, so that we can have a small Quidditch tournament – parents versus students. Anyone wishing to join the teams, please sign up with Madam Hooch. Now, please, enjoy the feast."

Severus gave another sigh as the room once more was filled with noise. He would eat quickly, and then retreat to his rooms.

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There were few people left in the Great Hall. Only the older students, Harry noted – all the younger children had been ushered off to bed by their parents. The ones remaining sat lounging in comfortable chairs, speaking to their parents about anything and everything. Molly shot glares at her husband. Arthur Weasley seemed oblivious, as he continued to question Ron, Harry and Ginny on just about anything that had to do with their school year. Ron did not seem to notice his mother's looks either, and just continued to tell some tale about Snape. Xenophilius and Neville's Gran added their points here and there.

Hermione had left with her parents. She should be taking them back to their rooms, but Harry knew that she would take a good while doing so, as she would educate her parents in Hogwarts' history along the way. That was Hermione in a nutshell. With the best grades in

After Rain

school, Harry was certain Hermione could outdo even some of the teachers with her knowledge of Hogwarts.

Harry stretched and stood. "Well, I'm off to bed. Must be awake for the game tomorrow."

He would be leading the Gryffindor student team – a larger team than usual, but no one had objected when the house had chosen him as leader.

Molly stood as well, and gave him a hug. "Of course, dear. Good night – we'll see you tomorrow."

Harry nodded, and said good night to the other three as well. Then he turned and walked out, heading for the Gryffindor dorms. He looked out the large windows as he went, watching the stars and the moon. He was deep in thought, which was why at first, he failed to notice the figure looming ahead. He only stopped when he got close enough to hear the heavy breathing.

The tall, black-clad man with oily hair was not hard for Harry to recognise.

Professor Snape, he thought, utterly confused. It was not so much the fact that Snape was in the corridor that puzzled him, because Snape always roamed the school, so much as the way he stood: One hand on the wall, seemingly for support, the other one gripping the clothes around his chest, his eyes closed. Even from several feet away, Harry could hear his professor's heavy breathing echo through the halls. His face seemed scrunched up in pain, eyebrows knitted tightly together.

Suddenly, Snape's head shot up, as though he had just noticed Harry's presence.

"What do you want, Potter?" he sneered.

For once, Snape's cold tone did not faze Harry. A mild concern settled in his mind. He was not used to feeling anything but hate towards the older man, yet at that moment he could not bring himself to despise him as he had. He looked ill – lost.

I've never seen him look lost before, Harry thought. *Hurt, bloody, angry, furious – never lost.*

"Are you all right?" he asked, ignoring Snape's first words to him.

After Rain

Snape, who seemed to suddenly realise that he still leaned against the wall, stood up quickly. Too quickly, perhaps, because he wavered. Harry, who had moved towards him, immediately reached out his hand to steady him.

As soon as he had made contact, Snape scowled. "Get your hands off me! Five points from Gryffindor for—being where you shouldn't be."

Harry stared disbelievingly at him. "What?"

Professor Snape did not answer. Without another word, he turned around and stalked away. Harry stared after him, anger and curiosity fighting each other – was Snape's walk a little stiffer than normal? He shook his head as his professor disappeared from his view.

I must be imagining things, he thought to himself as he headed off towards the dorms again. *Goddamn Snape. And what was that – being where I shouldn't be? What kind of stupid bloody reasoning is that? It's not even curfew yet.*

He did not notice the head peeking out behind a statue. That figure, too, wore a confused look. He studied Harry until he disappeared from view.

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The next morning at breakfast, Harry kept an eye on Snape. He tried not to make it obvious – the hatred between Severus Snape and Harry Potter was infamous at Hogwarts. Besides, he did not care about the insensitive bastard.

I don't, Harry thought. *He's a git. A slimy, greasy—*

He ranted in his mind for a few minutes about how he much he did not like Snape, nor care what happened to him. Besides, Snape looked better today. His posture was as tense as ever, his hair a thick, greasy curtain around his face as it had always been, and the trademarked scowl did not look laced with pain the way it had the night before. Every now and then, he shot a sour look at the students and their parents, though Harry noted that Snape avoided looking at him.

"What's on the schedule today, dear?" Mrs. Weasley asked her son, recalling Harry to the present.

After Rain

"Mum, would you please stop calling me 'dear'?" Ron whined, instead of answering her question. Molly gave him a look, and he muttered, "We've got Transfiguration."

"Have you done the homework?" Hermione asked. "I did mine last week, though—"

"Hermione, I'm sure your homework is fine," Ron interrupted her. She gave him a look, at which he shrank back just a little. "Yes, I've done it. Harry and I both have, right Harry?"

When Harry failed to reply, because he was watching Snape out of the corner of his eye – not that he cared at all, because he did not – and had lost track of the conversation, Ron elbowed him in his stomach.

"What?" he asked indignantly, looking at Ron.

"Please tell Hermione that we did our homework like good little boys," Ron said, earning another sour look from Hermione.

Harry nodded absentmindedly. "Yeah, we did it."

"Harry, what are you looking at?" Hermione asked, noticing his inattention. She followed his gaze and landed on the Potions professor. "What did Snape do this time?"

"He—" Harry broke off as he remembered the parents. They did not need to hear about Snape being sick – then they would go to Dumbledore, who would ask questions, and Snape would hate Harry even more, especially if it had been nothing. Really, Harry saw no reason to tell Hermione or Ron either, because it had probably been nothing, but to sate Hermione's curiosity, he said, with a sideways glance at the parents as an explanation, "I'll tell you later."

Hermione, of course, caught the quick look he gave her indicating the parents present, while the redhead did not. "Why can't you tell us now?"

"Because I'll tell you *later*," Harry said, before going back to his breakfast.

Ron watched him for a second, then he shrugged and began eating his soggy pancakes.

"Good God, Ron, how much syrup do you have on those?" Hermione asked, as Harry stole another glance at the Potions master at the High Table.

After Rain

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The clear skies of the afternoon boded well for the upcoming Quidditch tournament. The games would not be quite as usual – to be able to finish the eight games in a single afternoon, they had a time limit. Thirty minutes per game, and if the Snitch was caught before that time, it obviously ended then. If not, then the goal scores would decide the winners.

“Lucky for the parents – I think there are a few who’d have a heart attack from flying ‘round much longer than that,” Ron said.

Even his girlfriend had to chuckle at that.

The parents had been divided into two teams, with a mixture of Houses and people who had gone to other schools. They would be playing with larger than normal teams, because Dumbledore wanted to allow as many as possible the chance to play. Hermione’s parents decided against joining – they had never been anywhere near a broom other than for cleaning purposes, and to start out with a Quidditch tournament seemed—ill-advised. Harry thought the decision wise.

“All right, Ginny, and Dean, you guys are Chasers as usual,” Harry said. “I’ll be Seeker, if no one objects to that.”

“No one who wants us to win will object,” Ginny grinned.

“There will be three Chasers, as usual – and since Professor McGonagall has been forced onto the team by our beloved Headmaster, she’ll get the final spot.”

“I swear, one day,” they heard McGonagall grumble about Dumbledore’s decision.

“All right, moving on – Ron as Keeper, Colin as Keeper, because we’ll have two of those as well,” Harry said.

“They’ll need to have at least three Seekers to win against you, though, so what’s the point?”

Ginny’s comment made people giggle.

“And finally, two Beaters – Jimmy and Romilda, you wanted to try this?”

After Rain

Two nods met him.

An hour later, they had gone through a bit of tactics – since half the team consisted of people who usually played, they did not stray too far from the way they normally played.

“I’ll just stay out of the way,” McGonagall said, resignedly. “There was a time when I enjoyed a Quidditch game, but this is a few decades too late. I’m sure several of the parents will feel the same way.”

“I wouldn’t bet on it,” Ginny said. “Dad looked like he was looking forward to slamming some Bludgers.”

The Gryffindor team had gotten wind of the setup for the two parent teams – Arthur Weasley would be playing Beater. Padma and Parvati’s mother would be playing Seeker on one of the teams, and Lisa Turpin’s parents would both be joining as Chasers on one of the teams.

All in all, Harry did not fear the competition, save for one player – Lucius Malfoy would be playing Beater on the other parent team. It would be the last game of the day, and Harry had a bad feeling about the cold-hearted former Death Eater.

The afternoon passed pleasantly. The Gryffindor students won the first game after eighteen minutes, when Harry caught the Snitch. His competition, the parent Seeker Mr. Zabini, seemed long lost and had been on the other side of the pitch when Harry had set off after the small golden ball.

Afterwards, Harry and his team mates had joined the rest of the student body on the stands, watching the rest of the games – their next game would be the last game of the day, as they only played the two parent teams versus the four Hogwarts teams.

“Well, it’s not like the result’d be any different if we played the other houses,” Ron said. “You’d catch the Snitch anyway and we’d win.”

Harry watched the game going on before them – the Slytherins versus the parent team the Gryffindors had yet to meet. Aislinn Finnigan played Seeker on the team, and her eyes searched the skies for the Snitch just as Draco Malfoy’s did. Malfoy looked far more at ease on a broom – Seamus’ mother did probably not spend as much time on a broom these days as anyone on a Hogwarts Quidditch team did.

After Rain

The blond boy's hair, though mostly slicked back, had been loosened by the wind. Harry thought him to be a pleasant thing to rest his eyes upon – the lithe body, the slender hands, which he had no doubt inherited from his mother.

When did I start thinking of him as pleasant to look at?

Harry turned his eyes away to take in the rest of the team. Snape, who had been forced onto the team just as McGonagall had, played Keeper. Studying him briefly, Harry thought he looked paler than usual, though he could not be sure – perhaps it was only the unusual setting; Harry rarely saw the Potions professor outside the castle.

“Mr. Malfoy doesn't look like he'll play nice,” Hermione said, nodding towards Lucius Malfoy, flying on the other end of the pitch.

“Well, he is a nasty git, that one,” Ron said.

Ginny nodded. She had an odd look on her face and Harry knew why – Lucius had been the reason for her near tragedy in her first year. The diary and Tom Riddle had all been Lucius Malfoy's fault.

“He's a jerk,” she said, unusually quiet. Harry reached out and squeezed her hand in comfort, and she looked gratefully at him.

Neville came up behind her, hugging her. She melted into his arms, and Harry wished for a moment that he could feel jealous of Neville. It would have been much easier, to be in love with Ginny – he already felt like part of her family. But as Neville kissed her forehead, Harry felt no stirring jealousy, no annoyance that it should be him. Ginny was like a sister, just like Hermione – he wanted neither romantically, and was only too happy to see them find love for themselves in their respective boyfriends.

“I don't know why Dumbledore's allowing him to play,” Ron said.

“Probably because he can do less damage from there, than from the stands,” Hermione said. “At least in the air, he doesn't have much of a possibility to curse anyone. And he'll have everyone's eyes on him.”

“True,” Ron said, “but he's playing Beater. That means lots of chances to hurt others, and pretend it wasn't really on purpose.”

After Rain

Harry nodded to Jimmy and Romilda. “You two will have to keep him away from everyone else. He’s the only one out there that I think might be in it with an intent to hurt.”

Jimmy and Romilda both nodded.

Harry turned back to the game. He saw Snape, who had not done a particularly good job of guarding the goal posts – he and his counterpart had allowed seven Quaffles to get past them so far. Snape’s face was resentful, and pasty white against his dark clothes. He had donned as little as possible of the Quidditch gear.

Suddenly, he caught sight of the Snitch, at the other end of the stadium. It glinted in the late afternoon sun, buzzing teasingly from side to side.

Malfoy reacted immediately. Harry had to admire his skill on a broom, as he stretched out as though he rode a horse, allowing it to stretch its legs and move impossibly quickly. Mrs. Finnigan did not stand a chance. Draco reached the other end of the stadium, and his fingers closed around the Snitch, effectively ending the game.

Lucius Malfoy landed and Harry saw him shake hands with the Slytherins. He stopped for a second when he stood in front of Snape, and even from the distance of the stands, Harry could see the challenge on Malfoy’s face.

“Well, one more game and then it’s our turn,” Ginny said. “Perhaps we should head down.”

“Good luck,” Neville said, and Ginny pressed her lips against his.

The parent team that the Gryffindors had already defeated managed, by pure luck it seemed, to win the game against the Hufflepuffs. The Hufflepuff Seeker had been on the other end of the pitch when the Snitch had practically flown into Mr. Zabini’s hand.

When the teams of the final match made their way up onto the pitch, the crowds cheered wildly. The two teams greeted each other – Harry realised that Aislinn Finnigan barely reached his shoulder, but her grip felt firm when they shook hands. In her eyes, he could see a challenge, though he doubted she would pose much of a problem.

Lucius Malfoy regarded him coolly. “Good luck, Potter.”

“This doesn’t have to do with luck,” Harry replied.

“Are you certain?”

After Rain

Harry felt a jolt all of a sudden, but it was gone as quickly as it had come. He glared at Mr. Malfoy, wanting nothing but for the man to leave Hogwarts. He would not mind in the least if the Ministry sent him to Azkaban for life.

Madam Hooch blew her whistle, and the balls were off, the Snitch disappearing from view immediately.

Harry zoomed around the pitch, looking for it whilst keeping a lookout for stray Bludgers – or not-so-stray Bludgers for that matter, as Mr. Malfoy seemed quite intent on sending them his way.

“And that’s a score for the Gryffindors, who seem to be in fine shape today – especially Miss Ginny Weasley, who is certainly a fine shape to look upon—”

Harry chuckled as Ginny blushed – Neville was not the only one taken with her. Blaise Zabini, who did commentary, did not seem to mind inter-house relationships at all, and today, no McGonagall stood beside him to guard him.

“And there goes another Bludger in the direction of the Gryffindor Seeker – one of the Beaters on the parent team certainly seems intent on knocking him off his broom, although the success rate isn’t so high. But then, Harry Potter has survived things far worse than Bludgers—”

Too true, Harry thought with a shake of his head.

“Sixteen minutes have passed – a little less than half the game remains, and the parents have the Quaffle – Mrs. Patil seems to be aiming for a score for her team—she sends the Quaffle to her husband and there, zooming very nicely indeed – that’s a move I didn’t think I’d see from someone over forty – and no, Weasley is lost and the Quaffle is in—the parents score, reaching thirty points. Still a while to go to Gryffindor’s sixty, but a very nice goal indeed.”

Another five minutes of relative calm – as calm as any Quidditch game could ever be – passed, before Harry suddenly saw the telltale glint of the Snitch. He set off, and as soon as he did, Aislinn Finnigan set off after him. He wondered briefly if she had seen it at all, or if she simply followed his lead. It did not matter – he was closer to it than her, and he would catch it.

After Rain

“Potter has seen the Snitch and is going after it in the same fashion as always – breakneck speed. The parents don’t seem too happy – and there’s a Bludger heading the way of Potter—”

The Snitch turned, and Harry turned.

Or he tried to.

His broom did not budge under his shifted weight – it continued straight forward, under its own will. Harry looked around, searching for Lucius Malfoy, who was no doubt behind this.

Below him, Harry saw Mrs. Finnigan heading after the Snitch, but Harry had bigger troubles at the moment.

“Harry, look out!”

He realised a moment before it hit, that the Bludger was still coming right at him. He tried to swivel to avoid it, but his broom would not change its course.

Everything became deafeningly silent.

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After Rain

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Chapter three

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Severus hurried after Madam Pomfrey, the necessary potions already *Accio'd* from the cupboards in the dungeons.

Blasted boy, can never get through a game of Quidditch without injuries.

He remembered the time when Quirrell had hexed the boy's broom, and that game in his third year, and—the list went on and on. Potter was a bloody magnet for trouble – although this time, Severus knew all too well what the trouble was.

Goddamn Malfoy, he thought.

The day of Quidditch had worn Severus out, and he happily stood back as Madam Pomfrey worked on Potter. Potter looked bad – the wards on the pitch had softened his fall, but the Bludger had smashed into the side of his face, breaking his nose and several teeth, bloodying his chin and making it swell. Blood dribbled down on the ground, below Potter's lifeless body. His face had already started turning purple when Pomfrey started with her spells and healing charms.

Potter's friends came running onto the pitch, the Granger girl close to tears. His team mates had landed, as had the parent team. Severus looked up at Lucius, only to see him with a pleased smirk.

“Will he be all right?”

Draco drawled the words, but Severus had known him long enough to hear the subtle, honest worry in the boy's voice.

“Madam Pomfrey hasn't lost a student to Quidditch yet,” Severus said, careful to keep any emotion out of his voice. “I'm sure she won't allow the great Boy Who Lived to be the first.”

Draco nodded mutely, watching Pomfrey conjure a stretcher and place Harry upon it. Severus saw Draco glance at his father every now and then, and he knew that Draco too was

After Rain

aware of the person behind Potter's injury. As usual, nothing would stick, of course, if taken to the Wizengamot. Lucius Malfoy had gotten out of messes far worse than this one. He would claim that he had only sent the Bludger in Potter's general direction – it was his job as Beater after all.

Many followed Pomfrey as she took Potter to the hospital wing, and the rest of the crowd scattered, the good mood of the afternoon lost with Potter's injury. Severus mostly felt like lying down, tired after the day's escapades.

“Are you all right, sir?”

Draco spoke quietly now – Lucius stood speaking to the Parkinsons, but Severus did not doubt that he listened to every word Draco and Severus exchanged.

“Is there a reason I shouldn't be?” Severus asked.

Draco shook his head, staring out at the Quidditch pitch. “No, sir.”

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When Harry showed up for the feast that night, doused with Pepper-Up Potion and other strengthening potions, the crowd cheered. Many made their way down to speak to him and Harry wondered if some of them only did it because they finally had a reason to address the famous Harry Potter.

Once everyone was seated, Harry flanked by Hermione and Ron on either side, Dumbledore stood and spoke.

“Now that we have all gathered,” he said, “let me first thank you all for a fine afternoon of sportsmanship. I hope you've all had a great time – there seem to be no sore losers.”

Harry wondered what kind of drugs the Headmaster was on. A ‘fine afternoon of sportsmanship’? Was that what Lucius Malfoy's continuous misuse of Bludgers could be called? Harry was the only seriously injured player, but that did not mean Lucius had not done what he could to hurt the other students, particularly those who had been against Voldemort in the war. Harry held back a snort at the part about no sore losers as well – the Hufflepuffs did not look too happy about the Lucius Malfoy team winning over them.

After Rain

“I want to congratulate today’s winners. In second place, the Slytherin team, with four hundred and ten points.”

Some cheering, especially among the parents, took place. The Slytherins did not look as happy. Harry studied both Snape and Draco upon the announcement – Snape looked as he always did, with a heavy scowl on his face, and Draco’s eyes were cast downwards. Lucius, sitting next to him, did not look happy. Harry wondered what kind of pressure Lucius placed upon his son – did Malfoy Senior expect Draco to win, and if he did, what were the repercussions when Draco failed?

“And, our winners in this little tournament – the Ravenclaw student team, with four hundred and sixty points – congratulations!”

The Ravenclaw table broke out in wild cheers.

Harry knew it would have been the Gryffindors, had his broom only not been jinxed. It did not matter much – Harry had won enough games and this rather silly little competition against the parents had only been for fun, and not nearly the prestige of the House Cup. Harry clapped and smiled and told the players congratulations.

“We’ll take them next time,” Ron said.

“Yeah,” Ginny said, “When Lucius bloody Malfoy isn’t on the other team.”

“Now, now, watch the language. We have no proof of such allegations, do we?” Mrs. Weasley said, though Harry did not think her tone of voice quite matched. In fact, Mrs. Weasley sounded just as convinced of Mr. Malfoy’s guilt as everyone else.

An hour later, Harry felt the potions’ effects wearing off. He had promised to return to the Hospital Wing after dinner so that Madam Pomfrey could keep him over night, and after bidding the others good night – and fighting them off as they offered to walk him back to the Infirmary – Harry left.

The stairs barely moved as Harry made his way upstairs. The corridors echoed empty.

“Mister Potter.”

Harry’s blood froze upon hearing the chilly voice. He turned to face Mr. Malfoy.

“Malfoy.”

After Rain

“It’s a wonder you’re up and about,” Mr. Malfoy said. “And all alone, too.”

“Yes,” Harry said, wishing he had accepted his friends’ offer to walk him back. “A real wonder.”

Mr. Malfoy stepped closer, that unpleasant cane of his clicking against the floor. Harry felt light-headed. The potions were definitely wearing off and he might soon be too weak to stand. He would be no match for Mr. Malfoy tonight.

“Was there something you wanted?” he asked.

“What do you think people would say, if the Boy Who Lived was found dead in an empty corridor?” Mr. Malfoy asked.

“They’d realise it was you who killed me,” Harry said.

He gripped his wand, though he could not be certain that he would be strong enough to cast any spells.

“Are you really, truly sure?” Mr. Malfoy asked, levelling his wand at Harry.

“Harry?”

Just then, Hermione’s voice floated down the corridor. Harry had never been so relieved to hear his friend’s voice.

“Down here,” he said. He looked at Mr. Malfoy. “You should probably leave.”

Mr. Malfoy glanced back at the corridor where Hermione was sure to show up at any moment. He glared hotly at Harry for a long second, and Harry thought the man might just kill him anyway, but then he swept off in the other direction and disappeared.

“Hermione?” Harry called.

But Hermione did not come, nor did she respond. Harry frowned, making his way down the corridor.

“Hermione?”

After Rain

Draco Malfoy looked rather like a deer caught in headlights when Harry rounded the corner. He stared at Harry, then turned his eyes to the floor. Far from feeling like fighting – he swayed on his feet as it was – Harry asked tiredly:

“Malfoy? What are you doing here? Your father just went that way-”

“I—uh,” said Malfoy, with a lack of eloquence that was highly unusual for him. “I’m not looking for my father.”

“No? Then what are you doing here? Did you see Hermione? She was just coming up here,” Harry said. “Perhaps she and her parents are checking the castle out—”

Malfoy looked up. “Uh, that was me.”

Harry looked dubiously at Malfoy. “Right.”

Malfoy rolled his eyes. “*Vocius Hermione Granger.*” When he spoke again, his voice had changed to that of Harry’s best friend. “Harry?”

It sounded so very strange and wrong, to hear Hermione’s voice – female voice – come out of Malfoy’s mouth. Harry simply stared. Perhaps his exhausted brain was playing tricks on him. He could feel the pain potions lose their effect now too – the side of his face where the Bludger had hit pulsed painfully.

“Why?” he said.

Malfoy ended the spell, his voice returning to normal.

“My father is up to no good, as usual,” Malfoy said. “Or would you prefer I left the two of you alone?”

“No, no, that’s quite all right. I—uh—thanks,” Harry said. “Now, if you’ll excuse me—the Infirmary seems like a good idea.”

He nodded to the other boy, and passed him. He felt unsteady, his head spinning and his face throbbing. When he took another shaky step forward, he felt a hand under his arm, steadying him.

“Let’s get you to the Infirmary before you fall down,” Malfoy said.

After Rain

“You don’t usually help me,” Harry said, “and now you’re doing it twice in one night? Why?”

Anger and hurt flashed briefly through Malfoy’s eyes, although he did not let go of Harry. “I can leave you if you want me to.”

Harry shook his head. “No, don’t. I’m sorry – I’m just not used to you being anything but nasty.”

“I’m not my father, I don’t want you dead,” Malfoy said.

“But our fighting is fun?”

Malfoy shrugged, and they started making their way up the stairs towards the Hospital Wing. “Yes.”

Harry shook his head, then regretted it when the world spun even worse. He mumbled, “You have a strange sense of fun.”

“Sparring with you has always been fun,” Malfoy said, rather softly.

Harry did not answer; he barely noticed that he leaned rather heavily now on Malfoy, counting on his support to continue up the stairs. He did not notice Malfoy’s head turning this way and that, looking for something. Nor did he feel the light kiss Malfoy placed on the back of his head, when they had reached the Infirmary and Malfoy had helped Harry onto the bed.

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Harry recovered, as he always seemed to do, with Madam Pomfrey’s care and a hefty dose of healing potions. A night’s sleep later, he felt as good as new. The previous evening’s adventure seemed almost like a dream, and Harry could not quite piece together the helpful Malfoy he almost remembered of the night before, with the unpleasant git who sat sneering at the Slytherin table the next lunch, when Harry had been allowed to leave the Infirmary.

Yet the younger Malfoy’s sneer seemed kind and loving in comparison to his father’s hateful, cold eyes. Harry held back a shudder, thinking about what could have happened – *would* have happened – the evening before, if it had not been for Draco.

After Rain

“Now that you’ve had your Quidditch injury, do you think you could stay on the broom and away from the Bludgers for the rest of the year?” Ginny grinned at Harry.

Harry smiled, “I’ll try.”

“Please do,” Hermione said. “I’ve said it before, I don’t like that sport.”

Ron rolled his eyes, and kissed her cheek. “We know.”

“After yesterday, I have to agree,” Mrs. Weasley said. “It is an awfully dangerous sport.”

“But mum, his broom was hexed,” Ginny said. “It wasn’t Harry’s fault.”

“I overheard Professor McGonagall talking to Dumbledore,” Dean Thomas said. “They couldn’t find any hex on the broom.”

“What are you talking about?” Ron said. “Of course there was – he couldn’t steer it!”

Dean shrugged apologetically. “They didn’t find anything.”

“As usual,” Harry said. “Nothing sticks to him.”

Hermione, Ron and Ginny followed his glare to the Slytherin table, to the man sitting regally with his wife on one side and his son on the other. Mr. Malfoy looked up, and gave Harry a quick smirk. Harry felt his blood boiling.

One day, Harry would see to it that that man was sent to Azkaban – for good.

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That day passed quickly, and before anyone had time to realise it, Sunday had come and the parents were going home again. Hermione and Ron both said goodbye to their parents quickly, and waved them off as the Hogwarts Express began moving towards London again.

It was nice, Harry thought, to have the school back as it should be – without parents. The last three days had been a bit too chaotic for his liking; everywhere he had gone, there had been people. With the added bonuses of the Quidditch tournament and his subsequent

After Rain

intimate meeting with the Bludger, and his rendezvous with Lucius Malfoy in the corridor, Harry was only too glad for the return to normalcy.

He was tired.

Sitting down in the deserted Gryffindor common room – everyone else was still down in the Great Hall – he sighed deeply to himself. Dean had been correct – neither Dumbledore nor any of the other teachers had been able to find any hex on the broom Harry had used. Despite the fact that everyone had seen the broom's refusal to follow Harry's orders, no one could link it back to Lucius Malfoy.

Harry had told the Headmaster of his meeting with the elder Mr. Malfoy in the corridor – but his memories of it had been jumbled. He had extracted his memory into a Pensive, but all that had told them was that it could not be used as evidence – the pain and exhaustion of Harry's mind made even the Pensive memory foggy and uncertain.

"I'm sorry, Harry, but this would be far too easy for Mr. Malfoy's lawyers to shred," Professor Dumbledore had said. "And though I have no doubt his intent was to hurt you, he never did anything to you."

Harry had not told him of Draco's help that night. It would not have mattered – and Harry had some trouble believing it to begin with.

His thoughts turned to Professor Snape.

The Potions master had seemed all right after that first, strange evening, but there was something nagging Harry's mind. Perhaps it was the look in the professor's eye, or perhaps he really did walk more stiffly, as though his body hurt. Harry could not tell, and he could not very well ask.

That'd go over real well, he thought sarcastically to himself. *"Professor Snape, are you okay? You seem to be walking like you're hurting – are you in pain?" He bit my head off for wanting to help him the last time – Gryffindor house points would be in the negatives if I asked him that...*

Hermione and Ron still did not know what had happened on the night of the first feast with the parents. After the breakfast, when Harry had said he would tell them, there had just not been one moment where he had been alone with his friends, and too many other things had happened.

After Rain

He heard footsteps, and knew that his time for being alone was over. He sighed to himself, before forcing a smile onto his lips.

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Draco could not be happier about the fact that his father had finally left. To act like the perfect Slytherin for three days when he really felt like anything but had been draining. Even more so when he worked every moment to keep his father from hurting and killing the Gryffindors; one of them in particular. Still, he was getting very good at pretending. He wondered if it was a good thing, and decided that, when it came to his father, being able to pretend was a *very* good thing. If his father ever found out where his thoughts took him these days... He shuddered to think of what his father would do to him if he knew.

There was something else going on in the castle as well. An incident that troubled Draco.

On the first night the parents had been there – the night of the feast, that was – Draco had seen the very odd scene of his Potions professor leaning against the wall, breathing heavily with his eyes closed. In all the years Draco had gone to Hogwarts, and the years before Hogwarts when his father and Severus had spent time together, he had never seen him like that. His face looked tired beyond belief, his posture, which was normally proud, sagging.

He had just been about to go help Severus, when he heard footsteps. Harry Potter stood a few feet away from Severus. He looked confused. Severus did not seem to notice him at all, at first. Not until the professor asked, "What do you want, Potter?" did Draco realise he had known all along.

"Are you all right?"

Typical Harry to never answer a question. And an insane Harry to ask his most hated teacher such a question.

But Severus did not snap back. Instead he straightened, and Draco saw him begin to fall over. He was weak, that much seemed obvious. But why? He had not shown any signs of being sick during dinner, or throughout the day.

Harry leaned forward to steady him, and the Potions master growled, "Get your hands off me! Five points from Gryffindor for—being where you shouldn't be."

After Rain

Even Draco, who normally applauded the loss of Gryffindor points, had to wonder about Severus' reasoning. Harry looked upon the professor with disbelief all over his face.

'What?'

Severus turned around, not answering, trying to regain his posture, Draco noted. But try as the professor might to hide the fact, the young Malfoy could still see that there was something wrong with Severus. Harry watched him, puzzlement and anger marring his features, before he began walking towards his own dorms. Draco held his breath as he passed; no need for Potter to notice him. Luckily, Harry seemed to be in his own little world, for he did not seem to sense anything at all.

Draco could not help but wonder what had caused the sudden illness. Severus was still sick, of that Draco was sure, even if his professor tried not to show it, and even though he had denied it when Draco had asked.

Draco could not help but admire the man for everything he had gone through in his life. The things he had had to do, to secure a win for Dumbledore's side in the war that had finally led to Voldemort's downfall. Many powerful wizards had been involved of course, but few more so than Severus. The forbidden spells Draco knew had been used on Death Eaters to test their loyalty, the double life he had had to live – it was not something Draco envied, not something he ever wanted, but he could and did feel admiration towards the man.

Now, there was something wrong with him, and Draco cared, even though Snape tried his best to behave as unpleasantly he always did.

But there was a stiffness, a *pain* apparent in his eyes that Draco was unused to. No matter that he was a Malfoy – he did not want anyone to be in pain.

Of course I'm beginning to wonder if I'm really a Malfoy after all, Draco thought grimly. Helping Harry – Merlin help me if my father found out that was me.

Draco sighed. This was getting him nowhere. Closing his eyes, he tried to sleep. It would be several hours before it actually found him.

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After Rain

His sleep was plagued with nightmares of men clad in black, hovering above him. He could hear them laugh, hear them tell him it was over; they had won. He tried to fight against them, but found his wrists bound. As he struggled against the magic ropes, he found his body growing weaker and weaker. His chest felt as though on fire; he struggled to breathe.

The figures above him moved back, and something else came into view. A long, dark snake held its head perfectly still, and looked into his eyes. It hissed, but he could not understand, though he knew, somehow, that it was telling him it was over.

A second later, the snake's head shot forward, its teeth burying themselves in his neck. He screamed.

Shooting straight up in bed, with pearls of sweat covering his body, Severus Snape took several long gulps of air, trying to get his breathing back to its normal rate. His body felt weak, and he fell back on the bed, still gasping for air. The question that had burned in his mind for three days was the one thing occupying his thoughts.

What is wrong with me?

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After Rain

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Chapter four

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The next morning began with Herbology. Harry and Ron both spent the class almost asleep, while Hermione took notes and had her hand up at almost every question – as usual. Care of Magical Creatures followed. This was normally one of Harry's better subjects, since his long-time friend, Rubeus Hagrid, held the classes. Hagrid's love for odd creatures – or monsters, as most students would name them – made the classes—*interesting*.

However, today Hermione had to poke him in the side when she noted he was not paying attention.

"Harry," she whispered.

"Huh? What?"

"Are you okay? Perhaps you need to go to Madam Pomfrey – perhaps you're not okay after—"

"I'm fine," Harry said. "Just a bit tired."

"But Harry, that Bludger—"

"I'm fine," he assured her. "But I do need to talk to you and Ron later. Can we go to the common room after lunch?"

Hermione, sensing that what Harry was going to tell them was important, said, "We'll go to my room instead. There's more privacy there."

Harry nodded, and Ron shot them a curious look. Hermione leaned over to him to whisper what she and Harry had just agreed on. He looked surprised, then shrugged and went back to listening to Hagrid talk about the Shaebey he held in his hand. It was, for once, a fairly cute little bugger, with big eyes watching the class questioningly. It had small arms with hands that didn't look proportional; the eight fingers looked all too many. The same went for the feet, which had eight toes and looked too big. Its body looked like that of a small

After Rain

baby; pinkish in colour, soft and round. The creature seemed content in Hagrid's hand, for it closed its eyes and seemed to go off to sleep.

“The Shaebeys are useful too,” Hagrid said. “They have some protective magic, but most of all, it’s their hair the Potions masters are after. It has some great healing qualities to it.”

Harry took notes for a moment, but then drifted off into daydreams again, until Hermione poked him once more.

The lunch passed blessedly uneventfully. Draco noted that Harry no longer glared at the Slytherin table, instead having found a curious new target for his attention – Severus. Did Potter worry about him the same way Draco did? It should not be so – Severus had always been horrid to the other houses, Gryffindor in particular, and Potter most of all, and even though it might have lessened since the fall of the Dark Lord – Severus had even given Granger points on her perfect potion once – it would not erase six years of verbal lashings and hatred. But something troubled Potter about the professor, because he kept stealing glances at Severus.

Severus looked pale. Of course, the man had always been averse to sun – but his colour had turned almost ashen now. Dark circles fell as shadows beneath his eyes.

He looks like he may fall down dead any second, Draco thought.

Draco noted how the man only pushed his food around on the plate, never taking a bite. He also saw Professor McGonagall shooting concerned glances at her co-worker. Severus either did not notice or ignored them. Knowing how attentive Severus usually was, Draco assumed the latter.

Something was off, wrong, and considering the timing, Draco would bet that his father had something to do with it. What? And did it really matter? Draco knew his father had been the reason for Harry’s—*Potter’s*—accident too, but he had no proof and thus, he could do nothing.

Draco sighed to himself, and realised absentmindedly that he too only pushed his food around on the plate. Suddenly he did not feel hungry anymore, and so he stood and walked out of the hall. Crabbe and Goyle looked dumbly after him.

After Rain

Harry, Ron and Hermione finished lunch quickly. They had only another half hour before their next class – double Potions, of all things – would begin, so they had to hurry. They rushed up the stairs towards Hermione's room, and when they finally reached their destination, all three panted heavily from the exercise.

Ron slumped down on the bed, while Hermione sat down in her reading chair. Harry opted to stay standing, and before long, he had begun pacing.

"So," Ron began, "What are we doing here?"

Hermione shot Harry a questioning look, and he stopped in mid-stride. He thought for a moment, his face scrunching up a bit, before beginning.

"You know that day—the first day the parents were here? Before all the Quidditchstuff?" Hermione and Ron both nodded. "Well, after the feast—Hermione, you had already left with your parents, and I was sitting with Ron and Mr. and Mrs. Weasley, talking."

"Yeah," Ron said, "You left me with Ginny and my parents."

Harry nodded. "I was on my way back to the dorms, when I saw a figure standing in the hallway. Turns out, it was Snape."

"Snape? What did he do this time? Deduct fifty points from Gryffindor for breathing?" Ron asked, irritated simply from hearing the hated professor's name.

Harry shook his head at his friend. "Kind of—but not really. I mean, he did take points, but—it was weird." His voice trailed off as he remembered the night. "He looked sick. He was leaning against the wall, breathing heavily – he looked ready to fall down. I don't think he even noticed me at first."

Hermione and Ron sat quiet, both confused. Ron said, "So—Snape was sick?"

Harry nodded. "I think he was. And I think he still is. Have you seen him the past few days? He looks bloody awful."

After Rain

“So what?” Ron asked. “He’s a nasty git and he’s gotten the flu. Who cares?”

“I think I have to agree with Ron here,” Hermione said.

Harry’s eyebrows knitted together in a frown. “It feels like something else.”

“Feels like something else?” Hermione echoed hesitantly. “What do you mean?”

“For one thing,” Harry said, “if it was the flu, why doesn’t he just take one of the anti-flu potions? But more importantly—I had a Quidditch accident that was no accident at all this weekend, and Snape happens to get sick at the exact same time. It seems like too big a coincidence.”

“So,” Ron said doubtfully, “you think Malfoy has something to do with this too? Aren’t they friends? Snape and Malfoy—they seem like the same kind.”

Harry shrugged. “I really don’t think so – Snape did ensure our side’s win with his spying activities, and if I’m not mistaken, that turn of events has made Lucius lose quite a bit of money, as well as most of his reputation.”

“Not to mention the way Snape was ogling Mrs. Malfoy,” Ron sniggered. “Eyes wide as plates.”

Harry nodded. “That, too.”

"So this is why you've been watching the High Table so carefully?" Ron asked.

Harry gave another nod. “I wanted to see if he got better – but really, he looks like a walking corpse.”

Ron, who obviously had a hard time caring about the professor at all, snorted. “He can’t get any uglier than he already is.”

“Ron!” Hermione chided. “Be nice.”

Ron did not quite look abashed. “Sorry, Hermione.”

“If Malfoy – Lucius – has done something, this is serious,” Hermione said. “Curse or potion – I’d say potion, because it’s harder to trace than the magical signature of a curse.”

After Rain

“And we all know that he doesn’t want anything traced back to him,” Harry said.

“Slimy git,” Ron muttered. “Should be in Azkaban for life with his son.”

“Draco hasn’t really done anything to us lately,” Harry said, a need to defend him appearing suddenly. Flashes of the help Draco had given him on the night after the fated Quidditch game passed through his mind. “I really don’t think he’s like his father at all.”

“A git is a git is a git,” Ron huffed. “And both Malfoys are gits.”

“Perhaps we should talk about what to do about Snape,” Hermione said with a roll of her eyes. “Harry, what do you propose?”

Harry shrugged. “I don't know. I just wanted to tell you all of this so that you could keep an eye out as well. I know Snape's not our favourite teacher—” he gave Ron a look “—but he's a hero, and he’s been a great help even though he’s been nasty. And something is wrong, I just know it – and he doesn't want to admit it.”

Ron said nothing. Snape was *really* not his favourite teacher – in fact, he was without much doubt the teacher Ron hated the most. Still, he did not deserve to be poisoned, least of all by a former Death Eater who quite possibly fit the bill of being even nastier than Snape. Upon Harry’s pleading look, Ron relented.

“We’ll keep an eye out,” Hermione said, standing up. “Now we need to get down to the dungeons. Our class with the subject of this conversation is about to start, and it wouldn’t do for the Head Girl to be late.”

Professor Snape normally entered the room with his cape billowing out behind him. His eyes would travel over the class, and he would sneer at the Gryffindors, possibly deducting points for something trivial. Then he would reach his desk, and within seconds the class would quiet down.

He knew before he reached the door that today would not be like that.

Severus' head spun, the edges of his vision becoming blurry from time to time. His body felt as though on fire, yet chills ran through him, causing him to shiver. His hands trembled, he

After Rain

knew, and he hid them in the pockets of his robes. If he had looked in a mirror, he would have been met with a pale face and lifeless eyes, hair matted down and greasier than usual because of the sheen of feverish sweat on his skin.

His world was on end, and he could not make sense of it. A part of him realised that this was something worse than the flu – had it only been that, then his anti-flu potions would have been effective – and yet he did not want to admit it. He hated weakness.

The strength it took just to open the door seemed draining.

The class watched him with emotions ranging from fear – Neville Longbottom – to anticipation – Draco Malfoy. He spared a glance at Longbottom, and the boy shrank back. Then Severus' eye went to Harry Potter. He was surprised to find the boy looking straight at him, with a look of – what was that? *Concern*? No, it could not be. The brat had never cared for anyone or anything but himself. Just like his father.

Only that's not true and you know it, a voice inside his head told him.

Shut up.

He stumbled forward to his desk, fighting the nausea. He managed to press the queasiness down, and turned around to face his class. He would not show weakness in front of them. Too many years as a spy had given him excellent acting skills.

“Today we are going to brew a Healing Potion that Madam Pomfrey needs. It is a simple enough potion, though I don't doubt some of you dunderheads will mess it up.” He shot a look at Neville, amazing himself with how easy it was to play the part of 'greasy git of a Potions professor'. “Chapter seven, paragraph one through six, will tell you exactly what you need to do. Do not waste the Shaebey hairs.” He waited a second, then sneered, “Well, what are you waiting for?”

The class immediately began bustling around the room to the ingredients cabinet. Snape saw Potter and Weasley get together, as well as Granger and Longbottom. Malfoy paired with Pansy Parkinson. For once, he did not care, and he made no move to change the pairings. He only felt like going to bed.

Get a grip! he sneered at himself, but without success.

Settling for the second best alternative, he slumped back in his chair and began grading second year papers. When his vision blurred so badly he could not see the writing, he still

After Rain

moved a paper from one stack to the other so that no one would notice anything out of order.

Ron and Harry huddled closer. While keeping a close eye on the potion, they talked and stole glances at their professor. Harry had seen the obvious shock on both Ron and Hermione's face when Snape entered, and it had not been without reason. The man looked worse than they had been able to see from the distance of the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall. Close up, they could see his bloodshot eyes, the grey tint to his skin, and the shake of his hands.

He looks completely exhausted, Harry thought as he stirred the potion.

Snape had sat down and looked like he was grading papers, but his movements were slow and uncoordinated. The usual grace, which Harry had to admit that the man had, was gone.

"He should go to Pomfrey," Ron whispered to Harry. "He looks bloody awful."

Harry nodded. "I wonder why Dumbledore hasn't made him go yet. I mean, no one could take a look at him and not realise he's sick."

"Yeah, Dumbledore or McGonagall," Ron replied. "McGonagall mother-hens him, I'd reckon."

Harry smiled slightly. "I'm sure she's tried getting him to Pomfrey and he probably refused. She sat during lunch today and watched him, but she didn't say anything."

"Potter, Weasley, would you be so kind as to enlighten us to the subject of your conversation?"

Harry and Ron looked up and found Snape suddenly standing only a few feet away from their table. The boys' cheeks flushed red. Neither wanted to share their conversation.

"It was nothing, sir," Harry stammered.

"Five points each from Gryffindor for lying."

After Rain

His voice isn't—He sounds different than normal, Harry thought.

Harry heard Draco snigger, but it was easy for Harry to ignore with so many other things on his mind. He put a calming hand on Ron's shoulder as Ron shot murderous looks, first at Snape and then at Malfoy. Whatever worries for Snape Ron had felt had now dissipated.

Snape continued his way around the room. Harry heard him praise Malfoy and the other Slytherins for their “well made potions”, while he scowled at Neville. Neville had, for once, done nothing wrong – the potion was hard enough but with Hermione for a lab partner, he had been hindered from making mistakes – but Snape could always find something to criticise.

Suddenly, everything happened very fast.

Professor Snape walked down the aisle between the tables once more, watching the students. His black robes billowed behind him, yet not like they normally did for Snape did not walk at the speed he usually did.

He drew a deep, shuddering breath and stopped, right by Harry and Ron, grasping the side of the table for support. His other hand went to his chest, gripping his robes tightly.

He looks just like he did a week ago, Harry thought. *Scratch that – he looks a hundred times worse!*

The class had stopped stirring their potions and the students all watched as their teacher's shoulders heaved with every breath he took.

“Professor Snape?” Harry asked quietly.

The Potions master's head shot up and he met Harry's eye for a brief second. Nothing Harry could see in those eyes fit with Harry's image of Snape – fear filled them to the brim. Snape looked truly terrified. Harry gripped Snape's hand in his, just as the professor fell to the floor. A sickening thud echoed through the room as Snape hit the stone ground. He landed in a lifeless heap, his face contorted with pain and one hand fisted in the robes around his heart.

The room was silent.

“Sweet Merlin – get Pomfrey!” Hermione said.

No one reacted – not until Hermione's Head Girl genes kicked in, and she took control.

After Rain

“Harry, check his pulse and breathing – give CPR if he’s—” she did not finish, and she did not have to. Harry knew. “Ron, go to Dumbledore and tell him what happened. Neville, go to the Hospital Wing and find Madam Pomfrey. Seamus, bottle up one of the Healing Potions so that we can give him some.”

Ron and Neville had already run off. Seamus hurried over to Hermione and Neville's finished potion, and started pouring some into a vial. But before he could get it to Hermione, Draco Malfoy reached out a vial to her, with his finished potion in it.

Harry, with two fingers to the unconscious Snape's throat, keeping track of the man's weak pulse, saw the doubt in Hermione's eyes.

“I'm not my father,” Draco said, “and my potion is just as good as yours. Take it.”

Hermione thought for only a second more, before snatching it out of Malfoy's hand. Harry raised Snape's head and Hermione poured the healing potion into his mouth. Some dribbled down the side of his chin, and Harry was struck by the strange insanity of the situation – they might be saving their hated Potions professor's life.

But Harry could not have left, no matter how strange the situation. Not only was he shell shocked over what had happened, but also, Snape still held onto his hand.

“Come on, come on, come on – that should give you a kick enough to wake up,” Hermione muttered.

She bit her lip when the healing potion seemed to do nothing. The rest of the class moved around the room, some going through the potions in Snape's cabinet to find something to help him. Others sat still in their chairs, just watching their professor with wide eyes. Someone was crying.

Malfoy returned to the trio on the floor. “Here. Anti-poison, with healing herbs in it.”

“Anti-poison? Why?” Hermione asked suspiciously.

“Why not?” Draco countered, but despite the harsh words, Harry could hear the worry. “If he hasn't been poisoned, it won't do any harm and if he has—he's probably already taken it, but it still won't harm him.”

After Rain

Hermione, who knew this to be true, allowed Malfoy to administer the potion to the still unconscious Snape.

Snape stirred a few seconds later, but did not quite wake. His eyes opened and closed and he mumbled something unintelligible, and Harry saw Malfoy take Snape's other hand and squeeze it briefly. Then Malfoy's gaze met Harry's, and he dropped Snape's hand, a flush on his cheeks telling Harry he was embarrassed for the display of emotion.

No more than three minutes later help arrived, although it felt more like a small eternity. Dumbledore strode inside and knelt by his young Potions master's shaking body. His hands went over the man's face, continuing down his throat and chest. Madam Pomfrey came running only a few seconds later, and she quickly produced a stretcher to put Snape on. Within another minute, they raced Snape towards the Infirmary.

Dumbledore stayed behind to take care of the shocked class.

"I know you all have questions, but at the moment, I have no answers," he said. "For now, the rest of this lesson is cancelled, and you are free to go. If you could keep this quiet for the sake of Professor Snape, I would be grateful."

The class trailed out of the room slowly. Some shot looks at Dumbledore, others began talking softly amongst themselves again.

"Mr. Potter, Miss Granger and Mr. Malfoy, would you mind staying?" Dumbledore asked, and the three did, Ron mouthing that he would wait outside as he went. "What happened?"

Harry looked between Hermione and Malfoy first, before speaking. "He's been sick for several days, Professor. Ever since the first feast with the parents, if not before that."

Dumbledore nodded, but Harry could not tell if his words were news or not to the Headmaster.

"He looked like death warmed over when he got here today, but he went on. We were making healing potions and then, he was walking and watching us, when he suddenly stopped. He—he gripped the side of the table as well as his robes around his chest."

"He looked like he was in pain," Hermione said quietly. "If he'd been older and overweight, I'd have said a heart attack, but—"

"Then he just fell down," Harry said.

After Rain

“We fed him some of the healing potion we've just made,” Malfoy supplied. “Shaebey healing potion. And one of the professor’s own anti-poison draughts.”

"I hope that wasn't wrong," Hermione said, looking at the floor. It had seemed like the best thing to do at the moment.

"No, no, most certainly not. A healing potion is at its best when it is just made, which is why Professor Snape continuously has to stock up Poppy’s cupboards," Dumbledore said. He paused for a moment. "Ten points to each of you for quick thinking. Now, you should return to your dorms."

The three nodded, and parted ways with Dumbledore. Malfoy glanced at Harry, who did not know quite what to make of the boy, and then they separated, Malfoy heading towards the dungeons and Harry to the Gryffindor tower.

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After Rain

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Chapter five

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Draco entered the Slytherin common room still in shock. He tried to get rid of the unpleasant feeling, but then the image of his favourite teacher – he would even go so far as to call him friend, at least on occasion – lying on the cold floor would re-enter his mind, and the shock would intensify.

But Potter had felt Severus' pulse, and the man had stirred after getting the anti-poison draught. He had not died.

Not yet, his mind supplied.

Merlin, how Draco wished the parent visit had never happened. Without it, his father would not have been given the chance to nearly kill Harry with a Bludger, and poison Severus with a—something. Though Draco did not doubt that his father had chosen poison – something about poison had always enchanted Lucius Malfoy more than crude curses, and in the Malfoy library there were several tomes on the subject – he had absolutely no idea what. Something very rare, nearly unheard of, for Severus not to have recognised its effects and countered it with the correct antidote.

And if Severus could not find the antidote, then what chance did anyone else stand of finding it?

The common room felt crowded. Draco, wanting and needing to be alone, crept up to his dorm. He drew the drapes around his bed and lay down, sighing. He closed his eyes. Once again, he saw the scene play out—

Severus prowled the classroom like he always did. Well, almost – his steps were more hesitant, slower, than usual. And then he suddenly stumbled and gripped Potter and the Weasel's table. His face contorted in pain and Draco could hear his raspy breathing, yet could do nothing to help.

Then Severus fell to the floor. Harry gripped his arm, which broke his fall somewhat, but not completely. Draco saw the Severus' head hit the floor, heard the crack, and saw it bouncing back up as though it was a ball of some sort, before landing again. This time, the man stayed still; too still.

After Rain

Draco was unable to move. He heard Granger begin to bark out orders, and the Weasel and Longbottom obeyed and disappeared out the door. Only when Finnigan moved to get the healing potion did Draco realise that he was standing with a vial already in hand, and he gave it to Granger. His eyes were locked on the prone form on the floor.

He had never felt so helpless.

Draco shuddered.

Please let him be okay, he begged silently. He's the only one I can stand here.

It was not strictly true – there was one other person he could stand. Only, he could never tell that one person.

You are not supposed to lust after your enemy! Draco screamed at himself.

There was a knock on the window, and Draco opened the drapes. He looked out the window and found one of his father's black hawks. A Malfoy did not use regular owls.

What in the...?

The hawk flew inside as soon as Draco had opened the window. The hawk stood rigidly still, its eyes trained on Draco, as he untied the letter from its leg. Draco gazed at the hawk for a moment, thinking that it, rather than Draco, made a perfect Malfoy. Then he opened the letter, still wondering what in the world could have made his father or mother write to him after a mere few days. A bad feeling had already settled in his stomach.

'Draco,

You have sent no letters lately, and I thought we may take that habit up again.'

Draco wondered what 'habit' that was, because he had never written home regularly to his parents. He skimmed through the letter. It was about anything and everything, it seemed, though it held no particular details of importance. It was not until the end that Draco finally understood why his father had written the letter, and his stomach knotted together, feeling like he was going to throw up.

What did you do, Father?

After Rain

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Severus felt pain shooting through his body. It started at his chest and worked its way up to his head, out through his arms into his fingertips, and down his legs into his feet and all the way out to his toes. It burned like a slow fire, making him ache all over.

He tried to move, but found it hard and painful, making him gasp for breath. He stilled, not even wanting to breathe – the simple rise and fall of his chest hurt too much. He had been through the Cruciatius curse enough times, but it had never felt like this.

He tried opening his eyes, a task he succeeded in for a short moment. The room, however, was all too bright and he quickly shut them again. A second later, the room seemed darker through his eyelids.

A familiar voice spoke.

"It's okay to open you eyes, Severus," Albus Dumbledore told him.

Snape reluctantly did so, still expecting the blinding light of the Hospital Wing. But though he had been taken to the Infirmary, the room was now only dimly lit, his grateful eyes noted. Professor Dumbledore sat on a chair right next to the bed; Severus could see him out of the corner of his eye. He did not want to try to move again just yet.

"We're happy you're awake again," Dumbledore said with a smile at him. "You gave us quite a scare."

"What—happened?" Severus asked. His throat felt dry as a desert, and Dumbledore held a glass of water to his lips as he answered. The cool liquid seeped down his throat, soothing but not healing.

"You fainted in class. Shocked half of your students. Miss Granger's quick thinking and Mr. Malfoy's knowledge of healing draughts are the only reasons you are awake already. And it seems Mr. Potter helped as well."

Potter—Severus could recall the excruciating pain in his chest, the sound of blood rushing in his ears, and—Potter's eyes, filled with concern. Severus remembered falling, remembered that it seemed like he had simply continued on and on, down towards the hot and fiery gates of Hell.

After Rain

And Draco – how must he be feeling after the scene Severus had undoubtedly caused?

"How long was I out?" Severus choked out. Despite the water, his voice still would not carry, to the Potions master's annoyance.

"Three hours," Dumbledore said. "Poppy's been very worried about you, mind you."

"Poppy always worries," Severus muttered under his breath. "Mother hen."

Dumbledore's small smile was replaced by a look of apprehension a moment later. "Severus, how long have you been sick?"

Severus squirmed and looked away. He did not want the Headmaster to know; he did not deserve Dumbledore's concern. Still, he knew he would never be able to keep anything from Albus. He never had.

"Severus?"

"Last Thursday. Last Thursday night," Snape replied shortly.

Dumbledore sighed. "Why didn't you tell anyone?"

"Because it's my business, not everyone else's!" Severus snapped, and immediately regretted it, both because it made him cough, and because he was not mad at Dumbledore; he was only tired of feeling weak. For weak was exactly how Severus had felt all week long. He had been unable to keep his hands from shaking, unable to control the nausea that once again swept over him – unable to keep his students under control.

Unable to stay conscious through a lesson.

Dumbledore stayed quiet, but looked upon his Potions master with concern.

"You need to sleep, Severus," he said and stood. "Poppy will be back to check on you in a while. Until then you should rest."

Snape nodded. "Thank you."

Dumbledore gave him a small smile before leaving.

After Rain

Severus closed his eyes, wishing he did not have to breathe, because it hurt. He could still sense the feeling of a fire within his chest. The breath he let out was shuddering, raspy. Waves of nausea swept over him, and only sleep's oblivion numbed the pain.

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Harry awoke early the next morning. After five minutes of unsuccessful attempts at falling back to sleep, he got up instead. Without waking Ron or the others in the boys' dorm, he dressed and left the room. He grabbed his wand just before heading out.

The hallways were empty this early in the morning. The air felt crisp and cold and the sky had only barely begun to lighten. Flying would be nice – he had not been on a broom since the non-accident, and flying had always helped Harry clear his mind. He needed to clear his mind now, especially as he recalled the way Snape had looked at him.

He looked so scared...

It was hard to picture the professor without his normally permanently attached scowl on his face, even after having seen it in reality. Over the years, Harry and every other student at Hogwarts had grown used to the annoyed scowl and the low threatening voice he used, always sounding like an impending doom.

Yesterday, however, that voice and that mask had cracked.

As silly as it might sound, Harry had felt like he could see into Snape's very soul. It frightened him, for in those dark eyes, he had seen pain and a great deal of fear.

Then their eye contact had broken, as the Potions master tumbled backwards into a heap on the floor. Harry caught Snape's hand in his, and the professor had, for some inexplicable reason, caught his wrist in a grip like it was a lifeline. Perhaps, to him, it had been. The look of confusion on his face had told Harry that he had not known just how sick he was.

The grass felt slightly soggy beneath his feet; it must have rained during the night. The first rays of the sun were making their way past the mountains, shedding light and long shadows over the landscape.

Harry walked silently, smiling at the sight of his beloved Quidditch pitch. No matter how many accidents and injuries he suffered here, he would always associate the pitch with good

After Rain

memories – catching the Snitch for the first time in his mouth, winning games against Slytherin, watching his team mates score goals. The freedom of the air – nothing compared to it, and Harry’s childhood wish to be able to fly had been realised.

It felt good, to have pleasant thoughts for once – thoughts where Snape did not exist, nor did the cold eyes of Lucius Malfoy, or the strange, mixed feelings Harry felt for Draco.

He gripped the broom lightly, and kicked off, soaring up in the air. If he had not already been wide awake, the chilly morning air would definitely have awoken him by then.

Harry flew around the pitch, rather more languidly than he ever did during practices or games, because he had no snitch to watch out for now. He practiced loops and flew towards the ground at breakneck speed, turning up at the very last second.

But when Harry turned and headed into the air again, he caught sight of the Hospital Wing. He could not see in through the windows, but he knew that Snape rested on the other side of those walls. It made everything come crashing back, and Harry wanted to scream at himself for caring about the stupid git to begin with.

When he looked away, he saw another figure on the pitch. Blond hair and a Slytherin scarf – Harry groaned quietly. Why did *he* have to come here, of all people?

He descended, and Malfoy glared at him, obviously having seen him a while ago. Harry wondered how long he had been standing there.

“Malfoy.”

“Potter.”

“So we’re back to that, then?” Harry asked.

“Where else would we be?” Malfoy sneered.

The bright morning sun made Malfoy’s skin and hair look almost white, like fine marble. Harry had to admire it.

“Why are you here, Malfoy?” Harry asked, sighing.

Malfoy raised an eyebrow. “The pitch doesn’t belong to you. At this hour, anyone can be here.”

After Rain

It was true, of course. Malfoy had just as much right to be on the Quidditch pitch as Harry, although Harry wished he could have refused Malfoy.

Harry shrugged, climbing another few feet in the air until Malfoy had to crane his neck to see him. “Fine. I’ll keep to this side, you keep to that side, and we won’t have to talk.”

Malfoy sneered. “I’ll fly wherever I want.”

Harry threw his hands into the air. “Fine! Do whatever you want. You obviously already do.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“That means you have Multiple Personality Disorder,” Harry snapped. “Merlin, you were so much easier when you were just evil.”

With that, Harry turned his broom upwards and with a frustrated growl, he flew off.

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Draco stood, still staring haughtily after Harry. He had come to the Quidditch pitch to fly and think, not to fight with Harry at this hour of the morning. He had not slept more than a few hours, his sleep plagued by nightmares about Severus dying in the most horrid ways. He needed some time to let those dreams go, and Harry’s harsh words were not making things easier.

On top of that, Harry had to look so damn *good* while flying. The wild hair pushed back, the green eyes focused on sharp turns and flying even faster, the fingers wrapped around the wood of the broom.

Draco shook his head – he was still staring, even as Harry set off again.

He mounted his own broom and shot off into the air. The cold wind made his eyes tear up, but he ignored it. He could not cry for real, but perhaps he could get some emotions out this way.

After Rain

He looked longingly at the Infirmary, wishing he could go there and ask how Severus was. What if he had died overnight? Draco swallowed the lump in his throat – it hurt too much to think about.

His eyes settled on Harry instead, watching as the other boy swooped through the air, weaving right and left between the stands, perhaps chasing an invisible Snitch.

Suddenly, Harry stopped right in front of Draco.

“Are you just going to sit there and stare?” he asked.

“I’ll do whatever I want,” Draco snapped.

He wished he could be nice, but it was just so much easier, when Harry was good and strong and not in danger, to be the same way he had always been. An arrogant, sneering bastard. Harry hated him, and that was it.

Why even try to change?

“You won’t win any games just sitting around,” Harry said. “Perhaps that’s why I always win.”

Draco glared hotly at him. Without replying, he pulled his scarf off and his wand out, and transformed the scarf into a Snitch.

“A game, Potter? One on one? See who wins?” Draco asked. He wondered if it was stupid – he had yet to win a fair game against Harry. He was simply too naturally fabulous at catching the tiny golden ball.

Harry gave him a challenging grin. “Sure. What are the stakes?”

“Stakes?” Draco echoed.

“Yeah. We’re playing for something more than just to win, aren’t we?” Harry asked.

Draco stared at him for a moment before smirking. “Fine. If I win, I get to turn your hair blond.”

Harry surprised him then by laughing. He sobered a moment later, and said, “And if I win, I get to ask you a question, and you’ll have to answer it truthfully.”

After Rain

Draco's eyebrows rose in surprise; he had not been expecting that. Perhaps he ought to worry. But the two shook hands, and then Draco released the Snitch. Harry flew away from Draco, and Draco almost forgot to watch for the Snitch.

Come on, focus, Draco reminded himself. Visualise Harry's – Potter's! – hair blond, that'll be fun.

The Snitch seemed to have gone off for a tour around the castle. Harry and Draco both lounged on their respective brooms, although both were quite prepared to take off at any moment, should a flicker of gold become visible somewhere.

Draco found himself almost having a good time – flying felt wonderful as always, and his mind did not linger on Severus. He felt bad for not wanting to think about the man – he might be dying even as Draco was enjoying himself on the pitch – but he had to think about something else, lest he go bonkers. The impromptu Quidditch game with his—with Harry was just what he needed.

Then the Snitch returned, and all thoughts, even of Harry, other than as the opposition, disappeared from Draco's mind. The two boys raced alongside each other, at the same insane speed. The ground whirled into a blur below them, the goal posts swishing past them on their sides. All Draco saw, all he could focus on, was the little tiny golden Snitch.

He reached out his hand – he was so close, he imagined he could feel the fluttering of the Snitch's wings.

But then came Harry, with a burst of speed that should not be possible, and at the very last second, Draco's win was yanked away from him.

Furious, with himself for losing, and with Potter for—for being Potter!—Draco landed and threw his broom away, stomping away from the pitch in a manner not unlike a three-year-old child. He did not care.

“You're a sore loser,” Harry said, leisurely flying up beside him.

“Piss off,” Draco snapped.

“No, not before I cash my win,” Harry said.

After Rain

Draco stopped, his chest heaving with anger. He knew his face must be flushed red from the brief race, just as Harry's cheeks were red. He crossed his arms over his chest defiantly as Harry landed in front of him.

He's much more graceful in the air, Draco thought. *Stupid, irritating, bloody—*

His mind went off in a tirade of swearwords.

“So now what?” Draco snapped when Harry stood in front of him. “What do you want to ask?”

Harry looked thoughtful for a moment. Then he smirked.

“Do you like me?”

Of all the crazy things—Draco simply stared at Harry, aware that his mouth had fallen open. Why had he asked that? Of all the embarrassing, stupid things he could ask, why that?

“Remember, you have to be truthful,” Harry smirked. “No white lies.”

There was a challenge in his eyes, a look Draco wanted nothing more than to wipe off. Emotions fought in him, back and forth – one part hated Potter simply for being Harry bloody Potter, and another part hated him for asking the goddamn question. Why had he agreed to this anyway? It had been doomed to start with – he did not win over Harry in Quidditch. Really, he did not win over Harry in anything, but that was a whole other story.

Why did he have to be Draco Malfoy, son of Lucius? Why did his father have to be a great, big bastard, who expected Draco to be the same way? Why could Draco not simply be strong enough to stand up against him?

Harry stood, his hands on his hips, watching him expectantly. Draco thought he could see playfulness in those green eyes, and it only served to make him more irate. Playfulness! A Malfoy did not know playfulness!

Hair blew into Harry's face, and he pushed some of it away. He licked his lips – those full, red lips – and Draco could not look away.

In furious frustration, Draco took the two steps that separated them, and pressed his lips against Harry's. It did not feel quite like heaven, because Harry was too shocked to respond

After Rain

– and really, Draco was too shocked by his own actions – but it was close. Harry’s lips were salty from the sweat of their exercise, but sweet at the same time, with a hint of mint.

Then Draco pulled away, his eyes firmly on Harry. Harry stared at him, green eyes wide, and Draco could almost see the wheels turning in the other boy’s head.

Is that answer enough for you? Draco wanted to ask, but upon seeing that Harry had almost figured out how to make words again, he decided to flee. He did not want to hear about how disgusting he was, or how unworthy.

Draco ran.

~*~

After Rain

~*~

Chapter six

~*~

Ron and Hermione sent him odd looks as he entered the room. He met their gazes and shrugged as best he could, indicating that he would tell them later.

Or not.

The shock of what had happened on the Quidditch pitch had not yet worn off. Harry could not say for certain that it ever would.

Malfoy had *kissed* him.

Kissed.

Kissed!

...and Harry had, in all his stupidity, not pushed him away and laughed at him. No, he had stood there, broom still in hand, while Malfoy pressed his lips against Harry's, meshing them thoroughly.

I guess he likes me.

Although Harry could not be quite certain. The boy had run off after giving him the kiss, and Harry wondered if Malfoy liked him at all, or if there was simply some strange attraction going on. But he had seen fear in Malfoy's eyes, had he not? Fear of rejection?

Merlin, why did I ask that question? It wasn't what I was going to ask at all.

He had been meaning to ask whether Malfoy slept with a teddy bear – it was a rumour that had been all over school for a while, but no one had any evidence – but when he had opened his mouth, another question had escaped.

Do you like me? Because I like you. He had, thankfully, kicked his brain into gear before he had uttered the latter.

After Rain

He shook his head – he would have to think about it later. Hermione was already giving him questioning looks.

Harry shot a look at the High Table, noting that Snape's seat was empty. He had not been expecting him to sit there as though nothing had happened, but he felt had to check. Since Snape was still missing, it most likely meant that he was still in the Infirmary, and if he was, he would not have any of his classes.

Next, against his will, Harry's eyes were drawn to the Slytherin table. Malfoy had just taken his seat, his posture rigid and his eyes carefully avoiding looking anywhere in the general direction of the Gryffindor table.

Harry sat down between Ron and Neville, and began filling his plate – he spread butter on a slice of bread and took two pancakes. His mind was still filled with the events of the last twenty-four hours – mostly of the last hour, if he was completely honest – as he began eating.

"Where did you go this morning?" Ron asked. "You were gone when I woke up."

Harry shrugged and did his best to sound honest. "I woke up early and went for a walk."

It was not quite a lie.

Just then, Dumbledore called for the room's attention, hitting a goblet with the side of a spoon, creating a 'ding, ding' sound. As the room quieted down, he stood and began speaking.

"As I'm sure most of you know by now, Professor Snape has fallen ill," Dumbledore said. "Therefore, he will not be teaching his classes today, but there will be a substitute teacher. Professor Snape tells me you all know what you are supposed to do."

For once, Dumbledore's eyes did not twinkle, although the man seemed to be doing his best to pretend things were fine.

Several of the students groaned upon hearing about the substitute – they had obviously hoped for a free period. Professor McGonagall sent a stern look at some of the Gryffindor third years.

"Professor Snape will hopefully be back tomorrow," Dumbledore continued, "so there is no need to worry."

After Rain

Some snorted at this – Snape's nickname was after all ‘the bat of the dungeons’, and he was the most unpopular teacher of Hogwarts among the three houses that were not Slytherin. McGonagall sent another look at her students, telling them silently that if they were rude one more time, house points would be lost.

“Well, we don't have Potions today, so it doesn't really matter,” Ron said. “Typical, the one day we could have gotten away from Snape.”

Harry shot Ron a look, but the redhead did not notice. It amazed Harry at times, how quickly Ron could change. Obviously, the only reason Ron had cared at all the day before was because Harry had told him to. Harry did not know what he had expected – he certainly had not expected to feel the way he did about Snape at the moment. He *worried*. It was a sort of caring, a slight concern. He could not possibly be so cold as to hate a person whose very soul he had looked into.

Needless to say, Ron had definitely not done so. Maybe that was the reason why Harry now cared and Ron still hated the Potions professor.

"We should get going," Hermione said a few moments later, waking Harry from his train of thoughts. "I need to go get my books before class."

"Okay, Hermione," Harry replied. The trio stood and left, but not before Harry shot another look at the Potions master's empty seat, and at the blond Slytherin who was at the moment hiding his face behind a newspaper.

He kissed me.

~*~

The first half of Double Charms with Professor Flitwick passed uneventfully. Gryffindor had the class with the Slytherins however, and when the Gryffindors were paired with that house, well... Harry did not think that it would ever be anything but a disaster waiting to happen.

They practiced a rather complicated charm – the Answer-to-me charm – which Harry and the rest of the class had done once before, during the class a week earlier. However, although Harry had managed the charm back then, it just would not work this time.

After Rain

Hermione and Ron shot him sympathetic looks as he tried it again. Still, the small tortoise that sat before him stayed silent. It blinked and then yawned at him, but no sound came out of its mouth.

Harry sighed. He could not concentrate enough on the spell to make it work. His mind could not shut the images of Snape and Malfoy out.

"Potter is stupid," a tortoise from the other side of the room suddenly said.

Harry's head shot up, and he soon spotted the offending creature. Behind it, Malfoy stood.

"Potter can't even make a simple spell work," the tortoise drawled, and Harry thought it sounded much as the spell caster's voice.

"Just ignore him, Harry," Hermione whispered to him. Harry glanced over at Ron on her other side – his face was red as he glared at Malfoy. Harry felt his own blood boiling the exact same way and felt he would rather hit Malfoy than ignore him. What on Earth was he doing? Was this some sort of payback? And for what, exactly, considering Malfoy had been the one doing the kissing?

"Go back to work, Weasel," Malfoy drawled, and this time he himself did the talking. "Or maybe you should help Scarface over there instead? Mudblood, can't you help him?"

Hermione glared daggers at the blond boy. Crabbe, Goyle and the other Slytherins sniggered. Professor Flitwick, who had been helping Neville, glanced over at them, but they immediately pretended to be working.

Harry seethed. So this was what it would be like – Malfoy would kiss him, and then be an even bigger arse than he had been before?

Goddamn Malfoy.

The tortoise in front of him screeched as a bolt of magic from Harry's wand hit it. Smoke emanated from the tortoise's shell, as it fell backwards and landed on its back, mewling pitifully. Flitwick came running over as fast as his small legs could manage. The normally calm teacher looked upset.

"What did you do, Mr. Potter?" he asked angrily. He muttered a charm, and the smoking stopped, before he turned the tortoise back on her feet. "Mr. Potter, you will have to serve a detention tonight. Ten points will also be taken from Gryffindor for hurting the tortoise."

After Rain

Harry nodded mutely. He did not really know what had just happened, only that he had been angry. He must have reacted instinctively.

"Yes, sir," Harry said quietly.

He could hear the Slytherins snigger at him from the other table, and he wanted to disappear. He shot a glare at Malfoy, who stared back, before looking down. Harry sat back in his chair, angry at himself for what had happened, and even angrier at Malfoy, for being the reason.

~*~

"I wonder why Flitwick gave you a detention," Ron said. "I mean, it wasn't like it was a big huge mistake you did. You only, you know, burned it a little."

Harry, who sat with his Divinations homework in front of him, shrugged. The day had continued as badly as it had begun: Professor Trelawney had foreseen another one of his deaths, which of course was not rare, but still, it did not feel all that great to be predicted to die four times per week in the most gruesome ways possible.

Harry looked forward to Quidditch practice, which would start in an hour, even though the very thought of Quidditch made him think of Malfoy and the things that had happened earlier.

He would have to hurry down to eat dinner after practice, before meeting Professor Flitwick for his detention. That was why he now did a Hermione – he did his homework early in the afternoon.

"So, what's left?" Ron asked.

"We have to make predictions for two friends for the next week," Harry replied without looking up. "I did you two," he continued, motioning at Ron and Hermione. He mock-frowned slightly. "I don't know if Trelawney will like it though."

"*Harry*, what did you write?" Hermione asked sternly, trying to grab the piece of parchment Harry was writing on. Harry grinned and held it away from her.

After Rain

"Harry James Potter, give that parchment to me instantly!" Hermione said, her voice letting him know it was not a suggestion but a threat. Ron just looked at the two questioningly.

Harry just kept grinning and held the parchment out of Hermione's grasp. It was not a hard task – Harry was six foot one tall, while Hermione only reached five foot three. He kept changing hands, going back and forth, only serving to make Hermione madder. Ron laughed at the expression on Hermione's face, but quickly shut up when she sent a deadly glare at him.

Then, before Harry could react, Hermione had her wand out. "*Accio* parchment."

The parchment soared into Hermione's hand, as a triumphant grin spread on her face. She opened it and read it. Her face turned an interesting shade of red as she neared the end.

She glowered at Harry.

"Harry James Potter, you are *so not* turning this in," she said.

Harry grinned. "Why not? It's something that's going to happen this week, isn't it?"

Hermione's blush deepened. "I – no – well, yes – oh, but you *can't* turn that in!"

Harry's grin widened, before he said, "I won't Hermione, I was just teasing you. Here's my real assignment."

He handed her another parchment. She let out a frustrated scream.

"I hate boys," she yelled at him, and stomped out of the common room.

Harry, Ron and the rest of the room's occupants looked after the Head Girl. Harry and Ron giggled.

~*~

Harry slowly made his way to Professor Flitwick's classroom. Quidditch practice had gone well, though it had gone by too fast. Harry concentrated firmly on the Snitch and giving instructions to his team mates, not allowing his brain to focus on the game he had played a few hours earlier. Before he and Ron knew it, they were back inside, showering off the sweat

After Rain

and dirt. They spoke excitedly about the new moves they were trying, and bored a still steaming Hermione out of her skull during dinner.

Snape had been absent during the meal, and Harry guessed that his teacher was still in the Infirmary. Dumbledore had said that he was going to teach the next day, yet a voice in Harry's head doubted it. Madam Pomfrey healed minor illnesses in a whiff – to the annoyance of students who sometimes wanted to skip classes – and Snape's failure to reappear today told Harry how serious his condition had to be.

“Ah, there you are, Mr. Potter.”

Tiny Professor Flitwick came over to him, stopping only a few feet away. He tilted his head up to look at Harry.

"I am sorry to say that something has come up, Mr. Potter," he said. "You will therefore not spend your evening with me, but with Madam Pomfrey in the Hospital Wing instead. She said she needed help organising her potions, and as I can't have you tonight, I thought I'd lend you to her."

Harry's heart skipped a beat. *Hospital Wing?* That meant he would be serving his detention right next to Professor Snape.

I wonder if that's a good thing or a bad, Harry thought, frowning.

"I would follow you up there," the Charms professor said, "but I need to be going. I do trust you know the way up there? Good. I will see you in class next week, Mr. Potter, and I trust you'll behave better. Goodbye."

The professor set off down the stairs. Harry looked after him as he hurried off. Then he began walking towards the Hospital Wing.

~*~

Severus lay still on the bed. He breathed heavily, and even a person without the medical expertise Madam Pomfrey held would know that something was seriously wrong with him. His forehead glistened with tiny pearls of sweat, and if he lifted his hands off the bed, they trembled like leaves in the wind.

After Rain

He could not recall ever feeling this bad. Not even after the many times Voldemort had used the Cruciatus Curse on him had he ever felt as bad for as long as he had now. The effects of that curse passed after a few hours. What frightened Severus the most was the fact that even though Poppy held him in bed-arrest and was doing her best to treat him, he did not seem to be getting better.

At least I don't have to teach the dunderheads, Severus thought. The mere idea of getting out of bed to teach lessons made his head ache. His body hurt, and he had not even been out of bed to go to the bathroom all afternoon, instead using a magical catheter that Poppy had charmed to him.

He would not even be at Hogwarts if it had not been for the fact that no one else would want to hire him. Even after Voldemort's downfall, now that most knew of his work as a spy, the suspicion had not disappeared. And Severus could not stop acting like he had for the last twenty years, making himself even more undesirable to other employers. 'The greasy git of a Potions master' really did fit him as a description; it had become his personality.

Besides, this was easier. He would rather be hated than rejected – because rejected was what he would be. Ugly, hateful, cynical, with a load of wrong choices in his past – what was there to like?

Maybe the world would be better off without him.

The sudden thought both frightened and intrigued him. Another set of questions began to form in his mind.

Perhaps that's why I'm sick. Maybe there is no poison, no curse to counter, as Madam Pomfrey believes. Perhaps this is all because the world is better off without me. Maybe this is my punishment for what I've done to all those innocents in Voldemort's name.

His thoughts were interrupted as he heard the door to the Infirmary open. Light footsteps travelled over the floor, and soon a figure came into view. Snape's vision, blurred from dizziness, made out a black robe and equally black hair. The figure turned around and gasped.

"Professor Snape?" he asked, his voice quiet, yet Severus heard the boy's shock clearly.

Of all the people to come up here, it had to be Potter. The Potions master had hoped to avoid the boy, preferably forever. It did not seem like such a long time anyway, now. He definitely had not planned to have Potter arrive in the Hospital Wing to see him lying there.

After Rain

"What are you doing here, Potter?" Severus spat, but even he could hear that it did not hold the dark hatred it usually did. He simply felt too tired to converse with anyone, let alone have a battle of wits with the Boy Who Lived.

Potter moved closer to the bed, and Severus could not find it in him to tell him to get out of his sight, although he wanted to. Instead, he closed his eyes, and hoped that this was all a bad dream.

"You are not supposed to be here," he said to the boy. His voice was quiet, indifferent.

He opened his eyes to look at Potter. The boy stood closer now. Severus could make out his facial features even with the fog surrounding his brain.

"Actually, I am. I have a detention to serve with Madam Pomfrey," Harry said.

He looked as though he wanted to ask how his professor was feeling, but did not dare to, perhaps afraid of the answer. He bit his lip, his eyes darting over Severus' body. Severus felt self-conscious, knowing he must look like hell.

"What did you do this time, Potter?" He wanted it to be a sneer, as it always had been in the past, but it came out softer than he had intended.

"Um—I kinda burnt a tortoise," Potter replied sheepishly.

Severus wanted to give a snappish reply, but his eyelids felt so heavy. His body was exhausted, even after only being awake for little over an hour. As the numbness of sleep began creeping over him, he thought he felt someone take his hand, squeezing it briefly.

Potter? his sleepy mind wondered, before sleep claimed it.

~*~

As his Potions professor drifted off to sleep, Harry took Snape's hand in his. He did not know why, but it made him feel at least a slight bit better. After seeing the Potions master's prone form on the bed, his eyes the only thing that actually looked alive at all, he had become sure that the man was dying. And the more convinced he became of that fact, the

After Rain

more he knew that he did not want the man to die. Snape, along with Remus, was the only one who could tell him more about his heritage. His parents.

Yet that was not it; far from it. As Harry searched, he found admiration for the professor. Admiration for the work he had done for the Order, for the dangerous situations he had been forced to get into for years and years. He had survived somehow, even though Harry had seen, through his link with Voldemort, that Snape had been tortured along with the other Death Eaters on several occasions.

Snape was an honourable man.

But Snape has hated you for years!

He had to, and I don't care, Harry said to the voice in his head. I hated him back, for the way he treated me and the way he spoke about my dad, even though it was true. And his work for the Order has more than made up for everything.

Snape would never be a favourite person in Harry's eyes, but he could not be considered Harry's most hated anymore either. And no matter what, he certainly did not deserve this.

Harry's head shot up when he heard someone clear her throat. Harry's hand left Snape's, as he met Madam Pomfrey's eyes.

"I was just—He was awake—" Harry began a stumbling explanation, but Madam Pomfrey held her hand up.

"Don't worry about it, dear. If he didn't want you here, he would have told you so, I'm sure," the nurse told him. "Now, why don't we get started on your detention?"

Harry stifled a groan, but followed Madam Pomfrey into one of the backrooms.

~*~

Three hours later, when Harry was in the middle of filling up vials with potions and placing them in alphabetical order, a scream rang through the Hospital Wing. Madam Pomfrey shot up, and ran out of the room. Harry followed quickly. Pomfrey had not told him not to, after all.

After Rain

The scene he came upon left him speechless. Professor Snape, obviously trapped in a nightmare, thrashed back and forth, pulling at the sheets covering him. His forehead was covered in sweat, and his screams continued to ring through the Infirmary.

Madam Pomfrey tried to hold him down, but she was utterly unsuccessful. She muttered calming charms, but they seemed to have no effect.

“Help me hold him down,” Madam Pomfrey said. “I can’t freeze him – we don’t know what’s wrong, and I don’t want other magic interfering.”

Harry moved forward swiftly. He grabbed Snape's left arm, pressing it down. The professor was surprisingly strong, he noted, despite how weak he had looked earlier. Harry leaned over Snape, pressing the Potions master's right arm down as well. The man suddenly stiffened, his body tensing as though expecting a blow or a curse.

"Professor Snape!" Harry said, his voice barely hiding his panic. "Professor Snape, it's me, Harr—Potter. Professor?"

~*~

Severus' eyes fluttered open, although he flinched back as he saw a figure close to him. Still expecting the Cruciatu curse from the dream to be uttered, he did not relax until he realised that he was in the Infirmary, rather than at a Death Eater meeting. He saw the face hovering above him.

Potter.

"Get off, Potter," Severus spat. He was dismayed to find that his voice was wavering, making him sound more like a fearful child than a professor. He hated his traitorous body.

Potter followed orders quickly, and released him. Poppy hurried over to Severus' bed, and held a vial to his lips. He recognised the sour taste of citrus – it was the Dreamless Potion. One of the many potions he himself had brewed, he knew.

Ironic, really.

"I need to talk to Dumbledore," Poppy said, straightening up. "You are *not* going to teach class tomorrow, my dear Severus."

After Rain

She glared at him. He glared back, as she turned around and disappeared out of sight.

Now he noted Potter, who was still standing a few feet away.

"Aren't you supposed to be doing something useful for once?' he said, trying to inject some malice into his voice. Oh, how he wanted his old voice back. This new, wavering and hoarse voice did not intimidate in any way. Neither did the white tent-like garment Poppy had put him in, showing far too much scarred skin.

"Are – are you okay, Professor?" Potter asked quietly.

"Never better," Severus replied scathingly.

He wished what he said was true. Now, as the nightmare faded, the adrenaline did as well, and he found his body growing heavy and tired again. He tried his best to fight off the nausea – he was *not* going to throw up in front of the Brat Who Lived.

"C-can I get you anything?" Potter asked.

A new body and a non-foggy brain would be good, Severus thought. The waves of nausea hit him with bigger impact, and he knew he would not be able to hold himself much longer, no matter how hard he tried.

Need to get the brat out of here.

Potter seemed to have noticed how his expression had changed, however, for when the next wave hit and the walls that Severus had built collapsed, the boy was there with a bowl. Emptying his stomach's contents into the bowl, Severus' cheeks stung with humiliation. He would never live this down. Potter would tell all his friends, and all the school would know. It would be just like the boy, and everyone would think it served the greasy git just right. James would have done the same thing – the Marauders had spread whatever dirt they had on him.

He was surprised to say the least when Potter gently helped set him back against the pillows. A glass of water to his lips; he could rinse his mouth of the foul taste. He felt a wet cloth on his forehead, wiping away the pearls of sweat created there. It felt—soothing. He knew that nothing Harry did to him should ever be called 'soothing', but it was. Once again, he felt his eyelids become heavy, and within a minute, he was asleep again.

After Rain

'Harry'? he asked himself. *When did he become 'Harry'?*

~*~

After Rain

~*~

Chapter seven

~*~

Professor Dumbledore entered the Hospital Wing through the fireplace. His blue eyes filled with concern as Poppy gave him the most recent reports on his Potions master. Things did not look good. Albus wondered if the man on the bed knew. He probably did; Severus Snape had one of the sharpest minds he had ever known.

A figure followed Albus into the Hospital Wing. Dressed in a long gown and black robes with a hood, only a bit of pale skin and blonde hair was visible. Apparently, it was enough for the boy in the room to recognise her.

“Mrs. Malfoy!” Harry exclaimed, standing up.

Mrs. Malfoy looked up, grey eyes meeting green.

“Mr. Potter,” Mrs. Malfoy said.

“What are you doing here?” Harry asked curiously.

“Mrs. Malfoy has been kind enough to act as Professor Snape’s substitute today,” Dumbledore said. “She was his apprentice many years ago, and still has a great interest in the field of Potions.”

Harry’s eyebrows rose in surprise. “Oh.”

She smiled at him. Albus saw the surprise on Harry’s face.

“It’s—it’s nice to meet you,” Harry said.

“The same to you, Mr. Potter,” said Mrs. Malfoy.

Albus looked at his Potions master. Severus slept, and Harry returned to his seat next to him, dabbing a white damp cloth to his face. Severus looked very pale, more so than normal. His hair looked wet as well, and stuck to his throat, making him look even thinner than usual. He had lost several pounds in the last two days.

After Rain

Albus placed a hand on Harry's shoulder.

"You should go back to your dorm, my boy. Thank you for your help today."

Harry looked up at him. Without surprise, Albus noted the worry in those green eyes.

"Will he be all right?" Harry asked quietly.

Albus sighed. "We don't know, Harry. We don't know."

"But – Madam Pomfrey can always heal—And you—You're supposed to be the greatest wizard ever—"

"Harry, we're doing everything we can," Albus said. "Now you should go back to your dorm and sleep."

Harry recognised the firm tone in the Headmaster's voice, and he touched Snape's forehead one final time, before setting the cloth away on a table nearby. He gave the Potions professor one last look, and then he bid the other grown-ups in the room good night and disappeared out the door.

Sighing heavily, Albus turned back to Poppy.

~*~

Severus awoke to the feeling of soft hands cupping his face. Beautiful silver eyes framed by long lashes watched him, and he felt warm and loved all at once, even as pain wracked his body and his head thundered with a headache.

"Severus," she whispered, and she kissed his forehead softly with cool lips on his sweaty forehead.

"Cissa," he rasped, his voice barely holding together.

He could see the unshed tears in her eyes, knew the bad shape he must be in to put them there. He wanted to wipe them away, take her into his arms – love her, even when she could

After Rain

not, did not, love him back. He was her friend, nothing more, and she was married to the greatest asshole in the Wizarding World.

If only she were not so lovely.

Not that it mattered anymore. If this continued, he would be dead in a matter of days. No matter what the problem was, a solution was needed, before he expired.

“You’ve n’t found—an ant’—dote, then?” he said, forcing his throat to work as it should.

“I’m sorry, Severus,” Narcissa said. “I didn’t know he’d do this – I expected something against the Potter boy, but not you— it makes no sense.”

“Perfect—sense,” Severus said. “I spied—he lost—money—r’spect—b’cause of me.”

She placed her hand over his mouth. “Don’t talk. Save your strength.”

Dumbledore came to stand within his view then. Severus had not realised he had even been in the room – she stole his attention. Dumbledore looked upon him seriously.

“We believe Lucius Malfoy poisoned you,” Dumbledore said. “A letter to Draco that Narcissa happened to read before he sent it off asks unusually about you and your health.”

“Lucius—is an ‘rrogant arse,” Severus muttered.

Narcissa hid a smile behind her hand.

“We would like to try to draw him out,” Dumbledore said. “Place you back in the classroom, as though the poison hasn’t taken effect. Make him attempt to come here and finish the job.”

Severus regarded them. He wished his head could be a little bit clearer – the throbbing pain and burning fire at his heart kept his mind occupied. Her hand, now resting atop his, also kept his attention.

“Not the frst time—I’d be bait,” Severus said.

“No, but hopefully, it will be the last,” Dumbledore said.

After Rain

“Might be,” Severus said, then coughed painfully. If they did not catch Lucius, administer Veritaserum to him, and thus find out what the poison was, then this would be the last time Severus played bait. It might be either way – whatever the poison, an antidote needed to be brewed, and those took anywhere between hours and months to make. He did not have that kind of time.

None of the occupants of the room noticed the door that was slightly ajar, where two curious green eyes still watched beneath a mop of dark hair.

~*~

His mind reeling, Harry returned to the Gryffindor tower. He knew now; had his answer – Snape really was dying, and Lucius Malfoy was the reason why.

Had he not inflicted enough pain already? He had started with Ginny, innocent and young at eleven years old – for no other reason than that she had been convenient. He had not even quite known what the diary would mean.

Lucius had been there when Voldemort had been brought back, he had been there in the Department of Mysteries. Though he had never been convicted, Harry was certain the man had both tortured and killed Muggles. The very, very short stay in Azkaban that had followed, before his lawyers had managed to get him out, had been far too little to pay for his crimes.

If he stayed there forever, it would still be too short a time, Harry thought, rather bitterly.

And there was Draco. *Malfoy*, Harry reminded himself. They were not on first-name basis. Never had been – or had that changed, this morning? After a kiss, should they not be calling each other by their first names?

Never mind.

Had Lucius been a good father, or a horrid one, to Malfoy? Malfoy had no doubt been spoiled silly with things and expensive clothes, but he had not appeared to be the least bit happy about his father coming to Hogwarts. He had claimed since, that he was not his father.

He doesn't want Snape dead, Harry thought.

After Rain

He climbed into bed, the other boys already sleeping. Ron snored lightly, but Harry had been sleeping in the same dorm as him for the last six years, so it did not annoy him. Still, his mind would not quieten.

So Malfoy kisses me and might be good, and Snape is sick and has always been horrid but he was a spy for us and helped us win the war, and Lucius is an arse who's trying to murder both me and Snape.

I thought the war was over, Harry thought to himself, muttering even in his own head.

Hours passed, and Harry fell into a hesitant sleep. Then something tugged at Harry's cover. Sleepily, he jerked it back, hoping that the tugging would stop. Now that he had finally fallen asleep, he wanted to get a few hours of shuteye before the new day. The tugging did stop, but instead the something began poking his shoulder. Harry opened one sleepy eye, only to look into a pair of huge, tennis ball-like eyes.

"Dobby, *what* are you doing here?" Harry groaned at the small house-elf.

"Dobby is so sorry to wake Mr. Potter," the elf said, "But Dobby needs to tell a thing."

~*~

There was an annoying knocking on the door. Hermione, who wanted to sleep for just a bit longer, groaned. Why could the students of this school not wait until breakfast to bother her with their problems? She was Head Girl, but she did need her sleep. But her wish to remain in bed fell short, for the pounding continued, getting heavier and louder.

"I'm coming!" Hermione yelled to whoever was knocking. The pounding immediately stopped. She pulled on a robe, and told the portrait to let the visitors in.

Instead of some second years, worried about something or other, as Hermione had expected, Harry and Ron came running inside. It surprised Hermione.

"What could you two possibly have to say to me this early in the morning?" she asked, flopping down in her chair. "You're never up this early of your own free will."

"No, Hermione, this is something completely different," Harry said. "It's about Snape."

After Rain

Hermione sat up slowly, possibly interested. She noted the look of sadness as Harry began telling the two what had happened the night before in the Hospital Wing. He told them about Professor Flitwick turning him over to Madam Pomfrey instead, and how he had seen Snape up there.

"He looks bad, guys. And I don't mean just sick – he looks more like he's... dying. And Dumbledore said as much."

Hermione could not help but gasp. She was not particularly fond of the Potions master; she had always thought he treated Harry unfairly and acted as too big a git for her to see his redeeming qualities. Still, he had been pivotal to their winning the war, and she would not wish death on anyone – at least anyone but Voldemort. Shocked, she listened to Harry as he continued.

"He's so pale, and so thin," Harry said. "He wasn't awake for more than a few minutes at a time."

Ron kept silent throughout the story. Hermione knew his hatred had settled deeper than Hermione's and his sense of wanting revenge for all the rude comments and lost house points had always been stronger, his emotions taking over rather than logic and rationality. But he did listen, and that had to count for something.

Harry spoke, and Hermione had a feeling that he left bits and pieces of what had happened the day before out, but she did not say anything. Some things had to be private after all.

"This morning, Dobby came to our dorm," Harry said.

"Dobby? The house-elf? What did he want?" Hermione asked, surprised.

"One and the same," Harry said. "He said he had to tell me something."

"And what was that?" Ron said. Harry had obviously not told him anything, just to come along, so Hermione assumed he was hearing this for the first time just like her.

"Well, for one thing, that Snape was in fact poisoned," Harry said. "Apparently, it happened the night of the feast. Someone put the poison in Snape's drink, and Dobby saw it happen, but the goblet was taken away before Dobby could do anything about it. The other house-elves don't listen to him much, apparently, and they've been telling him he shouldn't be saying anything to anyone because it's not their business."

After Rain

Ron snorted at this – *no one* listened much to Dobby.

"So who did it? You said Dobby knew," Hermione said. "Is it who we think it is?"

Harry nodded. "So now we have a bit of proof – we just need more. A house elf won't convict him. But then we'll send the arsehole to Azkaban."

"Merlin, and I thought the war was over," Ron said.

"Yeah, well, Lucius bloody Malfoy obviously thinks life treated him unfairly and that he should be getting revenge," Harry said.

"What about Draco?" Hermione asked. "Is he involved?"

Harry shook his head, and Hermione was surprised to detect a slight blush on his cheeks. She stored this away for later pondering. "I really don't think so. He seems to genuinely like Snape and he's been worried about him too."

"He did say he's not his father when he gave me the vials, and it did help Snape," Hermione said.

Ron looked between Hermione and Harry. "So—if we know who did it, what do we do now?"

"That was the other part of why Dobby came to see me," Harry said. Then he carefully plucked the goblet from his robes. "This is the goblet that Lucius put the poison in – Snape's goblet. Dobby thought it best to keep it away from the rest after seeing his old master down in the kitchens."

"Smart elf," Hermione said, and the three shared a quick grin.

~*~

A dark shadow moved. He saw the two boys leaving the room with a promise to meet up in the common room before breakfast. They said their goodbyes and the boys climbed through the portrait hole. It slid back to cover the opening soundlessly.

After Rain

The man watched the girl move around the room to get ready. She went into the shower, and he positioned himself right outside the door of the bathroom. He kept completely still. One movement, one sound, and the bright girl on the other side of the door would be tipped off as to what was awaiting her. He forced his breathing to steadiness, a skill he had acquired years and years ago. He heard a hand being placed on the handle, and he raised his wand. His heart beat rapidly in anticipation.

The door opened.

She did not have time to scream.

~*~

Hermione headed off to the Owlery before breakfast, telling Harry and Ron she had to see if a certain book on rare poisons was available for fast delivery.

“Okay,” Harry said, “We’ll see you at breakfast.”

Harry and Ron made their way to breakfast in silence. Harry worried about Snape, trying to get used to that feeling, while Ron still could not quite bring himself to care. He did not want the man dead, but he was not much bothered with keeping him alive, either. The man had been too rude, too many times for his feelings to simply change overnight.

No matter Ron’s difficulty caring, the trio had decided upon a course of action while they sat in Hermione’s room – Hermione would spend her free time in the library, researching any and all types of fatal potions. This would not be odd since she always spent her free time in the library anyway. Harry would try to get to talk to Draco. Ron would help where he could, mostly by Hermione’s side.

Hermione would also take the goblet to the Headmaster, after performing the necessary protection charms on it, to save any remains of the poison. They had decided to leave it up to Hermione, because she was far better than either Harry or Ron at charms, and she could explain what she had done to the goblet better.

“I’ll go right after breakfast,” Hermione had promised.

Snape’s seat was still empty when they came in. Though Harry knew the man would return today, he could not quite make sense of how they would manage it. The way Snape had

After Rain

seemed to have to fight to keep his eyes open the night before did not seem like a professor ready to teach classes. The pale complexion of his face, greyer than normal, and the dark circles beneath his eyes and the way he had screamed, trapped in his nightmare – nothing had suggested an ability to return to teaching. He had thrown up, and he had allowed Harry to soothe him with the damp cloth, without comments and without a loss of house points.

Suddenly, gasps could be heard among the students. Harry looked up from his plate, and followed everyone's gazes.

There, by the main doors of the Great Hall, the professor occupying Harry's thoughts stood. His face was set in a scowl as always, though Harry wondered if that was not more because he was concentrating so hard on staying standing, rather than because he was angry.

Snape made his way up to the High Table. His motions were stiff, and Harry could tell that he was tired even from the short journey from the entrance to the teachers' table. The Headmaster walked just behind his Potions master, looking both proud and worried.

As Professor Snape sat down, he directed a few of his trademark glares at some students who were whispering. They quit immediately.

For a brief moment, Snape met Harry's gaze – and an understanding flowed between them. For Harry, it was a promise that he would keep some of the events of the night before to himself. An agreement that also meant that no matter what Professor Snape would say to him in the future, this would always be there, a slight shift.

They both knew in that short moment when their eyes locked, that they no longer hated each other. Harry doubted he would ever *like* the man, but not hating him was a start.

When the eye contact broke, reality suddenly dawned on Harry.

If Hermione did not do a damn good job in the library and find the poison and its antidote, then it would not matter what Harry's relationship with Snape was like. For if they did not have the antidote within then next day or two, Snape would be dead.

The owls came with the mail then, dropping Hermione's copy of The Daily Prophet off, but carrying nothing for Harry or Ron. The birds disappeared one after the other, and discussions resumed.

“Harry, check out that one,” Ron said.

After Rain

Harry looked up to find a black bird circling the room. It was not an owl, but a larger, more finely carved bird.

A hawk.

“Those are the Malfoy hawks,” Ron said with a roll of his eyes, “because of course, they can’t be like everyone else.”

The hawk held something in one of its claws and it was obviously searching for the receiver as it circled. Harry glanced at the Slytherin table and found that Malfoy had not yet arrived.

Then the door opened, and Draco Malfoy walked inside, calmly – until he saw the black hawk, and he stopped dead in his tracks.

Suddenly, the hawk locked its eyes with Harry. It screeched.

Harry barely had time to react. He saw Malfoy start to run, heard him scream, and then he tackled Harry off the bench. Harry hit the ground with an ‘oumph!’, the wind knocked out of him as he landed on the stone floor, and his head exploding in pain.

“What the bloody hell do you think you’re doing?” Ron yelled.

Ron punched Malfoy, who landed next to Harry on the floor. Harry looked foggily around, his head throbbing. He saw Malfoy, eyes wide with—fear? His eyes were not on Ron, but up in the ceiling – on the black hawk.

The bird released whatever it had been holding. It fell towards Harry, and Harry thought dimly that perhaps he should move away. He could not make his body work.

Malfoy threw himself on top of him at the very last second.

The item, a small stone, landed on him instead, and Malfoy let out a blood-curdling scream.

~*~

After Rain

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Chapter eight

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One Slytherin out of the Infirmary, another one sent there. Harry sat with his head in his hands, his hands fists in his hair, feeling completely empty.

The boy in the Infirmary should be me, not Malfoy.

He had bled, everywhere. His skin had been torn, starting at the point where the small stone had landed, and he had bled, invisible knives cutting and slicing and making everything red, including Harry. His face, his hands, still held traces of Malfoy's blood, even after he had scrubbed and cleaned himself. He saw it, dripping off his hands, every time he looked.

He saved my life.

They would not let him inside. No one would be let inside while they worked on him – Pomfrey, Flitwick and Dumbledore, Flitwick having been called in because of his expertise in charms and curses.

Harry had not been excused from his classes, but he refused to go.

“If for no other reason than that I have to question him about his father,” Harry said humourlessly to himself, knowing he would be doing no such thing in the coming hours. Malfoy would be fighting for his life, if he survived at all.

“You care about him, too, don’t you?” Ron asked. “What is it about you and bloody gits lately?”

“You care about Malfoy?” Hermione asked incredulously.

Harry wondered how much he could say without revealing what had happened on the Quidditch pitch. “I suppose—yes. And Merlin—he took that for me.”

Luna, who had been standing with them, looked off into the distance. “The line between love and hate is a thin one. He might have been on one side, and then he hopped over to the other.”

Ron’s face scrunched up. “Malfoy doesn’t love Harry.”

After Rain

Luna's smile was serene. "Perhaps he doesn't, perhaps he does."

Ron shook his head. "Barmy, that one. Completely barmy."

Luna had not seemed to take offence, and Harry had hurried off not long after that. He had taken the stairs two at a time, only to be met with a closed and locked door that he could not break through.

So he sat, or paced, waiting for an answer.

How much did it cost him to save my life?

And then, the more burning question, the one he could not fathom, the one he seemed to be posing more and more often lately.

Why?

~*~

"Mr. Potter – what happened?"

Narcissa Malfoy stood before him suddenly, tall and regal, her usually well-kept hair wild. Her eyes shone with tears and anxiousness, but the grey was a grey of steel. She was no cry-baby, but a capable woman.

"I—he—there was a hawk," Harry started, and managed to tell Draco's mother of the events during breakfast. He stumbled sometimes, on Draco's name, not quite knowing whether to use the last name he always did, or his given name, and not knowing at all how to understand what Draco had done for him.

"It should be me in there, Mrs. Malfoy," Harry said. "Not—your son. He saved my life. I don't know why – he's not even supposed to like me—"

Mrs. Malfoy looked at the closed door, longing on her face.

"You don't understand," Mrs. Malfoy said, "but you will. You're here – it's a start."

After Rain

She shook herself, the expensive fabric of her robes rippling, and her face setting in a harder expression.

“He’s here, at Hogwarts.”

“Madam?” Harry asked, dread filling him. It was almost odd, how very few seemed to actually speak Lucius Malfoy’s name.

Fear of a name, Harry thought, with chilly familiarity, as he thought of Voldemort.

“I summoned a house elf and asked,” Mrs. Malfoy said. “No owl has been sent in the last two days to Hogwarts, so nothing from our Manor that would reach the school now.”

“Then how—”

“One of the hawks is missing from the Manor,” Mrs. Malfoy continued. “I believe he brought it with him to communicate to someone on the outside, should he need anything.”

“But Snape—he didn’t return to teaching until today,” Harry said.

“It seems he grew nervous all on his own,” Mrs. Malfoy said. “He’s here, to finish what he started.”

“Then why did he try to hurt me?” Harry asked.

“Because you know about Severus, and you are trying to help,” Mrs. Malfoy said. “And because you defeated the Dark Lord, which makes you a target all in yourself. He did try before, after all.”

Harry made a face. “But we don’t know anything yet about the poison – Hermione has the goblet—”

“The goblet?” Mrs. Malfoy echoed with great interest.

Harry nodded, and quickly explained how Dobby had given it to him, and that they hoped to find some residue of the poison in the goblet.

“Has she given it to Professor Dumbledore yet?” Mrs. Malfoy asked.

“She was supposed to, after breakfast,” Harry said, “but I don’t know if she did.”

After Rain

He got no further, because Mrs. Malfoy had swept away from there, in a flurry of robes not unlike a certain Potions master.

~*~

Severus watched his class. He was tired, his vision blurred around the edges. The strengthening potions Poppy had given him were some of the most powerful ones, yet not powerful enough. He had stayed seated throughout his classes and only the hiding charms Poppy had performed kept his students from seeing his feverishly sweaty forehead, and the shivers that kept running through him.

Now, the Gryffindor and Slytherin seventh years were in front of him. Since the Potions master could not be up and about to see that the students did not screw their potions up, as they were bound to do, he had assigned them to writing an essay instead. This had been met by grumbling, but with one stern look, the protesters had fallen silent. He had been happy to discover that his death glare still worked.

Potter and Malfoy were both missing.

Severus wondered how his godson was doing – was he alive at all? Surely Dumbledore would come down and tell him if that was not the case? The lack of a Headmaster calling him must mean the boy was still alive.

If he was, it was pure luck. The hex on the gem that had been aimed at Potter should have killed Draco within minutes. At least Potter had had the presence of mind to chuck the gem away with the help of an expelling spell.

Severus wished he could get the image of Draco, blood spraying everywhere, out of his mind.

The class seemed restless. It did not surprise Severus – their “safe” school had once again been attacked, and now no one had a war to blame it on. Weasley shot looks at the door, obviously hoping for Potter’s return. Crabbe and Goyle mumbled to each other, and Severus strongly doubted it had anything to do with their reading. Granger read on, but Severus assumed she could read and think at the same time.

Severus leaned back in his chair, sighing softly.

After Rain

Potter – Harry. Severus strongly doubted the boy would come to class; knowing him, he sat waiting for news about Draco.

Severus was having a bit of a hard time with his feelings for Harry. Up until last week, he had hated Harry with a passion, for what the boy's father had done. However, it appeared that a great many things could change in a week, and the moment Harry had asked him, 'Are you all right?' that evening almost exactly a week ago, it seemed things had changed. Now, they somehow seemed to have reached an understanding of sorts. And for some inexplicable reason, Severus was in no way repelled by it.

Draco was a completely different story. As Lucius' son and Severus' godson, Draco had always been expected to follow in his father's footsteps to become a Death Eater. When Voldemort was finally defeated, those plans still did not change. Draco was the son of a Dark Wizard, and as such, he would become one as well. Lately, however, Draco was pulling back. He had become quieter, even *smaller* in a way. The light in the boy's eyes had gone, and Severus wondered if he was the only one who had noticed. He had tried to talk to Draco, but the young Slytherin had only told him that nothing was wrong, which worried the Potions master even more. Normally, a Malfoy would have told him to shove off. Severus knew that well enough after knowing Lucius for so long.

Severus felt his eyes become heavy, and he knew that he would need to sleep soon. His body felt so tired... The burning around his heart had increased again, spreading like fire through his body, making him hurt. Only his many years as a spy, where he had learned to control every part of his body, allowed him to keep from wincing.

The powerful strengthening potions and healing potions he had downed to be able to get out of bed and have classes seemed to have stopped working. The draughts were strong, and he had been dosed with enough to keep a healthy person awake for a week.

It had been five hours since he had taken the potions.

I am dying.

~*~

Harry sat silently by Draco's side. One of the boy's thin hands was in his two stronger ones. Earlier, he had been talking to the unconscious Slytherin, but after a while, he seemed to

After Rain

have nothing more to say. Silence fell, and Harry's guilt increased with every shallow breath Draco took.

Preoccupied with his thoughts, Harry did not hear the door when it opened, nor did he hear the footsteps. Only when the visitor cleared his throat did he looked up.

"Professor Dumbledore," Harry said. He did not stand.

"Hello Harry," Dumbledore said, sitting down in a chair on the other side of the bed. "How is he doing?"

Harry met the Headmaster's eyes for a moment. "I don't know. Madam Pomfrey won't tell me."

"I see," Dumbledore said. "Do you know of the item that fell onto Mr. Malfoy?"

"A—a stone, sir," Harry said, remembering the small, viciously green gem that had landed on Draco's back and made him scream and bleed. Silver ropes had shot from the stone, binding Draco effectively, before something had started slicing his skin, starting from the stone's location and working its way out over Draco's body.

It had take Harry far too long to react – the entire Great Hall had stood in horrified silence and all that could be heard were Draco's screams.

Harry screamed a Banishing Charm, and the gem flew off Draco, but something still held him, still cut him, an invisible ghost, holding him tight. Draco's fine robes had been sliced into shreds, and Harry's robes had been coloured by his blood.

"Finite incantatem!" Harry yelled instead, his grip on his wand slippery from the blood Draco had lost.

The curse finally ended then, the ghostly killer gone.

Draco lay whimpering pitifully, painfully on the ground, barely alive, and the sound broke Harry's heart.

He had cast whatever healing charm he could remember, his mind barely there, his world only Draco. He had not seen Ron's horrified look, or Hermione who had stopped dead in her tracks as she entered the Great Hall, nor had he heard the teachers come running, or other spells cast on Draco's lifeless body. The flurry of robes around them pulled Harry away from his saviour, and through his mind ran, *It should have been me it should have been me it should have been me.*

After Rain

“The curse is called the Umbra Depleo curse. ‘Ghost blood,’” Dumbledore added, “and it’s rarely used. It can be cast as a direct curse, but has often been found to be more effective when combined with an object. A ring is the most common item used, with a belated spell – once the wearer puts it on, the curse starts and—well, no need to continue.”

Harry shuddered. Definitely no need to continue.

He looked at Draco, deathly pale, with cuts on his cheeks and throat, and a long gash beginning at his temple and working its way up to the middle of his forehead. They no longer bled – Madam Pomfrey had seen to that much – but they had only just started to heal. Magical wounds were that much more complicated to heal than regular ones.

“The hawk was a Malfoy hawk,” Harry said. “Did his father—”

“We should not jump to conclusions,” Dumbledore said.

Harry stared at him. “Forgive me sir, but someone tried to kill me. Again. And we know who’s trying to kill Sn—Professor Snape. I don’t think the conclusion requires any jumping at all.”

“Be that as it may, we cannot go around and accuse anyone of anything until we have more proof,” Dumbledore said, not sounding particularly upset with Harry’s harsh words. “Professor Flitwick will trace the gem for any magical signature still on it, and we’ll go from there.”

Harry’s eyes rested once more upon Draco. The boy’s breaths were shallow, and every now and then, he whimpered in his potion-induced sleep.

“What about Professor Snape?” Harry asked. “He doesn’t have much time.”

Dumbledore looked for a moment like he was going to deny that anything was wrong with the Potions master, but then decided otherwise when Harry shot him a very knowing look.

“We’ll do what we can,” Dumbledore said. “We have ordered every antidote we can find, and Mrs. Malfoy is brewing the ones we can’t.”

“Did the goblet tell you anything?” Harry asked.

Dumbledore looked over his half-moon spectacles with curiosity. “Goblet?”

After Rain

“The one Dobby gave me,” Harry said. “Hermione was to take it to you after breakfast.”

“I’m afraid I haven’t seen Miss Granger, let alone any goblet,” Dumbledore said. “Dobby gave it to you?”

Harry nodded, a slice of fear running through him. Why had Hermione not taken the goblet to the Headmaster as she had promised?

“Yes—it was the one Lucius—eh, Mr. Malfoy poisoned when all the parents were here,” Harry said.

Dumbledore stood. “I’m sure she’ll give it to me – perhaps she has decided to test it herself? She’s a very bright witch after all.”

Harry frowned. “Perhaps.”

The Headmaster turned to leave, but before he did, he said, “I would say you owe Mr. Malfoy a thank you. You are allowed to stay for as long as Poppy will let you tonight – most of the day has passed already anyway. Tomorrow, however, you will have to go to class.”

Harry nodded numbly. “Thank you, Professor.”

Dumbledore gave him a sad smile. “You’re quite welcome, Harry.”

Harry sat back in the chair. He had never once let Draco’s hand go from his, and he would not for several hours. His worry for Professor Snape took a backseat at the moment, and besides, there was not much he could do about it anyway.

Madam Pomfrey came and went, fussing over her patient and checking his vitals every fifteen minutes. Every hour, she came in and applied a healing potion all over his body. Harry left for a little while each time, not wanting to humiliate Draco. He did not deserve humiliation after what he had just done for Harry. And Harry did not think gratitude, the way Dumbledore had said he owed him, was enough of a thank you.

~*~

Hermione shuddered.

After Rain

Slowly opening her eyes, she shook her head to clear it. Her mind was foggy, and the room dark, leaving her unable to see anything at all of the place she was in. She noted that she was sitting on something, presumably a chair, and her wrists and feet were bound to it. The air around her was cold, clammy.

Where am I?

She tried to remember how she had gotten there. Anything at all.

I was with Harry and Ron— They told me about Lucius and Snape. Oh God, I'm supposed to be in the library! And Harry and Ron, they're probably worried sick!

She let her hands wander as far as she could with the bindings around her wrists. She could not feel her wand anywhere on her. That left her with very little option on what to do to get out. Still, she was never one to just sit around and wait to be rescued.

I need to get out. Harry and Ron are counting on me...

~*~

Harry heard Professor Snape long before he ever saw him. Heavy, raspy breathing echoed through the stairwells and Harry looked at Draco for a moment.

"I'll be right back," he said softly and let go of the Slytherin's hand. The loss of contact seemed to hurt almost physically for him. Holding Draco's hand meant knowing he was still alive. A few feet away from him, anyone could think the boy was dead already, with his skin so pale, and cuts all over his body, his breaths silent and shallow.

Harry flew down the stairs, and it did not take long before he saw the Potions master, leaning heavily against a wall. He looked like he was about to fall down at any second.

"Professor Snape," Harry breathed as he reached him. He eased one arm over his shoulder, and let the professor lean on him. Snape did not protest and Harry found himself wondering if the man knew that he was there at all. "Come on, Professor. It's just a few more steps."

After Rain

By the time the two had managed to get up all the way, Harry sweated from the exercise. He almost carried the close-to-unconscious Potions master. Though the position was not comfortable, Harry had to reflect on how little Snape weighed.

He must have lost weight since he got sick, Harry thought.

They made their way over the floor, amazed that Madam Pomfrey had not come out yet. Carefully, he helped Snape onto the bed he had been occupying the previous night. He cast a quick spell so that the professor's black robes changed into the Infirmary's white ones, before pulling the sheets up over him, so that they covered his body up till his chest.

"Potter?"

Harry was astonished to see Snape's eyes open.

"Yeah, it's me," he said softly. "Don't worry, just rest. Do you want some Dreamless Potion?"

"How's—Draco?" Snape asked, eyes flitting around the room, ignoring Harry's question. He did not seem to see well at all, because he squinted and frowned, looking in the general direction of Draco's bed.

"Madam Pomfrey seems to think he'll be okay," Harry said. "He just needs a bit of sleep. Just like you."

"Blood loss?" Snape rasped.

Harry wondered how the man had possibly been able to make it through the day. "He lost a lot, but Madam Pomfrey managed to restore most of it, she said. And the cuts are already healing."

"Good."

Snape's chest heaved, his breath loud and wheezy. He shivered, even beneath the blankets, and Harry pulled his wand out and cast a warm and dry charm on the bed, so that it would stay pleasant even with Snape's obvious fever.

"Do you want some Dreamless Potion?" Harry asked again.

After Rain

Snape managed a small nod, and Harry held the vial to his lips. He held one hand behind his professor's head, so that he was in a better position to drink. It was a testament to just how weak and ill Snape was, that he allowed it. The man drank in small gulps, before Harry eased him back on the bed.

Snape looked up at him. "I'm really dying, aren't I?"

Harry shook his head, though a lump formed in his throat. "No, Professor Snape, you are *not* dying."

The Potions master looked at him, dark obsidian eyes unreadable. "You're not—a good—liar, Pott'r."

"Harry," Harry corrected. "After all this, I'd say we're a bit past last names."

Snape regarded him rather coolly, even through the feverish haze, and for a moment, Harry thought he would utter some scornful remark. But he appeared to decide that his energy was better spent on breathing, so he closed his eyes, and mumbled, "Harry."

Harry smiled gently. "Well done. Now sleep. You'll need your strength."

Within seconds, the professor had fallen asleep. Harry stayed by his bed for a few minutes longer, listening to his raspy breathing. He knew he should not look at the heavy breaths as something positive, but at least the man *was* still breathing.

Harry walked slowly over to the other bed in the room. Draco's pale complexion shone in the moonlight, making him look rather like an angel. A scarred angel in agony, but an angel nonetheless.

He really is handsome, Harry thought. Beautiful, even.

Then, for a moment, he paused. *Beautiful. Beautiful?*

Annoying, stuck-up, spoiled – beautiful.

Harry had to admit, the boy must be considered eye-candy. Blond, soft – he assumed – hair that was usually slicked back, though at the moment was a mess after Madam Pomfrey's not-so-gentle handling. Draco's cheekbones were high, his nose thin, small and straight. His grey eyes, when awake, held an intensity that not many could compete with.

After Rain

The memory of Draco's lips against his own made his skin tingle. Draco had smelled of lavender, salt and *Draco*, and he had fit so well against Harry, even when he had barely responded to the kiss.

His heart and mind confused, Harry sat down. Once again, he grasped Draco's hand in his. He watched both the boy and the man in the room, worry etched onto his face.

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Hermione's head shot up as she heard something move. Her breath caught in her throat as she realised that the door was opening, and she wondered briefly if this was it.

No! No thinking anything like that! I'm going to get out.

She had so far been completely and utterly unsuccessful at getting out. The bonds around her wrists were strong, and without a wand, she had no chance at breaking them. Still, she refused to give up. She was stubborn by nature; now was as good time as any to show it.

The door creaked open, and Hermione gathered whatever Gryffindor courage she could get her hands on. The room was still dark, and she could see only the outline of the items in the room – a table with what looked like a book on it, as well as a fireplace. The fireplace hadn't been lit though – it would have been idiocy for anyone taking her hostage to have the fire lit. Then anyone could Floo there.

She was surprised to see the door close again, without anyone entering. The room was eerily silent, and Hermione suddenly realised that there *was* someone in the room.

"Who's there?" she asked. Her voice was strong, trying desperately to hide her fear.

Something swept just past her, and she pulled herself the other direction.

"Hush, child," a feminine voice said. "I'm not here to hurt you. *Lumos*."

The room was suddenly bathed in light, yet Hermione could still not see anyone. She looked around the room, her head whipping back and forth.

"Who – who are you? Show yourself!"

After Rain

She felt the gust of air, and heard a sigh. A moment later, a woman stood before Hermione, the Invisibility Cloak in her hand. Blonde, lovely hair, pale features and expensive robes—

“Mrs. Malfoy.”

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After Rain

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Chapter nine

~*~

A soft hoot awoke Harry from his slumber. He looked around, confused, before remembering where he was. The Infirmary. Draco. Snape. The reality came crashing down on him.

Another soft hoot brought him out of his thoughts. Hedwig sat on his shoulder, nipping at his ear.

"What is it?" Harry asked. Hedwig stretched out a leg at him, and he saw the attached parchment. Quickly, he untied it and opened it.

'Harry,

Wherever you are, we need help. Ron and I found information about a poison in the library, and it sounds much like the one Snape's sick from. To be sure, I need a blood sample from him. As I assume you are with him, can you please get this to me? You need to hurry. Snape is dying.

Hermione'

Harry re-read the scribbled note, before putting it on the chair. She must have been in quite the hurry, because the writing was nowhere near as neat as it usually was. Then again, if she was working against the clock to find a cure for Snape, she must be in a hurry. Perhaps she had managed to draw something from the goblet, and that was why she had not gone to Dumbledore.

"Wait here," Harry told Hedwig, walking over to Snape's bedside. The man on the bed looked even worse now than he had when Harry had dragged him up there. His skin was grey, rather than the usual white. Beneath his eyes were dark purplish circles, making him look like a barely animated skeleton.

If it had not been for the heavy, rasping breathing, Harry would have thought him dead already.

After Rain

He needed to be silent and he needed to be quick. He muttered a silencing charm, and suddenly, the soft sound of his footsteps vanished. He did not believe that Snape or Draco would wake up – both were too ill, and Draco too drugged, to be awoken – but Madam Pomfrey might be alerted. As it was, he had seven minutes before she would come back to check Draco's vitals. He ran over to one of the many cupboards in the room.

One good thing about having spent detention here, Harry thought. I know where everything is.

Quickly, he picked out a small vial to pour the blood into, and a small needle. He hurried back to Snape's side, worrying that he might have passed away in his sleep in the short period of time that Harry had tuned out his breathing. Luckily, he had not.

Harry placed the vial on the table beside the bed. He did not know where to place the needle, but he had heard Madam Pomfrey's spell often enough. He hoped he did it right when he placed the needle to Snape's armpit, and then uttered the spell. The needle sank into Snape's skin, and a moment later, blood began pulsing. Harry held the vial to catch it, and made sure it was full before ending the spell. He had no idea how much Hermione would need, and he doubted that he would have another chance at getting blood from Snape. When the spell ended, the needle extracted itself from Snape's arm, and left no mark.

Harry put the lid on the small vial, and ran back to Hedwig.

"This," he said as he began tying the vial to the owl's legs, "needs to get to Hermione and Ron, and they need to get to it now. Please, Hedwig, hurry?"

The owl hooted reassuringly, and Harry wished that he could feel better. He could not. A life was at stake, and until his professor was out of danger, Harry would not feel better.

He thought he heard Draco shuffle on the bed, but when he turned and looked, the boy lay as still as ever.

As Hedwig flew out the window, Harry slumped back down on the chair. He removed the silencing charm, and shrank the used needle to a size where he could hardly see it, and threw it away. Next, he picked Draco's small hand up in his, and he studied the boy before him, as he had done for hours earlier. It was beginning to become clearer for Harry, that the feelings he had for Draco were not just any feelings. Admiration took the place of annoyance – though he did not doubt that the boy would annoy him once he awoke again – and something else nabbed at his heart, something that made him ache with the wish for Draco to open his eyes and be all right.

After Rain

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Mrs. Malfoy walked over to the table. The thick book lying there looked old and used. She opened it, flipping through the pages quickly. "I know it's here," Hermione heard her mutter. "I know it's in here..."

"Um—" Hermione began. The woman turned around to face her.

"Oh, I'm sorry dear." With a wave of her wand and a word Hermione didn't catch, Hermione felt the bonds on her wrists and feet disappear. The woman smiled at her. "I think I've kept you in the dark long enough, haven't I, dear? My *lovely* husband has poisoned Severus, and he needs help quickly. This is the only book with poisons in it that my husband has touched in the library in the last few weeks."

"You think he brewed it himself?" Hermione asked.

"He is nowhere near the accomplished Potions expert that Severus – Professor Snape – is, but he can certainly brew a poison," Mrs. Malfoy said. "The residue left on the goblet allowed me to narrow it down to these six poisons—"

"Where did you get that?" Hermione asked suspiciously.

"Your friend, Mr. Potter, told me you were supposed to give it to the Headmaster," Mrs. Malfoy said. "When you hadn't, I had to conclude that it was still in your rooms, or that he had it. I hoped for the former, and it was true."

Hermione did not know what to make of Mrs. Malfoy. "How did you get into my rooms?"

"My dear, I was Head Girl in my time too," Mrs. Malfoy said. "Once you get to know Lady Abierta, it's not the biggest of troubles to get her to open up."

"You were Head Girl?" Hermione asked, rather surprised.

"Yes," Mrs. Malfoy said. "Can you guess who was Head Boy? Never mind. There are more important things to discuss."

After Rain

She gave Hermione a list of the poisons in question. They had much the same ingredients, but each had a very specific ingredient that made the poison what it was. Hermione recognised all of the six specific poisonous ingredients, and she saw the problem.

“The antidotes for these are completely different,” Hermione said. “If we give him the wrong one, we’ll kill him instead of heal him.”

“Yes, Miss Granger,” Mrs. Malfoy said. “Which is why we need to know the exact poison. I have all six antidotes finished, but you need to tell me what his symptoms have been.”

“Why don’t we go up and ask Harry?” Hermione asked. “He must know better – and if you have the antidotes anyway, I don’t see the problem?”

“If I am correct in why my husband kidnapped you, I’d say there is a risk that he is running around the school as you, especially as no one seems to be missing you,” Mrs. Malfoy said. “If we happen to run into him, Severus might pay with his life for it. On top of that, I cannot bring these antidotes near Severus. One whiff of the wrong one—”

She trailed off.

“We could use a disillusionment charm,” Hermione said.

“You underestimate my husband, Miss Granger,” Mrs. Malfoy said. “He will no doubt have warded this door to alarm him if you leave. He might even be aware that I have come in here, although I doubt it. This is a hidden room Lucius found when he was a student at Hogwarts, and he shared it only with a select few. I was one of them.”

“And he won’t believe you’ve betrayed him?” Hermione asked.

“He won’t believe I would dare such a thing,” Mrs. Malfoy said. “Now, the symptoms.”

Hermione studied the list again, and its ingredients, going over what she knew of the qualities of the poisonous ingredients.

“We can strike these two out,” Hermione said and pointed. “They’d both have killed him already. He drank the poison a week ago and even if it just had been very little, he’d have been dead within a day or two if these had been Luc—Mr. Malfoy’s choice.”

“You may call him Lucius,” Mrs. Malfoy said. “Or ‘the biggest bloody bastard in the country’, for that matter.”

After Rain

Hermione had to snort at that, although she glanced up to find Mrs. Malfoy's face pinched with anxiety. Hermione did not know the nature or depth of Mrs. Malfoy's relationship with Professor Snape, but it obviously ran deep enough for her to be quite upset by the current events.

Then again, Harry, who did not have something that anyone could even begin to call a relationship with Snape, worried as well. Hermione herself could feel the tug at her heart, the worry about a fellow human being. Snape, for all his nastiness and cruelty to her and her friends over the years, did not deserve to die.

"This one would have made him throw up all over the place for days," Hermione said. "I think we can cross that off, because he had classes for several days before he got so ill he couldn't teach anymore."

"That leaves three," Mrs. Malfoy said, stating the obvious. "I have thought about the Moonseed potion. Considering the combination with the coriander, I'd say that poison would have a taste that Severus would have remembered. Since he drank it with water, as far as I can tell from the residue, he would have recognised it rather soon."

Hermione nodded. "After years as a potions master, yes, he would have recognised that. I'll cross it off. That leaves these two."

Narcissa sighed. "They would both have a slightly sweet taste, but otherwise be quite undetectable. Both would leave him alive for this long, but not much more."

"It depends on the amount he drank, of course," Hermione said, "but let's say a third of the goblet was the poison. I'd say he has a couple of hours left, at most."

Mrs. Malfoy looked stricken at this, although Hermione had to believe that she had, since she obviously knew her way around potions, already figured as much out.

"Mrs. Malfoy, cork those up as tightly as possible, and ward them, so that no fumes can get out to Professor Snape," Hermione said. "We have to get up there."

"And then what?" Mrs. Malfoy asked.

"We'll figure it out. But if we don't leave, he'll be dead anyway."

After Rain

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Morning came all too quickly for Harry. He had already decided to skip breakfast, and instead stay in the Hospital Wing, but after that, he would have to go. Of course, Potions stood first on the list of subjects for the day, and Harry doubted that it would matter if he did not attend. They would have a substitute anyway, as the real teacher lay a few feet away, unconscious.

The heavy, rasping breathing had turned into shallow gasps sometime during the morning hours. It worried Harry immensely, for it meant that he was getting worse. Madam Pomfrey had been in there several times, wringing her hands but being completely unable to do anything about it. She poured some healing potions down his throat – it was all she could do – and checked his vitals, just as she did with Draco. As expected, it had not helped.

Harry wanted to split himself in two. He wanted to go down to Hermione and Ron and help them with the antidote, yet at the same time, he wanted nothing but to stay here.

Madam Pomfrey entered the room again, distress etched on her face. She frowned at Snape's shallow breathing. Shaking him slightly, she received no response.

"He's getting worse," Harry said quietly, looking down at Draco's hand rather than meet Madam Pomfrey's eye.

Madam Pomfrey looked at him. It seemed as though she would start crying soon. Harry refused to cry. If he cried, it meant he had given up, and he had not, not yet. Now, he felt rather numb, and was glad for it. He did not want to feel any more pain.

"Harry, there is something I need to tell you about Professor Snape's condition," Madam Pomfrey said.

"What?" Harry asked. "That he's going to die? I know that."

Madam Pomfrey looked slightly shocked at his words. Her eyes told Harry he had guessed right on what she 'needed to tell him'. His tone was harsh, too harsh perhaps, because none of this was Madam Pomfrey's fault, any more than it was his. Her whole body shook when she looked at Harry and tears made their way down her cheeks. He wondered if he had ever lost a patient at all.

After Rain

Four sets of lungs breathed in the room, but only one held a regular pace. Draco's sleepy breathing was soft and deep, the suffering gone from his face, replaced by gentle neutrality as the potions of Madam Pomfrey allowed him to heal. Harry, Madam Pomfrey and Snape, however, all breathed quicker.

The head appearing in the fireplace was a welcome disruption to the silence in the room.

"Poppy, are you there?" Dumbledore asked. "Ah, yes, there you are. And Mr. Potter, you remain in the Infirmary, I see."

"Yes, Albus?" Madam Pomfrey asked between sobs.

"Well, you see, I have two students here with a rather large vial containing a red liquid. They claim it is the antidote to the poison Severus drank."

Harry's heart leaped, but he dared not hope. He would not let himself feel relief until Snape was well on his road to recovery.

"Well, Albus, what in the world are you waiting for?" Madam Pomfrey shouted at him, a smile threatening to break through amongst the tears. "Send them up!"

"Very well," Dumbledore said, stepping into the fire in his office and emerging from the infirmary one. Two students followed suit and arrived a moment later. Hermione held a vial in her hands.

"Go on, serve it to him," the Headmaster told Hermione.

She smiled. "Yes, Professor."

~*~

Hermione and Mrs. Malfoy raced up the stairs. Hermione cursed that there had been no fire in the dungeons, where Mr. Malfoy had imprisoned her. Now, instead, they had to race against time towards the Infirmary. Step by step, up, up, up. Hermione was breathing heavy, and her heart was beating wildly in her chest.

Up, up, up... Faster!

After Rain

They both felt an urge tug at them, and Hermione did what she thought impossible – she sped up even more. She prayed that the stairs would stay still; if one of them began moving, they would lose precious time.

She had travelled the way to the Hospital Wing many times before – after all, Harry had a tendency to be sentenced there far more often than she liked – but never had the way there seemed so long. Stairwell after stairwell. She was surprised that Mrs. Malfoy was still keeping up with her.

Finally, they were in the last one. It was a smaller set of stairs, as they all were when you came high up in the towers.

There were the doors, open, thankfully.

The scent of the Infirmary hit her nose, and she skidded to a stop just within the doors. Mrs. Malfoy came close behind.

"No!" Hermione screamed when she saw a figure move towards the sick Potions master on the bed. The vial in the other girl's hand shook, and she turned around, shocked to look at the source of the voice.

Hermione froze.

~*~

Harry watched Hermione move towards Snape's bed. He wanted her to hurry; he wanted the Potions master to survive. The man's salvation was there, mere feet away, contained in a vial with a tiny glass lid, carried in the hands of his best friend. Harry almost allowed himself to feel relief, but knew he could not, not until Snape had the antidote in him, and had opened his eyes once more.

He heard footsteps, and someone came crashing into the room.

"No!"

Harry's head whipped around to the door and the newcomers. Bewildered, he saw Hermione stand there. At the same time, she stood at the side of Snape's bed.

After Rain

"What the —?" Ron was the first one to say anything. "Two of them?"

Harry shook his head to clear it. He looked over at the other person, standing behind the newly arrived Hermione. Harry levelled his wand upon the Hermione by the bed, while Ron pointed his at the newcomer.

"Mrs. Malfoy!" Harry exclaimed, recognising the other person in the doorway.

"Who—who's the real one?" Ron asked.

"I am!" came from two directions. Harry, Ron, Dumbledore and Madam Pomfrey both looked between the two girls, all confused.

"It seems there has been some Polyjuice in the use," Dumbledore said. Had Professor Snape's life not been in danger, Harry guessed that the Headmaster would have been smiling. Now, both the smile and the twinkle in his eyes had gone.

Harry's eyes travelled between the two, trying to decide who could be the real one. Problem was, no detail differed between the two. They both had the same bushy brown hair, and the same brown eyes. They were the same height, the same — well, they were just *the same*.

All the while, Snape's breathing filled the air like a bad, raspy soundtrack.

Then Ron suddenly smiled. "I know — what did the Divinations homework that Harry showed you on Tuesday say?"

Ron looked between the two Hermiones, and gauged their reaction with interest. As did the rest of the room. The girl by the bed looked blankly at Ron, as though trying to hide her lack of knowledge by staring at the floor. The girl by the door, however, turned bright red.

"I—I can't say that with the Headmaster here!" she squeaked.

"That's our Hermione," Harry said. He turned to the girl by the bed. "That's someone else, and if I had to guess, I'm thinking, Mr. Malfoy. Right?"

"That would be cor—"

Before she had time to finish the sentence, Ron had swished his wand at the fake Hermione.

After Rain

“*Petrificus totalus!*” he yelled, and the girl’s legs snapped together, her arms to her sides, her body rigid. She began to tip over, no longer having any balance.

“No!” yelled Mrs. Malfoy then.

Harry realised why immediately— the vial held in Mr. Malfoy’s female hands. He could only guess that the very inhalation of whatever was in that bottle would be fatal, at least for one very ill Potions master.

“*Wingardium leviosa!*”

It was the first spell that came to his mind, the first-year-spell that Hermione had once excelled at, just as she excelled in anything and everything. It hit the bottle the very moment before it would have smashed into pieces on the ground, and it sailed up into the air, away from Mr. Malfoy’s furious glare.

Dumbledore plucked it from the air. “Twenty points to Gryffindor for that save.”

He turned to Hermione and Mrs. Malfoy. “I trust you have the antidote?”

“We don’t know which one it is,” Hermione said. “We’ve narrowed it down to two, but— we can’t say which one is—”

“Get Veritaserum and give it to him,” Harry said, pointing at the fake Hermione on the ground.

A gurgling sound came from Professor Snape, and he moved slightly on the bed, gasping for air even in unconsciousness. Madam Pomfrey hurried over, performing an oxygen spell that would help him breathe.

“We don’t have time to get Veritaserum,” Mrs. Malfoy said, her eyes filled with tears.

“Use the blood.”

Everyone turned and stared. They had completely forgotten about the other occupant of the Infirmary – Hermione looked shocked to see him there at all. Harry realised that Mr. Malfoy must have imitated her since breakfast, leaving Hermione without knowledge of the morning’s events.

After Rain

Harry had not realised that Draco had awoken at all. Draco looked blearily around the room, shadows beneath his eyes, but still alert. Harry wanted to take him in his arms and hold him and never let go, just to make sure that nothing else happened to him.

“What?” Harry asked.

“The blood,” Draco said. “You drew blood earlier. I—woke up and you—a vial.”

His lips were cracked dry and his voice barely more than a whisper. Harry stared at him.

“Well, I have a bit of that left,” Ron said, taking the vial out.

Hermione snatched it from Ron. “Ward me,” she said to Professor Dumbledore. “He mustn’t breathe in the fumes.”

The Headmaster held out his wand and started chanting a warding spell. Silver walls appeared around Hermione, who took a deep breath and opened the first of the two antidote vials. She levitated two drops of Snape’s blood in the air, and then added a single drop of the antidote. She studied it closely, her mouth moving, and Harry had to assume she was doing some spell.

He looked over at Snape, who gasped for breath even with the mask of extra oxygen that Madam Pomfrey had created. He arched his back, shaking badly, his forehead shining with perspiration.

Hermione redid the test within the confinement of the wards, with the other vial of antidote. Harry held his breath – what if they were wrong, and that one was not it either? Professor Snape had mere breaths to go now.

Hermione looked up, triumph on her face. Harry felt relief flood his mind, although it was replaced in the next second with a great sense of urgency. Even if that was the correct potion, it might still be too late. Dumbledore took down the wards.

She ran to Snape’s side, and Mrs. Malfoy stood on the other, holding Snape’s hand and crying all the while. Hermione poured the antidote into Snape’s mouth. His reflexes made him swallow, and Hermione pushed until the entire vial was empty.

He stilled, and for several seconds, he did not take a new breath. Harry stared, wondering if they were too late after all.

After Rain

Then he took a breath, raspy as the one before. It was no miracle antidote, no immediate cure.

Hermione turned to Dumbledore. "I guess all we can do is wait now. Wait, and hope."

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After Rain

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Chapter ten

~*~

The room was a little chaotic as everyone came to terms with everyone else. Mrs. Malfoy could not quite decide where to stay, until her son smiled rather gently, and told her to go sit with Severus. She hugged her son close, and he held her as tightly as his tired body could manage.

"I'll never forgive him," Mrs. Malfoy whispered to Draco, and Harry only heard because he sat by Draco's side.

"It's okay, mum," Draco mumbled into her hair. "I'll be okay."

She pulled back, and pushed a strand of hair out of his face, eyes filled with tears and love.

"Go sit with him now," Draco said. "He needs you. And Father won't hurt you. He won't hurt anyone anymore."

Harry heard the dark pain in Draco's voice. It tore into him and he wanted to kick and scream at Lucius Malfoy for hurting everyone Harry ever cared about.

Meanwhile, Ron took Hermione in his arms. She sighed contently, and wrapped her arms around him as well.

"I'm sorry, Hermione, I didn't realise..." he mumbled to her.

She pulled away slightly to look at him. "How could you have known? He looked exactly like me. And he'd changed his voice—and it wasn't for that long."

"But I feel like—" he began. "I should have known it wasn't you."

"How? Not even Dumbledore noticed it wasn't me. As long as he went to the library and pretended to read about poisons, how could you have known?"

Ron kissed her forehead. "I'm still sorry."

After Rain

Hermione smiled at him, and placed a hand on his cheek. Gently, she pulled his head down and his lips met hers. The kiss was filled with love and reassurance, something they both needed at the moment.

"Don't worry about it," Hermione said after pulling back.

Suddenly, Ron looked over at the fake Hermione on the floor. His face crinkled in disgust.

"What?" Hermione asked, confused.

Ron closed his eyes. "I just realised that I've kissed Lucius Malfoy."

~*~

An hour later, the fake Hermione on the floor, bound from head to toe, began to change back to Mr. Malfoy. 'She' grew taller, and the curly brown hair was turned blond and straight. The soft female form flattened out, to the thicker male body.

Dumbledore had made couches for Ron and Hermione to sit on, and he himself was seated in a rocking chair. Madam Pomfrey moved between her room and her patients' beds, as well as scowling at Dumbledore for letting so many people stay in the room. Harry sat by Draco's side, but had yet to say a word. Draco drifted in and out of sleep.

The room was silent. Everyone seemed deep in thought – or they were unconscious or asleep, as three of the room's occupants were. No explanations had been made, and none seemed to be forthcoming any time soon. Harry assumed they were waiting to fit the puzzle pieces together until Snape and Draco were both fully awake. Right now, no one would be able to concentrate on anything else.

Harry looked over at Snape, and could not help but allow a tiny bit of hope into his heart as he saw that some colour had returned to Snape's cheeks. Not much, but enough for a person who had been staring at that very face for a whole night to see the difference.

"He—he might actually make it, mightn't he," Harry said softly, more to himself than to anyone else.

Dumbledore gave him a small sad smile. "We still don't know, Harry. Hermione's potion may be the antidote, and it may even make him better for a moment, but we don't know if

After Rain

his body can take it. He's had the poison in him for a week; that's never healthy. His lungs and heart may not regain function as before."

Harry nodded. That was the reason he had refused to hope – he knew that Snape was far from out of danger yet.

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Ron looked down at the floor where Lucius lay bound. He felt rather sick when he saw that it was really Lucius lying there now, no trace of Hermione left in him. The older man glared around the room with hateful fury, and Dumbledore kept a close eye on him. Lucius had begun moving once, and the Headmaster had stunned him, leaving him unconscious for a while. Ron had all but cheered.

"Well, now that he is back to himself, I believe I should go contact the Ministry," Dumbledore said. "I will be back in a moment."

He stood, and faced Madam Pomfrey. "I trust you to keep him secure."

She nodded to him, and he left the room and the wing.

Silence once again fell over the room. Harry's eyes still flitted between Draco and Snape, his eyebrows knitted in a frown. Ron watched him curiously. He wondered what had made Harry change his mind on what he felt about Malfoy so completely. He knew that his best friend's opinion of Snape had already changed; that was both easier to see and easier to pinpoint when it had happened.

The change of heart on Malfoy's front, however, did not seem clear in any way. Except, of course, that it *had* happened. There was no way Harry would be watching Malfoy so intently if there had been no change.

Why would Malfoy willingly take a cursed gem meant for Harry? The git nearly died for Harry. Why?

Confused, Ron looked over at his girlfriend instead. He stood up, and walked over the short distance to her.

"You look tired," he said to her, standing behind her. He put his hands on her shoulders and began massaging gently.

After Rain

"You try being kidnapped," she said, looking up at him with a slight smile. "It's not all that much fun, you know. Mm, that feels nice."

He smiled, glad that at least something was right in his world. Hermione would stand by him, even when the world around him fell apart. Harry might decide to suddenly like Snape and Malfoy, and Lucius might try to kill Snape, and Dumbledore might be mysterious as always, but Ron would still have Hermione.

It felt really good to know that.

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Kingsley Shacklebolt and Maria Moonstone, both Aurors whom Narcissa had met before, entered the room a while later. Dumbledore walked behind them, and showed them Lucius. Narcissa did not want to watch – hatred welled up within her every time she glanced down at her husband. He had nearly killed their son in his stupid wish to get revenge. There was no forgiveness she could ever offer him, and she did not believe he wanted it. He was only angry now, that he had been caught, and that Severus had not died.

Not yet, at least, she thought, great agony piercing her heart.

Lucius' eyes screamed murder upon seeing Dumbledore, but he was given no chance to speak as the Aurors whisked him away by way of Levicorpus.

"Mrs. Malfoy, if you would please come with us?" Dumbledore asked. "I assure you, we will give you notice of anything that changes for Severus – but your statements are necessary—"

Narcissa looked at her son, and then at Snape, who lay so grey and still on his bed. She knew her son would be all right – he was merely sleeping after all, and he had been awake before, and she had held him – but Severus—would he live? Her heart broke when she thought that he might not be – then who would she turn to? Who would be there for her? Who would love her? Who would she love?

She rose, her movements precise and controlled, and followed Dumbledore out.

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After Rain

Draco woke again, and breath caught in his throat as he got his first good look at his beloved godfather. He had seen him before, when he had woken up; his mind had still been hazy, his eyes not used to the brightness around him, and too many people had stood between him and Severus.

Now he saw the grey colours of his godfather's face. His breathing was still shallow and suffering, his body shaking with cold, yet his forehead shining with pearls of sweat.

"Can't anyone do anything?"

His voice was raspy and dry, barely more than a whisper.

He found Harry by his side – a healthy Harry, without cuts and blood and death all over him. The memories flashed before Draco's eyes – his father's hawk, the green gem in its claws. He had thought it was all lost then, but he had tried anyway – tried to get Harry out of danger.

He could still feel the excruciating pain of the curse, ghostly knives, sharp and precise, cutting him. He had screamed, he knew, and he wondered if Harry would see him as weak now. He hoped he would not – he hoped for something entirely different.

"Shh," Harry said, placing a straw to his lips and allowing him to take a sip of water that tasted foul. Or perhaps his throat was simply so dry, that nothing would taste good. Draco did not know.

"Do something," Draco said again, when he had taken several sips.

"We have," Harry said. "We used the blood, just like you said. Hermione figured it out—she gave him the antidote. Now we're just waiting."

"For what?" Draco asked, before he could help himself.

Harry did not answer; he looked away as he placed the goblet of water back on the stand beside the bed.

Draco could feel his body go numb.

After Rain

It can't be—Father cannot succeed! his mind screamed. No, not 'father'. Only 'Lucius'. He is not my father, and will never be.

Harry pulled the sheets back up over him, tucking him in. Draco wished he could enjoy the feeling, but fear for his godfather made it impossible.

“Where is my mother?” he asked softly.

“She went to give her statement to the Aurors,” Harry said. “She’ll be back soon.”

He reached out then, and touched Draco’s cheek. Draco gasped at the touch, and looked up at Harry. Dark hair fell into those green eyes, and Draco wished he could concentrate on the moment. He thought he could see caring in those eyes.

He doesn't care about you, Draco said. Pity you, maybe, but he doesn't care.

Harry leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Draco’s forehead. He lingered there for a moment, his lips against Draco’s scarred forehead, and he breathed in. Shocked, Draco stared at him when he pulled back.

“Thank you for saving my life,” Harry said softly.

Draco realised he had his mouth open already, and he stammered a bit as he replied, “N-no problem.”

Harry smiled slightly. He glanced over at Severus, and then at his friends. The Weasel and Granger sat together on a couch that did not usually exist in the Infirmary.

“We’ll talk, later,” Harry said, “when we’re more in private.”

Draco smiled hesitantly back, although any happiness he could possibly feel about Harry wanting to be alone with him, was squashed as soon as the thought of Severus passed through his mind. If Lucius succeeded in murdering Snape, Draco would not be held accountable for his actions. In fact, even if Snape lived – and oh, how Draco prayed he would – Draco would hunt Lucius down and make sure he paid for his crimes.

Then Harry pressed a vial to his lips, and Draco trusted that Harry knew what he was doing, so he drank. Moments later, his world went black as he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

After Rain

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When Friday morning dawned, Harry refused to go to class. Hermione and Ron, however, left for breakfast and to attend Transfigurations and then Herbology. They had promised that they would take notes for him as well. Hermione had both hugged him tight and kissed him on the cheek as she left. Ron had given him a quick hug.

Dumbledore had been forced to leave. He had meetings scheduled that he needed to go to, and the school did not run itself. He had asked the house elves to serve Harry breakfast in the Infirmary. Dobby had served him, although Harry barely touched the food.

Madam Pomfrey had left for her room, organising or de-organising, by the sound of it. She had been upset still, when she left. After all, she had known Professor Snape since he was a little boy, when he first started attending Hogwarts at eleven years of age.

Therefore, Harry now sat alone with Draco and Snape. Draco still slept; the potion would work for a while longer. There was no need, Harry felt, for him to be awake through these agonising hours. If things began looking worse, Harry would give him some wake-up potion, and the young Slytherin would be able to say goodbye.

So far, however, things did not look worse.

The small amount of healthy skin colour that Snape's face normally held had returned, and Harry, who had been listening to his breathing for almost twelve consecutive hours, knew that it had gotten better. The rasp had gone, his breathing now calmer. Madam Pomfrey had fed the Potions master one of his own strengthening potions, which seemed to help. A vial an hour would be administered until he woke up.

Harry rose from Draco's side, where he had stayed despite the fact that he was long since out of danger.

He sat down on the side of Snape's bed rather than in one of the chairs this time. He took Snape's hands in his, and began talking quietly to him.

"You need to wake up, Snape- sorry, Professor Snape. Sorry. I'm just—I'm quite used to my professor being up and looking stern and being horrible, and you're just not like that right now." Harry's voice trailed off, and he sat silent for a moment before continuing. "You still need to wake up, though. You see Draco's over there and he'd be devastated if you, you know— And quite honestly, I wouldn't deal with it all that well either. So, all I need you to

After Rain

do is wake up and start spewing rude comments to me. Well, you don't have to spew stuff – you could be nice for a change, but that might give Madam Pomfrey a heart attack—"

Harry ended his short monologue in but a whisper. A lone tear was making its way down his cheek. It fell off his chin and hit the professor's pale hand. Harry did not notice – what he did notice was the slight pressure Snape suddenly put to his hand.

"Professor Snape?" Harry said, his voice suddenly filling with hope that he could not hold back.

Once again, he felt a slight pressure.

"Come on, come on, you can do it," Harry chanted, as much to himself as to Snape.

The professor's eyes fluttered, his eyelashes moving just slightly.

"Come on, come on, wake up, Professor Snape," Harry mumbled.

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It took Severus every ounce of will in his body, to press his eyelids open. He let them fall back down, blinking a couple of times at the dim light of the room, before he focused on the boy before him. Harry grinned madly.

"ott'r," he managed to croak out.

His throat felt dry as a desert, and his eyes hurt even from the mild light in the room. His body felt as though it had lived through hours of the Cruciatus curse.

Yet something was missing.

The burning... It's gone!

"Good morning, Professor," Harry said to him, very quietly. "I think there will be quite a few people that will be happy to hear that you're awake."

Severus shot him a questioning look, wondering what he meant by that. When he looked around and saw that he was in the Infirmary, he wondered how he had gotten there. He

After Rain

remembered—he remembered stairs from the night before. Or perhaps more than one night? It felt as though he had slept forever. But he recalled the burning in his chest, how it had become more and more unbearable with every step he took, until he had been forced to stop. Then he was unable to continue, as the burning spread into every cell of his body—

Firm arms, guiding him up the stairs—*Harry?* he wondered.

"I'll tell you all about it later," Harry told him as an answer to the questioning look. "Now I should probably let you rest some more before Madam Pomfrey comes in here and takes my head off for exhausting you." He grinned. "When you wake up again, I promise that another person will be very happy to see you."

Severus let his eyelids drop once again. Sleep seemed like a good idea, he knew. Slowly, he drifted off.

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Harry moved swiftly back to the blond Slytherin's bed, grabbing the vial he had kept ready since he gave Draco the sleeping potion on his way. Without spilling a drop, he popped the lid off and put it to the boy's soft pink lips. The potion went down easily, and the effects were immediate. Draco blinked as the world came back into focus.

"Morning," Harry said, unable to keep the large smile off his face. "I have good news for you."

Draco blinked, then understood and gaped at him. "Is he—he'll be all right?"

Harry nodded and motioned to Severus. Draco scrambled to sit up, and it seemed his body did not quite cooperate. Harry helped him, and soon Draco sat up and saw his sleeping godfather.

"He's back asleep again, but he will be okay, I'm sure of it," Harry said softly. "He was awake just a minute ago."

Draco's eyes moved hesitantly from Snape's still form to Harry as Harry laid him down again.

"Thank you," Draco whispered.

After Rain

"Don't thank me, I didn't do anything. Thank your mother and Hermione – and yourself," Harry said. "They're the ones that found what poison it was, and they're the ones who created the antidote. And you suggested the blood. I'd never have thought of it. I don't even know why Hermione needed it—or perhaps that was Lucius who asked for it—"

"You never were particularly good at understanding potions," Draco mumbled. "Father would have used it to create a cancelling potion, and tainted his blood." At Harry's questioning look, he explained, "It would have stopped the previous poison and made it untraceable, and the tainted blood would have killed him instead. It doesn't normally kill, but Severus was in such a state—you'd have known, if you'd listened during our lessons."

"Thanks for reminding me," Harry said, chuckling.

Draco groaned suddenly. "Oh Merlin. Granger helped? Does that mean I have to be *nice* to her now?"

"Might be nice," Harry said.

"Do you think you can convince Severus of the same thing?" Draco asked, chuckling.

"Severus?" Harry asked, raising an eyebrow. "You call him that?"

"Do you really think I call my godfather 'Professor' in private?"

"He's your godfather?" Harry asked. "That explains a lot."

Draco rolled his eyes at him.

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Forty-five minutes later, Harry had had time to inform Madam Pomfrey that the Potions master had woken up and would be all right. She was angry at first with him for not coming to tell her sooner, but relaxed after getting to check the man's vital signs and such. After she had finished, and after she had placed an IV with strengthening potion to his arm, she went to the fireplace to talk to Dumbledore. He was, unsurprisingly, very happy to hear the good news, and promised to come up to the Infirmary as soon as he was done with a few important things.

After Rain

Throughout it all, the professor in question slept soundly. His breathing became better and steadier; it would soon be back to normal. His face looked at peace, no longer contorted in pain as it had been most of the night.

Harry had helped Draco over to Snape's bedside. The blond was still sore – something which Harry kept apologising for, again and again.

“It’s okay, Potter,” Draco said.

“You took a deadly curse for me,” Harry said. “That’s not ‘okay’.”

“It wasn’t that big a deal,” Draco said, rolling his eyes. “Besides, it was my father’s curse, so who better to take it?”

“I’ll kill the bastard,” Harry growled. “There was blood everywhere. I thought you were going to die, and that I’d be to blame for it, and how in Merlin’s name is that okay at all?”

Then Draco took Harry’s breath away.

He pushed himself out of the chair, standing unsteadily and fell into Harry’s arms, his legs not quite carrying him. Harry stared, wide-eyed and open-mouthed, at the boy he held.

“Finally, you’re silent,” Draco murmured.

Then he pressed his lips against Harry’s.

Harry’s mind exploded with feelings and sensations. The soft lips beneath his own, pushing against his, Draco’s body trembling against his own. There was a moment of complete stillness, before Harry felt the dart of a tongue against his lips, and he parted his them before he had time to think about it.

It felt as good as the last time, and ten thousand times better, because now Harry knew that Draco cared, and that he cared about Draco, and Draco had saved his life and—oh Merlin— Draco’s tongue slid over Harry’s lips gently, exploring hesitantly. Harry pulled him tighter, and felt him sigh against his body as Harry began to kiss back in earnest.

When the kiss ended, they were both flushed and breathless.

After Rain

“So that’s how I get you to shut up,” Draco said, breathing quickly. Harry could see desire in his eyes.

“Ahem.”

Harry and Draco both looked at the source of the voice – and realised that they had an audience. Madam Pomfrey and Professor Dumbledore stood side by side, Madam Pomfrey pretending to be busy with charts, but Dumbledore’s eyes upon Harry and Draco, his eyes twinkling.

“While a display of love is always a thing to cherish, perhaps now isn’t the time and place?”

Harry blushed hotly. “No, sir.”

But he held onto Draco, tight against his own body. He felt as though he never wanted to let go. Draco, standing slightly shorter than Harry, fit perfectly in his arms.

Dumbledore moved to the end of the bed. Madam Pomfrey scurried around the room, muttering to herself about Draco, who she thought should still be in bed, and about boys in general, and displays of affection in the middle of her Infirmary. Harry pretended not to hear.

Then Madam Pomfrey checked her watch, and hurried to Snape’s bedside.

“I would think he’d wake up with this dose,” she said. “If everything is all right.”

They did not know whether everything was all right, obviously.

But mere seconds after the strengthening potion had been administered, they all heard the small groan escaping from the Potions master's lips. Draco, who held Snape's hand in his in much the same fashion Harry had done to him earlier, squeezed his hand a bit tighter.

Snape opened his eyes again, and blinked a few times in confusion. His eyes went from person to person, and his confusion seemed to grow.

"Good morning, Severus," Dumbledore said, his eyes twinkling. "Did you sleep well?"

The Potions professor nodded, his brows still knitted with puzzlement.

After Rain

"I see you didn't expect a wake-up party," Dumbledore continued, showing his amusement at the man's perplexed expression. "We were all quite worried for you, you know. When young Mr. Potter here told Poppy and Mr. Malfoy that you were awake, we were delighted."

"What happen'd?" Snape's throat still sounded dry, and Harry held grabbed a glass, placing the straw to Snape's lips. He was used to this now, he realised, having done it several times in the past few days.

"It's a long story," Harry replied.

Snape did not mind. He listened, rather sleepily, as the people around him told him how Lucius Malfoy had poisoned him by putting poison in his drink during the dinner when the parents had been present. Harry told them about Dobby, who had seen Lucius do it and who had, in a moment of rather rare wisdom, grabbed the goblet, and then Dumbledore told them how Lucius had kidnapped Hermione, used Polyjuice Potion to impersonate her, and had almost managed to give him the final bout of poison that would have killed Snape on the spot, and made it look like natural causes.

Just as they wrapped the story up, the door to the Infirmary opened.

Narcissa Malfoy, tall and beautiful in a long black dress, strode into the room. When she caught sight of Snape, awake and looking at her, her features turned into a soft smile.

"Severus," she whispered. "You're awake."

She ran to his side, manners rather forgotten, and placed a kiss on Snape's lips. It was no chaste kiss, but it was short, because Snape's lungs were not what they should be.

"I was so afraid—"

Draco smiled at his mother and godfather, while Harry watched Draco instead. Although he had grown to care for his professor, he did not need to see, or listen to, proclamations of love by or for him.

He intertwined his fingers with Draco's, squeezing softly. Draco looked up at him, his eyes shining with happiness. Without a word, Harry picked Draco up, and carried him to one of the other rooms in the Hospital Wing. Draco smiled at his mother as they left, and Harry caught sight of Snape, who seemed to be almost smiling.

Love is in the air, Harry thought with a smile, and pulled Draco closer.

After Rain

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Epilogue

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The rain clouds had scattered, breaking apart to reveal a blue sky and a bright sun. It bathed the Manor and its grounds in light, drying up the tears spilled by heaven.

The wedding would be perfect.

A small ceremony, with only the couple's closest friends and family. Harry waited, excitement pulsing through him.

Draco looked so handsome. His white robes, tailored to fit perfectly just like every other garment in his wardrobe, made him look like an angel descended from the heavens above. He had combed his blond hair back, but not slicked it down. Slicked back had been the preferred style of Lucius Malfoy, and since the bastard had been rotting away in Azkaban for several years, and Draco wanted to look nothing like him, he let his hair fall freely instead. The grey eyes danced with merriment.

He held out his arm, and his mother rested her graceful hand upon it. The bride, just as pale as her son, shone like the sun itself and though Harry only had eyes for Draco, he had to admit that she must be one of the most beautiful women he had ever seen.

Severus looked as though he agreed.

Harry hid a smile behind his hand, when he saw the man with his jaw on the floor, as the bride became visible walking down the slope of the field. He looked good too – Severus would never be a man described as beautiful, but the light grey robes and the well-washed hair, longer now and tied back with a ribbon, together with the smile on his face, made him pass for almost handsome.

Of course, he would never measure up to Draco. Even with the light scar on his forehead, Draco was the most exquisitely beautiful man Harry had ever seen. In fact, the scar only made him more so – it reminded Harry, every minute of the day, that Draco had nearly given his life to save Harry's. Draco had made many jokes about them both being scar heads these days.

After Rain

Draco handed his mother off to Severus with a kiss on her cheek. She smiled tearfully at him before grasping Severus' hand in hers.

Draco turned to Harry, and sat beside him, their fingers interlacing.

The ceremony – short and sweet, performed by one of the Ministry officials with a license – passed without a hitch. Harry wondered if he and Draco would ever stand there, together, vowing to love each other for eternity.

I hope so, he thought with a smile.

After the ceremony, the party started. While the ceremony had been small and private, the celebrations afterwards were not. Hermione and Ron came hand in hand, baby Rose in their arms.

“I have to say—the git looks happy,” Ron said, chuckling as they saw Severus lean in to kiss his new wife over and over.

“Ron, language,” Hermione said, though she chuckled.

“Well, I’d say he’s pretty happy,” Draco said. “After being in love with my mother for twenty odd years, he’s finally got her.”

“And a baby on the way,” Harry grinned. “Draco here will be a big brother.”

“I’m fairly certain the kid will see me more as the funny uncle who passes by every now and then,” Draco said, rolling his eyes. “I mean – twenty-three years age difference. I don’t even live with them anymore.”

Harry kissed Draco’s cheek. “Then I’m sure you’ll be the very best uncle ever.”

“So what about the two of you?” Hermione asked, grinning. “Marriage and children anywhere in the future for you?”

“Definitely.”

“I don’t—” Harry began, then turned around to look at Draco. “Really?”

“Why not?” Draco smiled with a shrug, as though he had just spoken about the weather. “Doesn’t seem like such a bad idea.”

After Rain

Harry stared at him, then broke into a wide grin, and pulled Draco to him. Their lips met in a wonderfully warm kiss, Draco's tongue darting out to tease Harry in the way he liked best.

Ron rolled his eyes. "I suppose it's time to go – once those two start, there's no stopping them."

Draco made a rude gesture at Ron, without ever breaking his kiss with Harry. Ron growled, but it had been years since the two had fought for real, so Harry did not worry.

"We'll see you later," Hermione said. "I think Rose will be wanting food fairly soon."

The baby had just started to fuss. Harry had to wonder what it would feel like to have a child. Could they adopt a child and raise him or her together? Perhaps from an orphanage – Harry had sometimes wondered what it would have been like to be placed in such a facility, instead of with the Dursleys, and to be adopted.

They would create their own family. With Draco, Harry felt he could do anything, and anywhere they went together, would be home.

"It'd be nice, wouldn't it?" Draco whispered to him, as though reading his thoughts. "A little kid of our own."

Harry shook his head. "You're insane, you know that?"

Draco smirked, lovingly. "And you're my boyfriend. What does that say about you?"

Harry kissed Draco lightly. "That I love you."

"Good," Draco whispered. "Because I love you, too. Very, very much."

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The End

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