Ensnared

by Quillbreaker

Summary

Harry is sent to die at the hands of the monster in the place of his uncle. A Harry Potter version of The Beauty and the Beast
The carriage arrived outside the gates and a thin, bespectacled fifteen-year-old boy with messy black locks and emerald green eyes, emerged from the cottage with three huge suitcases. The combined weight of the suitcases was more than what the boy weighed. He moved precariously towards the carriage and took every step with extreme caution. He breathed out a sigh of relief when he finally reached the carriage. The carriage driver got out of his seat and took the suitcases from the boy. He put them away and addressed the breathless boy,

"You work here, boy?"

The boy looked up at the driver and shook his head. A roar caused him to flinch and he ran back towards the cottage. His massive uncle stood in the dining room. At the sight of the boy, his tiny eyes were filled with rage and he roared,

"WHAT IS THE MEANING OF THIS BOY?"

The boy couldn't help but feel puzzled. What had he done now? His uncle grabbed him from the shirt front and shook him. The boy felt rattled but continued his attempts to remember what he could have done wrong. His uncle released him and threw him against the wall. The boy willed himself not to throw up and looked up at his uncle with puzzlement. His uncle grabbed a shirt from the table and waved it in front of Harry,

"Where should this be?"

Harry looked at the shirt and realization struck him like a lightning bolt. He spoke timidly,

"In your suitcase, Uncle Vernon."

His uncle threw the shirt on his face and the boy pulled it off and folded it carefully. His uncle's voice boomed out again,

"WHERE IS YOUR MIND AT? We feed you, give you a place to stay, give you clothes to cover your worthless body and WHAT DO YOU GIVE US IN RETURN?"

The boy bowed his head and listened silently. The food he was given were left overs. He slept in the shed and the clothes he was given to wear were hand me downs of his cousins. Sometimes he wondered that he was better off in an orphanage. He shook away the thoughts,

"I'm sorry, Uncle Vernon. It will not happen again."

His uncle was about to burst into another fit of anger but was distracted as his son and his wife entered the room. He turned to his son and gushed out,

"What would you like me to bring for you, Dudley?"

The boy looked at his massive cousin and felt envy almost bordering on jealousy. He wished that he had his own parents, that cared about him and his needs. He listened to his cousin demand a never-ending list of things, most of which, the boy knew that his cousin already owned.

He was forced out of his thoughts by his aunt's shrill voice,

"The dishes are not going to do themselves, boy."
The boy nodded his head silently and made his way to the sink. He looked at the large stack of dirty dishes that awaited him and got to work all the while listening to his uncle, talking affectionately to his son and wife.

The conversation ended and his uncle spat out an order to him,

"Take my briefcase to the carriage."

The boy hurriedly wiped his hands on the towel and picked up the briefcase from the dining table. He watched as his uncle kissed his wife and patted his son before stepping out the door. The boy followed his uncle out the door and got in the carriage. They boy placed the briefcase in the carriage carefully and spoke,

"Have a safe trip, Uncle."

His uncle looked at him and spoke,

"I don't want any complains about you upon my return, boy. Pay attention to your work."

The boy nodded his head quietly and stepped back from the carriage. He watched it as it drove away and felt relief course his body. Two weeks without his uncle were going to be pure bliss. He remembered the stack of dirty dishes that was waiting for him and hurried back inside the cottage.

Five hours later, the boy was reclining back on the cool grass and starring up at the starry sky. He loved this hour when his relatives were asleep and everything was serene and quiet. His gaze scanned the stars and wondered which ones represented his mom and dad. He liked to believe that they were looking down at him and watching over him.

But he also questioned his belief. If they were watching over him then why was he living in such a deplorable state? Why was his life so miserable? He was their son. They were supposed to care about him. Why had they left him all alone, at the mercy of people that didn't even want him? His being was nothing more than a servant in their eyes. He doubted that they even regarded him as a proper human being. He felt tears well up in his eyes and wiped them away before they could flow.

He had taught himself that he would not cry. He would endure whatever came his way. This would pass. He was hopeful that things would change. He rose to his feet and walked to the shed. He looked at his worn-out mattress on the floor and felt no desire to sleep. He lit an oil lamp and bent down to retrieve his books from under the loose floor board. He looked at them for a while and then hugged them close to his chest. These books were his most prized possessions. He sat down on the mattress, placed the oil lamp close to him and began reading.

After what seemed like hours, Harry closed the books, hid them under the floor boards and made his way back to the mattress. He laid down on it and pulled a thin blanket over himself. He smiled to himself. Someday, he would leave this place. Someday, he would have everything that he had always been denied.
Chapter 2

The boy was woken up by his aunt banging on the shed door and shouting his name. He immediately sat up straight and spoke,

"I'm awake, Aunt Petunia."

His aunt shouted back,

"I want you in the kitchen in five minutes."

And she stomped away. The boy rubbed the sleep out of his eyes. At least he wouldn't have to make breakfast for his uncle today. And with that, he got up from his mattress, stretched and exited the shed.

After making and serving breakfast. He stood by the sink and washed the dishes. His stomach grumbled and ached from starvation and he found it extremely difficult to stand straight. He was done with the dishes and drying his hands on the towel when his aunt placed a plate on the counter and spoke sternly,

"Eat your breakfast."

The boy thanked her and ate his dry piece of toast. A normal person probably wouldn't even eat it. But for the boy it was his source of sustenance. His aunt had always given him a single dry toast for breakfast for as long as he remembered. If his aunt was feeling more benevolent, she would apply a very thin coat of butter to the toast. The boy considered those days to be his lucky days.

After the boy was done with his meagre breakfast. he washed the plate and awaited further orders from his aunt. His aunt handed him a list and spoke,

"I want you to get these groceries from the town. And don't fall asleep there. I want you back within two hours."

The boy nodded his head silently while his heart practically screamed with joy. He loved going to the town because he could finally get some new books. He must have read his old ones at least a thousand times. His aunt handed him the money for the groceries and the boy was on his way.

He walked merrily through the fields, crossed the bridge and in no time, he was standing at the entrance of the town. The boy always felt happy when he saw the cheerful environment of the town. Everyone was always smiling, always happy. He loved the way people interacted with each other. He made his way through the streets and arrived at the book store. The boy could barely hide his smile.

He entered the store and the bell on the door rang softly. He walked into the store and breathed in the wonderful scent of books. This was his favourite place in the entire world. A voice behind him spoke,

"Harry, you're back. How are you?"

The boy turned around and saw a man with a pale face, thin moustache and greying hair. It felt good to hear his name. His relatives only ever called him boy. Harry hugged him tightly and spoke,

"I'm fine. How are you?"
Remus moved his finger down Harry's spine and spoke softly,

"I can still feel your vertebrae."

Harry laughed. Remus did this every time he visited to judge his health. Remus led him to the counter and pulled out a wooden chair,

"Sit, Harry. You look like you've been starved."

Harry shook his head,

"I really can't stay long, Remus. My aunt said that I have to be back in two hours."

Remus sighed in disappointment. He didn't miss the look of excitement in Harry's eyes and finally spoke,

"I know what you're waiting for, Harry. I do have a few books for you."

Remus disappeared into the back of the shop and came back with a stack of books. Harry felt overjoyed. He set the down on the counter and Harry realized that there were four books in the stack. Usually Remus gave him two or three books. He hugged Remus in excitement and spoke,

"Thank you…..thank you…..thank you. You're the best, Remus."

Remus hugged him back,

"Take care of yourself, Harry."

Harry nodded his head and spoke,

"I'll see you in a few weeks, Remus."

Harry dropped the books in his grocery basket and exited the shop. He made his way through the town, getting the bread, meat, vegetables and fruits that his Aunt had asked him to get. He was at the edge of the town and decided to take a break. He sat down on a stone and looked at the dense forest that started where the town ended. Everyone said that it was haunted. Whoever went inside, never came back out. Remus had told him that the forest was ruled by a monster. Harry had always been curious about it. He wondered if the monster really existed. Harry doubted it. It was all probably a tale to keep the children out of the woods.

Harry rose to his feet, picked up the basket and made his way back home. Well he really couldn't call it home. His status there was lesser than a servant's. Harry knew that his parents had died when he was just one year old. He was told that they had died in a snow storm during a journey. Sometimes he wondered what it was like to have parents. Life would have been so different. It would have been so easy. Harry was walking, lost in his thoughts when he collided with someone.

Harry realized that it was Sybil Trelawney, the town's fortune teller. Harry apologized and gathered her things from the ground. He had just handed them to her when she looked into his eyes with her enlarged ones and gripped his wrist,

"Your life is going to change."

Harry felt puzzled,

"What?"
Harry tried to look away but he couldn't break the eye contact. Harry felt as if she was looking into his soul and he felt oddly mesmerized. Suddenly she released his wrist and Harry's trance broke. Sybil blinked owlishly and then spoke,

"Was I saying something, my boy?"

Harry shook his head and departed. He felt oddly dazed. Sybil was known to be eccentric. She must have been having a fit. Harry continued walking and soon reached the cottage. He took out his books from the basket and placed them inside the shed before knocking at the door of the cottage. His aunt opened the door and Harry saw a look of pure anger on her face,

"You're late, boy."

Harry thought of an excuse and spoke,

"The baker was out of bread, Aunt. I had to wait for the fresh batch."

His aunt contemplated his excuse and then snatched the basket from his hand.

"Where's the change?"

Harry pulled out the leftover money from inside his pocket and handed it to her. She checked the groceries and then counted the money thrice before nodding approvingly.

Harry sighed out in relief. At least this time she hadn't accused him of stealing money. She signalled towards the kitchen,

"Lunch isn't going to prepare itself."

Harry felt his body protest as he stepped into the kitchen. He was too exhausted from the walk but at least he had something to look forward now. His new books were waiting for him at the end of the day.
Chapter 3

Harry had enjoyed three days free from his uncle's commands and curses. He was laying back on his mattress and enjoying his new book. The pictures and the words always aroused his senses and they took him away to his fantasy land where he could forget everything and just explore the most perfect, the most magical world, where he could have anything that he wanted.

Thunder roared outside, and lightning struck somewhere. Harry was forced out of his fantasy world as the wind howled and rattled the small shed. Harry felt a sinking feeling in his chest that something was going to be awfully wrong. He rose up to his feet but as soon as he did, a lightning bolt struck the shed and sparked a fire. Harry was too stunned to move. The fire was spreading at a rapid rate. Harry's survival instinct kicked in and he jumped to the floor. He tried to pry the loose floor board away to get to his books but it was stuck. Harry cursed and clawed the wooden plank to somehow get it away but only wound up, hurting his hands. The fire was consuming everything.

The shed was filling up with smoke and Harry found it difficult to breathe. His eyes watered and he felt as if he was suffocating. He clutched his chest and crawled out of the burning shed. Once outside, Harry laid on his back and breathed in deep gulps of the cold, night air. Once his breathing was normal. He raised himself on his elbows and saw the shed burned down to the ground.

Tears rose to his eyes and Harry couldn't hold them back. He fell back on the grass and closed his eyes. His world and everything that he had cherished most in it had just burned down. The wind continued to howl and the clouds thundered on. The first drops of rain landed on Harry but Harry was just too numb to care. Soon after it began to pour and Harry screamed. He screamed as loud as he could. But no one heard them because the wind and the rain drowned them out.

Vernon Dursley was travelling back home in a carriage when the storm began. The rain began to pour but the carriage continued to move on. Suddenly the clouds thundered deafeningly and the horses neighed and went out of control. They carriage was pulled off track and went shooting through the trees. Vernon Dursley fell out of the carriage and watched in the horror as the terrified horses raced away with the carriage. He got up to his feet and tried to run after it but soon found himself out of breath.

He sat down on a tree stump and looked around to realize that he was in the middle of a forest. He calculated where he was in his mind and he felt terror freeze his heart when he realized that this was the haunted forest. He immediately got up from the tree stump and ran as fast as his legs could carry him. He was running when he stumbled and fell over a rock. As he looked up, he saw a clearing. He was going to get out of the forest. But as he reached the clearing, his gaze took in the magnificent structure that stood at a distance. It began to rain and Vernon Dursley found no other option but to take refuge in the castle. It was probably deserted anyway.

He reached the huge oak doors of the castle and realized that they were ajar. He slipped in and saw that the paint that had been white was not so peeled off that it looked out of place amid the dark of rotting wood. The windows were boarded up. the once glossy stairs were too weak to bare weight. Inside was dank, gloomy, cold. The furniture, untouched in decades, was decaying and frayed. The floor was awash with moss. A dusty chandelier hung from the ceiling.

Vernon Dursley heard the rain pouring outside and made his way up the dusty steps. He wandered the gloomy, abandoned corridors for minutes. The castle was huge. His greed overtook his fear. The lust for gold and treasures kept his feet going and soon enough he found himself in a huge chamber. Five Pedestals stood in the centre of the room and he made his way to them.
Vernon Dursley's eyes grew wide as he saw the artefacts displayed on those pedestals. A Golden Locket. A Gold Ring, A Diadem, A Battered Diary and a Golden Cup. He had no interest in the diary but he was certain that the other artefacts would fetch him a handsome price and he would be rich. He had just grabbed the locket when he heard a snake hiss and a cry escaped his lips as the snake prepared to attack. Suddenly a grim voice hissed something and the snake stopped. The voice then addressed him,

"You dare to steal from me."

Vernon Dursley stammered and stepped back. The Locket was still in his hand. The voice laughed and then spoke,

"It seems that I shall have to kill you."

Vernon Dursley fell on his knees,

"Please, No. I have a family to take care of."

The voice hummed thoughtfully and then spoke,

"Very well, I shall allow you to leave so that you may bid farewell to your family. But by tomorrow evening, you shall return to me and accept your death with dignity."

Vernon Dursley rose to his feet, replaced the locket hesitantly on the pedestal and was about to run out the chamber when the voice spoke again,

"Take the locket with you. When you ready to die, wear it around your neck. It shall bring you to me."

Vernon Dursley picked up the locket from the pedestal and stumbled out of the room. He was just running out from the oak doors when the voice spoke,

"If you do not return, I shall find you and kill you along with your family."

Vernon Dursley ran senselessly into the rain. He ran through the trees and the bushes. Terror was tearing at his heart and he felt as if the voice was following him.

The night passed and in the morning, his aunt found him soaked to the skin and curled on the ground a foot from the burned down shed. She grimaced, turned around and walked back in the cottage. The boy would die from the cold, no doubt. If he wasn't dead already. Good Riddance. But the shed was burned down. Vernon would be returning today. He would be so mad.
Chapter 4

Vernon Dursley sat in a dazed state in the kitchen of the small cottage while his wife shook his husband and cried hysterically,

"Vernon, what's wrong? Tell me."

But the man was far from speaking. He felt the weight of the locket in his pocket and it seemed to him as the weight of his impending death. Suddenly he rose to his feet as an idea occurred to him. He spoke out,

"Where is the boy?"

Petunia looked stunned. She looked at her husband in shock and then spoke,

"He's outside."

Vernon yelled out,

"Get here right now, boy!"

He waited for a while but there was no response. Petunia rested his hand on his shoulder and spoke,

"He was out in the rain all night. The boy's probably dead."

Vernon's eyes grew as large as saucers as he digested the news. He stampeded out of the cottage. His gaze took in Harry's curled up form on the grass and he screamed,

"NOOOOO!"

He rushed towards Harry and fell on the grass beside him,

"WAKE UP, BOY! Wake up, now."

The man shook Harry's limp form. Petunia stood in the doorway and watched in horror. The only thought that ran through her brain was that her husband had gone mad. He had really gone mad. Vernon slapped Harry across the face and pushed on his chest. He grabbed Harry's wrist and felt his pulse. He felt relieved and called his wife,

"Make him better, Petunia. He needs to be in his senses, today."

Petunia looked at her husband horror-struck. Since when had her husband begun to care for the boy. He had despised him all his life and now all of a sudden, he was caring for him. There was only one explanation of this. Her husband had definitely lost his mind,

"ARE YOU NOT LISTENING TO ME, WOMAN?"

Petunia was forced out of her thoughts and she immediately began to tend to the boy.

Six hours later, Harry was sitting in front of the fireplace with three blankets wrapped around him and a bowl of steaming hot soup in front of him. Harry felt extremely lethargic. He was drowsy. He was weak and above all he was disoriented. This had to be a dream. Maybe he had died and gone to heaven because otherwise his relatives would never treat him with anything but disregard.
Harry pinched himself for the umpteenth time and realized that this was indeed real. His relatives were being nice to him. What could have brought about such a change in them? What could have caused them to change their ways after so many years? Harry was just lost in those thoughts and sipping his soup when Aunt Petunia appeared beside him checked his fever,

"How are you feeling now, boy?"

Harry nodded his head quietly,

"I'm better now, Aunt Petunia."

She looked at him sternly and then spoke,

"Get back to work then, boy."

Harry realized that this was all there was to it. His relatives hadn't wanted to lose their servant boy and that's why they had taken care of him. How could he have been so stupid? How could he have even hoped that his relatives could ever change? He was about to get up when his uncle appeared and spoke,

"He is not going to do anything. Let him rest."

Harry felt overwhelmingly shocked. Was this true? Was his uncle real? Aunt Petunia gaped at her husband and opened and shut her mouth several times. She looked like a fish out of water. After a few attempts of trying uselessly to get the words out, she huffed and stomped out of the room.

Vernon looked at the clock. There was an hour left till the deadline. He was certain that Harry could be easily convinced to wear the locket. The boy was the only way out. He would send him in his place and that would settle the monster's debt. He just had to explain the situation to Petunia. He knew for sure that she would understand.

Harry was staring in the fireplace blankly. Images from last night flashed through his mind. He had lost everything. He had lost it all last night. His books, his most precious belongings had been burned in the fire last night. What was he supposed to do now? Tears streamed down his eyes. He wiped them away. How would he ever get over this? Those books were all that he had ever known. They had been his singular source of joy and comfort. How would he ever survive in this world now?

Harry was just lost in those thoughts when his uncle sat down beside him and rested his heavy hand on his shoulder,

"Your soup is getting cold."

Harry ate his soup quietly. This was bothering him. Harry began to feel the same sinking feeling that he had felt last night. Something was extremely wrong. Trelawney's face swam in front of his vision and her words echoed through his head. Had she been right? His left definitely felt different. But he couldn't understand what had caused it. He needed to understand. But he was afraid to ask his uncle. He was afraid that he would shout at him again.

Vernon kept his gaze on the clock. Thirty minutes left. He reached in his pocket and felt the locket. He turned his gaze to the boy and observed him. He felt no remorse, no regret, no guilt. The boy owed them his life. They had fed him for fifteen years. It was time for the boy to settle his debt. He finally spoke,

"I got something for you during my trip."
Harry turned to face his uncle. He couldn't believe this. His uncle had gotten something for him. His uncle had never gotten anything for him. Harry had never seen his uncle smile and yet he was sitting here with him today and smiling brightly.

Vernon pulled out the locket and handed it to Harry,

"This is for you."

Harry observed the locket closely. It was made of heavy gold with a serpentine S in glittering green stone inlay on the front. Harry realized that the locket was extremely expensive. He wondered what had possessed his uncle to get him something so precious. Suddenly Harry heard it. Whispering…murmuring. Where was that sound coming from me? Harry was snapped out of his thoughts when he noticed that his uncle was looking expectantly at him,

"Wear it, boy."

Harry looked at the locket again. He wondered why his heart was beating out of his chest. Why did he feel so terrified? Harry hesitantly wore the locket. As soon as the locket touched his skin. Harry felt as though a hook just behind his navel had been suddenly jerked irresistibly forward. His feet left the ground and he was speeding forward in a howl of wind and swirling colour. The locket was pulling him magnetically onward and then…. 
Chapter 5

Harry's feet landed on solid ground. He lost his balance and fell down on his knees. What was going on? He looked around but could barely see anything. It was too dark. His relatives had betrayed him. What had they done to him? Where was he? He felt disoriented and his head spun. How was this possible? Was he dreaming? Was this a nightmare? It had to be.

Suddenly, Harry remembered the locket that his uncle had given him and told him to wear. Instantly his hands went to the locket around his neck and he tried to pull it off but it wouldn't budge. He held it in his hand and tried to understand what was going on. This wasn't a dream. The locket had brought him here, wherever here was. He rose to his feet unsteadily. His eyes adjusted to the dark and he realized that he was in the entrance of a castle. Everything was coated with a thick layer of dust. He looked for a way out but soon came to realize that the huge oak doors, his only way out, were closed. He tried to pull them open but to no avail.

Harry looked around. His fear was slowly being replaced by intrigue. Where was he? What was this place? Why was he even here? Harry made his way up the dusty stairs and looked around for another exit. He had to get out of here. Harry realized that he was getting Goosebumps and the hair on his arms were standing on edge.

He felt the weight of someone's gaze on him. It was following him as he moved. He wasn't alone here and it was terrifying him. Harry tried to convince himself that he was being paranoid. Who would live in this abandoned place? But something had brought him here. Someone was following him. Someone was watching his every move. Harry halted in his steps. He was in a corridor that had doors on either side of it. Which one should he take? None. He moved on ahead and looked around. He tried listening for footsteps, a rustle any sound that indicated that he was being followed but he heard none.

Maybe it was a ghost. That thought terrified Harry further. Ghost didn't exist. But if he could be brought here in the blink of an eye then ghost could also exist. He was scared. His heart was beating impossibly fast. Harry didn't know when his walking had turned into running. He ran through the extensive corridors until his footsteps came to a halt outside a huge chamber. Five Pedestals stood in the centre of the room and glowed eerily. Harry found his feet move automatically towards them. Suddenly he began to hear that murmuring again. But it was louder and this time it wasn't singular. Harry held the locket close to his ear and realized that the locket was not the sole source of the murmuring. He looked at the artefacts displayed on the pedestals and realized that the murmuring was coming from each of them separately.

He looked at the empty pedestal and understood that it was the locket's place. Harry tried to pull it off again but it was as if some force was holding it around his neck. He was in a daze as he focused on the murmuring. He didn't know when he spoke out loud,

"What are you saying?"

Harry suddenly covered his mouth his with hands as he realized that he had said it out loud and his voice had echoed throughout the chamber. He continued his attempts to pull off the locket. Harry felt sick. He felt nauseous and he felt dizzy. The fever was finally catching up with him again. His knees softened and Harry collapsed on his knees again. He closed his eyes and held the locket in his hand. Why was this happening to him? Why was all this happening to him? He did not deserve this.

A dark shadow regarded the boy from a distance and everything about him had piqued his interest.
From the moment, he had appeared till now. Firstly, he had been mildly surprised to see that the greedy man had sent someone as his replacement. He had half a mind to slaughter that pig but he would do that later. He had judged from the boy's clothing and his physical appearance that he was possibly that pig's servant. From the moment, he had set his eyes on him, all his intent to kill had been extinguished. There was something about the boy. He was puzzled when he had observed the boy's failed attempts to take off the locket and his puzzlement had only increased when the boy had finally spoken. The boy had spoken parseltongue. How could an ordinary person like him speak parseltongue?

He was tempted to face the boy but he did not want to terrify him. He would have to take a softer approach towards him. He realized that the boy was close to passing out. Now that he observed him closely, the boy looked starved and malnourished. He wasn't surprised when the boy's head finally hit the floor and he became unconscious.

Harry's head was spinning. He was burning up. He held his head in his hands to make it still but nothing was working. His head felt too heavy and he felt it hit the cold floor. He closed his eyes. The cold floor felt so soothing against his burning skin. The darkness began to consume him. He knew that he was passing out. Soon enough the dark consumed him completely and he felt blissful oblivion encompass him.

The Dark Shadow moved towards the boy and rested his hand on his cheek. The boy was burning up. Maybe he should let him die. Maybe he should allow the fever to consume his soul. But his curiosity got the better of him and he picked the boy up in his arms effortlessly. His snake appeared at his heels and he spoke to it,

"He is not food, Nagini."

Nagini hissed dejectedly and slithered away. The Dark Shadow looked down at the boy in his arms and instantly knew that he was going to regret not killing him.
Harry woke up feeling extremely warm. He snuggled into the covers until suddenly he realized what had happened. He shot up straight and took in his surroundings. He was in a huge bedroom, in an extremely comfortable bed. Apart from the bed, the room was furnished with two side tables, a dressing table, a divan and two armchairs by the fireplace. The stone walls were curtained with dark green curtains that were coated with dust. Sunshine slanted in through the French doors. Apart from that Harry noticed three more doors around the walls. One of them was probably the bathroom, the other was the exit. Harry was in doubt about the third one. Everything in the room had a thick layer of dust over it. It looked like as if this place hadn't been used in a while. Harry observed the bed covers and noticed that they were fresh.

Harry raised his hand to his cheek and felt his temperature. The fever was gone. He got out of bed and noticed that he was still dressed in his own clothes. Well not his own clothes. They were hand me downs by his cousin and hung loosely on his thin frame. He had never had clothes of his own. He remembered the locket around his neck and stared down at it blankly. At the moment, he couldn't hear any sounds from it.

Harry felt like he was being watched again. He probably was. One thing was certain, someone had brought him here from that chamber last night. Someone had probably nursed him back to health or as healthy as he could be. He wondered why he wasn't dead yet. It eased his fear to some extent. Whoever was watching him, didn't mean him any harm. Because if they did, he would be dead by now.

Harry made his way to the dressing table and looked at the dusty mirror. He wiped the dust from it with his hand and looked at his murky reflection. As he moved his fingers through his roughly cut hair, he remembered his aunt and uncle and tasted the bitter taste of betrayal on his tongue. He was glad he was away from them. He would never return to them again. But he couldn't stay here either. He looked around the room again and felt himself shudder. Someone was watching him.

Harry wanted to leave the room. He wanted to get out of this place and be as far away from it as possible. A thousand questions were running in his head. Could he really leave this castle without getting his answers? Harry cursed his curiosity. It would get him killed one day. Some exploration was in order. He went to the wooden door and tried to pry it open. He didn't feel shocked to realize that he was locked in. Harry made his way to the French doors. He felt pleasantly amused to realize that they led to the balcony. He opened them and stepped out in the balcony. At least they weren't locked.

The fresh morning air greeted him. The view was breath-taking. He saw the wide expanse of the forest surrounding the castle which broke off into the greenest hills. There was greenery as far as he could see. The sky was the most beautiful shade of blue. It was as if he was in a different world altogether. Maybe he was in a different world. He had been transported here by a locket. Harry held the locket in his hand and observed it again. Why couldn't he take it off? A feeling of despair filled Harry's heart. There was no way he could ever get out from this place. The woods and the hills seemed almost impossible to get through. Harry shook his head. He wouldn't think about it now. All he could do now was watch how everything played out.

He was just admiring the view when he heard a sound from the room. His heart began beating at a million miles an hour. Someone was in the room. He slowly and carefully made his way back into the room. He half expected to see a ghost there but saw nothing except for a huge tray laden with all manners of breakfast items sitting on the side table. Harry looked suspiciously around the room.
and made his way to the door again. He tried to open it and found that it was still locked.

Harry sighed in frustration and made his way to the bed again. The wonderful scent of food tempted him to eat. He had never been offered this much food before. His breakfast had only comprised of one dry piece of toast for as long as he could remember. What if it was poisoned? Well if someone wanted him dead then they would have killed him by now. Harry picked up the plate of egg and toast and began eating. He realized how starved he had been. Maybe it was his starvation of fifteen years that was finally displaying itself. After all he had always had nothing more than leftovers as meals all his life. Harry wolfed down as much as he could.

He was just about to pick up a glass of orange juice when his gaze noticed a folded piece of paper on the tray. He picked it up, unfolded it and saw a spidery handwriting scrawled across the paper. The note read,

"I shall allow you to leave the room, if you promise not to leave the castle."

Harry found the note extremely cryptic. So, whoever was watching him didn't want him to leave this castle. Harry sipped his orange juice. He wasn't in any hurry. It wasn't like he had people who would miss him or a life that he would miss. He was just puzzled if he was supposed to speak out the promise or write it down. Since there was no way to write it down, Harry decided to vocalize his promise,

"I promise I won't try to leave this castle."

For a few minutes, nothing happened. Harry began to think that he hadn't been heard. But his thoughts were proven wrong when the door swung open. Harry's heart beat that had just slowed down, quickened again. He began to grow certain that this castle was haunted by some ghost and the very same ghost was observing him very closely.
Harry stood at the door for a while. His heartbeat had returned to normal and he wasn't afraid anymore or at least he made himself believe that. He looked out the open door and felt apprehension dawn on him. Maybe this was a trap. Well, he had been at more risk when he had been asleep last night.

Harry steeled himself and stepped out of the room. He looked around and found himself in a long dusty corridor. The place had a quality of disuse to it. The air was heavy with a dank, musty smell. The castle must have been glorious once but now it had succumbed to the weather of countless years, the cold grey stone stoic in each storm. Harry made his way through the labyrinth of corridors. His fear and terror were replaced by intense curiosity.

Harry walked for several minutes through the castle and reached a courtyard. He sat down on a weathered stone bench and thought about what he had seen so far. The castle was a complete wreck. Black, withered vines clung to the bricks in desperation, and several windows were boarded up while the rest were covered in filth and grime. The once prized gardens were now overrun with weeds that leeched everything from the soil without mercy.

He wondered what had caused someone to abandon it. But it wasn't abandoned. Perhaps the ghost of its owner was still here. He was here, definitely. Harry had felt it countless times. He had felt it ever since he had arrived here. He had eyes on him at all times. Even now, someone was watching him. Harry closed his eyes and leaned back on the bench. A steady breeze was blowing and Harry felt it tickle him.

He felt free. After so many years of slavery to his relatives, he felt truly and utterly free. He had always thought that he would leave them when the time came. He would have everything that he had ever wanted. But was this truly freedom? No, it wasn't. He was constantly being watched and he was trapped in this haunted castle. He remembered the tray of breakfast from this morning. He had never had a proper meal in his life. Maybe this castle wasn't so bad after all. Maybe he ought to thank the ghost for their hospitality.

Another question rose to his mind. Was the ghost, a man or a woman? Did it matter though? But he was so tangled in all this when another thought occurred to him. Were they even a ghost? The way that door had opened, the way that tray had appeared. They had to be a ghost. Harry's thoughts came back to his initial question. Why was he brought here? How was he brought here?

Harry rose to his feet and wandered through the extensive courtyards and overgrown lawns. The castle must have been beautiful once. Harry knew that that beauty was still present under the moss-covered walls. It was just concealed from view. He wondered how long it would take to restore this castle to its former glory. Why was he even thinking about it?

When Harry had considerably tired himself he began to seek a place to rest. He took a few turns and found himself standing in a huge hall. At the head of the hall there was a huge throne. Around it there were rows and rows of once comfortable, now dusty armchairs. This must have been the king's court.

Harry picked his way through the dusty armchairs and made his way to the throne. He felt fascinated with it. His fingers ran over the thick layer of dust on it. It was made of gold. Harry traced his fingers over the grimy surface. It was crested with several jewels and decorative metals forming a huge S. Harry had seen that shape before. He pulled the locket out from under his shirt and saw the same S carved on it. What did the S stand for? Snake? Probably.
He hesitated for a moment as the desire to sit on it overcame him. He just wanted to know what it would feel like. What the king must have felt like to sit in it. He felt the gaze on him intensify. He felt as if it was burning a hole through him. He felt as if the ghost was daring him to try. Harry stepped back a little from the throne but he was never one to back away from a challenge. He willed himself and prepared for the ghost’s wrath as he sat down on the throne.

Harry felt a smug grin creep up on his face. He leaned back in the throne and looked around the court. It felt oddly satisfying to be seated here. But he wasn't a king. He was far from it. The grin slipped from his face as the golden armrests of the throne suddenly came alive and turned into snakes with emerald eyes. Harry felt his heart stop beating and he had half risen to his feet when the snakes wrapped around his wrists and pulled him back into the throne and restrained him to it.

Harry's pulse quickened. He struggled against the snakes but they had hardened back into solid gold, holding his wrists into a tight hold. He couldn't move. Harry closed his eyes and tried to calm himself down but he couldn't. He could feel the ghosts rage and closed his eyes. He was going to die here. Harry cursed himself. This was his fault. He was the one to blame for his own demise. He had overstepped his boundaries. Why did he have to sit on the throne? Harry realized that his breathing was shallow and fear was pumping through his veins.

The dark shape stepped behind the throne and smirked in vindictive pleasure at the still form restrained to the throne. He admired the boy's courage but he was also aware of his fear now. He could practically taste it in the air. He drew closer to the back of the throne. He had no intentions of hurting the boy. After all he was aware that the boy had only done this out of curiosity. He decided that it was time to make his presence known.
The Dark Shape drew closer to the back of the throne and dragged one of his long nails over the gold surface of the throne, producing a loud, shrill screeching sound.

Harry grew impossibly still at the sound. His eyes were closed tightly and he was practically panting now. His chest was heaving and he was slowly beginning to realize the fact that he was going to die. While his mind was willing to accept that. It seemed that his body wasn't prepared. Harry's heart was stumbling over its own rhythm.

The Dark shape felt highly amused by the reactions his simple actions were eliciting from the boy. He had always enjoyed fear. He tapped his foot on the floor and heard the sound echo around the room.

The ghost was here and Harry was beginning to realize that it wasn't a ghost. He'd heard it coming; the soft susurrus of its footsteps, like a threatening whisper. It didn't seem to come from any direction, just a sound that encapsulated him inside his cocoon of despair and hopelessness. Harry struggled hard to discern where the sound was coming from but he couldn't.

The Dark shape nearly laughed. He was enjoying this. For years, he had been deprived of any kind of entertainment and now he finally had a way to amuse himself. And then there was the matter of him being a parselmouth. He was extremely curious to investigate it. He definitely wouldn't kill him, in fact he intended to keep him alive as long as he would last. Slowly he moved his nail over the back of Harry's neck and spoke in a smooth, silky voice,

"Greetings."

Harry trembled uncontrollably as he felt the touch and he would have jumped if the restraints hadn't been holding him in place. His entire body was tensed up and he felt as if his heart would stop beating. Harry told himself over and over again not to be afraid but his body wasn't listening to him. He moistened his lips and when he spoke his voice came out broken,

"Hello."

The Dark shape titled its head as he assessed the response. He had expected him to beg for his life rather than say a simple hello. He found himself highly amused by it and laughed heartily.

The sound of the laughter reverberated through the room. Harry felt his fear beginning to slip away and being replaced by utter recklessness. He was certain that there was no ghost. There was a person standing behind him, a man by the sounds of it. The same silky voice rang out again,

"Hello? I imagined that you would plead for your life."

Harry failed to see the humour in that. Why would he beg for life? It wasn't like he had a reason to live and death did seem like the most obvious choice for him. Regardless, Harry felt his curiosity get the better of him,

"Are you a ghost?"

More laughter ensued. Harry opened his eyes and tried to crane his neck back to see the person talking to him,

"A ghost? Do I feel like a ghost?"
Harry shook his head. He had no idea where his fear had gone. Right now, the only thing he felt was inquisitiveness and recklessness. He was also itching with the desire to see his captor. He could still feel something sharp on the back of his neck. Well, he had already established that he wasn't a ghost,

"You're not."

Harry realized that this was his chance to get most of his questions answered but he was just about ask when the person behind him inquired,

"What is your name?"

Harry felt that it was an odd question. What would the man do with his name if he intended to kill him? Nevertheless, he spoke,

"Harry."

Harry quickly followed by a question of his own,

"What's yours?"

For a moment, there was utter silence. Harry had almost stopped expecting a response when the silky voice sliced through the silence,

"Lord Voldemort."

Harry wondered what kind of a name was that? It was odd. Surely it wasn't his real name. He was about to voice that when he thought better of it and spoke,

"Why am I here? How did I even get here?"

Voldemort removed his nail from the back of Harry's neck and contemplated whether to reply. It was obvious that Harry was not afraid anymore. He had heard that name before, he just couldn't quite remember where. He noticed that Harry's posture wasn't as tense as it had been a few minutes ago. Even his breathing had returned back to normal. He decided to end the conversation,

"You shall not attempt to leave the premises of this castle. You are free to explore the castle but I advise you to remain wary of my death eaters. They shall not hesitate to harm you but that locket around your neck might provide you with some level of protection. Lastly, I expect to see you at the dining hall every day at precisely seven for dinner."

Harry felt shocked at that. It was too much information for him to digest but the first question that escaped his lips was,

"Death what?"

Voldemort chuckled darkly. The sound made the small hairs across Harry's body stand on end. Voldemort knew that he would feel highly amused to see Harry's reaction when he would meet his death eaters. He decided that the conversation was over and had just turned back to depart when Harry spoke again,

"Why haven't you killed me?"

Voldemort turned back and looked at Harry's back. He noticed that his shoulders were set with determination. He failed to understand him. One moment Harry had been terrified, in the next, he
was curious, and now, he was determined to die. He felt fascinated by him. He had never been faced with a challenge in years. He was certain that discovering everything about Harry was a challenge and he was ready to face that challenge. But after he had fulfilled it, he would have to get rid of him unless his death eaters got to him first.

Harry closed his eyes again. He was still waiting for a response that he doubted would ever come. His eyes shot open as the reply came,

"I shall when I have suitably unravelled you. But until then, try not to perish."
Harry felt the gold snakes come alive again and draw away from his wrists. He instantly jumped up from the throne and put as much distance between it and himself. He looked around the courtroom but he knew that Lord Voldemort had vanished. Something about his last statement had made Harry uncomfortable. He hurried out of the courtroom and made his way through the winding corridors. He was afraid. He was a little more than afraid. He still doubted if Voldemort was human. He certainly wasn't a ghost. A thousand possibilities ran through Harry's mind and he wondered which one was correct. He realized that he was hopelessly lost and had no idea where he was.

After minutes of walking, he reached a huge hall. Harry stepped in and realized that this must have been the dining hall Lord Voldemort had been talking about. Harry glanced around. It had once been an impressive dining-hall but years of neglect had taken its toll. The table was long and solid wood, surrounded by straight backed wooden chairs. The once crisp golden wallpaper was torn in places. On the walls were gilded mirrors but the frames were dusty and the light that shone off them showed years of flecks of dirt and cobwebs that had never been polished off. The floor at first glance appeared to be mud, but it was made of large terracotta flagstones covered in years of grime. Above the table hung an old wrought iron candelabra with several black-wicked candles in it burnt to stumps.

Harry felt the impulse to clean the castle himself. It would certainly keep him busy and he could most certainly use the distraction. Harry wondered where could get some water and cleaning supplies from. He would most certainly need a lot of water. Harry dismissed the idea. It wasn't possible to clean this castle singlehandedly.

Harry found a clock on the wall but realized that it wasn't working. Harry drew back one of the chairs, leaned back in it and closed his eyes. He wasn't taking his chances. He knew that he would get lost and he had no idea how to get back here if that happened. On top of everything he had no idea what the time was. He decided to wait it out here.

Time flowed like cement. Sitting there with nothing to stare at but a wall with torn gold wallpaper was excruciatingly dull and there was no telling when it would be seven. It was so pointless too. Harry had never been idle. His aunt had always had something for him to do. His day passed cooking, cleaning and performing other mundane everyday tasks. This was different. He began to drift into an unpleasant daydream or was it a paranoid fantasy? It was so hard to tell and he didn't care. It helped to pass the time and he wasn't one for entertaining himself with optimism.

Harry woke up and inhaled sharply. He looked around and his jaw dropped open. The scene was quite unbelievable, shocking really. Harry's mind was sent reeling, unable to comprehend or process the images it was being sent by his eyes. He closed his eyes and looked away, then opened them and looked back to see if he wasn't hallucinating or dreaming. He pinched himself and gasped. He was definitely awake and this was real.

The dining-room was exquisite. The walls were covered with a shimmering gold paper and in the middle of the ceiling above the wooden table was a candelabra. Down the centre of the table was a runner with Celtic design woven in gold, silver and green into the fabric itself. He looked closely and realized that small snakes constituted the pattern. The polished silver cutlery was heavy to the hand and shone brightly. At each place stood a tall empty wine glass and there were beautifully
folded napkins to match the runner. All that was missing was the food and the guests.

Harry closed his mouth as he got over the shock. How long had he been asleep? Was he still at the same place? Harry rose to his feet and looked around. It was definitely the same room. But how had it been restored so quickly? There was definitely something sinister at work here.

Harry hadn't been terrified before but now...now he was beginning to realize how afraid he actually was. His chest had grown tight, restricting his air supply and labouring his breathing. Harry opened his lips but he was certain that no sound would come out. He wouldn't be able to scream. Harry felt the fear rob him of his senses. He could feel his muscles contract and his eyes widen. Harry thought he saw movement in the corner of his eye. He could feel that heavy gaze on him again. Harry shivered and wrapped his arms around himself. Even though the dining room was fully restored and bright with candlelight. Harry felt the shadow of something extremely dark and evil enveloping him.

His head lolled back and stared groggily at the candelabra. He had no idea what was happening to him but at the moment he had no control over himself. The shadow seemed to caress him slowly, softly. Was it Lord Voldemort? Harry tried to speak but no sound came out. He closed his eyes and felt fingers brush against his cheek. The touch was human but Harry's fear didn't subside. The air was thick with the dense, malicious aura and it was suffocating him. He became increasingly aware of the fact that he had stopped breathing altogether and was dying.

Lord Voldemort stood behind the chair. He felt extremely satisfied now that he had gotten the boy to be afraid. Although, earlier, he had been amused to know that the boy hadn't been terrified. But it had bothered him. And he wasn't fond of things that bothered him so he had decided to set it straight and that's exactly what he had done.

He realized that the boy had stopped breathing. He shook his head, a malicious grin crossed his features. The boy wouldn't be very amusing if he was dead. He pulled away his fingers, reigned in his aura and uttered an order in a soft yet stern voice,

"Breathe."

Harry's body complied instantly and he instantly drew in long, shuddering breaths. His lungs trying to get in as much air as they possibly could. He breathed as if no air would ever be enough, as if he were a drowning victim suddenly brought up from the depths. He fell from the chair and landed on the floor with a dull thud. Harry was on his knees, hands on the floor. His head was bowed and he was stabilizing. That smooth, silky voice made him flinch and tremble,

"Are you afraid now, Harry?"

Chapter End Notes

I don't know why AO3 keeps marking all my fanfics as completed. Believe me I have tried to get rid of that completed tag but nothing's working. Anyways this is not completed. There are more chapters to come
Chapter 10

Harry drew in several deep gulps of air. He realized that Voldemort had done all this, just so that he would be terrified of him. When he was certain that his voice wouldn't betray him, he spoke,

"Is it seven already?"

Lord Voldemort went still and retreated into the shadows. The boy wasn't afraid. He still wasn't cowering in fear even after he had almost killed him. What would it take to break him? What would it take to see those emerald green eyes filled with terror?

Harry got up to his feet as if nothing had happened because frankly nothing had happened. If Lord Voldemort wanted to kill him, he would have done it last night or this morning. He didn't feel like he was in mortal peril. But he knew one thing for sure. He was certainly terrified of whatever magic Lord Voldemort had used on him. He definitely didn't want to feel that way again. But voicing that would only cause Lord Voldemort to use it on him again so he acted nonchalantly and spoke,

"I know you're still here. I can feel your presence."

Voldemort looked at Harry's back and he could see that despite Harry's cool and calm tone, his shoulders were tense. He had managed to rattle him and he supposed that it would have to do for now,

"Yes, it is seven."

Harry tried to locate the origin of the voice but he failed desperately. Not knowing where Voldemort was standing, made him nervous. He got over it though,

"Can you get me a pocket watch and a map of this place?"

Lord Voldemort couldn't help but laugh at that. The boy was definitely something. He had spoken as if he had some control in this place and the manner in which he demanded those things almost made him adorable but he would feel no qualms about shattering that delusion, 

"I shall only grant you, what I see fit."

Harry huffed indignantly and sat down in the chair,

"I was only asking because I don't want to get lost and I don't want to be late."

Voldemort internally cursed. The boy was right of course. The castle was huge and he definitely didn't want him anywhere near the parts where his death eaters dwelled or maybe he would enjoy it. Maybe that would terrify Harry and he would finally be able to see fear in those eyes. His death eaters would certainly drain him dry or keep him alive for as long as he was useful.

Harry crossed his elbows on the table and had just rested his head over them when he heard a swish. He raised his head a little and found a yellowed folded piece of parchment and a gold pocket watch on the table in front of him. He couldn't contain the smile that crossed his features as he picked them up and considered them,

"Thankyou."
It felt odd to be thanked. He had never heard those words in years and that simple gratitude filled him with an odd, unfamiliar feeling. He shook it off and spoke,

"I believe that you should have dinner now."

Soon enough the table top was layered with trays of the most delicious food and drinks, delicacies capable of making one's mouth water: a whole roast deer with sprigs of rosemary threaded through its antlers and stuffed with bacon and rye bread, marinated Glenloth chicken, grilled trout with lemon, smoked sausages and a pineapple glazed ham, mounds of fragrant wild rice, potatoes and diced pumpkin smeared with butter and spices baked on hot stones, countless cheeses that went with baskets of crackers and bread rolls shaped as seashells, and all sorts of varieties of salads and side dishes. A tureen or two contained either hot soup or hearty casserole.

Harry had never seen this much food before. He almost thought he was dreaming. Slowly he pinched himself. The sharp pain assured him that this was very real. The sight and the wonderful aroma made his mouth water and urged him to grab a plate and pile it up with everything. But he didn't feel that it would be right. He didn't want Lord Voldemort to think of him as greedy.

Lord Voldemort had seen those magnificent green eyes widen with wonder and shimmer with want at the sight of the food but he couldn't understand why the boy was hesitating to just take it,

"Are you not hungry or is the food not to your liking?"

Harry closed his eyes and sighed,

"I've never seen this much food before."

Voldemort frowned. He found that very difficult to understand. Was the lavishness of the feast bothering the boy? If anything, he had seemed impressed by it. No, there was another reason,

"Does that bother you?"

Harry rested his hands in his lap. He had no intentions of wailing in front of Lord Voldemort about his distressed and miserable childhood and spoke instead,

"Aren't you going to eat?"

Lord Voldemort noticed how well the boy had deflected the topic. But it only served to pique his curiosity. He wanted to know how Harry was related to that worthless swine and why he had ended up with his locket. He remembered what he had thought, the first times he had laid eyes on him. He had assumed that the boy was his servant. Which could possibly be true but he had to certain,

"I do not require sustenance."

That puzzled Harry and he frowned,

"But you're human. How do you live without food? Do you sleep?"

Voldemort suppressed a sigh of exasperation from escaping his lips. He felt a combination of irritation and mild amusement at the boy's curiosity. Of course, he had lied about not requiring sustenance. He had merely said it because he wasn't really prepared to show himself to the boy yet. Well he could have just declined. This was his castle and he could do whatever he wanted. But he had instead chosen to lie, the reason for which still eluded him. Maybe he could use it to his advantage though and intimidate the boy with it,
"I only sleep during the day."

Harry's brow creased as he thought hard,

"But you weren't asleep today."

Voldemort cursed under his breath. He did not enjoy where this was going. He hated the boy's guts and he hated how the boy had just caught his lie. He stepped behind Harry and unleashed his dark aura again.

Harry gasped as the chill spread through his body and it felt as if his heart had been clenched in a vice-like grip. His eyes closed and his fingers curled into fists, nails digging into his palm. He could hear his rapid breathing and he could feel the oxygen flooding in and out of his lungs.

Lord Voldemort gently caressed his cheek,

"Harry, I am a Vampire. Does that terrify you?"

Harry struggled to get words and finally managed to choke out,

"No……No, it doesn't."

Voldemort stepped away from Harry, taking his aura with him. Harry finally managed to breathe out and gasped out,

"I'm not scared of you."

Voldemort chuckled darkly. He wasn't a vampire, but his death eaters certainly were. He wondered how unafraid Harry would be around them,

"Eat, Harry. I wish for you to meet my Death Eaters afterwards."

Harry poured himself a glass of water and drank it down in one gulp,

"I thought you wanted me to stay away from your Death Eaters."

Voldemort leaned back against the stone wall and spoke pleasantly,

"That was before I wished to see your body tremble with fear and listen to you scream. I do wonder what they would sound like?"
Lord Voldemort watched Harry eat. The boy was afraid, even though he still wasn't showing it. After a few minutes, Harry finally spoke again,

"I'm done."

Voldemort licked his lips,

"Did you eat to your hearts content?"

Harry nodded his head shakily. He didn't want to look scared but he was and Voldemort's voice was making his skin crawl,

"My death eaters will surely enjoy your company tonight."

Harry visibly gulped at that and Voldemort chuckled darkly. Harry felt indignant. Voldemort was playing with him and he was allowing it. He steeled himself and pushed his fear back. He wouldn't let Voldemort know he was afraid. Summing up all his courage, he smiled and spoke,

"I can't wait to meet them."

Voldemort felt his annoyance return. How did the boy manage that? He had to figure it out. He had to figure him out.

Harry rose to his feet and grabbed the map and the pocket watch from the table,

"Lead the way or point it out."

Voldemort felt his hands ball into fists. This was getting annoying. The boy's guts were getting on his nerves on and he couldn't wait to watch him break.

Harry stepped out of the dining hall and looked around the dark corridors lit with torches. The entire place felt eerily terrifying at night. Voldemort gave him instructions as he moved through the corridor and soon enough he found himself in a particularly darker part of the castle. The torches weren't alight here and the only source of illumination was the silvery moonlight. Harry walked through the dark corridor awaiting further instructions but none came.

Voldemort hung back and watched Harry proceed. His death eaters would be upon Harry like flies on honey.

The first cackle that rang through the air made Harry freeze and made Voldemort grin maliciously. The show was starting.

Harry stood his ground and tried to discern where the cackling was coming from but it didn't take him long because soon enough, the silence surrendered to the haunting scream of footsteps, the footsteps approached him, lurking closer. A narrow stream of moon light filled little areas of the ground as it spotlights, several shadow quickly followed avoiding the light watching him. He could barely make out the dark shapes in the shadows but he ascertained that he was surrounded.

Through it all, Harry felt Voldemort's familiar intense gaze on him and it made him angry. He wasn't going to be afraid. He wouldn't be afraid.

One of the dark shapes stepped out of the shadows and into the moonlight. It was a woman. Well
she looked like a woman. She was a tall woman with long, thick shiny dark hair, thin lips, heavily-lidded eyes with long eyelashes, and a strong jaw. She looked like any normal woman but then she smirked and Harry saw the sharp fangs,

"Well well well. Fresh meat. Where did you come from and I wonder what you would taste like?"

She stepped closer to him and her gaze came to rest on the locket around his neck. Her eyes widened and she spun around. It seemed she had found what she was looking for because she instantly fell on her knees,

"My Lord!"

Harry surmised that she was addressing Lord Voldemort,

"I did not mean to claim what is yours, my Lord."

Voldemort chuckled darkly and Harry felt extremely puzzled,

"You may not claim him but you have my permission to taste him. Hurt him, terrify him, make him scream but do not kill him."

The paralyzing fear at those words spread through Harry's body like icy, liquid metal. He clenched his fists as he hesitantly took a step back. He noticed that his feet were trembling and his legs twitched. He valiantly fought the impulse to whirl around and sprint down that shadowed corridor; his throat felt constricted.

"Thank you, my lord. You are ever gracious."

She then turned to Harry and bared her fangs,

"I'm Bellatrix. And you and I are in for a very long night."

She drew closer to him and Harry's fear grew out of proportion and he felt as if he was being smothered by an invisible hand. His breathing becomes erratic, deep, then shallow. He fought it. He tried to fight the feeling as his body writhed to be free or shut down entirely. He backed up further and he felt the wall behind him. He was cornered and there was nowhere he could run now.

She licked her red, voracious lips and Harry knew then what was going to happen to him. He closed his eyes and shuddered uncontrollably,

"Tell me your name."

Harry couldn't reply. His mouth felt too dry. Voldemort's smooth voice rang through the dark corridor and replied for him,

"His name is Harry."

Harry felt the intense urge to beg Voldemort to stop this because he felt that only he could. But he didn't want to give him the satisfaction. And so, he opened his eyes, jutted his chin out and spoke,

"My name is Harry and I'm certain you'll enjoy what I taste like."

Voldemort practically growled in annoyance at Harry's obstinacy.

Harry knew he would regret this. Maybe he would die from the pain. But, at least, he would die knowing that he wasn't a coward. Slowly, he threw his head back, undid the top two buttons of his
oversized shirt and exposed his throat,

"Bite me."

Voldemort licked his lips and felt something akin to desire in his heart as he watched Harry expose his neck. He began to doubt his initial decision. He shook away his doubt. He wanted to see him broken right now more than anything.

Bellatrix drew closer to him and Harry closed his eyes. He felt her unnaturally cold breath on his neck and shivered uncontrollably. She trailed her tongue over his neck, exactly where his jugular was located and Harry couldn't suppress the shocked gasp that escaped his lips. She dragged her fangs over his skin and Harry grabbed the wall for support as his knees threatened to give out.

The pain was sudden and overwhelming as Bella plunged her teeth in his jugular. One of her hands grabbed the back of his head and held him in place while her other hand held him around the waist and kept him pinned to the wall. Harry couldn't stop the scream that escaped his lips as the pain grew unbearable. His body spasmed and he couldn't stand still anymore. He wanted to struggle and get away from those fangs but Bella was stronger than him and she kept him pinned effortlessly and continued to drain his blood.

He had no idea for how long Bella drained him or how long he continued to scream. It felt like ages to him. His consciousness was floating through an empty space filled with a thick static. Throughout the inky space his heartbeats pounded loudly and echoed in his ears. Harry felt his senses draining away along with the blood in his body until finally all was black.
"Wake up!"

Harry's eyes flew open and he gasped. It didn't take him long to realize that Bellatrix still had him pinned to the wall and he must have only passed out for a few minutes. He looked over Bellatrix's shoulder, trying to locate where that command, in that foreign, sensual language had originated from. Before he knew what he was doing, the words spluttered out,

"I want to see you."

Harry didn't know why but his own voice sounded unfamiliar and he regretted saying anything at all.

Voldemort watched Harry intently. The boy's face showed no signs of fear. There was only a hint of exhaustion, but the dominating expression on his face was one of curiosity. It irked him. Why wasn't the boy affected by anything? Somehow the ease with which Harry was able to converse in Parseltongue irritated him further. He focused his attention on Bella and spoke,

"Again."

Harry realized that Voldemort was asking Bella to do and he felt his anger flare,

"I AM NOT GOING TO BE AFRAID!"

Harry felt Bella hesitate as well,

"My Lord, you ordered me to keep him alive."

Harry heard Voldemort growl threateningly and he felt Bella cower in fear,

"You will do as you are told."

Harry continued to feel Bella's hesitation so he decided to make it easier for her. He arched his head back and exposed his throat to her again,

"Just kill me."

This time when Bella's fangs sank into his skin, the pain was a hundred times worse. He felt as if a thousand small knives were sinking into his skin and twisting around in his flesh. His screams were loud enough to shake the heavens above and he was writhing against Bella with all the remaining strength in his body.

Voldemort watched Harry writhe from the shadows. He couldn't understand what he wanted but Harry's tormentured screams were definitely nothing like he had imagined them to be and yet they were beautiful. The pained expression on Harry's face was by far his favourite expression and he was beginning to adore it. The screams didn't last long and soon enough Harry had gone limp against the wall.

Voldemort stepped out of the shadows and Bella licked the remaining blood from Harry's neck and healed the bite marks. He stepped closer to Harry and took his limp form in his arms. Bella immediately fell at his feet and kissed them. Voldemort weaved his fingers through her sleek black curls,
"You have performed marvellously."

And with that, he picked Harry up effortlessly and carried him away. Once he reached the bedroom he dropped him on the bed and left him. Right now, he didn't have the patience to deal with the boy and the infuriating rush of emotions he made him feel. It wasn't healthy and he would most likely murder him with his bare hands if he stayed here with him a minute longer. So, he departed from the room, leaving the boy, laying sprawled on the bed.

The nightmare ended abruptly, as Harry was shaken back into reality. His eyes opened, his eyelashes faintly batting against his lids when he blinked. He was sprawled at an awkward angle on the same bed he had woken up on yesterday, debating whether or not he should get up. His muscles felt weak, just like his energy. His hand moved to his neck as he felt for the wound but there was nothing there. He let out an exasperated sigh, groaning as he rolled off of the bed he had been occupying. What time was it? How long had he been asleep? Had he really been bitten by a vampire or had everything been a nightmare? All of these questions shot through his mind as he let out a loud yawn.

He looked around the room and got up from the bed but as soon as he rose to his feet, his vision swam, he swayed and fell back on the bed. He looked down at his blood-stained shirt and wanted to get out of it but he was feeling extremely drained all of a sudden.

The light of late morning was shining into his exhausted eyes and he brought his hands up to guard them. Everything about him felt heavy from his arms to his feet. He let his head loll from one side to the other, his eyes closed again as he enjoyed the soothing darkness and fell back asleep.

Harry's head jolted upward letting him know that he had fallen asleep again. For a few seconds, he felt extremely confused and disoriented. He was unsure of where he was, then it all came back to him and he felt his neck again.

He realized that the room was shrouded in darkness. Was it night already? How long had he been out for? He raised himself on his elbows. He had to get up on his feet. Harry looked around the dark room and soon enough he felt Lord Voldemort's gaze on him,

"I know you're there."

Harry was momentarily surprised to hear his own voice. He sounded extremely weak. Voldemort continued to regard him silently and then his silky, smooth voice ran through the dark room,

"You need to eat."

Harry wanted to laugh at that. And he did,

"You threw me to your clan of blood thirsty vampires so that they could ravage me and now all of a sudden you're concerned about my diet."

Voldemort felt his hands ball into fists. The boy was infuriating. He decided that he liked him better when he was drained and senseless. But he wouldn't allow the boy to starve the death. No, he would have to think of a more creative way to kill him. He flicked his wrist and a tray of food appeared on the side table.

The wonderful scent of the food aroused Harry's dormant hunger and enticed him to eat. But he didn't want to eat in front of Voldemort,

"Are you going to have your vampires feed on me again?"
Voldemort chuckled darkly and Harry took it as a yes,
"Well, I'm still not terrified."

He pulled the tray in his lap. He might as well feed himself, if he was going to be fed upon later. He picked up the knife and fork and began eating. When he was done, he spoke,

"Thanks for the meal, My Lord."

Harry laughed softly and put away the tray. He decided that if he attempted to get up now, he would succeed. But Voldemort's silence was bothering him so decided to address that matter first,

"Are you cross with me, My Lord?"

Harry realized that he found it extremely amusing to address Voldemort that way,

"You have no self-preservation, do you?"

Harry felt delighted to hear Voldemort respond,

"Is that a question or an observation?"

He laughed hard when he heard Voldemort growl and vanish. Why was he enjoying this so much? Maybe because he really had no self-preservation.
Chapter 13

Harry was utterly bored. There was no other word for it. And even though he knew that he should be grateful that Lord Voldemort had finally decided to leave him alone and nothing bizarre was happening. His body was yearning to feel that rush of adrenaline again. Harry found the map and pocket watch on the side table and made up his mind.

He looked down at his blood-stained shirt again and pulled it off. He expected the wardrobe to be empty but was mildly surprised to realize that it was stocked with clothes. He pulled out a soft white linen shirt and a pair of black pants. They seemed like they would fit him.

A few minutes later, Harry was staring at his reflection in the dusty mirror with his mouth agape. Was this really him? He had never worn anything that had fitted his lean frame. His cousin's clothes had always been three or four sizes too big. He tore his gaze from the mirror and picked up the map and the pocket watch. It was nearly midnight. He was certain that nothing good would come out from exploring the castle at this hour but he just couldn't sit around and do nothing.

So, he exited his room and opened the map. He spotted the dining hall, the throne room and the relics room on it. But his gaze was drawn to a single caption, Azkaban. The name sounded interesting and Harry knew that was where he was going.

He began making his way through the long winding corridors lit with torches. The castle was incredibly silent and Harry wondered why it wasn't ringing with the sounds of those death eaters and whatever lurked within these walls. A gruesome picture of the death eaters feeding on some poor innocent soul filled his vision and made him pause. He shook his head to make the image vanish and it did. He began walking again and wondered where Lord Voldemort was and what he did in his spare time? Lord Voldemort had said that he was a vampire and he wondered why hadn't he bitten him instead of Bella.

He knew one thing for sure now, Voldemort was willing to hurt him but not kill him. And that made him wonder why. Why didn't Voldemort kill him? He stopped thinking and looked down at the map. He took a turn and came to a flight of stairs that were leading downwards into total darkness. Should he really go down? He could possible die down there. Was the rush really worth it? Well he would probably die in this strange castle anyway.

Harry pulled a torch from the nearest bracket and began making his way down the stone steps. The air grew colder and colder and the little light from the torch began to fade as he neared the end of the steps.

When Harry felt solid ground beneath his feet, the torch flickered but the flame didn't die. But despite the small light, Harry felt startled by the impenetrable dark and the blistering cold. His heart was racing and Harry scolded himself. There was that rush, that he had been yearning for. Suddenly, an odd, shuddering gasp escaped his lips. He felt as though he had been doused in icy water. He felt wrapped up in the piercingly, bitingly cold and total, impenetrable, silent darkness. He turned his head this way and that, trying to see something, but the darkness pressed on his eyes like a weightless veil.

What was going on? Harry stood stock-still, turning his sightless eyes left and right. The cold was so intense that he was shivering all over. Goose bumps had erupted up his arms, and the hairs on the back of his neck were standing up. He opened his eyes to their fullest extent, staring blankly around, unseeing. Something was here. Something was doing this to him.
And that something was drawing long, hoarse, rattling breaths. Harry felt a horrible jolt of dread as he stood trembling in the freezing air. He felt a creeping chill behind him and he realized that something was right behind him. Harry turned around slowly. This was his own doing. He was going to die here. He might as well face whatever was going to kill him. With the flickering light from his torch, he saw a cloaked figure that towered to the ceiling. Its face was completely hidden beneath its hood. Harry's eyes darted downwards, and what he saw made his stomach contract. There was a hand protruding from the cloak and it was glistening, greyish, slimy-looking and scabbed, like something dead that had decayed in water.

It was visible only for a split second. As though the creature beneath the cloak sensed Harry's gaze, the hand was suddenly withdrawn into the folds of the black material. And then the thing beneath the hood, whatever it was, drew a long, slow, rattling breath, as though it was trying to suck something more than air from its surroundings. Harry felt his own breath catch in his chest. The cold went deeper than his skin. It was inside his chest, it was inside his very heart.

Harry's eyes rolled up into his head. He couldn't see. He was drowning in cold. There was a rushing in his ears as though of water. He was being dragged downwards, the roaring growing louder. And then, from far away, he heard screaming, terrible, terrified, pleading screams. He wanted to help whoever it was, he tried to move his arms, but couldn't. A thick white fog was swirling around him, inside him. It was as though freezing water was rising in his chest, cutting at his insides,

"Not Harry, not Harry, please not Harry!"

Harry felt desperate to help whoever was screaming. Why was she saying his name? Was she trying to save him?

'Stand aside, you silly girl … stand aside, now.'

Who was that? The voice sounded familiar. It sounded too familiar but Harry couldn't figure it out who it was,

"Not Harry, please no, take me, kill me instead."

Why was she pleading for his life? She probably didn't even know him. Numbing, swirling white mist was filling Harry's brain and all his thoughts for leaving him one by one. He was falling, hurtling through the icy mist

"Not Harry! Please … have mercy … have mercy"

A shrill voice was laughing, the woman was screaming, and Harry knew no more.
Chapter 14

Harry woke up with a start and immediately tried to sit up, causing the muscles in his arm to pull painfully against whatever restraint it was in. Chains. The clanking of the chain told him that his left hand was restrained to the bed. He rubbed his eyes with his free hand and looked around. He was back in the room. Harry shivered involuntarily and pulled the covers closer to himself. It seemed that deathly cold had seeped into his bones. He had never felt so hollow. A thousand questions were swirling in his head. What had attacked him? Who was that woman? Had she made it out alive? Where was she? How had she known his name? And why had she been trying to protect him? But all of them slipped away when...

"WHO ARE YOU?"

The question had been roared out and Harry felt his heart jump to his throat. It was Voldemort's voice but why did he sound so enraged. Harry's brain was still foggy and he was finding it extremely difficult to piece together thoughts,

"ANSWER ME!"

A shudder ran through his body and he couldn't control the erratic beating of his heart. He had never feared Lord Voldemort before but now...now he was far more than terrified. Voldemort's rage was affecting him extremely adversely and he realized that he couldn't breathe. It was too much. Harry gasped for breath and closed his eyes.

Harry felt Lord Voldemort's presence close to him and he tried to open his eyes. He failed. His eyelids were too heavy,

"What is your name?"

Harry was still gasping for breath. He felt a hand close around his throat and squeeze. His head was pounding, every cell in his body was screaming for oxygen. He writhed and struggled, his free hand desperately tried to pry the fingers away from his neck but Voldemort's grip was relentless. Harry fought until he felt like his head was about to explode. Harry begin to fall. he fell further and further into the darkness until it threatened to swallow him whole. Red and black splotches danced in front of his vision. The coldness he had felt upon waking up was completely gone. A desperate hot wave had come over him, warming him. His heart was beating rapidly in panic. The urgency for air was more apparent than ever.

Harry's hand grew limp and so did his struggling, writhing body. He was going to die. The pressure vanished from his throat and Harry drew in several deep breaths greedily. He gulped and tried to open his eyes again but couldn't. Harry cried out as he felt his hair being gripped and yanked roughly,

"I want answers. And when you have provided them, I shall kill you. Your cooperation throughout this interrogation will determine if I shall make your death painful or painless. Do you understand?"

Harry's scalp was burning with pain,

"DO YOU UNDERSTAND?"

Harry nodded his head quickly causing his headache to worsen and the pain in his scalp to flare up. Voldemort released his hair and spoke,
“What is your name?”

Haven’t he told Lord Voldemort his name. When Harry remained silent for a while. Voldemort grabbed onto his hair again and tugged at them threateningly,

“Talk.”

Harry swallowed and spoke,

“Harry.”

Voldemort tsked and pulled roughly. A cry escaped Harry's lips,

“Your full name.”

Harry's eyes watered with the pain,

“Harry Potter.”

Voldemort growled and Harry felt several of his hair part from his scalp,

“Tell me about your parents.”

Harry tried to speak but the pain in his scalp and head was growing unbearable. He tried to string together words but he was interrupted with a sharp pang of pain every time he tried,

“I…I never knew my parents.”

Voldemort laughed maniacally at that,

“How did they die?”

Harry's body was trembling uncontrollably,

“They died in a snow storm.”

Harry heard Voldemort laugh again. He didn’t understand what was happening or why Lord Voldemort was so enraged? Something told him it wasn't about his most recent adventure. This was different. Why was Lord Voldemort suddenly asking him about his past? And why was he finding the death of his parents so amusing?

“When did they die?”

Harry spoke,

“When I was one year old.”

He felt Voldemort's grip loosen on his hair and he repressed a sigh as the pain in his scalp lessened to a more bearable degree,

“Who did you live with after their death?”

Harry realized that his quick replies were the only thing that was going to save him from any more torment. Voldemort was going to kill him after this interrogation. He might as well die painlessly,

“My aunt and uncle.”
The next question took Harry off guard,

"Did they care about you?"

Harry wanted to admit how much they had hated him, how terrible his life with them had been but whining about a life he was going to lose to his killer wasn't exactly dignified so he nodded his head,

"They cared about me very much."

Instantly Harry's vision went red as extreme pain shot through his body and he screamed. The pain vanished as soon as it had appeared and Harry just wanted to curl into himself,

"THAT should be your first and last lie."

Harry couldn't comprehend how Voldemort had caused him that much pain. All he knew was that he didn't want to feel it again. He felt Voldemort's finger caress his cheek and Harry shivered involuntarily with dread,

"I have seen your memories. I know exactly how much your relatives cared about you."

Harry tried to open his eyes again and failed miserably. He was beginning to realize that it was probably Voldemort that had done this to prevent him from seeing him. His curiosity was overwhelming his fear again and he didn't like it. It seemed Voldemort was going to kill him as painfully as possible because the questions slipped from his tongue,

"My memories? But how?"

Harry felt Voldemort's grip return on his hair and his scalp protested painfully,

"There is no need for you to know how I watched your memories. All you need to know is that I did and I discovered that your life has been miserable and pitiful."

Harry couldn't stop the bitter laugh that escaped his lips. Voldemort had definitely seen his memories and he was astounded by how aptly he had described his life in two words. Miserable and Pitiful. A cry escaped his lips when Voldemort gripped his chin,

"There is one more thing that you should know before I kill you."

Harry didn't know why but it was as if his body had caught on to the fact that he was going to be killed and he began struggling desperately to get away from Voldemort.

Every thought flew from his head and he grew extremely still as he felt Voldemort's warm breath tickle his ear,

"I killed your parents, Harry. And I shall kill you."
Chapter 15

It took Harry a few minutes to wrap his head around the words. Those words contradicted everything he had been led to believe. Those words changed the entire meaning of his life. His parents had been killed? But why? How?

"Why?"

Harry felt tears well up in his eyes and escape from his closed lashes. The emptiness in his heart, the numbness pounding his brain, the salty tears that flowed unchecked from his eyes, the shear nothingness that now took hold of his soul threatened to engulf him entirely. He felt Voldemort’s fingers brush the tears away. When there was no reply, Harry spoke again,

"I never knew them. I never even saw them."

Voldemort stared down at Harry. His tear-soaked eyelashes stuck to his cheeks, his soft features were riddled with confusion and grief. He savoured the vindictive pleasure he received from seeing him so utterly broken and defenceless,

"But you did hear your mother's voice."

The realization struck him like lightning. Harry struggled to open his eyes again but couldn't. Those screams, that woman's voice. It had been his mother. She had been trying to protect him,

"Why did you…?"

Voldemort held a finger to Harry's lips and quietened him effectively,

"No more question."

Harry spoke despite the finger on his lips,

"You're going to kill me. I deserve to know the truth."

Harry's breath hitched in his throat when Voldemort removed the finger and struck him across the face,

"Exactly, I am going to kill you and for that very reason, your knowledge of the truth shall not mean anything."

He watched with a smirk as Harry struggled against the chain and attempted to open his eyes again. It seemed Harry was gaining back his reckless courage. He would enjoy killing Harry immensely now,

"I want to know. I don't care if it means nothing. Please tell me."

Voldemort tugged back Harry's hair roughly,

"I murdered them because they stood in my way. That night, I set out to kill you because you had been prophesized as my downfall. I gave them the opportunity to step aside and save themselves. They refused and died. You, on the other hand…"

Harry listened with abated breath and then exhaled,
"How did I survive?"

A cry escaped Harry as the same blinding excruciating pain consumed him again. He struggled and writhed as Voldemort held him still by his hair. It felt like the pain had lasted an eternity before it finally came to an end. Harry panted and struggled to breathe. Voldemort spat out venomously,

"You're the reason for this curse. The curse upon me, my death eaters, this castle."

Harry was feeling overwhelmed by what he had learnt. He couldn't imagine being anyone's downfall. And he had only been a baby when his parents had been killed. How could a baby be anyone's downfall? He imagined how different things could have been if his parents had been alive. He wouldn't have lived as miserably as he had. He would have been loved and cared for. He would have had a family. Voldemort had snatched everything away when he had murdered his parents. Harry felt nothing but hate and contempt towards the man or monster currently holding him down. And Voldemort had mentioned a curse. Was that curse the reason everything and everyone here was like they were?

"Finish what you started then but I want my dying wish."

Voldemort admired the audacity,

"What do you wish for?"

Harry spoke,

"I want to see you. I want to see my murderer."

Voldemort's eyes widened at that request. It shocked him that Harry would ask for something so trivial and yet so significant at the same time. Voldemort snarled and roughly grabbed Harry's chin,

"Are you sure you do not wish me to give you a fighting chance. I can free you from these restraints and give you a chance to run."

Harry laughed cynically,

"I'm not a coward."

Voldemort tightened his hold on Harry's chin. Oh, how he would love to torture him into oblivion. But more than that he wanted him dead. Too bad Harry would just have to die without his wish being fulfilled,

"Do you prefer to die painfully or painlessly?"

Harry gritted his teeth,

"As painfully as possible."

Voldemort chuckled darkly,

"My thoughts exactly."

He moved his hand over Harry's chest and felt the thunderous rhythm of his heart,

"I am going to rip your heart out of your chest."

Harry squared his jaw and prepared himself for the impending pain. It was going to hurt but in the
end, eventually he would meet his parents. He was finally going to see them. That happiness outweighed everything else and he drew in a deep breath. He was ready. He was ready for this.

Voldemort watched the calm on Harry's pain and he was gripped by the urge to shatter it. How could he be this peaceful when he knew that he was going to die? He dug his sharpened nails into Harry's chest, tearing the material of his oversized shirt and penetrating his skin.

Harry felt the nails penetrate his skin and he restrained the cry that threatened to escape his lips. The pain was going to be far worse when the nails would tear his flesh.

Voldemort kept a tight hold on Harry's hair with his other hand and increased the pressure on his nails. He saw the crimson blood appear but as soon as it touched his hands, he cried out in shock and pulled his hand back reflexively.

Harry felt the nails sink deeper and he felt his self-control fading. He was just about to cry out when another cry rang out in the room. It was definitely Lord Voldemort's because the nails disappeared from his chest and Voldemort's grip vanished from his hair.

Voldemort stared down at his hand which was burned where Harry's blood had touched him. What was this? He observed the burn closely and healed it with a flick of his wrist. He looked at Harry and it was apparent from the confused expression on his face that he wasn't aware of what had happened. His gaze took in the crimson liquid that trickled down Harry's chest and felt extremely perturbed. How was this possible? He drew away from him and rose to his feet. This new development had changed things. It seemed he would have to keep him alive after all.
Harry tugged at the chain that was keeping his left hand restrained to the bed. It felt like hours since Voldemort's sudden departure. He couldn't understand why he hadn't killed him. What had happened to change his mind? Maybe something else had come up. Harry shook his head and looked around the room. He had been able to open his eyes as soon as Lord Voldemort had departed. His head was aching like hell inside and out. His fingers unconsciously moved over his throat which was probably bruised. The knowledge that his parents had been murdered made his heart ache and his eyes tear up. He could have had a normal life. He could have had everything that he had been denied by his relatives. His heart burned with hatred and contempt towards Lord Voldemort. His hands balled into fists and he cried out in frustration. That monster had destroyed his life. He had destroyed everything. For so many years Harry had been blaming fate for all his misfortunes when in reality it was Lord Voldemort that was the root cause of all his misery.

Harry looked up at the grey ceiling and cried. He had taught himself not to but he couldn't hold back his tears anymore. He cried his heart out and allowed fifteen years' worth of tears to flow unrestrained. Anger, confusion, hate, disdain and painful grief were burning through his very being and Harry found it impossible to breathe. The emotions were too heavy, too new. He had never felt them before but now that he was feeling them, he wanted nothing more than to stop feeling. This was too much, too fast.

Harry had no idea for how long he cried or when he passed out. But when he woke up, he felt the familiar scrutinizing gaze of Lord Voldemort on him. He immediately sat up straight and realized that the chain around his wrist had been removed. His head spun and he leaned back against the headboard,

"I suppose you're here to finish the job."

Silence,

"Well get on with it. I don't even want my dying wish anymore. Just end this."

Voldemort finally spoke,

"Nothing would give me more pleasure than to see the life leave your eyes. But there has been an unexpected turn of events."

Harry closed his eyes and let out a vehement breath,

"So, you won't kill me."

Voldemort spoke out with venom in his tone,

"Yes, I shall not be killing you. Keeping you alive has become, somewhat, a necessity."

Harry exhaled and then spoke,

"Fine, then let me go."

Voldemort laughed maliciously and it made Harry's hair stand on edge,

"No, Harry. You shall be staying here for the rest of your natural life."

Chapter 16
Harry wanted to cry out. He wasn't going to live like a slave again. It had been different earlier when he hadn't known who Lord Voldemort and what he had done and similarly Voldemort hadn't known who he was and hated him. The hate between them now was mutual and palpable and Harry didn't want to live with it. He knew he couldn't live with it. He'd lived with enough scorn for the past fifteen years.

"Why do you hate me?"

It was a simple question and the answer was simple enough,

"Because you continue to be my downfall."

Harry laughed. Downfall…..Yeah right….Voldemort had been his own downfall because the man had been foolish enough to believe that a child could ever destroy him. In the process, he had ruined his life as well,

"Your stupidity was your downfall."

Harry felt Voldemort's black, suffocating rage grip but it was gone as soon as it had appeared,

"It's the truth. None of us would be here if you hadn't been foolish. I could have had my parents. I could have had a normal life."

Voldemort regarded Harry, whose already swollen eyes were glistening with tears again but the contempt in them was unmistakable. He gnashed his teeth together and was overcome with the desire to murder him again but he inhaled deeply. He would have to exercise restraint because it had become evident that Harry would be the one to break this curse. He had no idea how the boy would do it but his research from the past few hours had proved the fact that only the boy could break this curse,

"Consider this castle your new home. Do not think about leaving it or you shall be responsible for the consequences."

Harry was about to speak when he felt Voldemort's presence vanish. He rose to his feet and looked at his reflection in the mirror. His neck was purple at spots where Voldemort's fingers had held him. His hair were a right mess and his eyes……his eyes were red and swollen. The white shirt he had been wearing was ripped at his chest and he could see the blood drops staining it and his skin. Harry hated the image he was presenting. He pulled off the shirt and then went to the bathroom to wash his face and the blood from his chest. After he was done, he pulled out a black shirt from the wardrobe and wore it. He looked down at his pants and decided to change them too. Once he was dressed, he nodded to himself in the mirror. To hell with the consequences, he was going to get out of here this instant.

Harry picked up the map from the side table and began navigating his way through the castle. He had no idea how long he had been walking but when he finally reached the main entrance, the one he recognized from the time he had first appeared here, he was disappointed to see that the huge oak doors were still closed. There had to be another way out. Harry opened the map again and noticed a small passageway through the west wing gardens, leading into the forest.

Harry made up his mind and began walking towards the west wing. The more he proceeded, the more he began to realize that this was the place he had met the Death Eaters. The corridors began to grow darker and darker and Harry could feel his heart hammering in his chest. Maybe he ought to turn back and find another way but he shook away the thought. No, he wasn't a coward. Harry felt several presences at once and several eyes on him. He wasn't going to stop. He willed himself
not to stop but a hand on his shoulder made him halt and someone cooed in his ear,

"Where are you off to, sugar?"

It was Bellatrix's voice. Harry turned around to face her and replied,

"The gardens."

Bellatrix's voracious red lips looked like they had been painted with blood. She was beautiful in a dark, sinister kind of way. She grinned and Harry saw her features distort. Her fangs made an appearance and that's when Harry seemed to remember that he wasn't dealing with a normal person. Well, if he didn't manage to leave through the passageway in the garden then maybe he could leave by dying at Bellatrix's hands. Bellatrix cupped his face and her long talons nearly dug into his cheeks,

"There is a perfectly good garden in the east wing of the castle, where you're residing."

Harry met her gaze and grinned,

"Yeah but it doesn't have a passageway out of this castle."

Bellatrix cackled and Harry felt her sharp nails pierce his skin,

"You're too brave for your own good, Harry. I believe I should return you to the Dark Lord."

Harry didn't want that. No, it was the exact opposite of what he wanted,

"Or maybe you could feast upon me. I think you enjoyed my blood when you drank from me."

Bellatrix bared her fangs and leaned closer to him. Harry felt them graze against his neck and heard her inhale his scent,

"You're right about that, sugar. I haven't had blood like yours in all my fifteen years of existence."

Harry eyelids fluttered shut as Bellatrix continued to scrape her teeth back and forth against his neck. He felt dazed. There was something hypnotic about what Bellatrix was doing to him. He felt his knees soften but before he could land on his knees, he felt the wall behind his back and Bellatrix's arm wrapped around his waist.
Harry leaned back against the wall and turned his head, exposing more of his neck to Bellatrix. His head was spinning out of control and he was burning up with the need for Bellatrix to sink her teeth into him. The teasing was worse than torture. Suddenly, he felt Bellatrix lick a trail from his cheek, down his neck. Harry shivered involuntarily but made no move to step away. She turned his head and repeated it with the other side of his face. A groan escaped his lips and Bellatrix pulled back and spun him around so that she was standing behind him. Her cold breath tickled his ear,

"Open your eyes, sugar."

Harry reluctantly opened his eyes and his sight was instantly met with his reflection in a mirror. He realized that the bruises around his neck had vanished and it all began to make sense to him. Bellatrix had never intended to bite him, she had been healing him. Harry noticed that even though Bellatrix was standing right behind him, her reflection wasn't showing in the mirror. She pressed a kiss to his neck and felt her head rest on his shoulder. Then she released him and spoke,

"Go back to bed, sugar. The Dark Lord shall not be pleased to find you here."

Harry closed his eyes and leaned back against the wall. Hadn't he come here to escape? Bellatrix stroked his cheek softly. Tears pricked at the corners of his eyes as he felt overwhelmed by all the feelings and emotions. He never wanted to feel again. At least, he never wanted to feel all those negative emotions again. But how would he avoid feeling them when he would have to be around Voldemort? Another thought invaded his mind. Bellatrix didn't know who he was. He was certain that the Death Eaters especially Bellatrix wouldn't be so amicable if she found out his true identity. He was the reason for this curse. The reason Bellatrix and all the others were like this. Maybe he should be feeling guilty. But right now, he was feeling drained, his soul felt too heavy inside his body. His knees gave out. Bellatrix grabbed him again and held him up.

"What's wrong?"

Harry kept his eyes closed and focused on just breathing. Just when he was feeling a bit normal again, it hit him. The familiar twist of haze around him squeezed the air from his lungs. That hard, unrelenting pressure forced itself against his skin. Purple swirls danced in front of his eyes, and blackness stretched far, so far, into nothing.... He felt Bellatrix step away from him and Harry had no idea what was keeping him on his feet. He tried to move. But his limbs weren't working right. His body felt like he'd been dipped in molasses and hung out in the sun to dry. The air he sucked in was thick and scratched his throat. The edges of his vision were blurred as blackness seeped in.

Something forced his eyes open. Through the silvery moonlight in front of him, he saw, with an icy surge of terror, the dark outline of a man, tall and skeletally thin. Harry stared back into the face that he had been so curious to see. Whiter than a skull, with wide, livid scarlet eyes, and a nose that was as flat as a snake's, with slits for nostrils. His hands were like large, pale spiders, his arms, his face; the red eyes, whose pupils were slits, like a cat's, gleamed still more brightly through the darkness. Snakes coiled themselves around his body—a blue one twining around his leg, a red-and-gold-flecked snake wrapped twice around his waist. The yellow end of a tail slipped out from just around his right arm. A huge black snake slithered and hissed as it slinked around his neck. It ran its smooth body against his Adam's apple, tightening, and then turned its yellow gaze on him.

He couldn't breathe. He couldn't move. He could only stare at the serpent as it wrapped itself around him, growing larger and larger until it became the darkness that surrounded him. It became a shadow, a part of him. Harry wanted nothing more than to close his eyes. To unsee what he had
just seen but just like earlier when Lord Voldemort had kept his eyes forced closed, now he kept them forced wide open.

Voldemort's presence shoved against him slowly, like a mammoth pounding against a door he was desperately trying to close. His gaze sent his heart into a frenzy, causing his stomach to recoil, and turning his mind into a kaleidoscope. A cruel smile twisted his snake-like face and he hissed,

"Were you going somewhere, Harry?"

Harry couldn't speak, couldn't breathe. He could only stare wide eyed and terrified at the person standing barely an inch away from him. The person who had murdered his parents. The person who had sought to murder him. Whatever influence Voldemort had over him snapped at the hate, anger and rage returned. Harry pulled himself up straighter and squared his shoulders, not wanting Voldemort to see how sick he felt. Not wanting to give him the pleasure of seeing how terrified he was,

"As a matter of fact, I was."

He attempted to sidestep Voldemort but Voldemort rested his hands on either side of his body, efficiently trapping him,

"Pray tell, where shall you go?"

Harry rested his head against the wall and took in Voldemort's face,

"Somewhere far away from you."

Voldemort leaned forward and laughed softly in his ear,

"Your spirt is commendable, Harry."

He lowered his voice and nearly hissed in his ear,

"Should I inform my Death Eaters of your true identity?"

Voldemort stroked his neck with a long, pale finger,

"It would be a shame. I can see that Bella was beginning to warm up to you."

Harry turned his head and met Voldemort's crimson gaze. He shook his head. Voldemort laughed and pulled away,

"Nevertheless, I shall give you your chance. If you manage to outrun me, I shall allow you, your freedom. But if I catch you before you exit my forest…well then…. I'll leave that to your imagination. You have not yet seen the extent of my cruelty."

Voldemort laughed demonically. Harry's eyes widened at the prospect. He weighed his chances and admitted to himself that they were very slim. But something was better than nothing and he was going to take them.

"Run, Harry."
Chapter 18

Harry ran like he had never run before. He didn't stop when he reached the gardens or when he spotted the tiny passageway hidden in the hedges. He just ran.

Stepping into the forest robbed you of one sense and heightened the others. He had underestimated the utter blackness of night time in the woods. In his mind, the trees would be black trunks against a bluish charcoal sky, the path would become deepest brown and the moonlight would bleach the stones within it. The silvery rays of the moon were incapable of penetrating the dense canopy above. It could be no blacker in a coffin, six feet under and piled with dirt. He began to breathe the cool air more rapidly. The darkness pressed in on him from all sides and his body screamed as he continued to run.

It was disorientating to be almost blinded. Even the soft susurration of the branches felt heavy in the ears. His sense of smell was sensitized, the loam in the earth and the decomposing leaves made the atmosphere close and thick. The blackness nurtured a sense of claustrophobia inside you even though the woodland stretched unbroken for miles. The narrow path, which was made uneven by the knotted roots that crossed it, branched at intervals. Harry pulled out the map from his pocket but the perpetual dark prevented him from using it so he thrust it back.

Suddenly, he tripped over a root and landed face first on the ground. White, hot pain was pulsing through his ankle. He clenched his teeth. He had to get up. He had to run. He wasn't going back to that castle because that would mean lifetime imprisonment for him. His hands curled up in the moist soil and he instantly raised himself to his feet.

His feet slipped outwards on the wet, dead leaves that littered the forest ground as he stumbled through the thick trees. The cold evening air shocked his throat and lungs as he inhale deeper, faster. With each footfall, a jarring pain shot through his ankle up to his knee. His heart was beating frantically, all or nothing. Fail and his whole body would pay the price, run and the damage would be limited mostly to his ankle plus he would have his freedom.

Harry was glad for one thing though. So far, he hadn't felt Voldemort's heavy gaze on him which either meant that he hadn't caught up to him or the man simply hadn't begun the hunt yet. Hunt. He was being hunted. The image of Lord Voldemort made him shudder and he ran a bit faster.

Harry heard the sound of twigs snapping around him and he realized with cold dread that he wasn't alone. In fact, he felt surrounded. Harry heard voices coming nearer and nearer: rough excited voices. Heavy footfalls surrounded him and Harry froze in place. A large, vicious-looking man with matted grey hair and whiskers stepped out from the trees. Harry stole a quick glance around to find an opening but there was none. Twelve or Thirteen men surround him and there was no way he could make a run for it without knocking down on of them, which seemed highly unlikely because every single one of them was bulky and muscular.

The vicious looking man seemed to be the leader because he stepped forward and Harry reluctantly took a step back. His back instantly came in contact with something solid. The unbearable warmth and the sickly stench of sweat and blood informed him that he had backed up into one of the men. Harry felt a muscular arm wrap around his midsection and he struggled and attempted to slip out of the hold but all his efforts were for nought and his injured ankle was screaming in pain.

Greyback flashed him a feral grin and Harry noticed the pointed teeth and long yellowish nails. He wasn't a vampire. He was something far worse,
"My name is Fenrir Greyback. What about yours, Lovely?"

Harry didn't reply. Couldn't reply because his throat was constricted with fear. Greyback drew closer to him and the stench grew stronger. Harry tried holding his breath but it was useless. The stench was making him feel nauseous and sick. Greyback grabbed his face and snarled,

"What's your name?"

Harry finally managed to say his name,

"Harry."

Greyback laughed and stroked his cheek with a yellowed nail,

"And what is a lovely, delicious human like you doing out here in the woods?"

Harry didn't miss the fact that Greyback had referred to him as delicious. Why was everything in this place so hostile and ready to feed on him? His fear was quickly dissipating, just like it always did and he felt reckless,

"I was searching for you, handsome."

Greyback grinned again and closed the distance between them further. The stench grew stronger and Harry resisted the urge to gag. Greyback continued to scrape his nail over his cheek and growled lowly,

"Delicious…. what a treat … I do enjoy the softness of the skin …"

Harry cursed his own stupidity and lack of self-preservation but there was only way to escape. Harry batted his eyelashes in what he hoped was a flirtatious gesture and spoke in the deepest voice he could muster,

"Can we go somewhere private?"

Greyback licked his lips. Harry could see the contradiction in his eyes. He was thinking but Harry was wishing he would act on impulse. Finally, Harry saw the first indicator that he had been triumphant. Greyback's pupils dilated with lust and he signalled the man to release him. Harry winced in pain as pain shot through his ankle again. Greyback, however was too focused on his body to notice his facial expressions. Harry steeled and readied himself to run. He just hoped these men weren't fast. Just as Greyback removed his hand from his face. Harry made a run for it. His ankle protested and screamed but he couldn't stop. He swerved through the trees. He could hear their cat calls, their jeering, their panting. They were on his trail and Harry was certain that they would rip him apart as soon as they would get a hold on him.

That was when he felt it. Lord Voldemort's heavy, ominous presence right at his heels.

NO……NO……NO. His heart was pounding, his panicked breaths sounded like thunder in his ears, thighs burning, lungs on fire, he just prayed he didn't trip again. Adrenaline was almost bursting through his skin. His eyes were wide with fear. His screams locked in his throat. He was coming. He groaned in infuriation. Voldemort laughed and the sound echoed all around him. It seemed the forest was laughing with him. Harry felt his long, thin fingers snatch his hair, tangling and tugging. His head bobbed backwards. The scream squeaked through his scorched throat. He snatched at the air and begged it to help him keep his balance. But it was over. Voldemort's laugh grew maniacal and asserted his victory. Harry saw the stars watching from the heavens above. His parents were probably up there looking down at him too. The night sky was blocked out by Voldemort's face looming over him. The man smirked demonically and his red eyes glowed with jubilation. Harry's
body went numb. Blackness.
Chapter 19

The blackness didn't last long and Harry jerked back to consciousness when he felt a sharp pain stab through his chest. His eyes flew open and he saw the thick woods all around him. How had he gotten here? Why the hell was he feeling so exhausted and drained? He tried to move his arms but realized too late that they were tied to a tree. His eyelids fluttered shut again as he felt pain coursing through his entire body. It wasn't intense. It was more like a dull throbbing. He tried to focus on where he was and how he'd gotten there. What would his relatives be thinking? He was definitely going to get punished for this. In a flash, a cry escaped his lips as it all came back to him. His head threatened to explode with the sharp pain that came with the memories. His relatives had dumped him here. And he'd been running to escape from Voldemort.

Voldemort, that name had never frightened him, however the image of the man downright terrified him now. He had caught him so effortlessly. He should have known that he hadn't stood a chance. He shouldn't have run. Harry was cursing his own stupidity when that dark, sinister voice made him freeze,

"Are you feeling more compliant now, Harry?"

Harry didn't miss the promise of pain behind those words. Fear tortured his guts and made his stomach churn in tense cramps. It was slowly starting to engulf his conscience, knocking all other thoughts aside, overwhelming his body and making it drastically exhausted. However, most of all, the fear was making him calm and that was what scared Harry the most. Harry opened his eyes and raised his head up to look at Voldemort standing a few feet away from him, dressed in black robes, his eyes were gleaming red and once again Harry caught sight of the huge snake wrapped around his shoulders, its tail coiled tightly around his throat. Harry wondered why Voldemort wasn't suffocating. The snake's yellow eyes were trained on him. It was too surreal and the question slipped out,

"Why is there a snake wrapped around your throat?"

A flicker of doubt and surprise crossed Voldemort's face for a brief moment but then almost instantly it was replaced by scorn. Harry watched the black snake slither around his throat, flicking its tail. The snake hissed. Harry's heart thudded in his chest. His flesh was on fire, his eyes useless and clouded in soot and ash. Currents of electricity surged and rushed, tingling in every vein as if he'd been asleep for a thousand years and only now, finally, he was beginning to wake. The snake turned back to shadows and disappeared inside Voldemort's skin. Harry realized he hadn't been breathing. He could breathe now, could think. Panting heavily, he hunched over as much as the ropes allowed him to, squeezed his eyes shut and willed the revulsion in his stomach to subside.

Harry felt long, spidery fingers grip his chin and he shivered involuntarily,

"I asked you a question."

Harry tried his best to string together words and managed to speak,

"I asked you one as well."

Harry felt his cheek sting as he realized that Voldemort had just backhanded him,

"Your insolence clearly illustrates the fact that you haven't learnt a lesson. Maybe I should hand you over to Greyback. He has been itching to take you somewhere private, as you requested."
Harry didn't care about what happened to him now. He was just too physically and mentally exhausted to be terrified or hurt. He could only murmur,

"Okay."

Harry barely registered Voldemort's fingers wrapped around his throat. Oh good, death was the best rest he could ever hope for but the fingers vanished and Harry's hope died. The ropes around his wrists vanished and Harry slumped to the ground and his body instinctively curled in on itself. He opened his eyes with extreme difficulty and found Voldemort's pale feet inches away from his face. Somehow, he found the fact that the man was barefoot extremely hilarious and he laughed deliriously.

Voldemort stared down at the boy, curled up on the forest floor. He had to wonder if the boy truly had lost his mind because it sure seemed like it. He was still perturbed about the snake statement though. Nagini was in the castle and he was fairly certain that Harry hadn't been talking about Nagini. But he had seen the way Harry's gaze had been fixated on his throat like the boy could see something there. Maybe Harry had been hallucinating. It was a viable option. Unconsciously, he moved his hand over his neck and then immediately let his hands fall. This was absurd. There was nothing there. They boy really had been hallucinating and it seemed they had gotten worse because his eyes were shut again but he continued to laugh weakly. He decided to indulge him,

"What amuses you, Harry?"

Harry's laughter died down and he watched as a frown crossed his features,

"You live in a huge castle and yet you don't wear shoes. Do you even have shoes?"

Voldemort shook his head in disbelief. That's what the boy had been laughing about. It seemed there was no way the boy could ever remain terrified. His fear lasted for barely a few minutes before being replaced by recklessness or curiosity. He could crush him in a heartbeat. He could torture him into oblivion. But none of that would work if the boy didn't fear him and he had a feeling that the boy really would never come to fear him. He didn't like the way he was thinking about him. He was the reason him and everyone associated with him had been cursed. By all accounts, he had the right to hurt him, torture him, break him. He had promised him that he would show him the extent of his cruelty if he failed to escape and the boy had failed. Well he had been doomed to fail. This forest was unescapable. Why wasn't he being cruel now? Maybe because the boy was barely in his senses. Anything he did now would have zero impact on him.

He looked down at Harry again and surmised that the boy had passed out, if his deep, steady breathing was anything to go by. He touched the red spot on his cheek where he had struck him. The boy hadn't even flinched at that. He lifted him up in his arms just like that night when Harry had first appeared in this castle. He had been curious then and he was curious now. His curiosity was the only thing stopping him from downright destroying the boy. There was something odd about Harry, well, not just something, he had noticed many strange things about him and he was certain that Harry wasn't aware of those things about himself as well. But now was not the time to reflect on them. He tightened his hold on Harry and apparated.
Harry awoke to soft sheets and wonderfully warm covers. That sleepy haze still surrounded him and he turned over to bury his face in the pillow. It quickly dissipated when pain flared up in his ankle and he felt wide awake and extremely aware of Voldemort's presence. He was glad that he had managed to bury his face in the pillow. He really didn't want to see Voldemort,

"Are you pretending to be asleep?"

Harry nearly jumped at Voldemort's voice but quickly calmed himself down,

"No, not pretending. Can't turn over now. I think I sprained my ankle."

He could turn over if he wanted to but he didn't want to face Voldemort so the ankle was a perfect excuse. And then there was that snake around his throat. The sight of it just made him feel sick and extremely weird. He remembered what had happened to him last night when he had looked at it. He didn't want to feel that way again. Harry felt the covers being pulled away from his feet. Was Voldemort really checking his ankle. He really hoped it looked sprained. The covers were replaced and Voldemort spoke again,

"It is indeed injured."

Harry nodded his head shakily. Voldemort had promised to show him the extent of his cruelty. He had been caught. Any second now, Voldemort would torture him. But when it didn't come for a while, Harry couldn't help but speak,

"I lost, you can torture me if you want. It'll only be fair."

Harry instantly regretted his words. Did he have a death wish? No, Voldemort wasn't going to kill him. Maybe he had become a bloody masochist. Nope, he wasn't a masochist. Voldemort, however only chuckled,

"Do you enjoy suffering, Harry?"

Harry shook his head and groaned,

"I don't know why I said that."

Harry felt the bed dip. Voldemort must have sat down beside him,

"It seems you do. You had no trouble offering yourself to Bellatrix and Greyback. And you purposely went looking for trouble when you encountered the Dementors."

Harry felt his curiosity return and he had a thousand questions in his mind,

"Dementors? Those things in the basement?"

Voldemort sighed in exasperation and then spoke,

"Yes, the very same."

Harry was dying to straighten up now but he knew he would just have another terrible reaction to seeing that snake and he didn't want that because then he wouldn't be able to ask all the questions he wanted to ask and he was certain he wouldn't get Voldemort in a mood like this again,
"What are they?"

Voldemort didn't reply for a while and Harry began to think that Voldemort had changed his mind and was going to torture him after all. Then he spoke,

"Dementors are Dark creatures, one of the foulest to inhabit this castle. They feed on human happiness and thus generate feelings of depression and despair in any person in close proximity to them. They can also consume a person's soul, rendering a person an empty-shell."

Harry frowned into the pillow,

"So, they could have sucked my soul out that day?"

Harry stiffened when he felt Voldemort's fingers touch his head, thinking that the man was going to grab his hair like last time. Nothing like that happened though and Voldemort began carding his fingers through his hair. Harry allowed himself to relax but the wariness didn't leave him.

"Why'd I hear my mother though? That doesn't make sense."

Oh damn, there it was. The reason why he had run in the first place. The man sitting beside him had murdered his parents in cold blood and he was laying here, letting him touch him and having a civil conversation with him. What the hell was wrong with him? Voldemort hated him. He had made that point very clear. The only reason he was alive was because…..now that he thought of it. Voldemort hadn't mentioned why he was keeping him alive. He had only said that there had been an unexpected turn of events. The point was that he should hate Voldemort too. But hate and rage were such taxing emotions. They had left him feeling drained and he didn't want to feel that again. There had to be a reason why Voldemort had gone after his parents. The voice in his head screamed at him to get real and stop this absurdity but his heart kept urging him to understand. He hated this confusion. Why was Voldemort so silent. Maybe he was going through an inner turmoil of his own.

Harry felt Voldemort's hand grab his hair. Yup, it seemed Voldemort had decided to go with his brain. Maybe Voldemort didn't have a heart. Harry tried not to react and kept himself as still as possible. Gradually Voldemort's grip relaxed on his hair and he began stroking his hair again. Harry couldn't understand what was going on. He was dying to know what Voldemort was thinking,

"Dementors tend to leave a person with the worst experiences of their life."

Harry closed his eyes and finally asked,

"Why are you keeping me alive?"

Voldemort went silent again and his hand stilled in his hair,

"That is none of your concern."

Harry resisted the urge to turn over again,

"My life is not my concern?"

Voldemort's hand began moving again,

"Yes, your life does not belong to you anymore. It belongs to me therefore it is my concern now."
He was subconsciously enjoying what Voldemort was doing. He felt soothed and couldn't help but relax completely,

"But that doesn't make any sense."

He was perfectly aware of the fact that he was arguing just for the sake of arguing now. It didn't matter why Voldemort was keeping was alive. The only thing that mattered was the fact that he would be spending the rest of his life in this castle. He might as well accept that fact now. And it wasn't like Voldemort was going to turn him into a slave. Would he? He wasn't sure. His body stiffened again at that thought,

"Are you going to turn me into a slave?"

Voldemort chuckled and spoke,

"Is that the only thing that terrifies you?"

Harry huffed indignantly. Voldemort really enjoyed it when he was terrified,

"No, it doesn't terrify me. I've been a slave for fifteen years. It's not going to be anything new for me. I just want to be mentally prepared for it."

Voldemort patted his head,

"I do not require slaves. I thought that was apparent."

Harry relaxed again,

"But you hate me. And everyone else here will hate me too once they find out that I'm the reason for this curse. I don't think I can live with so much hate."

Voldemort pulled away his hand from his hair,

"You lived with your relatives, did you not? Consider this an improvement. I shall not allow anyone else to know your secret."

Harry turned over steadily and looked up at Voldemort. the light must have been playing tricks because Voldemort's eyes weren't crimson, they were a beautiful clear shade of brown. Harry felt like he had been wrong about Voldemort's soul. Harry could see it as clear as day now, Voldemort's soul. There was something that flickered there, something golden and lovely. Something that was crying out to be set free. How was he seeing this? Was this really Voldemort's soul,

But then he saw it, the snake. Its head came from the darkness behind him. It slinked over his shoulder, across his chest, around his arm, and back up to his throat. Harry blinked and whatever gold he'd seen in Voldemort's eyes, vanished, leaving nothing but ash in its place and they turned back into smouldering crimson.

Harry turned his head and closed his eyes,

"You didn't tell me about the snake."

There was silence for a while and then Voldemort spoke,

"You are surely hallucinating again,"
Harry shook his head,

"It's there. I'm not hallucinating."

He felt Voldemort rise to his feet and vanish. Harry thought of the snake that crept from Voldemort's darkness, the way it slithered and crawled across his body like it was part of his whole. Maybe it was. But then why wasn't Voldemort aware of its presence. He had seen Voldemort's soul. Maybe Voldemort was right. Maybe he really was hallucinating.
It took a week for Harry's ankle to heal completely and now he was finally able to leave the room. He hadn't seen Voldemort or anyone else in that duration. His reckless side was threatening to burst out and he was itching for an adventure. Adventure.... yeah it seemed a reasonable enough word for his deadly explorations. He couldn't help but admit how right Voldemort had been when he had said that he enjoyed suffering. No, he didn't enjoy suffering. He was just wildly curious. This castle was so huge and it was so full of secrets. Harry just wanted to discover all of them. Maybe then he would understand why Voldemort was the way he was. He stood in the doorway of his room, the logical part of his brain, which was extremely tiny, kept screaming at him to go back inside and relax while everything else begged him to start walking and explore the castle. In the end, it wasn't a tough decision. His curiosity won over. He pulled out the map from inside his pocket and passed a glance over it. When he couldn't decide where to go, he just pushed the map back in his pocket and started walking.

He avoided the west wing because as much as he liked Bella, he didn't want them to find out who he was. His feet led him through long corridors and stone passageways until he found himself outside. It was unfamiliar to the orchards or gardens he had previously visited mainly because this part was rocky and barren. It looked like someone had abruptly stopped building the castle when they had reached this point. He carefully stepped over jagged rocks, but every irregular movement made his newly healed ankle ache. Why did he have no sense of self-preservation, whatsoever? He hated himself for it. Harry continued moving until he reached what seemed like a cave. His logical side started screaming again, trying fruitlessly to make him turn back but Harry ignored it. Something inside was pulling at him and Harry allowed himself to be pulled. His footsteps echoed inside the cavern as he made his way to a wall. He felt disappointed. It wasn't supposed to be a dead end. He was about to turn back when he felt the pull again. He stepped closer to the wall and touched it. Instantly an arched outline appeared there, blazing white as though there was a powerful light behind the crack. Harry pulled his hand away immediately. The outline vanished, leaving the rock as bare and solid as ever. Harry tried to figure out how he was supposed to open it. He touched the cold wall again and the bright outline appeared once more. He moved his hand over the wall. He didn't know what he was looking for, maybe a keyhole, some loose rock, something.

Suddenly a hiss escaped his lips as a sharp, jagged rock cut into his palm. Harry instantly drew away his hand and cradled it close to his chest. His gaze took in the rock face that was peppered with dark, glistening drops of blood. Surprisingly The blazing silver outline of an arch did not fade away. The blood-spattered rock within it simply vanished, leaving an opening into what seemed total darkness.

The allure grew stronger and Harry stepped through the archway. An eerie sight met his eyes: he was standing on the edge of a great black lake, so vast that Harry could not make out the distant banks, in a cavern so high that the ceiling, too, was out of sight. A silvery white light shone far away in what looked like the middle of the lake; it was reflected in the completely still water below. The bright silvery glow was the only things that broke the otherwise velvety blackness.

Harry felt drawn it. It felt like an invisible force kept tugging him forward. Harry grew aware that he had stepped into the ice-cold water when he felt the chill run from his toes up to the rest of his body and he shuddered. With a noise like an explosion, something very large and pale erupted out of the dark water some twenty feet away; before Harry could see what it was, it had vanished again with a crashing splash that made great, deep ripples on the mirrored surface. Harry leapt backwards.
in shock and hit the wall. His heart was hammering in his chest. What was that? He should just turn back now while he was unharmed and still had the chance. His shoes and socks were soaked and the cold was making his teeth chatter.

The glow emanating from the centre of the lake caught his attention again and Harry groaned. There was no way he could leave this place without finding out what was causing that glow. But he needed to find a way to cross this lake without touching the water. He stared at the sinisterly smooth water and his thoughts were all of water-monsters, giant serpents and demons.

He set off around the edge of the lake. His footsteps made echoing, slapping sounds on the narrow rim of rock that surrounded the water. He stopped when he reached the end. He had no idea how he was going to cross the water unless he sprouted wings and flew across. Harry jumped when something emerged from the depths of the black water. He gasped as the ghostly prow of a tiny boat broke the surface and floated, with barely a ripple, towards the place on the bank where he stood. Guess he had found his way across.

Harry climbed carefully into the boat which began to move at once. There was no sound other than the silken rustle of the boat's prow cleaving the water; it moved without his help, as though an invisible rope were pulling it onwards towards the light in the centre. Soon he could no longer see the walls of the cavern. He felt like he had just crossed the point of no return. The boat was carving deep ripples upon the glassy surface, grooves in the dark mirror and then Harry saw it, marble-white, floating inches below the surface. There was a hand in the water – a human hand. He stared down into the water, looking for the vanished hand, and a sick feeling rose in his throat. That thing that had jumped out of the earlier…. that had been…His answer presented itself when the boat drifted past a dead man lying face up inches beneath the surface: his open eyes misted as though with cobwebs, his hair and his robes swirling around him like smoke.

Harry cursed internally. Why the hell was he not terrified out of his mind? There were corpses floating in the water…. actual corpses…. and he was sailing through it daintily without a care in the world. He should be turning around, he should be worrying about getting out of this place as soon as possible but the only thing he could focus on was the light in the centre of the lake. He was burning inside to know what was causing it. The silvery light seemed to be growing larger at last, and within minutes, the boat came to a halt, bumping gently into something that Harry could not see at first, but when the boat hit solid land, he saw that he had finally reached a small island of smooth rock in the centre of the lake.

Harry stepped off the boat. The island was an expanse of flat dark stone on which stood nothing but the source of that white glow, which looked much brighter when viewed close to. Harry squinted at it; at first, he thought it was a lamp of some kind, but then he saw that the light was coming from a shallow stone basin with odd carvings around the edge; runes and symbols that Harry didn't recognise. The silvery light was coming from the basin's contents, which were like nothing Harry had ever seen before. He couldn't tell whether the substance was liquid or gas. It was a bright, whitish silver, and it was moving ceaselessly; the surface of it became ruffled like water beneath wind, and then, like clouds, separated and swirled smoothly. It looked like light made liquid – or like wind made solid – Harry couldn't make up his mind.

He wanted to touch it, to find out what it felt like, but all his remaining senses told him that sticking his hand into a bowl full of some unknown substance was a very stupid thing to do but he threw caution to the wind and prodded the liquid with his finger anyway. The surface of the silvery stuff inside the basin began to swirl very fast. Harry bent closer, his head right over the basin. The silvery substance had become transparent; it looked like glass. He looked down into it, expecting to see the stone bottom of the basin but what he saw instead stole his breath away.
Chapter 22

He was staring down at some kind of hallway and the view was what he would have if he were looking down from above the ceiling. Lowering his face so that his nose was a mere inch away from the glassy substance, he tried to get a closer look, to make some sense of what he was seeing. Where was this place? He leant even closer, tilting his head, trying to see. The tip of his nose touched the strange substance into which he was staring. The island gave an almighty lurch, for a brief moment, Harry thought the island was sinking and he was going to drown in that black lake and become one of the dead bodies floating around in it but then he was thrown forwards and pitched headfirst into the substance inside the basin. Harry braced himself for impact but his head didn’t hit the stone bottom. He was falling through something icy cold and black; it was like being sucked into a dark whirlpool.

Suddenly Harry found himself standing in the hallway. He couldn’t understand what had happened or how he had just gotten here, wherever here was. He stared up and was met with sight of a plain plastered ceiling, he had almost been expecting to see the shimmering surface of the substance in the basin. How was he ever going to get out of here? Well, it wouldn’t really be a loss if he wasn’t able to return. He might as well figure out where he was. Harry passed a glance around the hallway, it was practically filthy. The floor was chipped and covered with a thick layer of grime. Several cracks ran through the mould covered walls. Harry began making his way through the corridor, trying to assess what the place was when voices caught his attention. This place was actually inhabited? Somehow that shocked him because the place was uninhabitable. It looked downright miserable.

The more he walked, the more the voices grew louder, stronger, A woman’s voice,

“You’re here late tonight … Albus.”

“Are we alone, Minerva?”

“Until dawn Albus.”

Harry hadn’t realized he had reached a door. He peered in carefully and saw a tall, thin with long hair and an auburn beard and dressed in a flamboyantly cut suit of plum velvet. His blue eyes were light, bright, and sparkling behind half-moon spectacles. A tall, rather severe-looking woman stood at his side. Her body was full within the gray uniform,

“Who else shall be in attendance tonight?”

The woman spoke,

“Severus Snape and Dolores Umbridge.”

The man smirked pleasantly,

“Ah, our very good friends and midnight companions.”

The man, Albus, scratched his chin and pretended to think,

“Umbridge has the appetites of a woman. Several women.”

Minerva, the woman chuckled nervously. Albus laughed heartily,
“I’ve noticed you and Umbridge enjoy one another.”

“I enjoy many things, Albus. Especially your little puppets.”

Harry couldn’t make head nor tail of that conversation. Into a cavern of shadows. A small lamp flickered from a corner. Harry realized the space was a large supply room stocked with cans of food, barrels of cooking oil, metal bed frames for the floor, mattresses, light fittings and bulbs.

Call Severus and Umbridge. Hurry, then we’ll go select tonight’s puppets.”

The room spun to show the far side, a broad set of double doors. Albus appeared beside the doors and they opened with a sound of thunder. Harry watched a white trail drift into the room with a slinky, feline grace. The trail was the smell of food. It began to fill the room like fog.

Harry followed them silently and watched as Albus made his way to a bed where a dark haired, pale young boy with huge brown eyes, handsome features and pale lips sat, his nose inspecting the scents in the air. He looked ten or eleven. The boy was more fragile than a glass ballerina that his aunt had once owned. He was holding himself like he was trying to take up even less space than he already had and his clothes looked at least a size too small, that only exaggerated his skinliness. He looked so lost. The boy’s eyes did not register the man beside him, his face held no expression. Albus leaned until his mouth was at the boy’s ear, he whispered.

“Tom? Are you hungry?”

From the far side of the long room another door opened and Harry turned to see Minerva appear from it with four small children following behind her. They drifted into the fog and disappeared. Harry forgot his hiding place and he nearly jumped when Albus led the boy, Tom straight past him. Harry’s eyes widened in shock. It was as if they hadn’t seen him at all. Was that possible? Harry followed them to the kitchen, where plates of food awaited and it became apparent to him that no one could see him.

Activity in the supply room caught his eye and he was drawn to it. A tall, dark haired man was pulling mattresses from a stack by the wall and setting them on the floor. Harry made his way back to the kitchen and his heart hammered in his chest. This wasn’t right. He observed the children as they smeared their faces with food, eating without a word, as if alone. They looked like they were eating after several days. Harry felt his gaze drawn back to Tom, who wasn’t eating as frantically as the other children. In fact, he looked like he wasn’t eating at all. Albus stood at the head of the kitchen staring at the boys and smiling pleasantly. Something about the expression on his face sent shivers down his spine. There was something dark about the man, something utterly sinister. Then he saw it, thick black smoke emanating from the man, seeping out of his pores, swirling around his being. It was his soul. He was certain of it. Why couldn’t the children see that? His gaze travelled to the woman, Minerva, who was emanating the same darkness. He was feeling suffocated. Harry was overcome by the urge to get away from this place.

The light flickered and the children were no longer in the kitchen but the supply room. They stood naked in the vibrating luminosity, tattered clothes at their feet. Harry closed his eyes and turned away his head. He wanted to run……wanted to hide……This was madness. Complete and utter madness and he would die rather than watch it. His feet refused to move though. Some unnatural force kept him glued to the spot. His eyes were forced open and he was compelled to watch in horror as the scene unfolded before his eyes. His gaze was drawn again to Tom who stood at the left end, his gaze distant and far away, the only boy who didn’t have food all over his face. A sound caught Harry’s attention, it seemed to have caught Tom’s as well. A white cat was sitting on the outside ledge of a window, scratching at the glass. Tom spoke to the cat,
“Go away. Go away. It’s not safe to be—”

the man named Snape spoke,

“What is that noise?”

Albus spoke casually,

“It is of no consequence. Some cat climbed the fire escape.”

“Leave it to me,”

Harry noticed the woman for the first time. She was a short and squat resembling a large pale toad. She had a broad, flabby face, a wide, slack mouth, and little neck. Her eyes were bulging and pouchy, and in her mousy brown hair she wore a black velvet bow. Harry attributed her to the name he had heard earlier, Umbridge, her face was craned toward the window, a wide smirk gracing her lips. She set aside the bottle she had been drinking from and opened the window, multiple panes grated with steel. She coaxed in a poisonously sweet voice,

“Here, kitty kitty……Nice kitty kitty……”

She grasped the cat by the skin of its neck, her other hand under its thin belly, pulling it inside the room and holding it high like a prize. Her soul was just as dark as her companions. Her stubby hands moved to the cat’s neck. A scream of horror rose inside Harry’s throat as he realized what she was about to do. They made a fast twist and a cracking sound. The cat went limp as a wet dishrag and she threw it out the window. The scream escaped Harry’s lips and he nearly sagged to the ground but a hand closed tight over his upper arm, holding it in a bone shattering grip and keeping him on his feet. Harry was very aware of the fact that he was screaming, screaming for the children, those monsters were going to hurt them. He wanted to do something, anything to help them. He had to do something. But before he could do anything, he felt himself rising into the air; the supply room evaporated around him; he was floating upwards through icy blackness and the impossibly tight grasp on his arm grew tighter.
Harry was roughly tossed to the hard stone ground and he fell hard but he was far from experiencing any pain. Another wail escaped his lips and his body trembled uncontrollably as his mind conjured up images of horrific things happening to those children. Harry was grabbed by the scruff of the neck and raised to his feet only to be met by Voldemort’s rage filled, smouldering, crimson gaze. The man’s lipless mouth was pressed into a straight line. Harry closed his eyes before his gaze could reach the snake wrapped around his neck. Harry winced when he shouted, his voice reverberating through the cavern,

“How did you get in here???”

Harry didn’t know, couldn’t remember. His mind kept rerunning everything he had had just witnessed. Voldemort shook him hard and dragged him to the edge of the island,

“I have half a mind to drown you if you do not start explaining.”

Drowning….drowning was so much better than what he was going through. Those images were never going to leave him. Maybe drowning would help. He wanted that oblivion. He was burning for it because surely the images running through his head would drive him insane or kill him.

He got his wish as he was forced down on his knees at the edge of the lake and Voldemort grabbed his head and pushed it over the rim into the icy, cold water. Harry kept his eyes closed, holding his breath, feeling the lack of oxygen scorching up his lungs and slowly, gradually burning away his thoughts. He was glad…more than glad for the blackness that was slowly darkening his mind. His body wanted to struggle, to squirm but he refused to move. He resisted the panic his body was going through with all his will. He was terrified that the images would return if he moved and he didn’t want to see them again.

Voldemort had been enraged to discover that Harry had managed to gain access to his memories. It shouldn’t even have been possible for him to get into the cavern. He wasn’t going to rest until he found out how Harry had managed it. There had been something eerie about seeing Harry standing in what had once been his hell. He was certain that the boy wasn’t aware of what he had seen. He wouldn’t be able to make any sense of it unless he explained it to him. He had locked them away here because this cavern was supposed to be the most secure location. No one….no one had ever been able to get past the inferi lurking in the lake and guarding the Pensieve. He had ordered them to stay away as he held the boy underwater, otherwise they would have dragged him down to the bottom of the lake by now.

The haze of rage vanished leaving nothing but intrigue and curiosity behind as he held Harry down with one hand and held him in place with the other. Harry resisted, he didn’t fight, didn’t even squirm. For a moment, he considered that the boy was dead but no bubbles rose from the water and that was proof that he was alive. If there had been any other human in Harry’s place, he would have thrashed and screamed and would probably have lost every bit of breath in an attempt to free himself. But Harry didn’t, even though every harsh line of his body spoke of panic held in check with an iron will. How long had it been? A minute? It felt like five. He was tempted to test Harry’s limits but he didn’t want the boy to die. There were too many questions he needed answered.

Finally, he released Harry but the boy made no attempt to pull up. He noticed Harry’s knuckles whiten as he held on to the edge of the island. What was wrong with him? The brat was drowning himself. He plunged his hand into the water, grabbed him by the hair and pulled his head out of the water forcibly. Harry spluttered and drew breaths in huge, noisy gulps. He noticed that his
spectacles were gone, they had probably slipped into the water. Voldemort dragged him away from the edge. Harry lay on his back, coughed and continued to catch his breath. Voldemort stared down at him. He should have killed him the day he arrived here. A cry escaped Harry’s lips and he saw tears streaming down his temple. The boy was crying. He had never seen him cry before but there was something hauntingly beautiful about it. He shook his head and silently contemplated the reasons behind those tears. Was it because he had nearly died? Or was it something else? The boy had nearly died on countless occasions before in this castle so that couldn’t be the reason. Was it possible that he was crying because of what he had witnessed? That wasn’t likely. After all, why would he be bothered by any of it?

Why……Why hadn’t Voldemort just let him die? He had been so close. Those images were coming back, the naked children, those monsters, that darkness…..A cry escaped his lips and he couldn’t stop the tears from flowing. He couldn’t do anything for them. He should have done something, anything to stop it. He had never felt so worthless before. Maybe he could go back. Maybe it wasn’t too late.

Harry’s eyes flew open and he jumped to his feet, only to be grabbed by Voldemort by the throat. Everything was blurry and he was grateful for it. He didn’t want to see that snake…not now….not when he was going insane. Voldemort snapped his fingers and Harry unwillingly turned his head to see a blurry shape emerge from the water. Voldemort opened his hand and the thing…the shape…placed something on it. Voldemort leaned closer to him and his face came into clearer focus. Harry kept his gaze locked on those crimson eyes. He didn’t want to look down. Voldemort smirked and placed his glasses on the bridge of his nose. Instantly everything came into clearer focus and Harry nearly screamed when he saw what the blurry shape was.

A gaunt, skeletal, rotting corpse stood behind Voldemort, it’s white and cloudy eyes staring directly at him. Harry closed his eyes instantly and Voldemort gripped his jaw in a bone shattering hold,

“Open your eyes this instant!”

Harry refused to do so and kept them firmly shut. He wasn’t afraid of Voldemort. He was afraid of seeing more things that would act as a catalyst to his oncoming psychosis. Voldemort struck him hard across the face and Harry’s head snapped to the side. He bit his lip to hold the sound that threatened to escape, drawing blood. The corpse instantly lurched at him and Harry found himself back on the stone ground, with the corpse clawing at him. Harry screamed and kicked at it blindly as it attempted to scratch his face off with its blunt nails and snapped at him. The struggle only lasted a moment because Voldemort snapped his fingers and the corpse jumped away from him, as if burned.

Harry closed his eyes and panted. Before he could recover, Voldemort had grabbed him by his wet hair and had him back on his feet, his back pressed flushed against his chest, his head pulled back and forced to stare at the roof of the cavern. Harry wanted to pull away or grab onto Voldemort’s arm to ease the strain, but he resisted the urge,

“There are many things that you and I are going to discuss and it shall be far less painful you if you cooperate.”
Chapter 24

Harry found himself seated on the edge of his bed. The cold from the cavern seemed to have seeped into his bones and he shivered uncontrollably. He hadn't expected Voldemort to bring him here considering that the man had indicated that he planned on torturing him. He kept his eyes closed and waited for the pain to come but instead Voldemort's cold voice reached his ears and made his spine tingle,

"How did you get in there?"

The question sent Harry's thoughts whirling. He was glad for a distraction from those ghastly images of everything he had witnessed including that corpse. They seemed to have imprinted themselves on his mind. Harry wrapped his arms around himself to keep himself warm and still and focused on how he had gotten into that wretched place. He didn't recall getting in the cavern to be difficult. In fact, it had been too easy. Everything had happened on its own. He remembered the pull that he had felt. Maybe he had imagined it. Maybe he really was going insane. When he spoke, he was surprised by how hoarse he sounded,

"It wasn't difficult."

Voldemort instantly grabbed his forearm in a bone shattering hold and turned his hand, palm facing upwards. Harry felt his finger trace the cut on his hand,

"I think I asked the wrong question, Harry. How did you know how to get in there?"

Harry sat as still as possible and bit his tongue. Voldemort's hold was scorching hot and it felt like his hand was burning a hole through his skin. The finger that traced his cut, however, left his skin freezing cold. This was utter and complete torture but he wasn't going to give in. He didn't understand why he resisted but it just felt fundamental to his being. He felt like he would lose himself if he gave in. He felt Voldemort draw closer to him and growl in his ear,

"Talk, Harry, or there are far worse things I can do to you."

Harry couldn't talk, afraid that a cry would escape his lips rather than words. The heat was beginning to spread from where Voldemort's fingers were clasped around his arm to the rest of his body. He willed himself to stay still, his teeth biting deeper into his tongue. The metallic taste of blood filled his mouth and the intensity of the scorching heat increased. The urge to scream, to move and pull away tore at his insides but he held himself still and quiet by the sheer force of will. What's the worst that could happen to him? He would die from this… that wasn't a big loss at all. It was nothing compared to what those children must have gone through, all those unspeakable, horrid things…..Harry didn't know when the tears started streaming down his cheeks again and the heat began to dissipate gradually. He felt puzzled…because Voldemort's fingers were still wrapped around his arm and his other hand was still tracing his palm but now he felt nothing, no heat, no cold. Harry opened his mouth to speak and felt a trickle of blood dribble down the corner of his mouth. Voldemort instantly released him and Harry felt him draw away. The next thing he felt was something soft land in his lap,

"Wipe that blood away this instant!"

Harry realized that the thing in his lap was a handkerchief. He picked it up and wiped away the blood. Harry was glad he had his eyes closed. The darkness was soothing him immensely. Once he was done he put it down beside himself because he was sure he would need it again. Voldemort
drew closer to him again and Harry felt him grab his hair,
"It shall be in your best interests to start talking now."

Harry exhaled and then spoke,
"Something was pulling at me from inside the cavern."

Voldemort pulled sharply on his hair,
"I shall have none of your lies."

Harry's head was yanked back as Voldemort pulled roughly on his hair,
"Open your eyes. Look at me!"

Harry didn't open his eyes. Wouldn't open them even if his life depended on it,
"I'm not lying. I didn't know how to get in. It all happened by itself."

Harry's hands grabbed the covers tightly as Voldemort's hands gripped his face tightly,
"How do you know parseltongue? What are you, Harry? Because I am beginning to believe that you're not human."

Harry didn't understand what Voldemort meant,
"I don't know what you mean."

Voldemort struck him hard across the face and his grip on his hair was the only thing that kept Harry from falling sideways on the mattress,
"Parseltongue, Harry. It is the language of the snakes. A very rare skill that cannot be possessed by any ordinary human being. Any normal human would have been incapable of surviving in his castle. The fear would have killed them if the occupants did not manage to get to them first… You…..You have provoked nearly all of the occupants and you never seem to be afraid. Your bravery is unnatural for an ordinary human being."

Harry found it difficult to breathe, difficult to digest what Voldemort had just said to him,
"I don't know how to talk to snakes."

Voldemort drew closer to him and hissed in his ear,
"Oh really? You are a liar, Harry."

Harry nodded and the words that slipped off his tongue felt unnatural and sounded unnatural,
"I am not a liar."

Voldemort laughed maniacally,
"You are talking in that language now."

Harry tried to understand what was happening here. Now that he observed it, his voice did sound odd and the words that he had spoken had sounded off. He tried talking in English. They sounded
English in his head but when he spoke, they felt odd again,

"I'm not talking in parselt….whatever you called it."

But he was he knew it now. How….How was he even talking in a language he hadn't ever read or heard or spoken before,

"This isn't right. It can't be right. I don't know how this is happening."

Voldemort released his hair and cupped his face,

"Look at me and say that."

Harry opened his eyes and was met with Voldemort's crimson red gaze. He tried…..he tried desperately not to let his gaze wander but it did and he was met with the sight of the snake inches away from his face. Its yellow gaze fixated on him. Harry moved his head and the snake titled it's, it's eyes never leaving his face. Harry gulped and pulled away from Voldemort. It was becoming increasingly difficult for him to breathe. He rose to his feet and stepped as far away from Voldemort as possible. His gaze took in the darkness oozing from his skin and Harry couldn't help but gasp. It wasn't possible for the darkness to get any darker but it had. It was far wickeder than the darkness he had witnessed in the memory. Harry rasped out,

"You're one of them."

Harry retreated until his back hit the wall. A frown crossed Voldemort's features and Harry watched the snake coil tighter around his neck and hiss dangerously.
Chapter 25

Those words struck him like a lightning bolt. One of them? How had Harry figured it out? Had he seen a glimpse of his childhood inside him? Or had it merely been Harry’s intuition?

“One of them?”

Harry eyes were fixed at his throat. He had said that he saw a snake there and he had been adamant that it wasn’t a hallucination. His next words were enough to pull the ground from underneath his feet,

“One of those monsters.”

It felt as if the sky had crashed upon his head. Those monsters? Harry thought he was one of them? Had he really become one of them? Hadn’t he sought to not turn into the likes of them……those beasts or monsters as Harry put them, had taken everything from him. Harry spoke again,

“What do you see when you look at me?”

Voldemort regarded Harry, his lean figure, his emerald green eyes, his catastrophic, raven black hair and those soft pink lips. He hadn’t paid attention to those details before or maybe he hadn’t looked at Harry from this perspective. When he didn’t reply, Harry spoke again,

“I’ll tell you what I see. There’s an extremely dense darkness around you, it surrounds you, swirls around you and it’s darker……darker than the darkness I saw around Albus and those monsters……And then there’s that snake around your throat, I think……I think it’s made of the same darkness that surrounds you because I saw it turn to it once and vanish into your skin…… Don’t you see all that when you look at yourself in the mirror?”

Harry’s eyes fluttered shut and a shuddering breath left his body and he slumped down on the carpet. He observed him closely and couldn’t help but contemplate. He had shaken away Harry’s comments about the snake as lies and hallucinations before but he had a feeling he could not neglect the matter any further. And then there was the fact that Harry had seen something more in the memory. He had mentioned the darkness. What was it? What did it signify? And the main question was whether Harry really saw it or imagined it. When Harry spoke again, his voice was barely audible and extremely weak…. weaker than he had ever heard it,

“I can’t understand any of this………What am I seeing?……..I just spoke in a language I’d never been heard of before today. I think I might be going crazy……..I think you’re right…..I might be hallucinating…….You said an ordinary human being would die from the fear in this castle……I think I’ll die from insanity.”

Voldemort stood still and watched the distressed expression on Harry’s face,

“You are not going insane and I shall not allow you to die.”

Harry barked out a humourless laugh,

“Yeah right…. because my life doesn’t belong to me…it belongs to you. But my mind is mine and if I lose it then I won’t be any good to you alive.”

Voldemort stepped closer to Harry and grabbing him from his shirt and raised him to his feet. Harry allowed himself to be lifted. The boy had his eyes closed again,
“Do you have a library……books……something I can read.”

He hadn’t been expecting that question from Harry and he was a bit reluctant to allow him access to his books. The boy was a walking disaster and his prophesized downfall. But somehow despite his urge to hurt him, torture him, kill him, he couldn’t refuse him that request no matter how much he reasoned with his brain,

“Yes, I do.”

Harry frowned,

“It’s not on the map. Why?”

Voldemort bristled. He should have never given him that damned map. The whole purpose of giving him the map so that the boy stayed out of trouble but it seemed the map had been the cause of all the trouble, Harry had gotten in up until now,

“It is in my private quarters. You may tell me what you wish to read about and I shall bring you the books.”

He watched as Harry’s frown deepened and his forehead creased as he thought hard. Finally, Harry spoke,

“Anything about that language and those monsters and what I’m seeing.”

Voldemort released Harry’s shirt,

“I can provide you with several books on Parseltongue. As to what you are seeing, I cannot help you with that.”

Harry mumbled something incoherent. Voldemort held Harry’s shoulder and spoke sternly,

“Do not mumble in my presence.”

Harry hesitated before speaking,

“I think I can see souls.”

Voldemort’s grip tightened on Harry’s shoulder,

“You can what?”

Harry didn’t repeat himself and stood silent. Voldemort’s grip on Harry’s shoulder turned bone shattering,

“Tell me!”

Harry resisted the urge to whimper as unimaginable pain erupted in his shoulder. Voldemort loosened his hold and when Harry felt fairly in control of his voice he spoke,

“I think I can see souls. I’m not sure. I’m really not sure about anything anymore. Everything about me is so messed up now.”

Voldemort pulled his hand away from Harry’s shoulder. His thoughts were in havoc. What was it the boy? It seemed he was full of surprises and he had a feeling he had barely scratched the surface. It was also obvious that the boy was completely oblivious to all his hidden skills,
“Will you get me the books?”

Harry’s question sounded too innocent. And he was forced to speak,

“Yes, I shall get you the books but I am certain that you shall not be able to read them.”

Voldemort saw a wide smile curve Harry’s lips and light up his face. He felt his heart beat quicken at the sight. The room felt visibly warmer. What was wrong with him? But before he could step away, Harry started talking enthusiastically,

“I love reading. I never could afford books since I never had any money, but whenever I went to town to get the groceries for my aunt, the owner of the bookstore, Remus, always kept some books aside for me to take home. They were my entire universe. When I finished all my chores for the day, I used to return to my shed and read by the oil lamp. At that time, I used to just lose myself in them and I felt like I was in them, in another world, where I could be whatever I wanted to be and go wherever I wanted to go. That was the only time of my day that I felt truly alive……… but………”

Harry’s smile fell, stealing the warmth from the room and Voldemort’s heart,

“But what?”

Harry shook his head,

“The shed was struck by lightning and everything inside, including my books got burnt to ashes. My entire world burnt down in a flash.”

Harry stumbled to the bed and slumped down on it. Voldemort watched as Harry wiped his eyes,

“That happened a night before I got here. Maybe it was all destined to happen. Maybe fate took them all from me before sending me here so that I wouldn’t miss them.”

He had nothing more to say to the boy because he was right. Fate was definitely playing a devious game. The boy’s very being was proof of that. This was the second time he had told the boy that he would hurt him and failed. What was it about him that always made him stop? He needed to understand the boy but how could he understand him when the boy didn’t even understand himself. He was sure that nothing had perplexed him before as much as the boy did now. Wordlessly he vanished from the room.
Chapter 26

Harry sat on the edge of the bed long after Voldemort had left. He really needed his mind to shut down because it felt like all those images were making it difficult for him to breathe. Harry jumped when a tray appeared on the bedside table. The scent of food only made him feel nauseous but a flask filled with a purple coloured liquid caught his eye. He picked it up and turned it over in his hand. The label on it read “Dreamless Sleep”. Harry snorted. That sounded like another name for death. But if Voldemort wanted to kill him, he wouldn’t use a poison. The man was perfectly capable of strangling him to death. Harry was about to put it down when his curiosity got the better of him. What did he have to lose? He uncorked the flask and downed the contents in one.

Instantly, his vision started to blur and he felt drowsy. He cursed himself and his bloody curiosity. But it was too late now and he fell back on the bed and blacked out.

He woke up much later and squinted at the sunlight streaming in through the window. Lo and behold. He was alive. And here he had been thinking that he had ingested poison and would never wake up again. He sat up straight and heard his stomach grumble noisily. When was the last time he had had anything to eat? He couldn’t remember. He was about to get up and go in search for food when just like last night, a tray magically appeared on the side table. He stared at it for a while trying to make some sense of how it appeared but nothing in this place made any sense so it was hopeless to try. He focused on sating his hunger instead.

When he was done eating, the tray vanished and was replaced by a stack of books. Harry instantly screeched out in joy at the sight. The sound must have echoed throughout the castle but he was far from caring. He picked up the top one and hugged it close to his chest. He was surprised that Voldemort had kept his word but more than that, he was happy. Well more than happy. He was practically overjoyed. Harry settled down on the bed and just took a moment to stare at the book in his lap. The cover depicted a snake wrapped around a tongue and the inscription embossed on it read “Parseltongue. Origin and Characteristics.”

Harry opened the book and breathed in the scent of it. It filled him with so much warmth and happiness. He had missed this scent so much. The fact that he had unlimited time to read now was making him giddy and for the first time he was glad that fate had decided to pull him out of that hell. Not that this place was any better but anywhere he could read independently was better than his Aunt and Uncle’s place. Harry leaned back against the headboard and started reading.

The more he read, the more he began to doubt everything he knew about himself. He’d thought that reading would help him find some answers but all he had gotten were more questions and he knew that only Voldemort could answer them. He closed the book but couldn’t bring himself to get up. The answers would have to wait. Harry picked up the book again and resumed his reading but he couldn’t focus anymore. The questions kept buzzing in his head. Who had been his parents? Did he really belong to the slytherin bloodline? But if that was true then that meant that he was related to Voldemort because the man was a parseltongue himself. He closed the book and rose to his feet. He picked up the map and looked for Voldemort’s private quarters on it but couldn’t find them. Maybe Bella would know. But it was noon, the death eaters probably wouldn’t be out at his hour. Harry had a feeling they only came out at night.

Nevertheless, Harry decided to check. He was tired of sitting around anyway. He made his way to the west wing. He didn’t even feel the need to consult the map anymore. He knew the way all too well. When he reached the corridor where he had found Bella, he found it flooded with sunlight and he grew fairly certain that he wouldn’t find them here at least not at this hour. He walked ahead
and reached the gardens. He could escape if he wanted to right now. But when he remembered the books that were waiting for him in his room and the questions he needed answers to, he didn’t want to. Besides he had nowhere to go even if he did manage to escape.

Harry internally screamed at himself. What was wrong with him? Was he stupid? An opportunity like this wouldn’t present itself again. This castle belonged to his parents’ murderer. He couldn’t stay here. Harry tried to take a step forward but a force stopped him. It was too familiar to the pull he had experienced in the cavern. He tried to move again but the same force stopped him. It felt like his entire body was being tugged behind by invisible chains. Harry didn’t know how long he just stood there, staring at the passageway that led to the forest and attempted to move. Eventually he gave up. His body began to cooperate as soon as he thought about going back inside. But when he turned around to return to his room, he collided with something hard. It took him a minute to regain some of his composure and he realized that he hadn’t collided with something, he had collided with someone. Harry straightened up and looked up at Voldemort to find a thoughtful expression on his snakelike face. His crimson eyes were regarding him curiously. Harry felt rage burning through him and pushed past the man,

“Sorry, I didn’t see you there.”

Voldemort’s grip on his wrist forced him to halt,

“You could have left.”

Harry didn’t turn around. Of course Voldemort had been behind the force that had been stopping him. That bastard just wouldn’t let him leave. But the curious expression on his face said otherwise,

“I told you about the pull I felt in the cavern. It was a force that kept me moving, something that kept dragging me towards the center. You said that I was lying, didn’t you?”

Voldemort remained silent and Harry decided to keep talking,

“I wasn’t lying. And I don’t know if you’re doing this or don’t even know about it. But I felt that force again right now. I wanted to go. I wanted to leave but that force kept me from moving. I felt chained to this castle. I think I’m chained to you.”

Voldemort released his wrist,

“Chained to me, Harry? I have done no such thing. I did not want you anywhere near that cavern and even though I would have stopped you if you had taken a step towards that passageway, I did not do so because you made no move to leave.”

Harry wanted to stomp his feet in frustration,

“Then explain this. This is your bloody castle. Explain to me what’s happening to me.”

Voldemort did not reply and Harry had a feeling he was going to vanish,

“Stop. Don’t just vanish.”

Voldemort’s tone was bitter when he spoke next,

“I shall not explain your lies to you.”

Harry turned around to face him and shouted out,
“I AM NOT LYING, YOU IGNORANT BASTARD!! If I wanted to lie, I would have told you that I didn’t want to leave this castle instead of admitting that I tried to leave and something stopped me.”

Voldemort had his hand wrapped around his throat in an instant, his other hand was clamped tight over his face and his smouldering crimson gaze was burning into him. Voldemort’s tone was murderous when he spoke next,

“Watch your tone, Harry. I shall have no qualms about ripping that tongue out of your mouth.”

When Voldemort had removed his hand from his mouth. Harry finally gritted out,

“Do it then. But that won’t change the fact that you’re an ignorant bastard. Maybe no one has had the guts to say that to you before but know this…. I’m not afraid of you. I never will be. You can take my voice, my sight, my hearing, all of my senses…. But none of that will hinder him.”

Harry knew it was a terrible choice of possible last words but he just had to say something. He stuck his tongue out at Voldemort, waiting for him to act.
Chapter 27

Voldemort stared at Harry and he was instantly assaulted with an image of him pulling Harry close and sucking that delectable tongue in his mouth. He couldn’t quite understand where that image had come from but it awakened feelings and sensations inside him that he had never felt before. This was insanity. He finally turned away from Harry and spoke out,

“What do you want?”

Harry huffed out a breath and then spoke,

“What do I want? You weren’t listening to me? I want answers…about myself…about this place.”

Answers. Voldemort rubbed his chin thoughtfully. For one, he didn’t believe Harry because everything that he said seemed so far-fetched. Seeing souls…feeling unknown forces…it was all preposterous. But the conviction behind Harry’s words always made him reconsider. Maybe the boy was telling the truth. It was apparent that Harry was anxious and restless about something and he was certain that if he left him alone, he would get in trouble,

“Come along. This is not an appropriate place to talk.”

He felt Harry’s dumbfounded expression on his back and began walking back inside the castle and heard his hurried footsteps as he attempted to catch up with him,

“So, you’re really going to answer my questions?”

The disbelief in Harry’s tone was obvious and it was endearing in a sense. He led Harry through the corridors until they reached a statue of a man. It was ancient and monkeyish, with a long, thin beard that fell almost to the bottom of the man's sweeping stone robes, where two enormous grey feet stood on the smooth floor. Harry was practically gawking at it and the expression gave him more satisfaction than his fear had ever given him,

“How come I never saw this?”

Voldemort couldn’t help but laugh softly,

“You say that as if you have explored every corner of the castle.”

Harry was staring at him with wonder dancing in his emerald green eyes and he wondered what he was seeing and thinking now. He had never been looked at the way Harry looked at him. People and all the creatures in this castle regarded him with fear and reverence. Harry had never been afraid of him and that had bothered him before but now…. now he wasn’t bothered by it. He found it fascinating. He hissed the order to the statue,

“Open.”

The statue moved out of the way, revealing a passageway. A gasp escaped Harry’s lips and the sound was downright delightful,

“You said open, right?”

Voldemort knew that Harry was just trying to confirm the command so he could get in here later. Harry’s curiosity would be the death of him. Voldemort strode in through the passageway and
Harry followed in his wake. He heard Harry’s footsteps halt and smirked. The regular area of the library was a massive, cathedral-like area, with two long arms stretching to the left and right of the entrance, each lined with bookshelves at least five stories high. Wooden balconies lined each level, and books could be seen flying like birds from the centre of the room, up to the shelves where they each belong. Harry had said he liked books. This was probably heaven for him,

“I… I’m dreaming… Pinch me.”

Voldemort took a few steps back and pinched Harry on the forearm. Harry instantly squealed in pain and pulled away his arm,

“Owww.”

The fascination dancing in Harry’s eyes was beautiful,

“So, I’m definitely not dreaming. This place is real.”

Harry stepped forward and Voldemort watched him take in the sight hungrily. When he turned around and faced him again, Voldemort saw the same wonder in his eyes,

“You’re smiling and there’s something glowing around you.”

Voldemort hadn’t realized he had been smiling and Harry was talking about his hypothetical soul again,

“Something glowing around me?”

Harry nodded and turned away,

“Yeah usually it’s darkness but right now there’s a dash of gold there and that damned snake is gone. It’s beautiful.”

Voldemort felt his heart stop at that. Beautiful. Did Harry really mean that or was he just saying it to flatter him? He allowed Harry to explore the library and stood back and thought over what Harry had just said. Was it possible that Harry really could see souls? Harry was so sure when he spoke about that. That kind of conviction didn’t come with lies. Harry was nowhere in sight and he began looking around for him. He found him on the upper level in the section of soul magic. Harry was leaning against the bookshelf with a book open in his hand. It wasn’t difficult to tell that he was completely immersed in the reading. He snapped his fingers to catch Harry’s attention,

“Harry, I believe you wanted answers.”

Harry nodded quickly and closed the book. Carefully replacing it in its place. Voldemort led him back down and through the library to a pair of oak doors. They opened by themselves revealing a massive room. A huge fireplace took up one of the walls while the rest of the space was furnished with an assortment of leather settees and arm chairs and a plush rug covered the floor. Voldemort took one of the armchair and signalled Harry to take a seat. When Harry was seated, he asked,

“These are your private quarters, right? You live here?”

Voldemort nodded and Harry looked around,

“This part of the castle is so different. The rest of the castle looks abandoned. I mean why don’t you look after it? It must have been magnificent once. I know it isn’t really my place to….”
Voldemort raised a hand and silenced him,

“I believe that I have already informed you of your status as a permanent inhabitant of this castle.”

Harry nodded,

“I know that…”

Harry was hesitant and he didn’t miss the way Harry was nervously wringing his hands. Voldemort raised an eyebrow at him,

“I believe you wanted answers. Well ask away.”

Harry’s lowered his head and drew in a deep breath. He finally spoke in a low voice,

“I…um…I wanted to apologize about earlier first. I’m sorry. I know I crossed a line. I’ll try to be more cautious with my language in the future.”

Well this was certainly a start. Harry’s apology was unexpected but that was what probably made it all the more sweeter,

“Your apology is accepted, Harry. Now ask away. I shall attempt to answer all your questions to the best of my knowledge.”
Chapter 28

“Are you related to Salazar Slytherin?”

Voldemort considered Harry for a moment and then spoke,

“Yes. I am his direct descendant.”

Harry pulled out the locket from underneath his shirt and traced the ornate S carved on it thoughtfully,

“The S stands for Salazar or Slytherin?”

Voldemort’s gaze took in the locket around Harry’s neck,

“It stands for Slytherin.”

Harry rubbed his thumb over the locket’s smooth surface,

“This belonged to him, right? I saw him wearing it in one of the pictures in the book.”

Voldemort nodded and conjured a drink for himself,

“Yes, it belonged to him.”

He sipped it leisurely and waited for Harry’s next question,

“Why can’t I take it off?”

Voldemort sipped his drink,

“Attempt to pull it off.”

Harry tried. He tried to pull the chain off his head but it clung to his skin,

“Talk to it in parseltongue.”

Harry looked up at Voldemort in confusion,

“I don’t know how.”

Voldemort tapped his finger against the glass,

“You do know how. Just speak.”

Harry closed his eyes as he attempted to focus on speaking in that language,

“Get off.”

Voldemort tsked,

“English.”

Harry cursed and attempted again. Somehow, he knew that Voldemort had spoken in parseltongue and it grew extremely easy for Harry to slip into that language,
“Get off.”

The chain clinked and Harry felt the locked come alive. He gasped as his fingers closed around it and he felt something akin to a tiny heartbeat inside it. And then he heard the locket hiss back,

“No.”

Harry looked up at Voldemort and saw that he was just as surprised as him. Voldemort set down the drink and rose to his feet. He drew closer to Harry and closed his fingers around the chain. Voldemort’s touch sent a tingle down Harry’s spine,

“Come off the boy.”

The locked burned in Harry’s hand and he dropped it with a cry. The chain tightened around his throat and began cutting into his skin. He bit his tongue not to cry out,

“Come off him!”

The locket was resisting. It grew tighter around Harry’s neck and began to burn into his skin. Harry was suffocating and burning up at the same time. He felt Voldemort’s hand on his shoulder and his other hand around the chain, trying to pry the locket off his neck. Harry closed his eyes as the pain and the suffocation grew too much and managed to choke out,

“S…Stop. Just… Just leave it.”

Voldemort left the locket and instantly it grew cold and lifeless again. The chain loosened around Harry’s throat and Harry slumped back in the seat. He drew in several deep breaths but his skin was still hurting. He felt Voldemort rubbing his back carefully. It was too gentle, too delicate as if Voldemort was worried about shattering him if he touched him the wrong way. Harry heard his voice,

“Breathe….just breathe…..”

Harry did just that. He breathed. He breathed as much air as he could and when he had calmed down. He felt Voldemort hand vanish from his back and felt his fingers reappear around his neck. A cry escaped Harry’s lips and Voldemort’s fingers withdrew,

“Harry, just sit still.”

He felt Voldemort’s fingers return but this time something cool accompanied them. Harry couldn’t sit still. Whatever Voldemort was applying to his burnt skin was stinging like hell and he moved his head away. Voldemort’s hand gripped his hair, not hard and rough like he usually did. It was just strong enough to hold his neck in place,

“Relax. I shall not hurt you.”

Harry bit his tongue not to let anymore sounds escape his lips but it was becoming increasingly difficult. Voldemort’s fingers finally withdrew from his neck and his hand released his hair,

“It shall sting for a while.”

Harry opened his eyes and saw concern written all over Voldemort’s face. It was so unusual and it looked so out of place on his snake like features. Not out of place in a bad kind of way. On the contrary, it made him look more human. It looked out of place because he didn’t like that Voldemort was worried about him,
“I’m alright.”

Voldemort conjured a glass of water and held it to Harry’s lips,

“Drink.”

Harry wanted to take the glass in his own hand and drink by himself but the expression on Voldemort’s face told him that arguing wasn’t an option so he drank silently. Kindness was the last thing he had expected from Voldemort but he was receiving tons of it today. Harry wondered what had changed, When the glass was empty Voldemort vanished it and retook his seat,

“Would you like to rest for a while?”

Harry shook his head carefully. Every movement of his head caused him pain,

“I’m fine. Can I keep asking you questions?”

Voldemort picked up his drink again and signalled him to go on,

“Am I related to Salazar Slytherin?”

Voldemort looked intrigued by the question,

“You might be or might not be. Your parents were not related to Salazar Slytherin but any one of your ancestors might have been.”

Harry’s head fell and he focused on his clasped hands,

“How will I find out?”

Voldemort’s suggestion made him look up,

“A blood test may verify your parentage.”

Harry couldn’t keep the excitement out of his voice,

“A blood test? Can we do that now?”

Voldemort nodded,

“Yes. A drop of your blood shall reveal your true bloodline. There is no need to get so excited, Harry. We shall not be doing it now.”

Harry couldn’t hide his disappointment and his impatience showed in his tone,

“But I don’t want to wait.”

Voldemort waved away his impatience and took a sip of his drink,

“Next question, Harry.”

Harry pushed away his impatience and spoke,

“Tell me about my parents.”

Voldemort raised an eyebrow at him,
“You do recall that I murdered them?”

Harry nodded silently,

“What on earth compelled you to ask me about your parents?”

Harry lowered his head and unconsciously pulled at the hem of his shirt,

“I need to understand why you murdered them.”

Voldemort rose to his feet but Harry made no move to get back. He drew closer to him and forced him to look up,

“I informed you of the prophecy, did I not?

Harry nodded again,

“I’m not asking about the prophecy. I just need to know who my parents were.”

Voldemort met Harry’s gaze and spoke,

“They were members of a resistance. The sole purpose of that resistance was to kill me and end my reign. When I heard the prophecy, I spared no time in thinking about how logical or illogical it was. I was just spurred into action and sought to kill you.”

Harry looked away and sighed. Tears were streaming down his eyes. Voldemort turned his head back to face him and reluctantly reached forward and wiped the tears away. Harry pushed his hand away,

“You gave me these tears. You don’t get to wipe them away.”

Voldemort withdrew his hand and stepped away. As though all the light had been covered in a blanket of darkness, the ease in the room seemed to leave. Voldemort’s smile turned to a hard line. His relaxed shoulders had gone rigid. His Adam’s apple bobbed when he looked at him. And then, out of the shadows behind him, something dark slithered out. It slid up his side, over his robes, its tail hooking upward, moving over his taut stomach. A black snake. It coiled around his stomach, moved up his shoulder, wrapped around his neck. Scales shimmered and glistened in the fire’s light. When its tail flicked up and touched the edge of his lower lip. Harry stepped back and left the room without a backward glance.
Chapter 29

Harry didn’t go back to his room. No. He went back to the library and started going through the books. The blood magic section caught his attention and he began shuffling through the titles. He didn’t need Voldemort’s help. He was going to do the blood test on his own. Besides he didn’t feel like waiting at all. He needed to know right now. Harry pulled out a black book and thumbed through the pages. It seemed promising. He tucked the book under his arm and made his way out of the library.

He didn’t find it the least bit difficult to navigate his way around the corridors and find his room. Once inside he closed the door and locked it for good measure. Plopping down on the bed, he opened the book in front of him. He read the instructions, then re-read them and then rolled back his sleeve. He needed something sharp and a blank parchment. Something sharp could be arranged but where would he find a piece of parchment. Harry shuffled through the books on the bedside table and found a blank page at the end of one of the books. He hesitated for a moment but then tore it out.

Now for something sharp. He looked around the room, looking for something, anything. One the dressing table, he found a small pocket-sized mirror. He smashed it against the wall carefully and grabbed one of the shards from the floor. He pricked his thumb with it and held it over the page. A few droplets stained the yellowed parchment and Harry spoke the incantation,

“Sanguis Revelare.”

Instantly the drops of blood began to dissipate and form words. Harry watched, entranced as the words filled the page. When the page was full, Harry scanned it and felt something extremely confused. There was no Salazar Slytherin in his bloodline, not even someone remotely connected to the Slytherin bloodline was there. But then how could he speak that language? None of this added up. He set the page aside and absentmindedly sucked on his bleeding thumb.

Closing the book, he rose to his feet and cursed loudly. He shouldn’t have reacted the way he had. Voldemort had been nothing but kind today and he had ruined that. The man would probably never let him anywhere near his library again. Forget the library, Harry doubted the man would ever talk to him again. Not that it mattered but today had been one of the nicest days he had spent here. He liked the conversational, kind Voldemort but Harry was certain that he would never see that side of him again. And it was his own bloody fault. He had messed up hugely and he couldn’t even apologize because the man wouldn’t accept it.

Harry didn’t know what to do. He took a deep breath. He needed someone to talk to. It was night, so Bella was going to be out now. Harry didn’t know what made him think of Bella as his friend or what made him turn to her but he didn’t care. Harry began making his way through the corridors towards the west wing again. There was moonlight tonight. The corridor was dark. He leaned back against the wall and closed his eyes, waiting for her to show up.

Sure enough, he felt soft hands grab his,

“What brings you here tonight, Harry?”

Bella’s voice was light and playful. Harry opened his eyes and he looked up at her. Her red lips were redder than ever. Her heavily hooded eyes held mischief in them. Harry opened his mouth to speak but his words escaped him and a gasp escaped his lips as Bella took his thumb between her lips and sucked on it softly.
His eyelids drooped again. There was something about Bella’s presence. It was pure bliss. All thoughts evaporated from his mind and he just lost himself into the sensations that were spreading throughout his body from his thumb. Finally, Bella pulled away her lips taking the sensations with her. Harry groaned out in disappointment and opened his eyes to inspect his thumb. It was healed,

“Thanks.”

Bella’s lips were parted and Harry saw that her eyes were shining with greed. It took him a while to understand but he got it and exposed his throat,

“You are welcome to take as much as you like. It’s the least I can do.”

The blood from his thumb had definitely aroused her appetite because her fangs appeared almost instantly. She stepped closer to him and held her head gently. Harry shivered when he felt her fangs brush against his neck,

“Ready?”

Harry closed his eyes and could only nod. A little pressure and Harry felt them break his skin. He held onto Bella’s shoulders as she sunk them in deeper and began sucking on his jugular. Excruciating pain shot down Harry’s spine and a cry escaped his lips. Harry heard it reverberate around the empty, dark corridor. His grip turned white knuckled on Bella’s shoulder but he was too far gone to care. He couldn’t hold still any longer and struggled against her. Her grip tightened on his head and held him still.

It felt like a lifetime until Bella finally pulled away from him. He felt her lick away at the bite mark. The pain vanished and Harry resisted the urge not to slump down to the ground. Bella held him up and spoke softly,

“Are you alright, Sugar?”

Harry nodded silently and regained his footing,

“I’m fine, Bella.”

Bella cupped his cheek and Harry leaned against the wall,

“So why did you come here? This isn’t another escape attempt, is it?”

Harry shook his head and smiled,

“No, it’s not. I actually came here to talk to you.”

Bella took his forearm and pulled him away from the wall,

“Why didn’t you say that sooner?”

Harry shrugged,

“I didn’t get a chance earlier.”

She led him out in the gardens. Harry couldn’t help but think about the scene from earlier, when he had been here with Voldemort. She sat him down on the bench and Harry inhaled the cool night air. It was oddly soothing,

“What do you want to talk about, Sugar?”
Harry entwined his finger and looked down at his feet,

“Where should I start?”
"I messed up, Bella."

Bella turned and looked at him curiously,

"What did you do?"

Harry leaned back on the bench and stared up at the starry sky,

"He was kind to me today and I messed it all up."

Bella held his chin and turned his head so that he was facing her,

"He…you mean The Dark Lord?"

Harry nodded silently and turned away from her. He was feeling a bit lightheaded,

"You should apologize then. Maybe then he won't punish you."

Harry shook his head,

"He won't punish me unless his silent treatment counts as a punishment."

Bella laughed softly and pinched her thumb and index finger together,

"Sorry, sugar, but all this seems a little far-fetched."

Harry turned to her and huffed indignantly,

"Now you sound like him. He doesn't believe anything I say either."

Bella patted him on the cheek,

"The Dark Lord is anything but kind, sugar and no crime or transgression ever goes unpunished by him in this castle."

Harry sighed and turned away from her again,

"Yes, and that is exactly why I believe I messed up."

Bella pressed a kiss to his temple,

"Apologize."

Harry shook his head,

"He won't believe me this time."

He leaned back against the bench and closed his eyes,

"So, you apologized to him before?"

Harry nodded silently,
"When?"

Harry replied without opening his eyes,

"This morning."

He knew nothing of this conversation was making sense to Bella because she didn't know anything but somehow talking to her made him feel a bit better,

"Have you seen this castle in all its glory? It must have been magnificent."

Bella didn't reply so Harry opened his eyes and saw the confusion her eyes. She really didn't remember anything before the curse then. His chest immediately felt heavy with guilt,

"I'm so sorry, Bella."

Bella made a confused sound,

"Sorry? But why are you apologizing?"

Harry smiled at her,

"For just blabbering on about meaningless stuff. You must think I'm crazy."

Bella pulled him close and kissed his forehead,

"Your blabbering is music to my ears."

Harry blushed and ducked his head. Bella took his chin in his hand and made him look up,

"I mean it, Sugar. It feels nice to listen to your voice. This castle is usually so silent and the only proper sounds I used to hear before you came along is the screams of our victims."

Harry tilted his head,

"Victims? So, are there any other humans here? Do you really suck them dry in one go?"

Bella laughed,

"No, not in one go. But there are other humans here. They're just not as talkative as you and they certainly don't have the freedom to wander around as freely as you do."

That shocked Harry and blurted out,

"Really? Where are they then?"

Bella caressed his cheek softly,

"We keep them locked up in the blood cellar."

That seemed like a very very dark place but Harry still felt curious enough to see it,

"Can you show me?"

Bella smiled mischievously,

"Really? You want to visit the blood cellar?"
Harry nodded eagerly,
"What do I get in return, Sugar?"

Harry tilted his head, exposing his neck and watched as Bella licked her voracious red lips hungrily,

"You make a good bargain. Tomorrow night then."

Harry smiled wickedly,
"I really can't wait for it."

Harry turned his attention back to the stars,

"So, what's the deal with Greyback?"

Bella raised an eyebrow and tapped her lips with one of her painted nails,

"You met him?"

Harry shrugged,
"I ran into him in the forest when I was escaping."

Bella pulled her nail away and spoke,
"He's a werewolf and leads a pack."

Harry rested his head on Bella's shoulder,

"What do werewolves do?"

Bella laughed,

"The Werewolves eat their victims alive when they're done feeding their nasty sexual appetites."

Harry couldn't help chuckle. He knew he shouldn't because he himself had nearly become one of their victims but he couldn't help it,

"So, what does he do?"

Bella spoke cautiously,

"The Dark Lord... he keeps us all in check and deals with any trespassers that manage to enter the castle."

Harry closed his eyes,

"Deals with them how?"

Harry felt Bella shake her head,

"No one knows. Sometimes I think he feeds their souls to the Dementors. Other times he takes them to the back of the castle."

The back of the castle. Wasn't that where that cavern had been? He remembered the dead bodies
floating in the black water and he remembered the corpse that had attacked him. He shuddered,

"Are you cold?"

Harry shook his head and buried his face deeper in her shoulder,

"No, I'm good."

Bella patted his head gently. This was the most comfortable he'd been ever since he had set foot in this castle. Bella's presence was calming and incredibly soothing. It felt amazingly wonderful. Harry didn't even feel himself falling asleep.

Bella heard Harry's breathing grow deep and steady and she instantly knew he had fallen asleep. Even though she liked him, she couldn't understand why The Dark Lord hadn't murdered him like all the other trespassers. Was The Dark Lord playing with him before killing him? It seemed like a reasonable explanation because she had witnessed first-hand how The Dark Lord enjoyed giving his victims the illusion of freedom. She brushed her fingers through his raven black hair and felt her heart wrench in her chest. She really didn't want him to die. He was too precious to be wasted like that. The swishing of robes made her snap out of her thoughts. She was about to rise up and speak when The Dark Lord pressed a finger to his lips, signalling her to be quiet. She stilled and watched as The Dark Lord effortlessly took Harry away from her and into his arms. Harry murmured something in his sleep and she watched as his hands gripped The Dark Lord's robes tightly.

Bella instantly collapsed on her knees in front of him and whispered.

"My Lord."

Voldemort smirked softly and spoke gently,

"It seems Harry has grown quite fond of you. I must warn you though, Bella. Do not get attached to him. He shall die soon."

Bella could only nod her head as The Dark Lord vanished. She couldn't raise herself to her feet when she replayed her conversation with Harry in her mind. Somehow, she knew that she had already grown attached. Her heart wept tears of blood and her nails dug into the soil. Her suspicions had been proven right. The boy was being toyed with and he didn't even know it.
Chapter 31

A purple haze swirled and danced in front of him. When Harry laced his fingers through the mist, it twirled between them, leaving no warmth or coolness against his skin. On its touch, images of horror kissed at his cheek, caressing his consciousness and soothing his aching need to wonder about the differences between reality and make-believe that pulled at him. The haze toyed at the back of his mind as though it were a young child playing, beckoning. But this child was not sweet. Terrible, horrific pictures flickered in front of his eyes, and just as quickly, disappeared.

Sleep rarely provided any rest for him, as proverbially for the wicked, and now alertness prickled against the sweat on his collarbone.

Smoke wrapped itself around his neck, his waist, his arms, his legs. His clothes fluttered sentry against the breeze. He was dimly aware of the ache in his feet. That was strange. The breeze bothered him in his dreamy haze because even though he couldn't feel it, it streamed through his hair, pressed against his face, fluttered against his clothing. It poured against him as real wind would.

He stood in front of the cavern. While awake the hugeness and blackness in the cavern had never bothered him, but here, in the darkness of his slumber, it loomed taller than ever, surrounding him from all sides.

Up above, the midnight sky filled with gloom. The navy blanket held a few dark clouds. He vanished into the darkness of the cavern and then his dream changed abruptly.

He was standing in that filthy hallway again. His gaze was automatically drawn to the floor which wasn't just grimy anymore, a new colour had been added. A deep crimson red. Harry didn't want to acknowledge its presence, didn't want to understand what it was but he knew...he knew what it was. The understanding was unavoidable. A blood trail led from the hallway into the supply room. It wasn't a few careless drops from a bleeding nose or a cut finger; there must have been a couple of pints making the jagged red river and the splashes on the walls.

Harry's heart was screaming in his chest. WAKE UP...WAKE UP...THIS IS A DREAM...JUST WAKE UP... But he couldn't. Instead, his feet forced him to follow the trail into the supply room. He reached the door and saw that it was ajar. There was no activity and no voices this time. Had those monsters murdered the children? His thought jumped to Tom. Was he alright? He wanted to scream in despair as he slowly and gradually became overwhelmed by panic. He pushed the door open and it creaked ominously. The blood trail led him straight to the double doors beyond which Harry knew was the kitchen and the children's beds. Harry's gaze was fixated on the blood trail as it grew thicker until he reached the kitchens and came to a standstill. He choked on his scream as he saw that the entire kitchen floor was smeared with a thick layer of blood and the smell that assaulted his senses... He sought out a bloodless path through the kitchen but found none. He didn't want to but his feet forced him to step into the kitchen. The blood made squelching sounds underneath his bare feet and Harry felt ready enough to throw up. That was when he saw the bodies and despite his terror, a sigh of relief escaped him.

It wasn't the children. It was those bloody monsters. Their bodies lay like ghoulish mannequins, the hearts had been cleaved from their bodies. The arteries, now drained of their life fluid, stuck out from the bodies like rubber tubes. Their skin had been peeled back and pinned with iron nails, haphazardly banged in with a household hammer. The ribs cages had been cracked and pried open, the whiteness of the bone shone out in the sea of flesh. Their faces were barely visible underneath all the blood that coated them and that smell... That smell could only come from recently
slaughtered animals. In this case the animals were human and their corpses still looked fresh, the blood thickening but not yet dried on their waxy skin. He could still make out who was who. Albus' corpse was the most ravaged one, followed by Minerva, Umbridge and Severus. Four corpses. Harry felt something akin to sadistic glee filling up his heart but along with that came worry. Where were the children? A sniffling sound caught his attention and he moved in that direction. There in the corner of the kitchen, a small dark-haired boy sat with his legs brought up to his chest and his face buried in them. It was Tom. He was soaked in blood from head to toe. Harry panicked. Was he hurt? How much of that blood belonged to Tom? He saw a butcher's knife, a hammer and some spare nails at his side and Harry immediately understood,

"Tom."

Tom couldn't hear him of course. His body was trembling and Harry wanted nothing more than to comfort him and tell him that he had done the right things. Those monsters had deserved to be put down. He had only taken a step towards him to examine him closer when the boy stopped trembling and grew impossibly still. For a moment, there was no sound, no movement and Harry's eyes widened. Had he died? Had Tom just died?

The breaths returned to his body when Tom moved. He rose to his feet and Harry saw his face but he didn't just see his face, he saw so much more than that. Tom looked so broken. His big brown eyes were shining with tears, his lips were trembling as if holding back a cry and the aura that surrounded him was pure gold. Then it vanished. It all vanished. The tears vanished from his eyes, his lips stopped trembling and a malicious smile curved those thin blood-stained lips. Harry was forced to take a step back as he watched pure, liquid darkness gliding smoothly towards Tom and wrap around his frail body.

Harry wanted to scream as the darkness drowned out the gold but he couldn't. He could just watch it all happen with morbid fascination. Something changed inside Tom's eyes. The innocence was gone along with all the gold that had surrounded him only seconds ago. The only thing that surrounded him was that darkness that was more than just dark. It was pure evil and Harry felt suffocated by it. Tom's gaze scanned the kitchen coldly and then he threw his head back and laughed maniacally… the sound was so unnatural, so evil that it made the hair on Harry's body stand and he stepped back unable to take any more of the scene. He would die if he stayed around that darkness anymore.

The kitchen was drowned out by the purple fog and Harry closed his eyes. When he opened them again he realized that the dark water was up to his ankles, but it was rising. The purple haze grew thicker and thicker until it was solid black. The water kept rising and Harry realized that he was waking up from his dream.
During his first moments of consciousness, Harry expected to find himself in that kitchen again and see Tom standing in front of him. The childishness of his fear dwindled quickly as he realized he was in bed.

The fear returned though when his senses kickstarted and he realized that he was soaked to the skin and the dampness had soaked through to the sheets as well. Pain unbidden and unwelcome originated from his feet and when he looked down to check them he nearly let out a scream. The white sheets were crimson where his feet rested. For a moment, he believed that he had really walked through that blood covered kitchen floor and that blood had followed him out of his dreams but no. He sat up straight and checked the soles of his feet which were cut and badly injured.

Harry felt confused…beyond confused. There had to be a logical explanation for this. Taking a deep breath, he tried to remember the last thing that had happened to him before he had fallen asleep. Bella…He had been talking to her and fallen asleep next to her on the bench. He clearly remembered wearing shoes then. How had he gotten in bed? How had he gotten so soaked? How the hell had he gotten his feet injured so badly? A dark thought began swirling inside his head and Harry began trying his damndest to avoid it.

The muscles of his neck and shoulders ached with fatigue. His gaze drifted down to his hands and saw something purple peeking from underneath his sleeve. He pulled off his shirt with trepidation, looked down at his bare arms and frowned. Purple, angry bruises laced around his wrists and forearms. They’d come upon him like a tormentor in the night and followed him back into the world of the waking.

What the hell was going on? Harry couldn’t quite look away from the bruises and noticed that their pattern resembled chains. The dark thought grew impossible to ignore and he crawled to the corner of the bed and looked down at the floor. Sure enough, there was a whole trail of bloody footprints on the stone floor leading to the bed from the entrance of the room. It confirmed his deepest fear and he collapsed back on the bed.

He’d been sleepwalking. He’d really been sleepwalking. If that wasn’t a sign of insanity then he didn’t know what was. He shivered involuntarily and pulled the duvet over his head as he curled himself into a ball. His eyes closed for a brief moment and his vision was clouded by the image of Tom cocooned in that terrible darkness. He didn’t deserve it. Tom didn’t deserve it. He wasn’t evil. He’d just been protecting himself. Harry clutched the damp covers as his heartbeat ratcheted up a notch. He hadn’t been dreaming. He’d gone back to the cavern. Harry shuddered again as he thought of the corpses in that black lake. He was soaked that meant he had been in the lake. How…How had he gotten away from them?

The duvet provided him with no warmth and he shivered again. He needed to get up and change out of these clothes. Harry couldn’t help but admire his own indifference. He had just witnessed four brutally slaughtered corpses and was still able to function normally. Maybe he really had gone insane? Maybe Voldemort was counting on him to die from insanity. Harry swung his legs off the bed and tested his feet. A sharp stab of pain shot up from his feet and through his spine as soon as he attempted to put his weight on them. Perfect…just bloody perfect.

Harry took the support of the side table and hauled himself up cautiously without putting too much weight on his feet. He hobbled to the wardrobe and pulled out the first dry pair of clothes he could get his hands on. He threw them on the bed and barely managed to haul himself to the bathroom where he took the support of the sink.
He wasn’t surprised to see that he looked as exhausted as he felt when he caught his reflection. Dark bags hung under his eyes as signs of a sleepless night. His damp raven black hair was stuck to the sides of his head. The paleness of his skin was alarming. His colour was drained and gaunt, as if his heart had stopped beating lifetimes ago.

He turned on the hot water faucet and stripped off his pants. A gasp escaped his lips when he noticed the bruises that looped around his calves and reached down to his ankles. The pattern was the same. Chains. When the bath tub was half way full, he stepped in and rested his head against the edge of the bath tub. The warm water felt amazing. His eyes closed blissfully but then he began to shake. Behind his eyelids swirled visions of dark, purple serpents, twisting and squeezing his arms, waist, neck. They cut air off from his lungs, squeezed his throat. Their colours swayed from mulberry to black.

The darkness was closer, preparing to swallow him. It was clawing at his insides, screaming and wailing. It wanted him so badly, he could almost taste its need. And oddly enough he needed it back. he needed those purple swirls of smoke and fog to fill his lungs, to wrap around his heart and slow its rapid beating. His breathing came hard, fast, and uncontrolled. Suddenly there wasn’t enough air in the universe to fill his lungs. And then, just as quickly as the vision had come, it left him.

The tiles on the bathroom wall were off-white, and he held on to that fact as best he could. He wasn’t in some dark, dank place. He wasn’t in that cavern. He wasn’t in that blood-soaked kitchen. He was in his room, in a bathtub, staring at the off-white tiles.

Harry couldn’t stop the trembling though. The warm water wasn’t soothing anymore. Finally, he dragged himself out of the bath tub and grabbed one of the towels, which hung on the rack next to the door, and dried off. The rough feel of a towel against bare skin brought him back to where he was. He staggered back into the room and put on the dry clothes with extreme difficulty. His body ached like hell. Slowly he dragged off the damp covers from the bed and collapsed on it.

He lay there on his side, his eyes staring vacantly at the wall as tremors continued to rake through his body. He didn’t dare blink, afraid that whatever had happened to him in the bath tub would happen again.
Chapter 33

Harry had lost track of time, in fact he had lost track of himself. He had memorized every tiny crack, every imperfection in the wall he had been staring at. Something inside Harry’s head kept yelling at him to get up or go to sleep but both options terrified him right now. He was afraid of getting up because he knew that as soon as he left this room, his feet would lead him to the cavern again. And he was afraid of falling asleep because he didn’t want to face what had happened to him in the shower again. He felt contaminated and disgusting as he reflected on what he had wanted in that moment. He had wanted the darkness, yearned for it. A shocked voice forced Harry’s thoughts to come to a full stop,

“Harry!”

Harry blinked and dragged his gaze away from the wall and to the doorway. Bella stood there, looking shell shocked and terrified. But Bella had never been to his room before. Maybe he was hallucinating. Harry’s throat and mouth felt incredibly dry as he attempted to speak,

“B…Bella?”

Bella stepped inside the room and Harry watched her as she took in the sight of the blood-soaked covers on the floor. Her gaze lifted and she scanned Harry from head to toe, only coming to halt at his feet. She sat down on the edge of the bed and Harry saw tears in her eyes,

“What happened to you?”

Harry couldn’t speak and his gaze wandered away from Bella to the jug of water on the side table. She followed his gaze and poured water for him in a glass immediately. Harry attempted to sit up on his own but every part of his body ached like hell and Bella seemed to understand that because she helped him and held the glass to his lips. The water tasted like heaven on his dry tongue and he drank it down in one gulp. Bella refilled the glass and held it at a distance away from his lips,

“Slower. You need to drink slowly, Sugar.”

Harry nodded that he understood and she brought the glass to his lips. He exercised all his restraint and drank down the water as slowly as possible. Bella pulled away the glass and then asked him,

“What happened, Harry?”

Harry stared down at himself for a while. He couldn’t understand what had really happened to him. The sleepwalking idea was just a theory. It could be incorrect for all he knew but it felt right in his head. All the pieces fit but he wasn’t sure if his head was screwed on right at the moment,

“I don’t know.”

Bella frowned and cupped his cheeks, lifted his head and made him meet her gaze,

“What do you think happened to you, Sugar?”

Harry looked away from her and his hands gripped the covers tightly,

“Are you really here?”

Bella forced him to meet his gaze again and took his hands in hers,
“I’m really here. Talk to me, Sugar.”

Harry pulled his hands away from her and gripped his hair. Bella instantly pulled his hands away and held onto them tight,

“What happened to your feet? Are there anymore injuries, Harry. Tell me.”

Harry’s gaze unconsciously wandered to his forearms and Bella instantly picked up on the gesture. She released his hands and began rolling up his sleeve. A gasp escaped her lips and she spoke softly,

“Did the Dark Lord do this to you?”

Harry shook his head but it did spark something in his mind. Had Voldemort done this to him? Was this a form of punishment? No, if it were, he would have been here instead of Bella and goaded him. Bella was already rolling his other sleeve up and observing the bruises there.

“Are there anymore injuries?”

Harry wanted to shake his head and say no but Bella spoke again,

“I’m willing to undress you to find out.”

Harry pointed to his calves and she rolled up the trousers to reveal the bruises there,

“You’re not fine, sugar. This isn’t good.”

Bella pulled him into an embrace and Harry buried his face in her shoulder,

“I’ve lost my mind, Bella.”

Bella rubbed soothing circles on his back and whispered in his ear,

“No, you haven’t lost your mind but you will IF you stay here.”

Harry pulled away from her and tried to understand what Bella was saying to him. She pressed a kiss to his temple,

“You need to get away from here and I can help you.”

Harry eyes widened with fear and he shook his head,

“I can’t leave.”

Bella held his shoulders,

“You need to get away here. The Dark Lord will kill you if you stay here. Even if he doesn’t kill you, you’ll die from insanity.”

Harry pulled away from her,

“You don’t understand, Bella.”

He showed her his arms,

“I’m chained to this castle. I can’t leave.”
Harry saw the grief in Bella’s eyes and let his head rest on her shoulder,

“Bella, don’t feel bad for me. I knew I was going to die here sooner or later.”

Harry felt her fingers tracing the bruises. Slowly she pulled his arm up and pressed her lips to the bruise. Harry felt none of the bliss, he usually felt,

“It’s not going to work.”

He knew it wasn’t going to work. Those bruises weren’t going to go anywhere. When Bella pulled her lips away from his arm and Harry saw the pain and fear in her eyes,

“Harry…you’re…”

She couldn’t finish the sentence and Harry saw her tears stream down her eyes. He couldn’t understand it. Why was Bella so worried about him? She held him close and rubbed his back. Her voice was a hoarse whisper when she spoke,

“Do you know what this means?”

Harry shook his head, unable to understand what was going on, unable to understand what was happening. Bella had said he hadn’t lost his mind but he felt like he had because nothing was making sense to him right now. His head was exploding with pain, along with every part of his body. What was Bella so afraid of?

“What does it mean?”

Bella spoke the words and Harry’s world was crushed under the weight of them,

“The curse is claiming you too.”
Chapter 34

The initial shock took some time to wear off but it did eventually and Harry felt indifferent. He kept his head on Bella’s shoulder and finally broke the silence,

“Bella, being cursed isn’t that bad, right?”

Bella remained silent for a while and then spoke softly,

“Harry…I don’t know what to say to you.”

Harry pulled away from her and smiled,

“Don’t say anything. The curse doesn’t matter.”

It really didn’t matter because Voldemort had never made it clear that he was supposed to stay in this castle as long as he lived and Harry had a feeling he wasn’t going to live long at all so it really didn’t matter whether he was cursed or not. He wiped the tears away from Bella’s dark eyes and whispered,

“When was the last time you saw me?”

Bella seemed puzzled by the question at first but then understanding dawned in her eyes and she spoke,

“Last night. You fell asleep on the bench.”

Harry frowned,

“How did I get in bed?”

A frown creased Bella’s forehead,

“I left you in bed.”

Harry nodded absentmindedly and then spoke,

“Did you see my bloody footprints?”

Bella nodded and Harry saw something akin to concern in her eyes,

“I think I went sleepwalking last night.”

It sounded more absurd now that he had said it but he could see that Bella was thinking hard about it too,

“Where did you go?”

Harry moved his hand through his hair and thought hard about whether he should Bella that. In the end, he reached a conclusion,

“My feet weren’t injured when I left the room so that means they were injured on my way there and that’s why there’s only one set of footprints entering the room. Let’s follow the footprints, Bella.”
Bella had a strange look in her eyes and Harry wondered if she thought he was insane. He did sound insane and he couldn’t blame Bella for judging him. She rose to her feet and Harry thought she was going to leave but instead she sat down at the foot of the bed and pulled his right foot up. Harry instantly attempted to pull away from her and protested,

“No…Bella…Don’t…”

Harry’s thoughts left him and his head slumped back against the pillows as Bella began to trace the sole of his foot with her tongue. His mind was filled with that wonderful bliss and he felt weightless. It felt like he was floating on a cloud. There was no pain, no fear, no darkness and no threat of insanity. It was all so light and wonderful. He didn’t really feel it when Bella moved from his right foot to his left. He really couldn’t feel anything except for delightful, heavenly calm.

And then it ended. Harry felt like he had been slammed back to earth from the sky. A groan escaped his lips and the dull stone ceiling came into view. He hadn’t realized how badly his arms and legs had been aching before but he realized now. Bella came over him, she straddled him and kissed his forehead. Harry turned his head to the side, unable to meet her gaze,

“I feel so embarrassed.”

Bella kissed his temple, cupped his chin and made him face her,

“Why do you feel that, sugar?”

Harry stared into her eyes and mumbled,

“You healed my feet…umm…that was…”

She rested a finger to his lips and caressed his cheek,

“I would heal all your injuries if I could.”

Harry felt her other hand encircle his bruised wrist and he saw the pain in Bella’s eyes,

“Thank you.”

Harry felt her fingers weave through his messy locks and she smiled,

“Anything for you, sugar.”

She pressed another kiss to his forehead and stood up. Harry lifted himself back into a sitting position and swung his legs off the bed. He got up to his feet and his head spun. Bella instantly had a hand around his waist,

“When was the last time you ate?”

Harry shook his head,

“Can’t remember. It was probably breakfast yesterday.”

Bella tsked and sat him down at the edge of the bed,

“You’re going to eat something first.”

She snapped her fingers and a tray appeared. She set it down in Harry’s lap and ordered,
“Finish everything on it.”

Harry realized his stomach was eager to follow Bella’s command. He picked up the knife and fork and began eating. It didn’t take him long to finish everything on the tray. Bella vanished the tray and smiled brightly,

“How we can go investigate.”

Harry rose to his feet with trepidation bubbling in his stomach. He was silently hoping that the footprints wouldn’t lead to the cavern. They exited the bedroom and followed the trail. Harry gave up all hope when the footprints lead him to the back of the castle, to the rocky and barren part. His feet had been injured on the jagged rocks and he was certain that if they proceeded to the cavern, Harry would find two sets of footprints, one leading inside it and another exiting it. His sleepwalking theory was correct and he saw his own concern mirrored tenfold in Bella’s eyes,

“This isn’t good, sugar.”

Harry looked up at the inky black sky. He distinctly remembered seeing it and wondered why he hadn’t woken up right there and then,

“I know, Bella.”

Bella looked uncomfortably at the cave located across the rocks and asked,

“Do you want to go there?”

Harry shook his head. He wouldn’t go near that cavern even if his life depended on it. Bella held his shoulders and made him face him,

“Do you remember what you saw when you were sleepwalking?”

Harry smiled sadly and turned away from her,

“I wish I didn’t remember.”

Bella pulled him into an embrace and rubbed his back,

“It’ll be alright, sugar.”

Harry nodded half-heartedly. He knew it wouldn’t be because he was beginning to feel that pull again. The bruises on his forearms and calves were beginning to sting and Harry spoke,

“Let’s get away from here.”

Turning his back to the cave proved to be the most difficult thing he had done in his life. It was agonizing. The bruises were burning up and Harry resisted the urge to cry out. Keeping himself on his feet was a struggle and he was afraid that any minute now he would burst out in screams. Bella seemed to have picked up on his pain because she held him his upper arms and pulled him back inside the castle and away from the cave. Once they were a safe distance away, the pull began to subside and Harry’s pain grew to a dull throb. He slumped against the wall and felt Bella holding him up,

“Tell me what happened, sugar?”

Harry attempted to roll his sleeve up with a trembling hand but failed. Bella took over for him and gasped. Harry stared down at his forearm where the bruises had turned from purple to Dark Red.
They looked about ready enough to bleed. Only a thin layer of skin separated the blood flowing underneath from emerging to the surface. It was probably the same with his calves. He shuddered and Bella held onto him tight. If she hadn’t believed him before, she definitely believed him now and that reassured him that he wasn’t going insane or this wasn’t just his imagination,

“You need to rest.”

Harry shook his head vehemently,

“No. Rest is the last thing I need.”

Bella cupped his jaw and pressed a kiss to his forehead. Harry held her hands and pleaded,

“Don’t let me fall asleep, Bella. Promise me you won’t.”

Bella’s eyes were glimmering with tears and Harry cursed himself,

“For how long, Sugar? How long do you think you can stay awake? Depriving yourself of sleep will not help and I can’t be with you during the day.”

Harry squeezed her hands,

“Please, Bella. Keep me awake for as long as you can.”

He knew he sounded desperate. He was desperate. After what had just happened to him, the thought of going to sleep and sleepwalking again terrified him. He had a feeling that if he returned to the cavern, the darkness would consume him too, just like it had consumed Tom. No, he couldn’t let that happen to him. Even if he was cursed now, he wouldn’t let the darkness take him too. He fell against Bella and continued to plead,

“Don’t let me sleep, Bella. Please…Don’t…”

Bella rubbed soothing circles on his back,

“I won’t…Just relax, Sugar. I’ll keep you awake as long as I can.”
When Harry had calmed down to a certain degree, he spoke,

"Bella, last night you promised to show me the blood cellars. Can we see them now?"

Bella combed her fingers through her hair and looked concerned,

"Don't you think you should sit down for a bit?"

Harry shook his head. He didn't want to sit still because he was certain that sleep would catch up with him,

"Please, Bella. I'm fine. Can we go now…please?"

Bella smiled softly and ruffled his hair,

"You know I hate it when you plead."

Harry laughed softly and she pressed a kiss to his forehead,

"Shall we get going then?"

Harry nodded and she led him through countless corridors and passageways. The more distance he put between himself and the cavern, the better he felt. The pain in his arms and legs had reduced to a dull throb now and Harry realized that the bruises on his arms had faded back to purple. They were back in the west wing and came to a halt outside a fairly dark passageway. Bella held his hand tightly and spoke,

"No matter what happens, don't let go of my hand."

Harry smiled and spoke,

"I won't."

Bella kissed his neck and Harry spoke,

"I do remember my end of the deal."

She looked up and met his gaze looking slightly offended,

"If you think I'll drink from you in your current condition then you must be out of your mind."

Laughter bubbled out of Harry's mouth at that remark,

"I told you I have lost my mind and there's nothing wrong with my condition."

Bella eyed him from head to toe and spoke sarcastically,

"Right. You're in absolutely perfect shape."

Harry huffed indignantly and smoothed his hair,

"Yes, I am."
Bella laughed softly and kissed Harry's forehead,

"Okay, I'll decide whether I'm going to drink from you or not at the end of your visit. Does that sound fair enough?"

Harry nodded,

"Yeah, it sounds fair."

She wrapped an arm around his waist,

"If it gets to be too much for you just tell me."

Harry nodded and Bella led him down the steps. Harry didn't know what he had been expecting but it hadn't been this. The only light in the basement came from a torch. The prison cell was more of a holding pen, containment with no protection from the elements. The walls were metal rods laid in a criss cross pattern. The inmates were crammed in so tight they were constantly touching one another. There was no way everyone here could sleep at the same time or even sit for long unless they were so weak that they couldn't. Even then they were likely to be stepped on. The stench was something he hadn't expected but should have; it was excrement, urine, sweat and vomit. The prisoners were all hacking and wheezing, most were gaunt. He reckoned he could tell how long a person had been there by the amount of flesh they had left.

Just then a vampire emerged from a doorway at the far end of the basement. He bowed his head reverently at the sight of Bella and the proceeded to unlock the iron gate. A few moment later he had locked the gate and was dragging a pale, gaunt man by his matted hair back from where he had came. Harry couldn't help but ask,

"Are they fed?"

Bella snorted,

"We do feed them. When food comes the strongest ones eat every bite. There are no thoughts of sharing. They are just mindless living corpses now."

Harry stepped closer to the bars and looked through. His nose had grown accustomed to the horrible stench but somehow the sight of these people reminded him of the corpses he had seen in the cavern,

"They're so silent."

Bella stepped next to him and pulled him close,

"Crying or wailing is the quickest way to die. Besides they don't even have the strength."

Harry frowned and then spoke,

"What happens when you drain them dry?"

He waved his hand in front of the nearest inmate, who was all skin and bones. His eyes were glossed over and it seemed he didn't even see Harry standing in front of him,

"The Dark Lord takes away the corpses."

Harry wondered where Voldemort was. He stepped back from the cell and Bella led him to the room where the vampire had disappeared into.
I'd been walked through an enormous front room. The floor was covered with gleaming white ceramic tile. A tall central fireplace, with no fire in it, surrounded by low, white leather settees on which sat a number of men and women. Some of them had their fangs buried in some unfortunate inmates while the rest chatted pleasantly as if they were present in a social gathering. Harry spotted the vampire he had just seen drag one of the inmates, sprawled on the floor, next to the fireplace with the pale inmate in his lap. The inmate was barely breathing, he was so still. Harry remembered all the times Bella had fed from him and he recalled writhing at some point on all those occasions. She led him to a vacant settee and sat him down,

"He looks dead."

Bella followed his line of sight and turned his head away so that he was facing her instead,

"Does it bother you?"

Harry shook his head. Frankly, it didn't. It should have made him feel squamish. It should have made him feel weird but he felt unbothered. The scent of blood was heavy in the air but it didn't nauseate him because this was nothing compared to the blood and gore he had witnessed last night in his dream or whatever the hell it had been,

"Would you like to leave?"

Harry shook his head,

"I'm fine, Bella."

He was garnering curious, lustful and greedy gazes from the other vampires and they made his skin prick as if a thousand needles were embedded in it. Bella noticed it and growled loudly,

"NO ONE TOUCHES HIM!"

Bella brushed her lips against his neck and Harry asked,

"So, about our deal?"

Bella sighed softly,

"You're so difficult to distract."

Harry smiled charmingly and winked,

"What can I say? I've got a one-track mind."

Bella caressed his cheek,

"I like it when you smile."

Voldemort watched from the shadows. His gaze fixated on the light in Harry's emerald green eyes. At that moment, he couldn't agree more with Bella.
Harry was lying sprawled on the couch, his head rested in Bella’s lap. He felt like his skull was filled with cotton and his eyelids felt heavy…so heavy. He tried to keep himself focused on everything that was going on around him but the voices just sounded too distant, too muddled up. Bella had drunk from him a while ago and now he was wishing he had listened to her and hadn’t insisted. At this rate, he was going to fall asleep in no time. Bella’s voice made his focus snap to her. She looked guilty and Harry hated himself for that,

“You’ve gone awfully pale, Sugar. I knew I shouldn’t have fed from you.”

Harry held her gaze,

“I’m fine…Just feeling a bit sleepy.”

He covered his mouth with his hand as he yawned. Bella pursed her lips and Harry knew she was resisting the urge to tell him to sleep. He sat up straight and his body protested against the movement. Maybe some water would help with his sleepiness,

“Can I get some water?”

Bella conjured a glass for him and handed it to him silently. He splashed the water over his face and ignored the incredulous stares he received. Yup, he definitely felt more alert. The water dripped down his face and he wiped it clean with the hem of his shirt. Bella conjured another glass and spoke before handing it to him

“It’s for drinking, Harry.”

Harry laughed and drank the water in a single gulp. Bella shook her head admonishingly but Harry could see the fondness in her eyes,

“Do you really sleep in coffins?”

Bella laughed softly,

“Who told you that?”

Harry frowned,

“So, you don’t? I read it in a book.”

Harry rose to his feet and Bella rose as well,

“Where are you going?”

Harry had half a mind to return to his room but he cancelled that,

“I want to see where you sleep.”

Bella was about to reply when a vampire rushed to her,

“The Dark Lord shall be arriving soon,”

A crease marred Bella’s perfect forehead and her gaze wandered to Harry,
“He won’t be pleased to see you here.”

Harry nodded in understanding,

“I’ll go.”

He hadn’t even taken a step when Voldemort appeared. His presence dark and imposing filled the room and stole all the air. Harry felt like he was suffocating. He lowered his gaze because he was in no mood to see his darkness. He was hoping Voldemort would downright ignore him but all his hopes came crashing down when Voldemort addressed him in a mock pleased tone,

“Harry, what a pleasant surprise. I was not expecting to see you here.”

Harry kept his gaze fixated on his shoes and he felt Voldemort’s draw close to him. Soon enough his pale, bare feet appeared right next to his,

“You’re still not wearing any shoes.”

He heard Bella inhale sharply and chuckled,

“How do you even prevent them from getting injured? I went sleepwalking barefoot last night and my feet were practically skinned.”

Voldemort’s hand gripped his jaw and Harry closed his eyes,

“I shall hear all about your recent adventures in a moment.”

He didn’t miss the threat underlying in Voldemort’s tone and stood still. Voldemort released his chin and turned to Bella,

“You and I have some matters to discuss in private.”

Harry opened his eyes and finally looked at Voldemort. The darkness surrounding him nauseated the hell out of Harry and he resisted the urge to close his eyes again. At least, the snake wasn’t there,

“She didn’t bring me down here so don’t punish her.”

Voldemort’s crimson gaze came to rest on him and Harry met it head on. A devious smirk curved Voldemort’s mouth and he spoke,

“I have every right to punish her…and I have every right to punish you as well.”

Harry took a step forward. His hair was still dripping and the droplets sliding into his eyes were irritating him. He wiped them away with the sleeve of his shirt. When he was done, he realized that there was a peculiar look in Voldemort’s eyes. And then he realized the reason for it. His sleeve had rolled back, revealing his bruises. Harry tugged it back hurriedly and concealed them but there was no point now because he was certain that Voldemort had seen them. Voldemort stepped closer to him and caressed his cheek,

“Perhaps our conversation shall have to wait, Bella. I must deal with Harry first.”

In the blink of an eye, Voldemort was gripping Harry’s upper arm and dragging him away from the vampires. He made no move to get away. He had expected Voldemort to ignore him after yesterday’s events. Had it only happened yesterday? It seemed like he hadn’t seen Voldemort in days. Voldemort’s grip was too tight. His fingers were beginning to tingle and his arm was steadily
growing numb. Voldemort seemed furious and that disbanded all of Harry’s theories. It seemed Voldemort hadn’t been behind what had happened to him last night. Or maybe Voldemort was an incredible performer. Voldemort came to an abrupt halt outside Harry’s room and Harry crashed into his back. He peeked past Voldemort’s shoulder and realized that his gaze was fixated on the trail of bloody footprints leading into his room.

After a minute, Voldemort dragged him inside the room and threw him on the bed. Harry’s back hit the mattress hard and the wind was knocked out of him. He looked up and found Voldemort’s gaze scanning the room. Finally, those crimson eyes came to rest on him and Voldemort growled out,

“What happened to you?”

Harry propped himself up against the pillows and shrugged,

“You won’t believe me so there’s no point in telling you.”

Voldemort was straddling him in the blink of an eye. The weight of his body was pressed over Harry’s, his hands were bracketing Harry’s head against the headboard. The black snake around his neck had materialized from the darkness and now stared at him, unmoving, unblinking,

“Try me, Harry.”

Voldemort’s body was oddly warm and Harry found it pleasant. He mentally slapped himself. What the hell was wrong with him? The darkness around Voldemort was too close but it didn’t sicken him. Instead it made his heartbeat ratchet up a notch. He wanted it…He wanted the darkness to wrap itself around him. He wanted it to suffocate him. He yearned for it. The snake hissed at him and Harry’s eyes widened. He understood it. He understood what it was saying to him and a shiver ran down his spine.
"Embrace the darkness, lose your soul.  
Accept the curse and become whole."

The snake's words echoed in his head. He wanted the darkness...something inside him yearned for it but he couldn't...he still had some sense left...he couldn't give into the darkness and lose his soul. Never. A hollow sound left his throat which suspiciously sounded like a no. Voldemort gripped his chin and forced his gaze to meet his,

"No?"

Harry realized he was hyperventilating and the weight of Voldemort's body and darkness on him wasn't helping. His heartbeat was out of control and he was positive Voldemort could hear it. Harry closed his eyes and attempted to regulate his breathing,

"Calm down, Harry."

Harry shook his head. He was trying. It wasn't working. His lungs were starting to burn with the lack of oxygen and his head was starting to spin. His hands came to rest on Voldemort's chest and he feebly attempted to push him away. Voldemort seemed to have gotten the message because the weight disappeared and Harry drew in several deep gulps of air greedily. The spinning subsided and he went boneless against the headboard,

"What happened to you, Harry?"

Harry exhaled slowly and started talking,

"I...I don't know what happened. I woke up with the covers soaked in the blood seeping from my feet..."

Voldemort was leaning against the nightstand with his arms crossed over his chest,

"You said you went sleepwalking last night."

Harry nodded while he clenched and unclenched his hands,

"Yes, I did...I think I did."

He was staring down at his hands so he wasn't really aware of what Voldemort's expressions were and the man's voice betrayed nothing as well,

"Where do you think you went?"

A hollow laugh escaped Harry's lips,

"I followed the footsteps...the cavern...they lead to the cavern."

Instantly Voldemort's fingers were wrapped around his throat and he gritted out,

"You went back there?"

Harry struggled against Voldemort's hold with all the strength left in his body,
"I sleepwalked there... I wasn't in my senses... I didn't go there willingly."

Voldemort struck him hard across the face and for a moment Harry saw stars,

"What did you see?"

Harry blinked several times to regain his vision. His cheek was stinging like hell and his body was trembling uncontrollably. Voldemort gripped his shoulder tight and brought him back up into a sitting position, while the fingers of his other hand remained firmly wrapped around his throat. Harry spoke in a low, hoarse voice,

"Blood..."

Harry paused and released a shuddering breath. He focused on the wall and attempted to push the images that were surfacing in his mind,

"Tom... he killed them... he killed those monsters..."

Harry couldn't stop the tears that slipped down his cheeks. A broken sob escaped his lips and his fingers clenched the covers tightly,

"He didn't deserve it... he did the right thing... he didn't deserve what happened to him..."

Voldemort's fingers fell away from his throat and his grip loosened on his shoulders. His voice was oddly soft when he spoke,

"What happened to him?"

Harry couldn't get the words out. He didn't know what made him feel secure enough to do it but he let his head fall on Voldemort's shoulder and just cried. He expected Voldemort to push him away. After what had happened last time when Voldemort had attempted to wipe his tears away, he was the one that was messing up right now. They were enemies. He had clearly told Voldemort that there could be no affection between them. Voldemort had killed his parents... This man had ruined his life, he had wanted to kill him... he had attempted to kill him and just a few moments ago, he had struck him hard across the face and would have possibly choked him. And here he was crying on his shoulder.

It surprised him a bit when Voldemort's hand came to rest on the back of his head. He expected him to grip his hair, he was mentally prepared for that but it didn't happen. Instead Voldemort's fingers began carding through his hair and Harry's eyelids fluttered shut as tears continued to make their way down his cheeks. He felt so conflicted right now. He had tried not to think about it. He had been trying so hard not to think about what he had witnessed and somehow, he had succeeded. Bella had helped him keep his mind off that but now those images were playing on the forefront of his mind with vivid clarity. All the blood... gore... that terrible darkness and Tom,

"What happened to Tom, Harry? What didn't he deserve?"

Harry tried to string together the words and managed to succeed in forming a coherent sentence,

"Those monsters abused him and he killed them. But their darkness latched onto him... he was so pure... his soul was so beautiful... he didn't deserve it... he was only saving himself... he didn't deserve how the darkness consumed him."

Harry was distantly aware of the fact that he was gripping Voldemort's robe tightly and he whispered,
"It's going to happen to me too."

Voldemort removed his fingers from his hair and started rubbing his back,

"What are you talking about, Harry?"

Harry couldn't stop the words from escaping his lips,

"*Embrace the darkness, lose your soul.*

*Accept the curse and become whole.*"

They were resonating in his head ever since he had heard them, it was only natural that they fall off his tongue as well,

"The curse?"

Harry nodded his head imperceptibly and pulled away from Voldemort. He unbuttoned his shirt and shrugged out of it. The dark purplish bruises stood in stark contrast to the pale skin of his forearms. He realized that Voldemort's crimson gaze was fixated on them,

"How?"

Harry closed his eyes again and murmured,

"I don't know. Bella thinks it's the curse claiming me."

Voldemort hooked a finger under his chin and forced him to meet his gaze. There was something akin to concern in those crimson eyes but Harry didn't read too much into it. At the end of the day, Voldemort would always hate him. This moment meant nothing.

"Are there more?"

Harry nodded and rolled up his trousers to expose his bruised calves. Voldemort's gaze travelled down Harry's legs and settled down on the bruises. Suddenly, Voldemort pressed down on one of the bruises on his calf and a cry escaped from Harry's lips. Voldemort withdrew his finger and snapped his fingers. An entire array of flask phials filled with coloured liquids appeared on the side table. Harry stared at them a bit warily and Voldemort spoke,

"You shall drink each and every one of them."

Harry didn't nod his consent,

"Will they put me to sleep?"

Voldemort made him meet his gaze,

"You cannot deprive yourself of sleep."

Harry set his jaw,

"I will end up in that cavern again. I can feel the lure all the time. It keeps pulling at me and the moment I let my guard down, I'll be back there."

Voldemort caressed his cheek softly,
"Take the potions. I shall restrain you to the bed when you fall asleep."

Harry frowned. It could work. He wasn't sure but there was no harm in trying. He had a feeling, Voldemort would enjoy restraining him but he was going to benefit from it more. So, he nodded his acceptance and drank down the potions. It took a few minutes but eventually sleep began to overpower him. Voldemort pulled Harry's shirt back over his body and buttoned it up. Once that was done, he rolled down Harry's trousers and laid him down. Harry hadn't expected to be coddled by Voldemort and he believed that he was imagining all of this up because of the hazy state of mind, he was currently in. Voldemort conjured a thick duvet over him and then waved his wand. He felt a length of velvety soft rope coil around his wrists and restrain him to the bed. But they didn't feel tight enough so Harry murmured sleepily.

"Tighter."

For a moment, nothing happened but then the ropes tightened around his wrists and it felt heavenly. Harry never knew being tied up would ever feel this good but it did. It seemed like this was exactly what he needed. Harry was soon lulled into deep sleep by the reassurance that the restraints brought him.
Chapter 38

Harry woke up feeling wonderfully warm and well rested. He couldn’t recall having any dreams and that made him feel positively ecstatic. He hadn't gone sleepwalking again. A hand on his forehead made him open his eyes and he realized that it belonged to Bella. She smiled down at him,

“You’re awake. How do you feel?”

Harry smiled back and his gaze was drawn to his restrained wrists. The ropes uncoiled from them by themselves and retreated underneath the bed. Harry watched them slither away in fascination and sat up straight,

“I’m feeling good.”

Bella’s smile disappeared,

“What happened last night?”

Harry frowned,

“Last night?”

Bella sighed,

“Yes, Harry. When the Dark Lord dragged you away from the blood cellars.”

Harry sat up straight and leaned back against the headboard. Bella gently perched his glasses over his nose and everything came into clearer focus. He stared at the wall,

“Nothing happened. He just restrained me and put me to sleep.”

But that wasn’t what had happened though. Voldemort had been rough with him in the start but then…his roughness had turned into something different. He had cried on his shoulder last night and Voldemort had been gentle with him. Bella rested her hand on his shoulder and made him face her,

“You're lying.”

Harry met her gaze and she traced his cheek with her finger,

“He struck you.”

Harry lowered his gaze. Bella removed his finger from his cheek and touched his neck gently which was decorated with fingertip sized bruises,

“And attempted to strangle you.”

Harry closed his eyes and spoke,

“Yeah that happened…but it didn’t…he didn’t hurt me…”

He knew he probably sounded pathetic right now. He had told himself that he wouldn’t read too much into Voldemort’s behaviour last night. Voldemort hated him…he would always hate him.
And Harry was supposed to hate him more because that man was his parent’s murderer...he didn’t though. He didn’t hate him as much as he should. Bella wrapped an arm around his shoulder and pulled him into her embrace. He allowed it. She pressed a kiss to his bruised cheek and Harry exhaled as the bliss cleared his thoughts and made him relax. Her lips moved to his neck and a soft moan escaped Harry’s lips. Harry was dimly aware that his head was now resting in Bella’s lap and she was bent over his neck,

“You can...you can feed from me if you want.”

Bella removed her lips from his neck and threaded her fingers through his hair,

“Not today, Sugar. It’s nearly dawn. I have to go.”

Harry looked up at her,

“Really? How long have I been asleep?”

Bella pressed a kiss to his cheek,

“More than twenty-four hours. But you needed the rest.”

Harry sat up straight and Bella rose to her feet,

“Don’t go looking for trouble, Sugar.”

Harry laughed softly,

“And what if trouble comes looking for me?”

Bella smiled sweetly and patted his head,

“It won’t come looking for you if you don’t wish it.”

She brushed his hair away from his face and kissed his forehead,

“Just take care of yourself. I’ll see you tomorrow night.”

Harry rose to his feet as well and Bella hugged him one last time before leaving. Harry stared around the room. The room looked clean but the trail of bloody footprints was still there. It unnerved him and he decided to do something about it. Harry grabbed a bucket of water, a brush and a wash cloth from the bathroom and set to work.

He set the bucket down beside him, knelt down and began scrubbing the blood stains from the floor. It was more difficult than he imagined because the blood stains were more stubborn than he had initially thought. Nevertheless, he continued to scrub the stone floor until it seemed acceptable enough. This should feel familiar to him because had scrubbed the floor at his relative’s house as well but it didn’t. Maybe because he had felt obligated to work there but here...here he wasn’t obligated to do anything. He was doing this because he wanted to.

He followed the trail and continued scrubbing until a voice made him pause,

“I bet the human tastes delicious...juicy...tender...”

Harry dropped the brush and the wash cloth in the bucket and turned around to see a large, green snake, roughly twelve feet long and very thick. Its yellow eyes were focused on him and it reminded him of the snake he usually saw wrapped around Voldemort’s throat. For a moment, he
thought he was hallucinating and that his mind had conjured this up. But this didn’t feel like a hallucination and the snake seemed solid enough. It wasn’t made out of darkness. It was real. But if it was real then he was supposed to be terrified. Any normal person would most probably be terrified. Right, but he wasn’t normal and he wasn’t terrified. He’d seen far worse things in this castle and a snake failed to instil terror into his soul. The snake probably thought he couldn’t hear it…to be fair…it sounded like a she…Okay, he was definitely insane. Hearing snakes and talking in their language was bad enough but now he could tell their gender by their voice. This was getting out of hand,

“Why don’t you find out exactly what I taste like?”

The snake cocked its head and Harry could have sworn its yellow eyes widened in shock. Harry held back a snicker as the snake spoke again,

“You can understand me and talk to me?”

Harry nodded and smiled,

“I can understand you quite clearly but you haven’t answered my question.”

He crossed his legs and settled down on the stone floor. The snake slithered closer to him and then spoke,

“Master has forbidden me.”

Harry laughed,

“Master…you mean Voldemort?”

The snake moved its head in what suspiciously seemed like a nod and hissed dangerously,

“Do not say his name with your unworthy lips.”

Harry laughed again and Nagini sprang at him. He landed on his back with the snake on his chest. The wind was knocked out of him by the weight of the snake. The snake flitted its forked tongue close to his neck and spoke,

“Is it still funny, human?”

Harry drew in a deep breath and smiled,

“My name is not human…it’s Harry.”

It was difficult to breathe because of the weight of the snake on his chest and he spoke,

“You’re heavy and I can barely breathe. Your master won’t appreciate it if you suffocate me.”

The snake slithered off his chest reluctantly and Harry sat up straight again. Once he had caught his breath, he asked,

“Do you have a name?”

The snake wasn’t looking at him and Harry realized it was ignoring him. Harry shrugged, pulled out the brush from the bucket and got back to work but the snake made no move to leave and Harry surmised that it would talk to me again. His assumption was proved correct when the snake spoke,
“Nagini. My name is Nagini.”

Harry looked up at her, met her yellow reptilian gaze and smiled warmly.

“Pleased to meet you, Nagini.”
Harry resumed scrubbing the floor when Nagini hissed in an irritated tone,

“Why are you working like those filthy, disgusting creatures?”

Harry looked up at her and met her yellow gaze,

“What disgusting creatures?”

She threw her flat head back and laughed…Harry had never heard a creepier sound but he guessed that’s how snakes laughed…He mentally shook himself. He must really be going insane. Before today, he’d never really considered that snakes could talk, or they had feelings or they laughed…well Nagini didn’t seem like an ordinary snake. She was beautiful…well as beautiful as snakes could be. Her scales changed colour in the light and Harry found it absolutely mesmerizing. Harry crossed his legs again and sat up straight. Nagini slithered closer to him and cocked her head,

“You don’t know?”

Harry shook his head and Nagini grimaced,

“Those house elfs. They do all the work in this castle, the cleaning, the cooking and all those menial tasks.”

Harry looked around the dusty corridor,

“They do a very poor job.”

Nagini laughed again and the hair on Harry’s arm stood on their ends,

“It’s the curse on this place that keeps it this way. No matter how much cleaning they do, the dust won’t leave. It’s supposed to remain a ruin till the curse is broken.”

Nagini had sounded wistful and Harry asked,

“Well how is the curse supposed to be broken?”

Nagini rested her flat head in his lap and stared up at him with her yellow eyes,

“Only the Dark Lord knows about it.”

Harry thought for a moment before running his fingers over the smooth skin of Nagini’s head. Her eyelids fluttered shut and she hummed in delight,

“That feels good.”

Harry was thinking hard about what Nagini had just said. Voldemort knew how to break the curse? Well if he knew then why hadn’t he broken it then? Harry continued stroking Nagini’s head and frowned. He was starting to think about what that snake around Voldemort’s neck had told him. According to it, the only way to break the curse was by embracing the darkness and losing his soul. Well, he had seen what that darkness had done to Tom…he couldn’t resign himself to the same fate. He didn’t get the last part though. How was losing his soul supposed to make him whole. That didn’t make sense at all. If he lost his soul, there’d be nothing left of him. Harry shook his head. What the hell was he thinking? Was breaking this curse really worth his soul?
No…it wasn’t…Voldemort had murdered his parents, he had murdered countless others. He was a monster and he deserved this…deserved this isolation…deserved these ruins…deserved that darkness that swarmed around him…But what about Bella? She was the victim of the same curse and she had been nothing but nice to him. How could he condemn her to this life? How could he be that cruel? Bella was an exception…He’d seen some of the dark creatures that inhabited this place, the inferi, the dementors, the werewolves…they were all monsters…even the vampires excluding Bella were blood thirsty fiends that would destroy the world if they were freed from the curse.

The sound of snoring halted his train of thought. He looked down and realized that Nagini had fallen asleep. He stopped stroking her head and wondered how he was supposed to get up now. He had a feeling Nagini wouldn’t react well if he disturbed her sleep so he just sat there in the middle of the corridor and watched her sleep. The sun was peeking through the slits in the corridor walls and the light practically bounced off Nagini’s smooth black scales, causing them to shimmer beautifully. Harry was tempted to run his fingers over them but restrained the urge because she looked too peaceful,

“She does not sleep often.”

Harry felt Voldemort’s presence behind him but remained still,

“I didn’t know you owned a pet.”

Voldemort chuckled softly and Harry repressed a shudder when he felt his fingers rest on the nape of his neck,

“She is more than a mere pet.”

Nagini’s head stirred in his lap and Harry turned his attention to her. For a moment, he thought she was going to wake up but she merely nuzzled her head in his stomach and went back to sleep,

“She seems to have grown quite attached to you.”

Harry snorted,

“Attached? You should have seen her a few minutes ago when I said your name in front of her.”

A moan nearly escaped Harry’s lips and his head fell, giving him better access to his neck, as Voldemort began to stroke the nape of his neck softly,

“How long has she known you?”

Harry couldn’t keep his eyes open, the way Voldemort was stroking his neck, it was doing something to him and he couldn’t snap out of it. Damn, he was acting like Nagini had acted when he had stroked her head and he had a feeling Voldemort knew that and he was doing it on purpose. If only he could move but he didn’t want to wake Nagini. He didn’t know why her comfort mattered so much to him but it did and he wasn’t going to bother her just because Voldemort was playing some weird game with him.

“A few minutes.”

Voldemort chortled very close to his ear. He felt Voldemort’s fingers disappear and his warm breath replaced them. Without warning, something soft brushed his nape and a stifled moan finally escaped his lips. He fist his hands on his sides and tried to breathe. Something was happening to him…This type of reaction to Voldemort’s touch wasn’t normal…but it hadn’t been just touch…he was certain Voldemort had kissed the nape of his neck. He tried imagining it…tried imagining
Voldemort’s lipless mouth pressed against his skin but came up blank…oh but the sensations running amok through his body…they told him exactly how good that lipless mouth pressed against his skin felt.

Snap out of it…Snap out it right now. If only he could move. This man had killed his parents and his touch wasn’t supposed to feel good, it was supposed to repulse him. He was a monster…Voldemort was a monster. He had been just thinking that before Voldemort had arrived. Why wasn’t he thinking it now? Why was it so difficult? Voldemort withdrew with a chuckle and Harry felt him thread his fingers through his hair. Harry drew in a deep breath and sighed out,

“You’re treating me like a pet.”

Voldemort patted him on the head,

“You are more than a mere pet as well.”
Chapter 40

Voldemort vanished as abruptly as he had appeared leaving Harry slightly dazed and extremely perplexed about what had just taken place. Voldemort had kissed him on the nape of his neck and instead of being repulsed by it, he had acted like a...like a...he didn’t know what he had acted like. He would say he had acted like a pet but no...That wasn’t the best way to describe his reaction to Voldemort’s touch and kiss. It was unexplainable and illogical. He needed to get his head on straight. Voldemort was a monster. He needed to remember that. Why hadn’t he been able to remember that earlier? Why had all rational sense left him as soon as Voldemort’s fingers had touched his nape? There were too many questions and no answers in sight.

He had no idea how long he just sat there with Nagini’s head in his lap and tried to make some sense of events. Nothing made sense though. Nothing had been making sense since he had arrived at this castle. Everything was all wrong inside his head. Well everything was wrong in this castle. There were vampires and werewolves that he had only read about in the books Remus had used to give him...Remus...Had he noticed his absence? Did he miss him? He had been here for more than a month...well he wasn’t sure but it had to be more than a month. He was certain that his relatives would never miss him. They would probably be a bit sad that they’d lost their slave but that would be the extent of their compassion when it came to him. He had never mattered to them and he was glad he was here...in this castle...where there were people...no...creatures that he could talk to. He could read as much as he wanted to here. He could walk around, explore the castle. He wasn’t obliged to work here. He could just lay back in bed all day and no one would stop him. No one scolded him here...except for Voldemort...well his uncle had a nasty habit of shaking the daylight out of him...but he had never been physically struck before and when Voldemort struck him or attempted to strangle him, he just felt a bit disgraced and extremely incensed. He hated it...well he had found something else he hated more now...Voldemort’s gentle touch and his lips on his skin...They made him lose his composure and he would never allow it again.

Nagini stirred in his lap and her yellow reptilian eyes snapped open. She stared at him for a split second with those yellow eyes filled displaying an odd look and then lunged at him. Harry was knocked on his back once again and Nagini’s fangs scratched the back of his hand as he brought it up to defend himself,

“Nagini!”

His shout echoed in the corridor and Nagini instantly reared back. Harry looked at the back of his hand which had two distinct scratches on it and tiny droplets of blood were beginning to erupt from the abrasions. He looked up and saw that there was still something weird in her eyes and her voice sounded odd when she spoke,

“Oh no...I’m not used to waking up in someone’s lap...I’m not used to waking up around people at all.”

She coiled herself around Harry. Not too tight...It felt like he was being hugged from all sides. She raised him up in a sitting position. Harry laughed softly,

“It’s alright. I was a bit disoriented when I woke up in this castle for the first time as well. You aren’t venomous by any chance, are you?”

Nagini just stared into his eyes for a moment and then nodded her flat head hesitantly. Harry shrugged,
“Well, it’s just a scratch. I don’t think it’s fatal.”

Nagini spoke,

“I’m sorry.”

Harry laughed again because Nagini sounded like she didn’t want to apologize. Harry snorted,

“Let me up, Nagini. I’m going to be fine. It’s just a scratch.”

Nagini uncoiled from around him reluctantly and Harry rose to his feet. He did feel fine. His arm was hurting a bit but that was expected. Well, Bella was going to be disappointed though. She had told him not to get in trouble. Well, he hadn’t gone looking for trouble, it had just come looking for him. He wondered why Bella hadn’t gotten sick of healing him yet. He didn’t dwell on it and entered his bedroom. Nagini slithered in after him. He knew she was worried about him but he was fine and he voiced it,

“I’m just going to clean the wound.”

Nagini settled down on the floor and Harry didn’t like it,

“You can wait for me on the bed.”

Nagini slithered up the bed post and nestled comfortably on the covers. There was still something odd about her demeanour and it made Harry feel a bit uncomfortable.

He stepped into the bathroom and began cleaning the wound with water. His vision swam for a moment but then returned to normal. The bathroom felt cold and he was eager to get back to the warmth of the room. Harry couldn’t stop shivering. As soon as he finished cleaning the wound, he felt a wave of nausea grip him. He looked up and was greeted by his reflection in the mirror, a cold sweat glistened on his forehead. His eyes looked sunken and his skin sallow. Everything was starting to ache inside him. Alarms bells went off inside his head...Maybe the scratches weren’t harmless after all.

His knees gave out and he collapsed on the floor. Harry curled into a tight ball as the pain coursing through his entire body grew ten times worse. A scream ripped its way out of his throat. Nagini slithered into the bathroom and Harry finally understood what that odd look in her eyes had been… Malice…What had he done to make Nagini feel that way? Harry’s eyelids dropped shut but he felt Nagini slither closer to him,

“You were absurdly mistaken if you thought that you could steal my master from me and take my place.”
Chapter 41

Harry's throat constricted and he couldn't even scream to express the pain that was tearing him apart from the inside out let alone voice the thousand questions running through his mind. Harry felt something warm running down his cheeks and that startled him a bit. Was he crying? Why the hell was he crying? It didn't make sense. He really wasn't bothered by the thought of dying. He wasn't even affected by the fact that Nagini was the one killing him. He just wanted to know why.

He felt something soft flick against his cheek and wipe away the tears, Harry had a feeling it was Nagini's forked tongue,

"I didn't want to hurt you...not at first...we could have been friends...I overheard your conversation with my master and I realized how fond he has grown of you. That was something I really couldn't tolerate."

Harry attempted to breathe which was growing increasingly difficult with every passing second. He was distantly aware of how much his body was convulsing and writhing on the tiled floor of the bathroom. He was dying...really dying...He hadn't thought he would die from a snake's venom, well, before he had arrived here, he had always thought, he'd grow old and die like any other old man but everything had changed when he had arrived here. The thought of growing old and leading a long life hadn't even crossed his mind because he was certain that one of the creatures lurking around would kill him or he would die from insanity. His first assumption had proved to be correct. Well, he had no qualms about dying. He was going to free from the curse and Voldemort and this castle. This was the best possible thing that could have happened to him.

He felt Nagini's smooth head nuzzle his cheek,

"I'm going to go inform the Dark Lord about how I accidentally lashed out upon awakening. But by the time he arrives here with the antidote, you will be dead. I am certain he will be a bit bothered by your sudden demise and he shall be infuriated with me but I will comfort him and beg for his forgiveness. Eventually, he will forgive me and everything will go back to normal. It'll be like you never existed."

Were all snakes evil geniuses? Harry smiled to himself...he wasn't going to find out. A flicker of his smile must have showed on his face because Nagini gasped,

"You're smiling?"

Harry really couldn't reply as much as he wanted to. He was gasping for breath now and everything inside him felt like it was broken and bleeding. It was good that he would die with a smile on his face. Death was a mystery and he had always been a little too curious for his own good. Nagini slithered away from him,

"It doesn't matter. I'm glad you're happy."

Harry heard Nagini slither away and the silence bothered him more than anything else. He was going to die alone on the bathroom floor. Wasn't that a miserable way to die? He wished Bella was here and soothed him like she always did. That would certainly make his last moments bearable but...He was glad Bella wasn't here. She would be heartbroken to see him like this and it would be extremely excruciating for her. Bella's agony would make death seem like a terrible thing for him because he couldn't die peacefully knowing that he had caused her so much pain...No this was easier. By the time, Bella would find out, he would be long gone and she would get over it.
He wondered why he wasn't having his flashback…usually when people were dying they saw their lives flash in front of their eyes. Why wasn't he seeing that? And then he realized…he hadn't really had a life before he had arrived at this castle. He had thought about Bella because she was the only friend he had ever had, the only person in all his fifteen years of existence that had ever truly cared about him. Harry remembered her smile, her dark eyes, her blood red, full lips, her soothing voice, her familiar touch and the bliss he felt whenever she healed him.

Harry was aware of cold tendrils embracing him and his final gasping, shuddering breaths leaving his lips, He felt nothing. There was no pain, no heavy weight upon his shoulders or his soul, just the feeling of floating, of being pulled away from the world and becoming a part of the stars…the stars he had once looked at and wondered which one his parents were. He was returning to them…He was going to be with them, finally. He felt like he was finally going home, as if he had found a piece of the puzzle he hadn't realised he needed. He was everything, and nothing could ever be better than this.

Voldemort was reclining in his chair and deeply absorbed in a book when he felt it. A sharp, excruciating pain in his chest that made him drop the book and rise to his feet. His hand came up and clutched at his chest. The pain wasn't physical…It wasn't emotional…It was something much deeper. It was something else. His insides were in chaos. A mess. Something was bothering him. Something was hurting him. Something ached inside him. Something felt so wrong. He tried to pinpoint the cause for this unexplained pain but failed. He tried to reason this unbearable burning but didn't find any. Everything felt so confused, just like a jumbled set of a puzzle and when Nagini slithered into the room and collapsed at his feet. He felt rage burn through his entire being. He began to get a hint of what this was about…or rather who this was about…He bent down beside her and stroked her head,

"What did he do to you?"

Nagini had her eyes closed and he could tell that she was in immense pain. Had Harry attempted to kill her? Nagini was a horcrux…his horcrux. He instantly bent over her and checked her for injuries. There was no sign of a wound. He pulled her into his lap and she instantly wrapped herself around his shoulders. He stroked her head softly,

"What did he do to you, Nagini?"

For a moment, Nagini didn't speak. Voldemort winced as the pain worsened and Nagini's body jerked violently as well. Finally, she rasped out,

"He's dying."
Chapter 42

It didn’t take a second for him to appear into Harry’s room and find Harry’s spasming form on the bathroom floor. One look at him was enough for him to gauge what was killing him. The symptoms were as clear as day. The locket was glowing around Harry’s neck and that was all the evidence he needed as proof of his theory. Nagini was wound tightly around his shoulders. He conjured a small phial and crouched down beside Harry. It was no small feat to hold him but he managed to elevate his head and forced the contents of the phials down his throat.

Harry’s body jerked violently as the antidote did its work and Voldemort held him still through it all. For a few minutes, the only sound in the bathroom was Harry’s irregular, shallow breathing. The pain was beginning to recede and Nagini was beginning to relax around his shoulders as well. When Harry had gone completely still and his breathing had gone from ragged to deep and slow he spoke to Nagini in a low, deadly whisper,

“What did you do?”

His gaze took in the sight of the scratches on Harry’s hand and he lifted it to take a closer look at them,

“It was an accident, Master.”

Voldemort pulled her off from his shoulders and dropped her to the floor.

“You are lying.”

Nagini was about to speak when Voldemort raised his hand,

“Do not speak to me… You shall be punished for your transgression.”

He picked Harry up in his arms and carried him back into the room. He looked ghastly pale and ashen. After depositing him on the bed, he healed the scratches on his hand and pulled the covers over him. He was perturbed by what had just taken place and he needed to confirm it. He rested his hand on Harry’s chest and closed his eyes as he recited the incantation. When he opened his eyes, Harry’s entire being was glowing a soft blue and he pulled away his hand with a loud curse. The glow vanished and he rose to his feet and began pacing the room furiously.

He should have known…He should have known that Harry was a horcrux. He should have known it that first night when he had heard him speak in parseltongue. He should have known it when the locket had refused to leave his neck. He should have known. How could he have been so blind? He was positively furious but he couldn’t understand who he was furious at more…himself, Harry or Nagini. Well Nagini was going to be punished suitably for her crime and Harry…Well he would deal with him when he had fully recovered. He was a bloody magnet for trouble. Harry was attracted to perilous situations like a moth to the flame. It had irked him before but now…now that he knew how precious Harry really was, it downright terrified him. He was tempted to chain him here but he had a nagging feeling that that wouldn’t help either. Today was proof of the fact that perilous situations were just as attracted to Harry as Harry was to them.

He made his way to the bed and took stock of the pale form. He looked absolutely deathlike and that didn’t sit well with him. As much as he hated Harry and wanted to murder him, he couldn’t. Harry was the one that was supposed to break this curse, now it turned out that he was a horcrux as well. Harry’s very being was interwoven with his fate. He caressed his cheek and moved his
other hand through his raven black strands. There was something extremely alluring about him and it had nothing to do with the fact that he was horcrux. He had grown too accustomed to his presence in the castle, grown too fond of his lethal curiosity. The joy Harry found in all the little things was infectious. He found his insubordination and defiance refreshing. He was beautiful. Harry was truly something out of this world…

He mentally shook himself...What was he thinking? His thoughts had started off fine with murder and hate but then what had happened? He pulled his hands away from him and stepped away, He was certain Harry wasn’t going to be waking up anytime soon. He signalled Nagini to follow him. Nagini had her head bowed and trailed him out of the room silently. The walk to his chambers helped him get rid of any wayward thoughts that had been left in his head regarding Harry. Once inside his chambers,

“What made you do it?”

Nagini didn’t look up,

“It was an accident, Master.”

Rage swelled up in his chest and he roared,

“DO NOT INSULT MY INTELLIGENCE...I KNOW YOU BETTER THAN YOU KNOW YOURSELF!”

Nagini flinched,

“I was afraid, Master. I was afraid he would steal you from me. You have grown too fond of him...”

Voldemort started pacing again. Typical jealousy. He had almost lost Harry because of such a petty sentiment,

“No food for three days.”

He constructed a sphere around her which floated unsupported in mid-air and she began swirling and coiling in it as if she was underwater. He pressed his palm to it and met Nagini’s tormented yellow gaze,

“There was no need for you to feel threatened, Nagini. You are my oldest companion and you shall remain to be until the end the time. You shall accept this punishment because you have most certainly earned it”

Nagini let her head fall...A clear sign of acceptance and Voldemort stepped away from her. The punishment wouldn’t be hard on her at all because her type could last more than a month without food. He had coddled her too much. His thoughts kept returning back to Harry but he shook them away. He was going to be fine now. Harry was alive and that was all that mattered at the moment. He was still bothered by the fact that he was a horcrux and some part of his brain failed to accept it. But he was...The signs had been there since day one. He had just been too stupid to see them. But now that he knew, would he tell him? Should he tell him? Harry was a glorious disaster. He thought about the way Harry had tried to drown himself in the lake or invited Bella to suck him dry or flirted with Greyback. How was he ever going to stop that reckless behaviour? What was he going to do with him? He cursed his fate for throwing Harry in his lap. The brat was better off with his relatives. At least they knew how to keep a leash on him.
Harry was excited…if excited was the right word for what he was feeling right now. He had surely died. Call him presumptuous but he was sure he would end up in heaven because he hadn't done anything notably wrong his entire life.

Harry had a mental image of what heaven would look like or what he would see upon opening his eyes. He would be in a meadow. The grass would be soft and green around him. The temperature would be like it was in spring. Not too hot and not too cold, perfectly ambient. The flower-perfumed air would be alive with the song of birds. He would be surrounded by rich colours, iridescent blues and greens, flowers of all kinds. He could hear a gentle tinkle and splash nearby, and when he would investigate the sound he would see that he was near a large stream of perfectly clear water running over a rocky bed. The river would be teeming with plump silver fish. The sky would be the perfect shade of blue, the sun more yellow and bright than it had ever been. A rainbow with all its glorious colours would be arching across that beautiful blue canvas. There would be no night and no darkness. And then on top of everything, he would meet his parents. He wondered if they would recognize him. Wondered how they would react or rather how he would react. He imagined there would be a lot of hugging involved…enough to make up for all those years he had starved for their love for and warmth.

He sighed happily and a very familiar…very concerned voice called his name,

"Harry…"

Was Bella in heaven too? It wouldn't surprise him. She was the nicest person he had ever met. Remus had held that spot once but now Remus was down to second place. His idea of heaven grew even better now that Bella was in there too and he couldn't wait…he just couldn't wait to open his eyes and find himself in that perfect place. Harry felt something soft against his cheeks,

"Harry…wake up."

Yes…Yes…Yes…It was here. That moment was finally here. His heart was bursting with joy as he opened his eyes but when he saw the grey stone ceiling, everything shattered…all his hopes and dreams and they escaped from his lips in the form of a long scream full of agony,

"NOOO!"

He felt Bella smoothing his hair and whispering sweet nothings to him in order to soothe him but that wasn't what he needed. He struggled against her and Bella rested a hand on his shoulder to hold him still,

"No…No…No…"

Bella pressed a kiss to his forehead and Harry felt something warm land on his cheek. He opened his eyes just as Bella was pulling away and saw the tears in her eyes. She must have been worried sick about him and he was only making her worry more. His idea of heaven be damned, he didn't like seeing Bella cry and he wasn't going to lie here and throw a tantrum for something that he couldn't attain.

He tried sitting up straight and nearly cried out in pain. His body felt like it had been beaten to a pulp. Every inch of it felt stiff and ached like hell. He tried raising his hand to wipe away Bella's tears but even that felt impossible. Bella gave him a watery smile,
"You're awake…"

Harry nodded and smiled back,

"I'm awake and, regrettably, still alive."

Bella was hugging him in an instant, her face buried in the crook of his neck, her hands wrapped around his body and her soft curls tickling his face,

"I thought I'd lost you."

Harry would have definitely hugged her back if he wasn't feeling so sore. Heaven definitely couldn't compete with what he had now,

"I thought I was dead."

Bella's hold tightened on his body, as though she believed she could keep his soul from leaving his body if she held onto him tight enough,

"Don't say that. I don't know what I would do without you."

Harry laughed softly,

"If I were dead, you would sleep better."

Bella sat up straight and swatted him on the head lightly,

"Don't joke about this."

Harry stopped laughing and Bella cupped his face. The look in her tear filled, dark eyes was intense,

"I don't think you understand how important you are. You're the only light in this otherwise dark castle. The only untainted goodness among all this evil. Harry, if something were to happen to you…If you died…This castle would go back to being dark and dreary and I don't think I'll be able to live with that again."

Harry attempted to raise his arms again and managed to some extent. His shoulders protested but he ignored them and wiped away Bella's tears,

"Maybe that's why I didn't die. Maybe I'm destined to stay here with you or maybe I am destined to break the curse and free you all."

The sleeves of his shirt had slipped back when he had raised his arms, revealing the fading bruises. Bella kissed them reverently and whispered against his skin,

"I don't know why. I just can't bear to see you hurt."

Bella's kisses did nothing to heal the bruises but Harry felt better…happier…So what if he hadn't died? So, what if he couldn't meet his parents? So, what if he didn't go to heaven? This was better…having Bella by his side…knowing that she cared about him so much was sufficient for him…it was more than sufficient…it was perfect. Harry stared up at the stone ceiling as Bella kissed his arms,

"I thought about you..."
Bella pulled away her lips and looked up with obvious confusion in her eyes. Harry smiled and continued,

"You know they say that people have a flashback of their entire life when they're about to die. I didn't have a flashback…All I could think about in my final moments was you. How good you had been to me. How much you had cared for me and how hurt you would be when you found about my death."

Harry watched as Bella's lower lip quivered and a fresh stream of tears slid down her cheeks,

"You're too good for this world, Harry."

Before he knew it, she had him wrapped up in another embrace and it felt wonderful,

"I love it when you hug me."

Bella laughed weakly and held him tighter,

"You can have all the hugs you want. In fact, you can have anything you want just don't leave me."

Harry turned his head and planted a kiss to her cheek,

"I wouldn't dream of it."
Chapter 44

Harry was stumbling through the corridor, his legs still too weak to carry him. He collapsed on his knees. He couldn't feel anything, no pain, no emotions. His mind was invaded with one urge and one urge only. He needed to keep moving. He had to keep going no matter how. That purple mist swirled around him, wrapped around his body and invaded his vision.

He tumbled through dark nothingness and landed in a sitting room in front of an immensely fat old lady wearing an elaborate ginger wig and a brilliant pink gown that flowed all around her, giving her the look of a melting iced cake. She was looking into a small jewelled mirror and dabbing rouge on to her already scarlet cheeks with a large powder puff, while a wiry looking woman perhaps a servant, laced her fleshy feet into tight satin slippers. The woman spoke imperiously,

"Hurry up, Holly! He said he'd come at four, it's only a couple of minutes to and he's never been late yet!"

She tucked away her powder puff as the maid straightened up. The maid looked miserable. Her skin hung off her skin loosely, she looked emaciated and frail. The woman addressed her,

"How do I look?"

The woman turned her head to admire the various angles of her face in the mirror. The maid murmured in a low voice,

"Lovely, Madam."

Harry could only assume that it was down in Holly's contract that she must lie through her teeth when asked this question, because the woman looked a long way from lovely in his opinion. A tinkling doorbell rang and both mistress and maid jumped.

"Quick, quick, he's here, Holly!"

The maid scurried out of the room, which was so crammed with objects that it was difficult to see how anybody could navigate their way across it without knocking over at least a dozen things: there were cabinets full of little lacquered boxes, cases full of gold-embossed books, shelves of orbs and globes and many flourishing pot plants in brass containers: in fact, the room looked like a cross between an antique shop and a conservatory. The maid returned within minutes, followed by a tall young man. He seemed familiar. Something about his face, his eyes...And then it struck him. He was Tom. This was Tom. He was no longer a child. He had grown up. The temperature in the room dropped and the darkness that surrounded Tom came into view. Harry wondered why the woman couldn't see it. He wondered why the woman couldn't feel how cold it was in the room. He was plainly dressed in a black suit; his hair was long and reached below his ears and his cheeks were hollowed, but all of this suited him: he looked more handsome than ever.

Harry watched as Tom picked his way through the cramped room with an air that showed he had visited many times before and bowed low over the woman's fat little hand, brushing it with his lips and spoke quietly, producing a bunch of roses from nowhere.

"I brought you flowers."

Harry was a little amazed by that trick. Where had the flowers come from? Had he been hiding them behind his back? No, Harry had given him a complete once over. How had Tom done that? He had seen trays filled with food popping up in his room so this shouldn't surprise him at all but it
did. He was absolutely fascinated by it. The woman squealed in delight,

"You naughty boy, you shouldn't have!"

Harry noticed that she had an empty vase standing ready on the nearest little table. So that meant Tom hadn't performed that trick for the first time. The woman squealed again,

"You do spoil this old lady, Tom … sit down, sit down … where's Holly … ah …"

The maid came dashing back into the room carrying a tray of little cakes, which she set at her mistress's elbow. The woman spoke in a low, sensual voice that made Harry gag,

"Help yourself, Tom. I know how you love my cakes. Now, how are you? You look pale. They overwork you at that shop, I've said it a hundred times…"

Tom smiled mechanically and the woman simpered and asked, batting her lashes.

"Well, what's your excuse for visiting this time, Tom?"

Tom spoke in a low, polite tone. His voice was absolutely beautiful and entrancing,

"Mr Burke would like to make an improved offer for the armour…"

She interrupted him and pouted,

"Now, now, not so fast, or I'll think you're only here for my trinkets!"

Tom smiled apologetically and spoke quietly,

"I am ordered here because of them. I am only a poor assistant, madam, who must do as he is told. Mr Burke wishes me to enquire…"

The woman spoke waving a little hand,

"Oh, Mr Burke, phooey! I have something to show you that I've never shown Mr Burke! Can you keep a secret, Tom? Will you promise you won't tell Mr Burke I've got it? He'd never let me rest if he knew I'd shown it to you, and I'm not selling, not to Burke, not to anyone! But you, Tom, you'll appreciate it for its history, not how much money you can get for it…"

Tom bowed his head,

"I'd be glad to see anything Miss Hepzibah shows me."

So that was what her name was. Harry couldn't understand why Tom was here. He couldn't understand what was going on. Hepzibah gave another girlish giggle,

'I had Holly bring it out for me…Holly, where are you? I want to show Mr Riddle our finest treasure … in fact, bring both, while you're at it …"

The maid entered the room holding two leather boxes, one on top of the other,

"Here, madam."

Hepzibah smiled happily, taking the boxes from the maid, laying them in her lap and preparing to open the topmost one,
"Now. I think you'll like this, Tom … oh, if my family knew I was showing you … they can't wait to get their hands on this!"

She opened the lid. Harry edged forwards a little to get a better view and saw what looked like a small golden cup with two finely wrought handles. It seemed familiar and Harry tried to remember where he had seen it. His thoughts were interrupted as Hepzibah whispered,

"I wonder whether you know what it is, Tom? Pick it up, have a good look!"

Tom stretched out a long-fingered hand and lifted the cup by one handle out of its snug silken wrappings. Harry thought he saw a red gleam in his dark eyes. It had to be a trick of light. Harry stumbled back as the darkness grew in intensity. Tom's greedy expression was curiously mirrored on Hepzibah's face, except that her tiny eyes were fixed upon Tom's handsome features. Tom murmured, examining the engraving upon the cup.

"A badger. Then this was …?"

Harry was still trying to remember where he had seen it but the woman spoke again and his thoughts halted once again,

"Helga Hufflepuff's, as you very well know, you clever boy!"

Hepzibah leaned forwards with a loud creaking of corsets and actually pinched Tom's hollow cheek but she looked like she wanted to do much more and that sickened Harry to the core,

"Didn't I tell you I was distantly descended? This has been handed down in the family for years and years. Lovely, isn't it? And all sorts of powers it's supposed to possess, too, but I haven't tested them thoroughly, I just keep it nice and safe in here …"

She hooked the cup back off Tom's long forefinger and restored it gently to its box, too intent upon settling it carefully back into position to notice the shadow that crossed Tom's face as the cup was taken away. She spoke happily,

"Now then. Where's Holly? Oh yes, there you are…take that away now, Holly…"

The maid obediently took the boxed cup, and Hepzibah turned her attention to the much flatter box in her lap and whispered,

"I think you'll like this even more, Tom. Lean in a little, dear boy, so you can see…of course, Burke knows I've got this one, I bought it from him, and I daresay he'd love to get it back when I'm gone…" She slid back the fine, filigree clasp and flipped open the box. There upon the smooth crimson velvet lay a heavy golden locket. A locket Harry had no difficulty recognizing. He was wearing it around his neck right at this moment. He reached up and felt it, almost hoping that it wasn't there but it was. Harry felt the hard outline underneath his shirt. He finally remembered where he'd seen the cup. A faint connection was beginning to form in his mind but he ignored it.

Tom reached out his hand without invitation this time and held it up to the light, staring at it,

"Slytherin's mark"

Harry watched as the light played upon an ornate, serpentine S, Hepzibah looked delighted, apparently, at the sight of Voldemort gazing at her locket, transfixed,

"That's right! I had to pay an arm and a leg for it, but I couldn't let it pass, not a real treasure like that, had to have it for my collection."
Burke bought it, apparently, from a ragged-looking woman who seemed to have stolen it, but had no idea of its true value…"

There was no mistaking it this time. Tom's eyes flashed scarlet at her words and Harry saw his knuckles whiten on the locket's chain. Realization struck Harry hard like a punch to the gut,

"I daresay Burke paid her a pittance, but there you are…pretty, isn't it? And again, all kinds of powers attributed to it, though I just keep it nice and safe."

She reached out to take the locket back. For a moment, Harry thought Tom was not going to let go of it, but then it had slid through his fingers and was back on its red velvet cushion,

"So there you are, Tom, dear, and I hope you enjoyed that!"

She looked him full in the face and, for the first time, Harry saw her foolish smile falter. The expression in Tom's eyes conveyed his murderous intent,

"Are you all right, dear?"

Tom smiled charmingly but the darkness around him swirled thicker and thicker until Harry felt like he was suffocating from it,

"Oh yes, I'm very well."

Hepzibah looked unnerved and Harry knew what was coming. He wanted to warn her. He wanted to shout but it wasn't going to be much use,

'I thought…but a trick of the light, I suppose…"

Harry guessed that she, too, had seen the momentary red gleam in Voldemort's eyes. Why wasn't she getting up and running. She wouldn't be so calm if she saw the way the darkness was thickening, twisting around Tom,

"Here, Holly, take these away and lock them up again … the usual…"

She didn't have the time to finish the sentence and Harry's shout to warn her died in his throat as a flash of green filled the room, followed by the maid's hysterical screams. Harry realized he'd closed his eyes. He opened them cautiously and saw Hepzibah slumped back in her chair, her eyes wide open, lifeless, her mouth agape. It was hard for Harry to imagine that she had been alive less than a moment ago. The maid was lying face down on the floor. The boxes lying on the floor.

His gaze landed on Tom who looked insanely happy as he bent down to pick up the boxes. There was no remorse in his eyes, no sorrow, nothing but manic jubilance. Harry felt the tendrils of the purple haze entwining around his arms, his legs, tightening around his chest and his throat. He was suffocating now. The lack of air was making him dizzy and eventually managed to drown him into blissful darkness.
Chapter 45

Harry let out a hoarse scream as his eyes flew open and he returned to reality. A thousand thoughts were racing through his head. Each one running at a million miles an hour and too fast for him to grasp. He was dimly aware of the fact that he was lying on the cold stone floor. His heart was threatening to beat out of his chest and his breathing was laboured. He shivered involuntarily and realized that he was soaked to the skin again. His head was spinning and Harry closed his eyes, willing his brain to just shut down for a moment so that he could get up. He tried to raise himself into a sitting position but pain shot through his entire body forcing another cry to escape his lips. He settled back on the floor and tried to calm himself down. But the only thought running through his mind was Tom was Voldemort…Lord Voldemort was Tom.

He wanted to scream at the unfairness of it. Tom had been turned into a monster by his circumstances. He hadn’t deserved what had happened to him…hadn’t deserved the abuse…hadn’t deserved the violence…and he certainly hadn’t deserved the darkness that had latched onto him when he had saved himself. Tears filled his eyes and Harry felt them slide down his temples. Tom was Lord Voldemort. The man who had murdered his parents was the same delicate boy he had seen in that awful orphanage. Tom had murdered his parents. Harry wanted to hate him now…he wanted to despise him…but his heart wouldn’t let him. He pitied Tom. He wanted to hold him and tell him that he wasn’t a monster…that it wasn’t his fault that he had been turned into one. A part of him wanted to criticize Tom on his choices. There was always a choice. Just like Tom could have chosen not to kill the woman and her maid but Harry couldn’t….He couldn’t criticize Tom because Tom hadn’t really been taught the difference between right and wrong. He had only been abused and those people had robbed him of his innocence, his feelings, his sense of judgement.

A broken sob escaped Harry’s lips as he curled into himself. He didn’t know what to feel. He didn’t know what to think. He was aching, inside and out. Someone shouted his name and Harry couldn’t bring himself to care who it was. He kept his eyes squeezed shut and just wanted to disappear through the floor. Harry felt hands on his shoulders and then he was being pulled in an embrace, Warmth instantly flooded his senses and shattered him completely. He buried his face in Bella’s wonderfully scented hair and screamed out. Bella only held him tighter but said nothing. Harry felt her hands on his back, her fingers rubbing patterns on his damp skin to soothe him but it wasn’t working. Harry screamed again because his world was coming apart. This was worse than when he had found out that Voldemort had murdered his parents. He didn’t know why it was worse…didn’t know why it affected him so much but it did. The image of Tom’s innocent brown eyes was plastered to the forefront of his brown and watching them turn into cruel crimson slits was absolute torture. Watching Tom’s delicate features turn into the gaunt snakelike visage of Lord Voldemort was killing him inside. That golden aura being consumed by darkness slowly suffocated him.

Then a memory flashed in front of his eyes. It was the time when he had woken up in bed, after Voldemort had chased him through the forest, with a sprained ankle and Voldemort had been surprisingly gentle with him. He had caught a brief glimpse of those brown eyes, that golden aura that was begging to be freed. The memory changed and he was standing in the library. Voldemort was smiling, his golden aura shining around him. Bella’s weak voice made his thoughts come to a standstill,

“Harry…what…what happened?”

Harry couldn’t bring himself to talk. He held on tight to Bella’s shoulders and kept his eyes closed. He felt Bella’s hand on the back of his head,
“I am going to put you to sleep, Harry.”

Harry felt like that was the only thing that could save him from the onslaught of emotions. He nodded his head imperceptibly to show his willingness and felt something like steady warmth seeping into his head from Bella’s fingers and filling it up. The thoughts began to die one by one, the spinning began to subside as Harry felt his mind being wrapped up in cotton or it felt more like a warm blanket and before he knew it everything blacked out.

Voldemort stood in the corner of the room and watched Bella tend to Harry’s unconscious form on the bed. She vanished his soaked clothes and a choked gasp escaped her lips. He stepped closer and his hands balled into fists as he saw the purplish bruises crisscrossing Harry’s chest, his arms, his legs. There was barely an inch of Harry that wasn’t covered in them. His gaze took in Harry’s bloodied, scraped knees, his injured hands, his wounded feet. It wasn’t difficult to surmise that Harry had been to the cavern again. He was shocked that Harry had managed to get in there despite, all the extra enchantments he had placed on the place after Harry’s last visit. Bellatrix was cleaning Harry’s wounds and drying him off with a towel while tears streamed down her cheeks. He had asked her to leave but she had been adamant about staying and tending to him, “Do not heal his wounds until he awakens.”

Bella looked up, her forehead creased with concern, “Why not, My Lord?”

Voldemort conjured a robe and handed it to Bella, “He will want to see them.”

Bella pursed her lips and nodded before carefully pulling the robe over Harry’s body and dragging the covers over him. He stepped back and observed how Bella bent down over him and kissed his forehead as more tears streamed down her eyes. He failed to comprehend why Bella cared about him so much but at some level he understood her concern. He did not enjoy seeing Harry in this state but this was state was becoming more and more usual for Harry.

He wondered what Harry had seen this time. He couldn’t help but feel a little guilty. Harry had been afraid that this would happen. He had been afraid of returning to the cavern. He should have restrained him to the bed. No, that wasn’t a permanent solution. He needed to find out what was going on. Was Harry really being claimed by the curse? It wasn’t possible. Harry was meant to break the curse. He wasn’t supposed to be affected by it. No, this was something else. He needed to know what force kept dragging Harry to the cavern. He could see that this time Harry really had been dragged in the middle of the day. His hands and knees were proof of that. He sighed and spoke, “Take care of him when he awakens.”

He knew that Bella would so without waiting for a reply he departed from the room.
Chapter 46

Harry woke up with a sharp inhale and his eyes flew open. Someone was holding him down and whispering soft words to him,

"You're alright, Harry…It's alright…"

Harry drew in several deep breaths to calm his racing heart and his trembling frame. His body wasn't aching as badly as before but a dull pain still lingered in all his muscles and bones. His vision was blurred and he raised his hand to his face and realized that his glasses were gone,

"My glasses…"

His glasses were pushed over his nose and everything came into clearer focus. Bella looked deathly pale and her usually bright luscious lips seemed colourless and dull. Her dark eyes were swollen and her normally sleek curls were in disarray. The room was dark. Harry looked at the French doors that led to the balcony and realized that they had been boarded up. His gaze moved to the pocket watch laying on the side table and reached for it but it was too far. Bella instantly grabbed it and handed it to him. As he was flipping it open with shaking fingers, he noticed how injured his hand was. Ignoring it he looked at the time. It showed eleven. He wasn't sure whether it was night or day but the way the door was boarded up and the weakness on Bella's face, he was certain, it was day. He pulled himself into a sitting position despite Bella's protests and his body's weakness. He leaned back against the bed and pulled Bella into a hug,

"I'm sorry…I'm sorry for worrying you over and over again…"

Bella had her arms wrapped around him and was rubbing his back,

"No, Harry…You don't have to apologize."

Harry buried his face in her shoulder,

"It's day and you're awake. This isn't good for you, Bella. You should go and rest."

Bella kissed his temple and cradled his head,

"I am not going to leave you alone…not after what happened…"

Harry looked around the dark room and then pushed the covers away to assess the damage. He was dressed in a black robe and Bella pulled it away from his knees, showing the scrapes and cuts. There must have been blood but Bella must have cleaned it away. The soles of his feet were aching too so that meant they were injured as well. He pulled open the robe and looked down at his chest. He wasn't surprised to find the purplish bruises that wound around his chest in that chainlike pattern. He closed his eyes and pulled the robe close. Bella took his hand and began kissing his palm, her lips gently rubbing against the cuts and scrapes there…taking away the pain and filling Harry up with blissful peace. Harry whimpered and Bella continued to kiss her way over his palm. He melted against the headboard. Pure bliss ran through every nerve of his body and every particle of his being sang with it. There was no sign of pain or any discomfort…no thoughts, no fear, no uncertainties as Bella shifted to his other hand, then his knees and eventually to his feet. Harry wanted to protest but the bliss weighed heavy on his heart and soul and he found himself unable to open his mouth.

It lifted though and Harry opened his eyes to realize that Bella looked more drawn out than before.
A weak smile graced her lips and Harry's heart cried tears of blood. He leaned back and exposed his throat,

"Bella, you need to drink."

Bella squeezed her eyes shut and shook her head,

"No…not from you…"

Her skin was so pale it was almost translucent. Harry was afraid she would vanish into thin air if this kept up for another few minutes. He took her hand and pulled her down over his throat,

"Take as much as you want, Bella. I'm not short on blood."

Bella held his shoulders and resisted,

"No…Please…No…I'll hurt you if I drink from you in this state."

Harry moved his fingers through her curls,

"Please, Bella. You've done so much for me…Let me do this for you."

He nudge her head and felt her lips against his neck. Harry drew in a silent breath and spoke,

"I'm ready, Bella."

Bella sobbed against his skin and for a moment, Harry thought she wouldn't do it but then he felt her fangs graze against his skin, right over his jugular. He relaxed against the headboard and nudged Bella's head again in encouragement. The fangs broke his skin and Harry bit his lips to stop any sounds from escaping. Excruciating pain burned through his being and he fist the sheets while he ensured that his other hand continued to stroke Bella's hair softly. He squeezed his eyes shut and endured the pain as noiselessly as he possibly could. He felt a dribble of warm blood run down his neck. Bella's grip tightened on his shoulders and continued to drink from him. Harry was beginning to feel a little light headed but he made sure that he didn't pass out or let his weakness show. He needed to make Bella feel better. He was on the brink of darkness when Bella finally pulled away from him and healed his neck. The wave of bliss washed away the pain instantly and Harry's head slumped against Bella's shoulder. When Harry had recovered a bit, he raised his head and looked at Bella. She looked infinitely better. Her skin had gotten back its healthy glow and her lips were once again crimson and lovely. Bella smiled and Harry was relieved to see that it was bright and beautiful,

"Thank…"

Harry didn't let her finish and rested a finger on her lips,

"Don't…I should be the one thanking you."

Bella kissed his forehead and Harry spoke,

"You need to rest now."

Bella grew concerned once again,

"I'm not leaving you."

Harry frowned and spoke,
"You can't rest without your coffin?"

Bella nodded and Harry spoke,

"Well can't you conjure it here?"

Bella smiled softly,

"I can."

Harry felt his curiosity overwhelm him,

"Conjure it then. I want to see it."

Bella closed her eyes and snapped her fingers. Harry saw a huge black coffin appear right next to the bed. He didn't know where the energy came from but he jumped to his feet before Bella could stop him and surveyed the coffin. It was made of dark black oak and polished to perfection. The inside was cushioned and contained a dark purple quilted silky lining. It looked quite comfortable, inviting. Harry stepped into it and laid down. It was quite roomy and Harry felt an odd kind of safety in it. He closed his eyes and rested his hands over his chest in the perfect imitation of a corpse,

"How do I look, Bella?"

Bella didn't reply so he opened his eyes and found a look of utter horror on her face,

"Get out of there, Sugar. I never want to see you in a coffin…Never…"

Harry closed his eyes again and laughed,

"I love it in here besides it's not like I'm dead."

Harry felt Bella lean over him and tug at his arm while her curls tickled his face. He laughed again and refused to move. Bellatrix left his arm and he laid down on his side. Burying his face in the plush quilted lining, he rested his hands underneath his head. All the energy he had felt a moment ago was gone and he felt drained out,

"I'm just going to…"

He couldn't finish his sentence as he closed his mouth to stifle a yawning,

"I'm just going to sleep here for a while. There's plenty of space here. We'll fit if you spoon close to me."

He drifted off for a minute and then murmured slowly,

"Need your warmth, Bella."

He had almost fallen asleep when he felt Bella's slender form behind him and her arms wrap around him. He couldn't help but smile and spoke,

"Thank you for everything"
Harry had made a full recovery. It had been two weeks since his last sleepwalking adventures. Two weeks since he had found out that Voldemort was Tom. He hadn't seen the man once since then. Harry had had a lot of time to think about what to do but he hadn't come to any conclusions and he still had no idea what role he was supposed to play in all this. He was sitting on the edge of the bed and watched Bella sleep in her coffin. She looked hauntingly beautiful. After she had moved into his room permanently, he had made a habit of sleeping during the day and staying awake with Bella through the night. Besides, it didn't really matter anyway. He never really knew what time of the day it was because the room was so dark all the time. Bella hadn't allowed him to take a single step out of the room and it was finally beginning to take its toll on him. Harry stared longingly at the boarded-up French doors. He needed some sunlight, some fresh air because he felt nauseous and smothered.

Without a second thought, he picked up the pocket watch and the map from the bed side table, whispered an apology to Bella and stepped out of the room. Once outside, he unfolded the map and navigated it. According to the map, there was a lake on the northeast side of the castle. Maybe he ought to go there today. Harry navigated his way through the corridors as he imagined how the water would feel around him. He hadn't swum in a while. The last time, he had gone swimming was last year when the Dursleys had been away visiting Aunt Marge. Of course, they had locked the cottage and left him with barely any food in the shed. It had been his hunger that had forced him to the freshwater stream that ran a few miles away. He had swum and roasted the fresh fish he had caught with a net he had found in the shed. Harry smiled at the memory. That had been a good picnic if you could call it that.

Harry reached a small door that led outside and stepped through it. There was a few meters of clear ground before the forest began. The weather was the kind that felt like a kiss of summer without the fiery heat of noon time. The grass was soft green peppered with yellows and blues and the sky was pristine. A beautiful blue with not a single white cloud. It was perfect. Harry toed off his shoes and set his foot on the cool grass. It felt heavenly. Harry eyed the forest a little distance away. It seemed so inviting…so different from the forest he had ran through while Voldemort had hunted him. Who needed to run when walking felt so blissful. Harry took a few steps, then stopped and closed his eyes so that he could focus on the sounds and scents that surrounded him. He recognized a blackbird song, how could anyone not say that was music? There were other beautiful sounds that were coming from the forest. The scent of the grass, the flowers that surrounded him…he took it all in greedily like he had been starved for it.

He opened his eyes and let the daylight flood back in, bringing the day right back into focus. Then he sat cross legged on the grass and looked at the flowers. He liked roses but there weren't any roses in this patch of land. There were only meadow flowers here like forget-me-nots and buttercups and he loved them just as equally. He laid back on the glass and focused his gaze on the cluster of blue forget me nots inches away from his eyes. They were absolutely beautiful…more beautiful than Harry ever remembered them to be. Or maybe this had something to do with the castle as well. He caressed them with his fingers and enjoyed their softness. He checked the map. The lake was supposed to be around here somewhere. He folded up the map and pushed it into his pocket. It didn't matter anymore if he reached the lake or not. He was absolutely content with where he was.

He laid there on the cool grass for a while and soaked up the sun. When he'd had his fill, he rose to his feet and started making his way to the forest. In the forest, the sky vanished almost completely, only a few fragments of blue remained like scattered pieces of an impossible jigsaw puzzle. The air
was rich with the fragrance of leaves and loam, damp too. It must have rained because the soil felt
damp and wet between his bare toes. slowly releasing its heady fog. Outside, the noon daylight, the
powerful rays of the sun had been warm but in here everything was cool and the colours had the
softness of that time just before twilight. The only visible movement was the occasional bird,
startling in a tree or a squirrel dashing up a nearby trunk but Harry felt something else's presence as
well. He was fairly sure that werewolves didn't reside in this part of the castle. Harry willed
himself not to worry about it and tried to relax as best as he could. He took in all the air in his lungs
could hold and expelled it slowly. He felt better, so much better. He made his way through the
trees at a leisurely pace, enjoying everything about his surroundings until the sound of a twig
snapping right behind him made him freeze. A thousand different scenarios ran through his head
and in most of them he ended up dying at the hands of whatever creature stood behind him. He
willed himself to turn around and took in the sight in front of him with a mix of mild fear and
curiosity.

If he had had to give them a name, he supposed he would have called them horses, though there
was something reptilian about them, too. They were completely fleshless, their black coats clinging
to their skeletons, of which every bone was visible. Their heads were dragonish, and their pupil-
less eyes were white and staring. Wings sprouted from each wither… vast, black leathery wings
that looked as though they ought to belong to giant bats. Standing still and quiet in the shade of
trees the creatures looked eerie and sinister. There were three of them and Harry didn't feel overly
terrified of them. He stepped a little closer and lifted a hand to touch one of them, instantly they
reared back and looked ready to charge him. Harry took an immediate step back, stumbled over a
root and fell down on the ground. By the time he straightened up, they were gone and Harry
couldn't help but feel a bit mystified by them. He had half a mind to chase after them but he battled
the urge and forced himself to walk deeper into woods. A few minutes later, Harry approached a
clearing and he was sure he had found the lake.

In that land of virescent beauty lay a disc of brightest blue. Like a mirror on the wall it was oval
and flat, the surface forever guarded from the winds by the crown of lush hills that surrounded. At
the edge, the land met and carried right on as a perfect reflection. Looking up into the sky and
down into the water was just the same. The lake was brighter than the colours of dreams. It shone
cyan, turquoise and shimmering blue. Against the greens of the hills the lake sat as the most
impossible of paintings, the artist painting with colours he thought would fade in time but never
did.

A deep sense of serenity overcame him as he stared in rapture at the expanse of blue that lay before
him. Rays of lights danced delicately across the water, birthed from the afternoon sun that both
limited his sight and made the view all the more beautiful. The only sound was the soft whispering
of the trees and the sounds of the birds originating from the forest. Harry made his way to the shore
which was an outcropping of rocks of variable sizes, small enough to get stuck between his toes
and big enough to sit on. He settled down on one and just stared ahead at the breath-taking view.

His mind wandered to Voldemort. It was a good thing he hadn't faced him yet because he wasn't
sure what he was going to do. Did Voldemort know that he knew? He probably didn't. So, should
he seek him out and tell him that he knew about his childhood. Something told him that wasn't a
good idea. Wrapping him in a hug and telling him that he wasn't responsible for the choices he had
made and that there was still hope. That wouldn't go down well at all. He couldn't imagine
Voldemort crying, repenting and leaving his wicked ways. What else was he supposed to do? What
else could he do? The darkness that surrounded him…that was his soul…and the snake on his
shoulder…that was the curse. How the hell was he supposed to break this curse? It irritated him
and frustrated him that he couldn't come up with an answer.

Before he knew it, Harry was pulling off his shirt. He contemplated whether to take off his pants.
He decided against it and jumped into the water. The cool water moved over his skin like a potion, removing the irritation and replacing it with a meditative peace.

The freedom was intoxicating as he dove under the water. He could move in any direction or even just stop and float a while. The water was blue like the perfect sky. Harry watched as his air bubbles made their way to the surface with every exhale; they were the only thing down here that were in a hurry to leave. He could stay down here all day if his lungs would last, but they didn't and he had to come to the surface to catch his breath before diving down again.

Underwater, in those perfect moments he forgot the past and ceased to analyze the future. He didn't worry about who he was, who he would become or who he might never be. In the watery embrace, there was only the present, nothing more.

When he came up for air for what seemed like the umpteenth time, he saw something at the far end of the lake. The sunlight bouncing off the water nearly blinded him and he had to squint to focus on the object that had caught his attention. It looked like a...a tentacle... As soon as realization struck him, he swam for the shore as fast as he could and jumped out of the water. But his gaze was still fixated on the tentacle and he momentarily saw stars as he collided hard into something...or someone.
Chapter 48

When Harry realized who he had bumped into, he took a step back and became extremely self-conscious. He was shirtless and his soaked pants were clinging to his legs like a second skin. Harry was ready to jump back into the water and take his chances with whatever creature that tentacle belonged to rather than face Voldemort. Before he could finalize that plan, Voldemort stepped closer to him and spoke in a low, velvety tone,

"You look good."

That only served to increase Harry's self-consciousness and he felt his cheeks heating up. The water dripped down his hair and streamed down his cheeks. Before he could raise his hand and wipe it away, Voldemort did. Something about his touch sparked a fire underneath his skin and Harry took another step back. He felt Voldemort's gaze raking over him and despite how soaked he was, he felt extremely warm and uncomfortable. Usually he never got tongue tied around Voldemort but today...today he couldn't come up with anything to say. Somehow, he was afraid that if he opened his mouth he would blurt out that he knew the truth about him and he didn't want to reveal that...not yet...

"Harry..."

Harry looked up at his name and met Voldemort's crimson gaze. A smile was present on Voldemort's lips and his snakelike features seemed softer. There was no snake though. Harry tried to search for a shadow of Tom in that face...a flicker of those handsome features...those soft brown eyes...nothing. Harry saw nothing and it broke his heart. There was something more than wrong with him. There was something broken inside him, inside his very being, inside his soul. He closed his eyes and let his head drop. There wasn't anything he could say. Maybe it was too late. Maybe Voldemort was beyond redemption. An image of Tom trapped inside all that darkness flooded his mind and before he could stop himself, tears started streaming down his cheeks. A sense of failure and desperation gripped his heart in a vice like grip and he couldn't stop the choked sob that escaped his lips. What If he couldn't save Tom? He felt Voldemort step closer to him and took another step back,

"Are you crying?"

Harry wiped away his tears hurriedly and shook his head,

"It's just water."

He spoke without looking up,

"Did you want me for something?"

Voldemort took another step closer and Harry was about to back away again when Voldemort grabbed his wrist and pulled him forward. Harry turned around and realized that he'd almost fallen into the water. He pulled away from Voldemort and shivered violently as the cool evening breeze skimmed over his damp body,

"What makes you think that I shall only come see you if I want something from you?"

Harry wrapped his arms around himself,

"Because I haven't seen you for the past two weeks."
Voldemort chuckled softly,

"I did not expect you to miss me."

Harry looked up and met Voldemort's crimson gaze that contained amusement and a hint of smugness.

"I did not miss you."

He picked up his shirt from the rock and began walking towards the forest. Voldemort was right behind him. He wasn't watching where he was going and bit back a cry as something penetrated his sole. He leaned back against a tree, lifted his foot with the other hand to assess the damage. It was a wood splinter and without much thought, Harry yanked it out. He was relieved to see that there wasn't much blood. Bella was going to be mad at him tonight. He was about to pull on his shirt when Voldemort came into view and walked towards him. Harry's fingers tightened on his shirt,

"What do you want?"

Voldemort took another step toward him, his chest pressing against Harry's, his thigh touching his thigh. Quietly, he spoke,

"You."

Heat covered Harry's body. Why had he thought that Tom was stuck in there? Voldemort was Voldemort...a murderer...a monster who just took whatever he wanted...who had stolen his family from him. Rage was a tangible thing pouring out of him. He put his hands between them and shoved him.

"Leave me alone."

Harry stepped away from the tree and began walking away from him. He hadn't even taken two steps when a vice like grip grabbed his arm and turned him back around. Voldemort's crimson eyes were no longer crimson but dark...darker than the darkest night. The colours faded all around him and the sounds died away. There were no more birds chirping, no rustle of leaves...nothing...

Voldemort didn't let go of his arm. He pressed against him, shoved him hard against the tree at his back. He wrapped his other hand around his free wrist, slammed both of his hands against the trunk near his shoulders.

A snake slithered up from underneath his black robes. Its blue scales glimmered in the light that wasn't really there. Another coiled itself around his arm, smooth purple scales running over his skin, its pale eyes fixed on him.

The black snake slithered around the side of his neck, coming from the shadows behind his shoulders. It wrapped around his throat, watching him each time it looped around.

Voldemort leaned in. There wasn't an inch of space between their bodies. Something not only stirred in him, but it took over his thinking. The rest of his world became an unimportant blur that was banished into the far recesses of his mind. The only thing that mattered was the solidness of Voldemort's body, the heat that was seeping into his damp, cold skin and warming him up. He wanted this...wanted Voldemort's touch...wanted more of it.

Voldemort pushed away a damp lock of his hair and touched his lips to the sensitive skin below his ear and spoke in a low voice,
"That is not what you wish to say to me, Harry."

Harry bit back a moan as he felt Voldemort trace his fingers over the faded bruises on his chest and heard him whisper in his ear,

"You want me. I can see it written all over that pretty face."

Harry struggled to get his wrists free and gritted out,

"You're a monster."

He meant for it to come off as an insult, but he sounded out of breath. Voldemort pressed a gentle kiss behind his ear and Harry shivered,

"It breaks my heart when you look at me like that, like you cannot even stand the sight of me. I watch the emotions play over your face and it makes me want to cause something to bleed. At this moment, you want me too, but you wish you did not. Tell me just once, Harry. Tell me you feel this electricity between us."

Voldemort pulled back enough to look at his face and stared into his eyes. Without blinking, Harry said,

"No."

Voldemort grinned. It was a wolf's grin. Feral and dangerous. The grip on Harry's wrists vanished, and for a moment Harry thought he'd turn around and leave. Instead he fisted the locket around his neck, forcing the chain to pinch into his skin. He slipped his other hand around to the back of his head, grabbing a fistful of his hair. And then he pulled him towards himself and kissed him.

Could a person lose his soul from just one kiss? If Harry could, he didn't give a damn right then.

When they parted, Voldemort's lips remained against his and pressed his tongue into his mouth. Harry lost his mind.

Voldemort hands fell to his hips, squeezing, taking his breath. He lifted Harry against him roughly, and Harry wrapped his legs around his thighs. Voldemort thrust against him, and Harry winced as the back of his head banged against the trunk. He gasped, and Voldemort stole it away with another kiss. Harry's world shook and crumbled all around him.

They were wild together. Harry fisted Voldemort's robes and Voldemort gripped his hips hard enough to leave bruises on his skin.

The kiss was hot and needy, wet and too rough. Harry couldn't get enough of it, of Voldemort's touch, of his skin touching his skin, of his body pressing against his own.

Harry closed his eyes and listened to the sizzle and snap of current between them, to the gentle hum in the back of his mind. The hum was a cry, a warning, a blessing, a curse. Those black waters ran through his veins, that purple haze entwined around his body and forced his heart to beat. Those snakes hissed to him how deeply Voldemort wanted him and that darkness…that darkness ensnared him.

Small, smooth scales tickled up his arm. They wrapped around his wrist, then his elbow, then to his throat. Harry tossed his head back against the trunk again. Voldemort bit his bottom lip, ran his tongue along the inside of his teeth, whispered his name.
Harry was drowning in him. He was sinking, his body a stone. He begged the current and the waves to pull him under.

And suddenly he was gone. Voldemort had stepped back, staring at him, chest heaving, his crimson eyes blazing. The loss of his touch was like a slap to Harry's face. He was cold, impossibly cold. He felt empty, hollow, a shell of what he'd been a second ago.

Without a word, Voldemort disappeared from right in front of him and Harry's knees gave out.
He had no idea how long he just sat there on the forest floor, trembling and shivering from the cold that wasn't just physical...a cold that was soul deep. He felt empty...so hollow...Had Voldemort stolen his soul with the kiss? He wiped at his lips with the back of his hand. How had he allowed that to happen? How had he allowed the monster that had murdered his parents to kiss him?

Harry pulled his knees up to his chest and buried his face in them. He had enjoyed it, taken pleasure from it and he had wanted more. How sick was he? A cry escaped his lips and he hugged himself tighter. Even now he was yearning to have that warmth back. He wanted Voldemort's body pressed up against his, his hands back his body...

He rose to his feet abruptly, ran back to the lake and came to a halt on the outcropping. His chest rose and fell as he drew in ragged breaths and dropped down on a stone. His gaze was fixated on the lake, aglow with the last orange rays before twilight beckoned the stars. Through teary eyes he watched the sun fall behind the horizon, painting the sky shades of red and pink. The hurricane inside him began to calm down. This day had come and gone. The colours were symbols. Each showing him the good tomorrow could bring. But a despairing thought invaded his mind. Those colours were going to be consumed by the darkness soon. The hope in his chest refused to die though. Those colours would be back tomorrow. No darkness was meant to last forever and he was going to do everything he could to erase it...even if it meant erasing himself in the process.

He couldn't help but think about what Voldemort had said to him. He had lied when he had said that he didn't feel anything between them. Was this Voldemort's way of punishing him for that? Leaving him hanging at the apex of pleasure. Did Voldemort expect him to crawl to him and beg him to finish what he had started? Something inside him approved of that idea. Harry shook his head. No, he was not going to let this affect him. But...

Voldemort had kissed him...he had told him he wanted him...Somehow Harry kept muddling up Tom and Voldemort in his head. Everytime, he thought of Voldemort, his mind conjured up Tom's handsome face. It was there. Tom was there behind that snakelike mask. He could bring him out. He would bring him out.

Harry hated his optimism and the fact that he wasn't feeling as devastated as he should be after being kissed by his parents' murderer. It felt like betraying their memory...but he had no memories of them so there wasn't exactly anything to betray.

Harry shut off his thoughts and watched with an unwavering gaze, as the fiery red orb of light slowly sank beneath the horizon, and threads of light lingered in the sky, mingling with the rolling clouds, dyeing the heavens first orange, then red, then dark blue, until all that was left of the sunset was a chalky mauve, and then that melted away in turn as darkness took over the sky. Sequin-silver stars like the glowing embers of a dying fire winked down at him, illuminating the inky curtain of the sky, and then suddenly the clouds parted, and Harry found myself looking at a lustrous, silver disc casting brilliant rays of moonlight onto the dark lake.

He rose from the stone and jumped into the water. It was absolutely frigid and Harry felt his entire being grow numb, inside and out. He was dominated by his fearlessness and swam through the quaint water. No creature or sentient being could hurt him or terrify him in this moment. Harry was forced to emerge from the water a while later because of his growling stomach. He hadn't eaten a bite since last night and he had exhausted his energy supply with all the swimming he had done. His teeth chattered as he began searching for his shirt but it seemed like a lost cause in the darkness of the forest so he focused on getting back inside the castle.
His soaked jeans clung to his skin and he finally registered the weight of something in his pocket. He cursed verbally when he realized what it was. Pulling it out hurriedly with numb, trembling fingers, he noticed that the pocket watch was still ticking but the map was in tatters. Harry cursed his own stupidity as he stepped into the castle and made his way through the long, winding corridors.

Several minutes later, Harry found himself to be hopelessly lost, extremely cold and absolutely bitter. What was the point of having so many rooms when they were all bloody uninhabitable? He was so exhausted and his muscles were starting to ache…it wasn't the pleasant kind of pain either. His stomach grumbled noisily and he tried to assess which part of the castle he was in. He felt like stamping his feet on the ground in irritation as he failed to identify his location. He forced himself to keep moving.

When he found himself in front of a very familiar statue, Harry realized the extent of the rottenness of his luck. Of all the places in the castle, he had to end up here. Harry would have preferred having his soul sucked out by the dementors rather than be here. He was tempted to walk away but his stomach protested loudly and his muscles joined in. Any port in a storm. Damn it. He was still shirtless and his pants were still damp. Voldemort was going to think that he was here because he wanted more. Well he could think whatever he wanted. He wasn't going to let him touch him again. Harry willed himself to slip into parseltongue and spoke what he had heard Voldemort speak.

The statue slid aside and Harry walked in through the passageway apprehensively. The warmth felt heavenly as he made his way through the library towards the massive oak doors that opened by themselves. The fireplace was like a tiny sun, casting long shadows over the rug. The flames curled and swayed, flicking this way and that, crackling as they burned the dry wood. It was so good to feel their warmth, even if was from only one direction. Harry settled down on the thick rug close to the fireplace and watched the flames in hypnotized joy, hands out to get just a little more of the gentle heat. The warmth seeped into his skin and Harry reveled in it. He was so glad Voldemort wasn't here and it helped him relax further. Harry's muscles loosened up and he curled up on the rug as the warmth soothed him to sleep.
Chapter 50

Harry woke up feeling extremely warm and well rested. He was just savouring the last dredges of blissful sleep when a voice forced his eyes to fly open and his body to jerk up into a sitting position causing the blanket to slip from his bare shoulders…blanket…There hadn't been a blanket when he had fallen asleep…nevertheless he pulled it up and wrapped it around his shoulders hurriedly before looking up and finding Voldemort lounging on the settee. He was still on the rug. Harry looked away immediately and focused his gaze on the fur blanket instead. Somehow, this action caused guilt to coil around his heart and Voldemort's words resonated inside his head.

*It breaks my heart when you look at me like that, like you cannot even stand the sight of me.*

It took him a moment to gather the necessary words and spoke,

"It's not you that I can't stand the sight of. It's that snake around your neck."

Voldemort said nothing. Harry kept his gaze lowered but he steadily grew impatient. Why wasn't Voldemort responding? He looked up and found a purely contemplative expression on Voldemort's face,

"Did you feel it when I kissed you?"

Harry was caught off guard by the question. Feel what exactly? He had felt a thousand things when Voldemort had kissed him and he was not going to describe them all in detail,

"Feel what?"

Voldemort rose to his feet and Harry willed himself to remain still. He succeeded to some extent but his heart, as rebellious at it was, was trying to beat its way out of his chest as Voldemort settled down on the rug beside him. Harry felt an unwanted innate desire to be closer to the man but he quashed it as instantly as it had raised its ugly head,

"The snake, Harry."

Harry shivered violently as his mind and body replayed the sensation of smooth scales wrapped around his wrist, moving up his arm and finally wrapping around his throat. Harry held the blanket closer to him, reminding himself that it was a memory and willing himself to relax. Voldemort seemed to have picked up on that,

"You did. You felt it."

Harry nodded his head silently but before he could speak, his stomach grumbled noisily and Voldemort laughed softly. A flush crept up his cheeks and he felt his ears burning up with embarrassment. Voldemort stopped laughing, held his chin and made him look up. Harry saw nothing but pure earnestness in those crimson eyes and for a moment he caught a glimpse of warm, beautiful brown,

"Feeling hungry is nothing to be ashamed of. I believe your relatives have ingrained that thought in your mind and I shall make them pay dearly for that. Food is your right, so is a comfortable bed and good clothes."

The brown gradually dominated the crimson and Harry felt absolutely fascinated and completely entranced. The hope in his chest burned brighter and he couldn't help but smile. He could save
Tom. It felt so possible and so simple in this moment. Harry found himself asking,

"Where's the kitchen?"

Voldemort tilted his head as his gaze grew confused,

"Kitchen? You have a map. Have you not located it on it?"

Harry's head drooped and he spoke,

"I forgot to take it out before diving into the water. It's ruined."

Once again, Voldemort lifted his head and Harry realized that the crimson was completely gone and Voldemort's eyes were completely brown and filled with so much warmth. The shadows behind Voldemort were flecked with gold, shimmering and glimmering and oh so beautiful. Voldemort snapped his fingers and a map appeared in Harry's lap. Harry couldn't stop the shriek of joy that escaped his lips. He let go of the blanket to pick it up and opened it to check its contents,

"Oh, this is absolutely wonderful. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

Before he knew it, he had his arms wrapped around Voldemort's neck and was hugging him tightly,

"You're amazing."

A jolt of current went through Harry's entire being as he realized what he was doing and he was about to pull away when he felt Voldemort's arm snake around his waist and hold him there. He felt his hand on his bare back and sparks flew underneath his skin. An overwhelming feeling of wholeness consumed his senses and a gasp escaped his lips. It was like a little touch of heaven, warm, cozy. It brought him peace like he'd never known before, a calming of the storms in his heart…erasing his doubts and kindling his hope. His mind swam with the heady excitement of pulling Tom and seeing him in the flesh.

Voldemort's hand disappeared and Harry jerked back. The hollowness he felt made him want to weep in despair but he pushed it down and tried to distract himself. He located the kitchens on the map and rose to his feet. He needed a shirt first and then he was getting himself something to eat. Bella must be going crazy. He was about to walk away when Voldemort spoke,

"Where exactly are you going?"

Harry didn't turn around because of the fear that the hollowness might consume him again if he looked at Voldemort again. He really didn't want to burst into tears,

"My room for a shirt and to tell Bella that I'm alive. She must be worried sick. Then I'm going to the kitchens to cook something for myself."

A surprised sound escaped Voldemort's lips,

"You are going to cook? But there is no need for you to. I could simply conjure a meal for you."

Harry shook his head and couldn't help but smile,

"I need a distraction…Oh and before I forget you have to teach me magic. You just have to."

Voldemort laughed softly,

"You wish to learn magic."
Harry nodded fervently,
"Yes…Definitely…"

Harry felt Voldemort step closer to him,
"How about a deal?"

Harry turned around,
"What kind of deal?"

Voldemort smiled brilliantly,
"Cook for me. If I am impressed than I shall teach you magic."

Harry couldn't help but feel exhilarated by the challenge,
"Prepare to be amazed."
Chapter 51

He had indulged, eating more than he'd thought possible. Harry had started him off on a creamy wild garlic and nettle soup that felt warm in his belly. When the bowl had been in front of him white wisps had etched themselves on the air, stretching out to caress his nostrils. It had been mossy green, with islands of orange floating through the broth. A handsome fish dish had followed. Harry had laid a silver platter in front of him on top of which sat a fleshy pink strip of trout, garnished with dashings of green herbs that he didn't know, but liked the taste of. The fish course was supplemented by a side plate of mussels. Their black shells lay open, the beige insides spilling out…absolutely enticing. He had never eaten them before, mainly because he thought that they felt horrible on his tongue, slippery and nasty, but today when Harry had urged him on and he had sampled one, he came to realize that they tasted pleasantly of the ocean without an overwhelming aroma of fish.

After the seafood dishes had been cleared away, Harry had returned from the kitchen with the main meal and served him cuts of the pork with a refreshing apple sauce, easing the perfectly cooked meat down. It had been accompanied by potatoes that were diced up in a bowl with carrots, mushrooms and zucchini topped off with a healthy dash of pepper that stung the throat in the most pleasurable way. Then after the pork, had come the dessert, Harry had smiled as he had placed a slice of a cherry torte on the table in front of him. The pastry had been light, both in texture and color, with a thick dark brown crust, all of which contrasted with the beautiful cherry red sauce that poured out of it. The torte was topped by a thin layer of icing sugar as white as snow, but as sharp as salt. In short, the meal had been pure ambrosia.

He looked at Harry was still munching on his dessert and practically vibrating with excitement. His raven black locks were dusted with flour. Harry was bound to be exhausted though. He had spent hours in the kitchen to prepare this feast but there wasn't a sliver of exhaustion visible on his face. He looked happy. There had been a perpetual smile on his face throughout the meal and it had made everything taste all the more heavenly. It was irrevocably the best food he had ever tasted and he knew that Harry was desperately waiting for his verdict. Harry finally leaned back in his seat and looked up at him expectantly,

"So…What do you think?"

He found himself rendered speechless by how utterly beautiful Harry looked. Harry's smile was lighting up the room and his eyes…his gorgeous emerald green eyes glinted beautifully with a mixture of excitement and anxiety. He wasn't sure if it was a hallucination or not but he saw that Harry was glowing…radiating a warm golden sheen that was the quintessence of everything good and whole. Harry made an impatient sound and his smile disappeared as doubt crept up on Harry's face and into his eyes,

"You didn't like it?"

He shook his head hurriedly and Harry's smile returned,

"Don't be like my relatives. Say something."

Murderous intent raised its head inside his chest. He was going to kill them slowly and extremely painfully. How could they have disregarded such a gift? Harry was an absolute blessing. Guilt coiled tight around his heart. He had tried to kill him…wanted to end him…He was so glad he hadn't succeeded,
"Everything was absolutely marvelous. You deserve all the praise in this world for this meal and every other meal that you've prepared up until now. Your relatives were utter fools to disregard you."

Harry ducked his head and he noticed a flush creep up his cheeks. Modesty looked beautiful on him…everything looked beautiful on him…

"Sorry, I went a bit wild with the pantry. I've never had so many ingredients at my disposal before and I just had to try them all out."

Harry didn't sound remorseful though. He sounded extremely jubilant. How could something as simple as cooking bring him so much joy? He decided to voice that thought and Harry laughed and leaned back in his seat,

"I never enjoyed cooking for my relatives since they never appreciated me for it and I never got to taste it anyway unless I licked it off the pots and pans. It was just a compulsion for me, a chore, something that I had to do. But today, it wasn't a compulsion. I wanted to do it for myself and after you offered me that challenge, I knew I had something precious to gain from all this and I…"

Harry paused and his cheeks grew redder with embarrassment. He hoped Harry finished that sentence because he was absolutely dying from curiosity. Harry had his gaze focused on the table as he spoke,

"I…Ummm…I wanted to please you."

He was thunderstruck by that revelation. He wanted to please him? That was the last thing he had expected from Harry. The splotches of red on Harry's cheeks only grew when he looked up and ducked his head again. He must have noticed his perturbation. He corrected his expressions and spoke as gently as possible,

"It was an absolute honour and an utter delight to have you cook for me. It seems you have won the challenge."

Harry looked up and his eyes were glittering with joy,

"So, you're going to teach me then?"

He nodded and Harry jumped to his feet with excitement,

"When can we start?"

Harry's enthusiasm was endearing and he was certain that he would prove to be a quick learner,

"We cannot start yet."

A shadow of doubt flickered over Harry's face and he asked with a hint of fear in his voice,

"Why not? Is there an initiation ritual? I won't have to sell my soul to the devil, will I?"

He couldn't help but burst out into laughter at Harry's naïve and innocent inquiry. Harry rested his elbows on the back of the chair and spoke sullenly,

"It's not funny. My doubts are perfectly justified."

He couldn't remember if he had ever laughed with happiness. Something about Harry lit up his heart and soul and made everything seem brighter…merrier. Once he was sure that he had his
laughter under control, he spoke,

"We cannot start until you have a wand."
Chapter 52

He led Harry back to his chambers and told him to sit down on the settee. He could tell that he had a thousand questions. As soon as they were seated, he asked,

"What's a wand?"

He reclined back in his armchair and tapped his lips before speaking,

"A wand is an instrument through which you will be able to channel your magical powers. It is made from wood and has a magical substance at its core."

Harry frowned,

"My magical powers?"

He regarded the confusion in Harry's eyes and spoke,

"Magic is not something that can be learnt. The ability to use magic is a hereditary trait passed down from a person's ancestors."

Harry jumped to his feet and his emerald eyes reflected his hurt perfectly,

"You lied to me then. You said you could teach it to me."

He felt deeply unsettled by how hurt Harry looked and spoke,

"Do you believe that you do not possess magical abilities?"

Harry paced the expanse of the room and his agitation was quite obvious,

"I'm sure I don't…"

He halted and faced him with hope blossoming in his eyes,

"I didn't know my parents. I don't know my ancestors. What do you think?"

He signaled him to sit and Harry obeyed reluctantly,

"I believe that you do have magic coursing through your veins."

A smile finally crossed Harry's lips before being replaced with another frown,

"So, I need a wand to channel my magic…if I have any…How come I've never seen you use a wand?"

He smiled at Harry's question,

"I do not require a wand because I have reached a certain level of skill."

Amusement lit up Harry's eyes and he laughed,

"So, you're basically saying that you're powerful enough to use magic without a wand."

He couldn't suppress his own laughter. Harry was far too perceptive,
"Yes, you may put it that way."

Harry rested his elbows on his knees and leaned forward,

"So, how do I get a wand?"

He smirked and snapped his fingers. A number of dusty boxes appeared in front of him. He opened one of them and withdrew a finely carved piece of wood,

"Try this one. Beechwood and dragon heartstring. Nine inches. Nice and flexible. Just take it and give it a wave."

Fascination danced in Harry's eyes as he rose to his feet and took it from his fingers. He watched as Harry waved it but nothing happened. Dismay crossed his features but he took the wand away from his fingers and handed him another,

"Maple and phoenix feather. Seven inches."

Harry looked absolutely defeated when nothing happened. He snatched it away from his hand and pushed another in his hand,

"No, here, ebony and unicorn hair, eight and a half inches."

Once again nothing happened and Harry looked close to tears. He rose to his feet and cupped his face,

"Harry, there is no need to lose heart over this. I believe only a very special wand will cater to your needs."

Harry kept his gaze lowered and murmured miserably,

"What if I don't have what it takes?"

He plucked the wand from between Harry's fingers,

"You do possess magical abilities. I can sense them. We just need to find the right wand for you."

Harry finally looked up and a gentle smile lit up his features,

"Okay. So, which one's next?"

He slipped another wand between his fingers and Harry waved it with a flourish. He felt relieved when the smile stayed on Harry's lips when it didn't work.

Harry tried. And tried. The pile of tried wands mounted higher and higher along with Harry's despondency. He was perturbed. Why hadn't any of the wands worked for Harry? Did Harry really lack magical abilities? Harry's head was lowered and his shoulders were slumped. His posture screamed that he had given up. He rested his finger underneath Harry's chin and tipped his head back. The tears glimmering in his eyes pierced his soul. Harry sounded broken when he spoke,

"I don't have it."

He kissed Harry's knuckles and spoke softly,

"You do have it. Just one more. Try one more wand, Harry."
He snapped his fingers and conjured a black box. Curiosity shone in Harry's eyes as he regarded the box and asked,

"Is that special? The box is different from all the others."

He pulled out the wand and handed it to Harry,

"Holly and phoenix feather, eleven inches"

He felt the surge of power that radiated from Harry as soon as his fingers closed around the handle. Harry's eyes were wide open with shock and then his lips curled into a wide smile as he raised the wand above his head and brought it swishing down through the air. A stream of red and gold sparks shot from the end like a firework and threw dancing spots of light on to the walls.

Harry's joy was illuminating the room with a heavenly golden glow and the air thrummed with the power he was radiating. Harry laughed and he could swear that the sound was the most beautiful serenade he'd ever heard. And when Harry wrapped his arms around him and hugged him tight, the warmth seeped into his skin like the warm sunlight on a beautiful summer day. It enlightened him from the inside out,

"Thank you."

He watched as Harry stepped back and observed the wand closely,

"It is special, isn't it?"

He shook off the daze Harry had put him under and spoke softly,

"Yes, it is."

He could read the question in Harry's eyes and conjured his own wand. Harry stared at it in fascination for a moment before asking,

"What's so special about it?"

He chuckled and spoke,

"Our wands are brothers. They both contain a feather from the same Phoenix."

He could see that Harry was trying to make sense of it and patted him on the cheek,

"You will understand what that means when I have taught you everything you need to know about magic."
Chapter 53

The wand felt warm between his fingers and thrummed with power. Voldemort smiled and Harry looked up at him. He hadn't seen a glimpse of that dark or the snake all day and he was glad of it… In fact he was absolutely overjoyed and it strengthened his resolve,

"Can you start teaching me now that I have a wand."

Voldemort chuckled softly and patted him on the cheek,

"You need to rest, Harry. You spent hours in the kitchen and before that you spent hours in the lake."

Harry frowned,

"But I don't feel exhausted."

Voldemort pulled away his hand and Harry felt him brush back a stray lock of hair from his forehead,

"You'll need all your energies when I start training you."

Harry nodded silently and looked down at the wand,

"Can I take it with me or will it stay here with you?"

He looked up and found a crease on Voldemort's forehead,

"Where do you wish to take it?"

Harry laughed softly and smoothed the crease on Voldemort's forehead with his thumb,

"To my room, of course. You told me to rest so I'm going to rest."

Harry realized what he was doing and pulled his hand away from Voldemort's forehead immediately. He took a step back and looked down at his feet,

"Umm…I guess I'll see you in a couple of hours then."

Harry was about to leave when he felt Voldemort's hands on his forearms. A shockwave of bliss flowed through him and all his nerve endings came alive and tingled with soothing pleasure,

"Stay here with me."

Every particle of his being wanted to say yes and agree so badly but…But, he knew what Voldemort wanted from him. He hadn't forgotten that kiss in the forest. The memory was still too fresh on his lips…he felt those scales on his skin, those tendrils of purple mist wrapping around his body and pulled away from Voldemort with a shiver,

"I'll see you later."

He hurried away from Voldemort. The more distance he put between them, the better it was going to be. He wanted to save Tom but not that way. He had a feeling, he would lose himself if he allowed Voldemort to have his way with him and then they'd both be beyond redemption.
He didn't go to his room. He made his way to the gardens and felt a sense of calm overtake him. Darkness had not long surrendered to the light. The sunrise meant so many things as it drifted down and ignited the colours of the garden. Harry felt his eyes smile and a rising coziness in his core. Harry walked on the path. Along the way, the rays revealed silken webs and grass wands of many hues, the rich browns of oak arms. Each waving leaf, told its own story to the wind with each dancing flutter. Harry sat down on the cool dewy grass and stared up. The sky glowed like a summer peach. Sunlight filled the sky, pure scattered light, its hue ambitiously illuminating each crevice of the land. Sparrows chirped an explicit background melody. With breath paused in his lungs, he wished time would halt. It was the perfect dawn, one to be savoured instead of squandered and he was so glad that he had come here instead of going back to his room. The sky remained beautiful regardless of went down in the world. That was the one thing that had kept his hopes up...if the sky could remain vivid and powerful, then so could he. Harry wished he had brought Tom...Voldemort...out here with him. Maybe it would soothe him too.

Harry wondered if Voldemort would teach him after he had refused to stay with him. He laid back on the grass and closed his eyes. He had been nothing but nice to him today. They had shared some wonderful moments and Voldemort had seemed happy. Keeping him happy was the only way he was going to save Tom but once again...he was stuck on how he was going to keep Voldemort pleased if he couldn't give him what he wanted. Voldemort had made it very clear yesterday that he desired him. Harry traced his lips with his finger and wondered what Voldemort had seen in him. He wasn't very attractive. His relatives had always said that he was an unsightly little boy and that was the reason he was never allowed to leave the shed when they had guests over. He pulled off his glasses and put them on the grass beside his head. Maybe Voldemort wasn't attracted to him. Maybe this was just a game to claim him and own him.

He stretched his arms over his head and sighed. Maybe it was just lust. Voldemort would bed him and then go back to hating him and torturing him. Maybe that was the only reason Voldemort was being so nice to him. He opened his eyes and stared blearily at the sky. Why was everything so complicated? He closed his eyes again and moved his fingers over the velvet soft and pleasantly cool grass. It didn't have to be complicated. He could just give Voldemort what he wanted and see what would happen afterwards. Harry scoffed at himself. No, if he gave himself up then Voldemort would go back to hating him. He wouldn't teach him magic...he wouldn't praise his cooking and he certainly wouldn't treat him like he was the best thing that had happened to this castle. Today with Voldemort, he had felt wanted...needed...He hadn't felt like he was a waste of space. He had felt special...almost cherished and he was too selfish to let that all go. Maybe...after Voldemort had taught him magic then he could offer himself up as a token of gratitude. That was fair, right? Right. Harry yawned and curled up on the grass. The exhaustion was finally catching up with him and he was sure that he would fall asleep here if he didn't get up soon.

When he reached his room, he found Bella asleep in her coffin. She was curled up on her side, leaving just enough space for him. His heart fluttered with joy. He was most certainly cherished here and the feeling was absolutely sublime. After pressing a kiss to her forehead and whispering an apology to her, he got into the coffin and snuggled into her. He was sure he had a wide smile on his face when he fell asleep.
Harry woke up to a warmth he'd grown fairly accustomed to and murmured sleepily, "Hey, Bella."

Bella let out an angry little huff and Harry opened his eyes fully. His head was on her shoulder and her face was inches away from his. Harry raised his hand and touched Bella's cheek softly, "I'm sorry, Bella."

Bella turned to face him and spoke nonchalantly, "Sorry for what? It's not like I was worried about you. It's not like I'd thought some infernal creature in this castle had gobbled you up or a thousand other ways you might have died."

Harry wrapped his arms around her and buried his face in the crook of her neck, "I'm sorry, Bella. I'm so sorry. I came to get my shirt last night but you weren't here and I figured you would be down at the blood cellars."

Bella huffed angrily again but wrapped her arms around him and pulled him closer, "Where were you?"

Harry nuzzled his head deeper and told her every tiny detail about his day…well he didn’t mention the kiss…but apart from that he told her everything. Bella listened with rapt attention and when he got to the part where he had made the deal with Voldemort, Bella was mildly surprised but practically buzzing with excitement, "What was the deal about?"

Harry took his sweet time and let the suspense build up. Bella pinched his arm lightly, "Oh, tell me already."

Harry laughed and spoke, "I had to impress him with my cooking skills if I wanted him to teach me magic."

Bella's eyes widened and she gasped, "He said he'd teach you magic? Did you impress him?"

Once again Harry kept his face impassive and stared up at the stone ceiling. He knew that the opportunity Voldemort had offered him had been absolutely gold. Had he squandered it by declining Voldemort's offer to stay with him? Bella pinched him again and Harry snapped back to reality, "Yeah I did. I spent most of last night in the kitchens and he was really impressed when I served it to him."

Bella's excitement was a tangible thing and Harry could feel it infecting him as well,
"And?"

Harry grinned and took out the wand from the pocket of his jeans. As soon as Bella set her eyes on it, she squealed,

"Is that a wand? He gave you a wand? I can't believe it!"

She hugged him tight and showered him with affectionate kisses,

"I am so happy for you. He gave you a wand that means he won't kill you…He's warming up to you."

Harry basked in Bella's affection and care and savoured it to the fullest. When Bella's excitement began to wind down she asked,

"Did you have your first lesson already?"

Harry shook his head and stared at the ceiling with a little bit of sadness and doubt creeping into his thoughts,

"Not yet…"

Bella's brow furrowed and she turned his head to make him face her,

"What's wrong, Sugar? Did something happen?"

Harry sighed and twirled a lock of her hair around his finger,

"He…ummm…"

Harry didn't know how to tell Bella this. He wasn't sure whether he should tell her this at all. Bella waited patiently for him to continue. Harry exhaled and spoke,

"He wanted me to stay with him in his chambers last night."

Bella instantly stiffened,

"He what?"

Harry closed his eyes and buried his face in her shoulder before mumbling out,

"You heard me."

Bella stroked his hair softly but Harry could feel the tension in her body. He hadn't meant to disturb her with this knowledge. Finally, she spoke in a reasonable voice,

"Maybe he didn't mean to say that in the way it came out."

But Harry knew and he knew that Bella knew too that Voldemort had meant exactly what he had said,

"I declined and now I think he won't teach me."

Bella pressed a kiss to his head and rubbed his back,

"It'll be alright."
Harry held her tight and hoped with all his heart that she was right,

"You know he could have forced you if he had wanted to. The Dark Lord is capable of anything. The very fact that he gave you a choice and respected your decision speaks volumes of how much he has warmed up to you."

That sounded logical but still not enough to lay his doubts to rest. Bella seemed to have sensed that and spoke,

"Why don't you go to him and find out rather than sit here and stew in your uncertainty?"

Harry nodded his head and traced his lips absentmindedly. What if Voldemort kissed him again? He wasn't ready to feel that onslaught of sensations again but every particle of his being craved it...yearned to feel that connection...Bella held his hand and Harry saw something like amusement and plain mischief dancing in her eyes,

"Are you attracted to him?"

Harry laughed but it sounded hollow. He hadn't considered it that way. Attraction to Voldemort...it sounded so wrong.... He had murdered his parents...He had ruined his life and on top of that he had tortured him and attempted to kill him... Besides he looked like a snake and that darkness...He didn't even want to think about the darkness that lingered around him. Only someone crazy would be attracted to a man like that...Oh...And the biggest reason he couldn't be attracted to Voldemort...He was a man...a man...

He was a little crazy, wasn't he? Sane people didn't go looking for trouble just to feel that thrill of adventure. This morning, he had only been thinking about pleasing Voldemort...he had been thinking about offering himself as a token of gratitude. He had been thinking about saving Tom. Even before that when he had thought about the kiss as he had sat by the lake, he had been thinking about betraying his parents, he had been thinking about Tom. He hadn't even thought of the fact that he had been kissed by a man and he had liked it...he had liked it...no matter how much he denied it...He could almost hear his uncle's disgusted voice sneering at him...telling him that he was a deviant...an unnatural freak...And he was right...his uncle was so right.

Bella was wiping away his tears and holding him close. Harry squeezed his eyes shut and drew in a deep breath,

"I'm fine...I'm okay."
Harry felt nauseous because his uncle's voice wouldn't leave his head. Even a freezing cold bath couldn't wash away his self-doubts. Was he really that unnatural? Dressing up in front of the mirror, he considered himself. He didn't look any different or feel any different. He moved his fingers over his chest where the fading bruises still remained. Maybe he really wasn't attracted to Voldemort. Maybe it had just been the curse. Maybe whatever he felt for Voldemort wasn't what he felt...it was just another effect of the curse. He brushed his fingers through his damp hair and sighed as he put his shirt on. He really was ordinary looking. There was nothing special about him. He tugged at his rebellious curls. His aunt had absolutely detested his hair and she had attempted countless times to tame them. They always grew back more rebellious and resilient than the last time. He chuckled when he remembered the look on his aunt's face when she saw that they had grown back again.

He covered his mouth with his hand and grew solemn again. What had he been thinking about? Oh right. He was thinking about how ordinary looking he was...Well, what was the point in thinking about that. His uncle's voice rang in his ears,

"Freak…deviant…Sinner…"

He turned away from the mirror and exited the bathroom. Bella was standing in front of him and instantly pulled him into his arms,

"What's eating you up, sugar? Talk to me."

Harry pulled away from her, pressed a kiss to her cheek and smiled for her,

"I'm fine. I'm just going to go and ask Voldemort if he's still going to teach me."

Bella kissed his forehead and murmured against his skin,

"Good luck, sugar."

Harry smiled and exited the room with one last look at her. He was nervous and his heart was in his mouth as he made his way through the corridors towards Voldemort's chambers. He chewed on his lower lip as he stood in front of the statue of Salazar Slytherin. He was certain Voldemort wouldn't teach him now. He was about to speak when the statue slid open revealing Voldemort standing there. Harry saw a flicker of surprise cross Voldemort's face before it was gone,

"How long have you been standing there?"

Harry lowered his gaze and stared at his feet,

"I asked you something, Harry."

Harry couldn't talk. It was so difficult to hold back his tears. Was it really that terrible to feel what he felt? Was he really a freak?

"Harry!"

Harry's gaze snapped up to Voldemort's face and realized that his lipless mouth was pursed in a frown and there was concern in those crimson eyes,
"What is the matter?"

Harry continued to chew on his lower lip but he couldn't say anything afraid that his thoughts would burst out from his mouth. He really didn't want Voldemort to know about his insecurities. Voldemort stepped aside and ordered,

"Get in."

Harry stepped in and made his way to the chambers. He paused in the doorway when he realized that the couches and the rugs had been vanished and the space had been cleared away. A table with a huge pile of books neatly stacked on it and a chair were placed by the far wall.

He felt Voldemort standing behind him and hesitantly stepped closer to the fireplace. He was still feeling a bit cold from his bath and the gentle warmth soothed him to some extent,

"Turn around."

Harry obeyed silently and kept his gaze rooted to the spot,

"What happened?"

When Harry didn't reply, Voldemort sighed and conjured a chair,

"Sit down."

Harry sat down and folded his hands in his lap. Voldemort conjured another chair and sat down in front of him. He gripped his chin and forced him to face him,

"Tell me what happened? Are you hurt?"

Harry shook his head and Voldemort released his chin,

"Is this about what happened yesterday?"

Harry lowered his gaze and Voldemort cursed verbally and rose to his feet while kicking his chair back. The chair landed on the floor with a loud crashing sound that resounded through the empty room. The temperature in the room dropped and Harry winced when Voldemort grabbed his hair tightly and yanked his head back until he was staring directly up into rage filled, crimson eyes. His gaze instinctively drifted to the darkness that lurked behind him and the snake that emerged from it and wrapped around his throat. Voldemort ground out the order,

"Talk."

Harry couldn't hold back the tears anymore and they streamed down his cheeks as he squeezed his eyes shut. Voldemort released his hair and cursed again. Harry buried his face in his hands and tried to bring himself back under control. He could hear Voldemort pacing furiously behind him and what he'd been fearing happened,

"Am I really an unnatural freak?"

He heard Voldemort come to an abrupt halt right behind him,

"What?"

Harry kept his face buried in his hands as he heard Voldemort correct the chair and sit down in front of him,
"What did you just say, Harry?"

Harry drew in a deep breath and repeated the question,

"Am I an unnatural freak?"

Voldemort pulled his hands away from his face but Harry ducked his head and kept his eyes squeezed shut,

"Who said that to you?"

When Harry didn't reply, Voldemort cupped his cheek and spoke,

"Tell me who said to you and I shall make them pay dearly for it."

Harry opened his eyes and blinked away the tears. The darkness was gone along with the snake but Voldemort's crimson eyes held a mixture of concern and rage,

"My uncle…He would have said that if he…"

Voldemort drew closer to him and hissed in a dangerously low voice,

"If he what?"

A fresh stream of tears raced down his cheeks and a broken sob escaped his lips,

"If he'd seen the way you'd been kissing me in the forest and I…"

Harry paused and wrapped his arms around himself. Voldemort's voice was nothing more than a deadly whisper,

"And you what?"

Harry burst into sobs and cried out,

"And the way I was kissing you back…He would have called me an unnatural freak…a deviant…I'm a freak…I'm a freak…"

Before he could contemplate what was happening, Voldemort had him wrapped up in an embrace and Harry's tears stopped flowing because he was too busy feeling shocked,

"You are not a freak."

Harry rested his head on Voldemort's shoulder despite his better judgement and murmured,

"It's not natural…"

He felt Voldemort's long spidery fingers comb through his hair and he instantly felt better,

"What is not natural?"

Harry closed his eyes and spoke,

"What I feel for you…It's not natural…"

Voldemort's arms tightened around him and he hissed out,
"What do you feel for me?"

Harry drew in a deep breath and he blurted out whatever came to his mind. He couldn't string together words and he had no control over the words escaping his lips,

"Attraction… I feel attracted to you…But you're…you're a man…and…and I'm a…It's not normal…normal people don't…they just don't..."

Voldemort pulled away from him and clamped a hand over his mouth,

"Do you believe that this place is normal? That I am normal? That Bella is normal?"

Harry met Voldemort's gaze and shook his head reluctantly. A smile curved that lipless mouth and he spoke,

"Do you consider that to be a bad thing?"

Harry thought about that. It wasn't bad…it wasn't bad at all. This place was beautiful…unlike anything he'd ever seen and Voldemort…Voldemort was…he'd murdered his parents…but he wasn't bad…There was Tom trapped inside him…He shook his head and Voldemort's smile grew and Harry saw a glimpse of those warm brown eyes,

"Would you say that this place is a freak…that I am a freak…that Bella is a freak on the count of that we are not normal?"

Harry shook his head vigorously and spoke,

"No, this place is fantastic…it's beautiful…Bella's beautiful and you…you're beautiful too."

Harry clamped a hand over his mouth and felt himself flush as he realized what he'd just said. Utter surprise crossed Voldemort's feature before it was replaced with a warm smile again,

"You find beauty in everything because you are beautiful. You are not normal…but the word that I would use to describe you is rare. You are rare, Harry. Do not even think of that abhorrent word to describe yourself…You. Are. Rare…Now tell me what are you?"

Harry held Voldemort's gaze and murmured,

"I am rare."

Voldemort cupped his cheek,

"Louder."

Harry blushed and raised his voice a notch higher,

"I am rare."

Voldemort smiled and his eyes weren't crimson anymore. They were brown…For a moment, Harry thought that it would vanish and the crimson would return. It didn't and Harry felt himself smile as the sweet taste of victory filled his mouth. He was succeeding…he was getting Tom back bit by bit. Voldemort patted him on the cheek,

"Remember that always."
Chapter 56

Harry couldn't quite believe that Voldemort's eyes had changed colour. He hoped it would stay. He hoped with all his heart that the crimson would never return. Voldemort snapped his fingers and Harry realized that he'd been staring at Voldemort's face while he'd been thinking,

"Will you teach me?"

Voldemort smiled softly and spoke,

"Yes, I shall teach you but before that you must eat something. You look unnaturally pale."

Voldemort snapped his fingers and a tray appeared in front of Harry. He couldn't help but be in awe whenever Voldemort did that. He looked at the food on the tray and imagined that his relatives would lose their minds with jealousy if they could see him now,

"Will you eat with me?"

Voldemort looked a bit surprised at the request but then smiled benignly which made his snakelike features soften and seem more human. And those eyes...those beautiful brown eyes...they looked absolutely stunning when Voldemort smiled. Harry picked up a sandwich from the tray and held it Voldemort's lipless mouth. He didn't know what made him do it but he just did. Harry expected Voldemort to get angry at that gesture but that didn't happen. Instead, Voldemort held his gaze and took a bite. Harry took a bite from exactly where Voldemort had and chewed. He wanted a taste of Voldemort. Something inside him longed to be kissed by him again...to be touched by him again.

He felt Voldemort's curious gaze piercing him. It felt like he was trying to figure him out, trying to read his thoughts. Harry lowered his eyes and held the sandwich to Voldemort's mouth again. He felt startled and was forced to look when Voldemort snatched the entire sandwich from his hand with his teeth and chewed on it with a smirk on his face while he held his hand. When he was done chewing and had swallowed, his tongue peeked out and Harry could only watch mesmerized as Voldemort licked the sauce from his fingers one by one. The warm heat from his tongue felt heavenly against his fingers. When Voldemort released his hand, the trance broke and he blinked. The look in those brown eyes was purely playful and Harry fell back into whatever trance Voldemort had him ensnared in. Voldemort laughed softly and snapped his fingers. Harry blinked again and Voldemort laughed softly and rose to his feet,

"Finish your meal. I shall be right back."

Harry could feel himself flushing furiously as he nodded his head. Voldemort was about to walk away when he halted and spoke in a low, silky voice,

"By the way, you taste absolutely heavenly."

Harry ducked his head and felt like he was about to spontaneously combust on the spot. When Voldemort was gone, he mentally shook himself and tried to focus on the food in an attempt to distract himself from feeling the pleasantly wet warmth of Voldemort's tongue on his fingers. He was just finishing his orange juice when Voldemort returned to the room with another stack of books in his hand which he placed on the table along with the other books. The tray vanished from in front of him and he rose to his feet. Voldemort turned around and leaned casually against the table as he crossed his arms over his chest. He had a serious expression on his face as he spoke,

"The first thing you must know about me is that I am a very strict teacher."
Harry nodded and Voldemort continued,
"So, if your performance is not up to my standards then I shall be eligible to punish you."

Harry felt himself tense up and spoke,
"I understand."

Voldemort straightened up and spoke,
"Very well. Did you bring your wand?"

Harry nodded and pulled it out from his pocket. Voldemort snapped his fingers and his own wand appeared in his hand as he stepped closer to him,

"Hold it like you would when casting a spell."

Harry wrapped his fingers around the handle firmly and held it up. Voldemort nodded and spoke,
"Now cast a spell."

Harry felt puzzled,
"But you haven't taught…"

Voldemort raised his hand and he fell silent as he spoke,
"Imagine that you're casting a spell."

Harry thought about how he was going to cast a spell and then swished and flicked his wand in the air. Voldemort clicked his tongue and came to stand behind him. Harry felt the warmth of Voldemort's body seep through his clothes as he felt his chest press up against his back. He inhaled sharply as Voldemort wrapped an arm around his waist and held his wand hand with the other. His warm breath tickled his neck as he spoke,

"You cannot swish-and-flick if you are grasping your wand like a sword, it restricts your wrists too much."

Harry felt Voldemort correct his hold on his wand and tried to focus on that instead of the way Voldemort was holding him…It was difficult but he was determined to learn and that determination gave him the will to center himself and pay attention. Voldemort released his hand but his arm remained around his waist. He spoke softly,

"Very good."

The praise made him glow and he yearned for more of it. It also strengthened his determination and helped him concentrate better as Voldemort gave him tips on efficient wand movements and helped him practice them. He learned them effortlessly and when Voldemort finally released him and came to stand in front of him, he had a small smile on his lips,

"I am proud of your work so far, Harry. You are a considerably fast learner."

Harry couldn't repress his smile. No one had ever been proud of him before. The fact that Voldemort was proud of him made his chest swell. It was the best feeling in the world and he vowed that he would never disappoint Voldemort.
Chapter 57

Harry was thrumming with excitement. He could feel it radiating from his very being and it was absolutely infectious. He found himself looking forward to teaching him. So far, Harry had been exceptionally disciplined and extremely obedient and perceptive. He had never taught anyone before but he imagined that even if he had, no student would ever be able to live up to Harry's standards. He was the perfect student and he was glad to be teaching him. Harry was shifting his weight from foot to foot nervously. He had no intentions of punishing him not unless he really warranted it. He had seen Harry's eyes glow with the desire to please and it was breath-taking. He took a few steps back and spoke softly,

"What would you like to learn first?"

Harry frowned and then a shy smile curved his lips,

"Umm...the way you snap your fingers and things appear…"

He had to bite back a chuckle at that,

"That might be a tad bit difficult for you but we can try something easier. The spell I shall teach you will allow you to summon objects."

He could see that Harry was struggling not to shriek with excitement. He continued,

"It is a summoning charm and the incantation is Accio."

Harry mouthed the word and he spoke,

"You are allowed to speak it out loud."

He did. Harry repeated it, paying special focus to the pronunciation. He stepped closer to him and spoke,

"Good. Now, you have to understand how it will work. Accio will allow a target at a distance to levitate or fly over to you. This spell needs thought behind it, the object must be clear in your mind, before you try to summon it."

Harry nodded his head silently and asked,

"What are the limitations?"

He resisted the urge to pat Harry on the head for such a logical question,

"The Summoning Charm cannot be used on buildings. In addition, it will not work on living things, although they may be moved by summoning an object they are wearing or holding. It is risky to summon them that way, because they travel at close to the speed of light and may be injured in the process. Apart from that there are no limitations."

Harry frowned and asked,

"What if the object I want to summon is too far away? Does distance affect the use of the charm?"

Clever. Harry was asking all the right questions and he was ecstatic at that,
"There are theories that distance does not hinder the charm. It does not matter how far away the object is... so long as the caster has it clearly in mind, they should be able to summon it with ease."

Harry nodded again and asked,

"Can we try it now?"

It was getting increasingly difficult to keep a straight face because Harry's eagerness to learn was endearing,

"Yes, we can. I want you to watch me very closely."

He conjured an apple and sat it down on the chair. After taking a few steps back, he uttered the incantation,

"Accio apple!"

The apple zoomed straight into his hand and Harry's jaw dropped open. The expression looked adorable on Harry's face. Harry closed his mouth and corrected his expressions before saying,

"Can I give it a go now?"

He nodded and signalled to the apple,

"Summon it from my hand."

He watched as Harry closed his eyes and his brow furrowed as he concentrated hard. His pink lip peeked out and he wet his lips unconsciously. The gesture was purely innocent on Harry's part but it was the most sensual thing he'd seen,

"Accio apple!"

The apple quivered in his grip but didn't budge. Harry opened his eyes and disappointment shone in those emerald orbs. Maybe he ought to provide him with some motivation,

"Try again, Harry. If you summon the apple from my hand before I finish eating it and then you shall receive a reward but if you fail then..."

Harry raised his chin and finished his sentence,

"Then I'll accept whatever punishment you propose, Sir."

Sir...Something about the way Harry used that honorific made heat coil in his stomach and his cock twitch in his pants. He schooled his features and ensured that none of the lust he felt showed on his face,

"Very good."

He brought the apple close to his mouth and took a bite. A drop of juice slid down the corner of his mouth and he chased it with his tongue. It was apparent that Harry felt every bit of the desire he felt. He saw the way his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed and the desire that was burning in those green eyes. It was nearly impossible to keep a straight face and his voice even as he spoke,

"You are wasting time, Harry."

Harry shook his head and blinked. Determination replaced desire in those eyes and Harry cast the
spell again and was once again met with failure. He took another bite and licked his lips afterwards just to watch as Harry's gaze grew unfocused again,

"It seems you are having trouble focusing."

Harry blinked once again and ducked his head as his cheeks flushed red,

"I can't pay attention when you..."

He allowed himself to smirk then and asked,

"When I?"

Harry looked up and he straightened his face,

"When you...umm..."

He stepped closer to him and took another bite of the apple before licking the juice away with his tongue. Harry's breath hitched in his throat. It was gorgeous,

"When I do this?"

Harry ducked his head and nodded his head hastily,

"Yes, Sir."

Yes, Sir...He imagined all the scenarios where Harry could say that...all the ways Harry could say those words...all the scenarios where Harry's desire to please could be well utilized,

"Does it excite you?"

Harry shook his head. That was obviously a lie. He made his way back to where he had been originally standing and spoke,

"Reward or punishment, Harry?"

Harry set his jaw and looked up,

"Reward, Sir."

He took another bite from the apple...a smaller one...just to give Harry more margin to win. He wanted him to succeed,

"Cast the spell."

Harry's grip on his wand was white knuckled when he cast the spell again,

"Accio apple!"

The apple instantly flew out of his grasp and rushed towards Harry who caught it with utter disbelief. He allowed himself to smile then,

"Very good, Harry."

Harry beamed at the praise and took a bite from the apple. His soft moistened lips shone with juice...so kissable...
"What do you want as a reward?"

Harry finished the apple and frowned before speaking.

"Can I think about it?"

He nodded and spoke,

"Certainly."

Harry's smile returned as he took another bite from the apple. He couldn't recall ever doing a single good deed which forced him to wonder what he had done to have someone as pure as Harry here, in the midst of all this darkness.
Harry had never thought he'd see the day when he would get bored of reading. He massaged his throbbing temples as he stared at the open book in front of him. The words seemed to blur together. Voldemort had grinned evilly when he had pointed to the chair and the table and told him which books he would need to study. Theory of spellcasting had only been able to hold his attention for the first two hours. Harry blinked rapidly and pressed his forehead onto the book, as if that could imprint it in his memory. He groaned and glanced at the pocket watch. He'd been studying for the past four hours. He stole a glance at Voldemort, who was seated in front of the fireplace, deeply engrossed in a book. He leaned back in the chair and glanced at the ceiling before forcing his gaze back down to the book. Stifling a yawn, he rubbed his bleary eyes. His thoughts became groggy and incoherent. Voldemort's voice forced him to straighten up,

"Are you done, Harry?"

Harry shook his head and murmured,

"No."

He heard the unmistakable rustle of robes and knew that Voldemort had risen to his feet,

"You have been at it for the past four hours. What seems to be the problem? I thought you enjoyed reading."

Harry closed the book and rested his elbows on the table before burying his face in his hands,

"I do enjoy it. But...this is just..."

Harry could hear the smirk in Voldemort's voice when he spoke,

"Unexciting?"

He nodded,

"Well, you must read. Knowledge is power, Harry. You cannot learn everything by practice alone."

He nodded again and spoke,

"I'll get right back to it now."

He sat up straight and was about to open the book when Voldemort put a hand on it and effectively stopped him,

"Perhaps some fresh air and a meal would do you good. Why don't you go and take a walk?"

Harry looked at the pocket watch and realized that there were still two hours before dawn. He instantly brightened up when he imagined telling Bella about what he had learned today,

"Thank you, Sir."

He slipped the pocket watch in his pocket and rose to his feet,

"How soon do you want me back, Sir?"
Voldemort held his chin and spoke softly,
"Take the books with you. Have something to eat, get some rest and study when you feel like it. I
expect you back here tomorrow night."

Harry picked up the books and held them close to his chest,
"Thank you for agreeing to teach me."

Voldemort smiled softly and it looked beautiful. He hadn't noticed the colour of his eyes. Harry
debated whether to tell him or not. He decided against it and figured that he would notice it himself
when he would look in the mirror. Voldemort snapped his fingers and Harry blinked,
"What were you thinking?"

Harry shook his head and spoke,
"Nothing. I'll see you tomorrow night."

He had turned to leave when he felt Voldemort's fingers wrap around his upperarms. Harry stiffened
as Voldemort whispered into his ear,
"Stay, Harry."

He stood still and forced the words out as his breath constricted in his throat and his body burned
up with unwanted desire,
"I can't… I can't give you what you want…"

Voldemort pulled him back against his chest and his warm breath tickled his cheek as he
murmured,
"What do I want?"

Harry's eyelids dropped as he unwillingly leaned into Voldemort's embrace,
"Me… my body…"

Voldemort hummed with delight as his fingers tightened on his arms. Harry felt breathless and
dizzy with want,
"You want it too. Admit it. Admit that you feel it too."

He shivered involuntarily as he felt the cold scales slide over his neck. He couldn't stop himself
from trembling as the smooth muscular body wrapped around his throat. For one insane moment,
he wanted more… he wanted the snake to squeeze tighter, his head tipped back as he felt the
snake's forked tongue lick his chin and Voldemort trail kisses down his exposed throat. The snake
squeezed tighter and that brought reality crashing over him like a tidal wave. It took Harry
everything he had in him to groan out,
"No…"

The scales retreated as Voldemort released him. At some point, he had dropped the books. He bent
down and picked them up before walking away as fast as he could. Once outside in the hallway, he
rested his back against the stone wall and drew in several breaths. His body went boneless and he
slid to the floor as he pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around himself. It took
him a moment to get himself back under control. Voldemort could have forced him. He could have gone on even when he had said no but he hadn't. Voldemort respected his wishes, wanted his consent. How much longer was he going to deny that he felt what Voldemort felt? He sighed and rose to his feet. He was wasting time. He needed Bella's arms…needed her to make him feel better.

He rushed down the stairs that led to the blood cellar and walked straight past the cage towards the doorway that led to the white tiled room. He found Bella reclining on one of the white leather couch with her fangs buried deep into an oddly healthy-looking inmate. Bella retracted her fangs at the sight of him and shoved the inmate away as a bright smile played across her lips. The inmate was instantly grabbed by another death eater and Harry flopped down in Bella's lap. Bella's smile instantly turned into a frown and she wrapped her arms around him,

"You don't look happy."

Harry shook his head and leaned back into her warmth as his body relaxed,

"I'm happy. Just a bit tired."

Bella kissed his cheek and spoke against his skin,

"You should know by now that you can't lie to me."

Harry sighed and stared at the ceiling as the scent of blood overwhelmed his senses,

"Where should I start?"

Bella kissed his temple and spoke,

"I want to know everything."
Harry played with Bella's locks as he told her all about his time with Voldemort. Bella stroked his hair and Harry felt unbelievably soothed. His eyelids fluttered shut and he was dimly aware of his voice getting slurred and his words tripping over one another as he told her the last part. He heard Bella chuckle and press a kiss to his cheek as she shushed him with a finger on his lips,

"Just sleep, sugar."

And he did just that.

She couldn't help but feel concerned as she stroked Harry's raven black locks. It was difficult to comprehend The Dark Lord's behaviour. He had wanted Harry dead and now he was pursuing him and propositioning him. Was this another game? Was this just another way to break Harry? She wrapped her arms around him protectively and kissed his hair. If it was up to her, she wouldn't let him anywhere near The Dark Lord...in fact, she would take him far away from here if she could. This wasn't right. Harry was too young, too innocent, too pure for this. What would The Dark Lord gain by sullying him? But she knew that he was a twisted and evil man. She had seen the extent of his cruelty and sadism and it made her shudder when she imagined Harry in his clutches.

Dawn was approaching fast, she was about to pick Harry up in her arms when The Dark Lord appeared and signalled her to move aside. She bit back a gasp when she noticed the colour of his eyes. All the death eaters had retreated to their coffin so they were the only one's present. She could only stand by and watch as The Dark Lord sat down on the couch and pulled Harry's head in his lap,

"You may leave, Bella. Your presence is no longer required."

She couldn't leave Harry with him. The lust in his gaze was unmistakeable. Her heart threatened to beat out of her chest as she imagined all the things, The Dark Lord could do to Harry. She collapsed on her knees and pleaded,

"Please, Master. Please, don't hurt him."

The Dark Lord looked up and the sight of his brown eyes unsettled her,

"Why would I would hurt him?"

She lowered her gaze and spoke,

"Because you wish to kill him, My Lord."

The Dark Lord chuckled darkly and stroked Harry's hair,

"I wished to kill him. I, no longer intend to."

She bit her lip but knew that it had to be said,

"Master, your sexual advances unsettle him."

The Dark Lord leaned back on the couch and Harry moaned in his sleep as he tugged roughly on Harry's locks. That small action inflamed her down to her very soul and she pushed his hand away from his hair and took him in her arms. Ignoring the Dark Lord's murderous glare, she carried
Harry back to the room. She knew she was going to be punished for this and she just wouldn't allow The Dark Lord to hurt Harry. It was utterly unacceptable. She laid him down in the coffin, wrapped the blanket around him and got in beside him. Harry instantly clung to her and she rubbed soothing circles on the small of his back with one hand while she soothed his scalp with the other until dawn arrived and she fell asleep.

He was utterly furious with Bellatrix. How dare she disobey him? How dare she defy him? He grabbed one of the inmates from the cage, threw him on the couch, where Harry had been laying mere minutes ago and snapped his fingers to conjure a knife. The inmate seemed to know what was about to happen to him because he instantly began to writhe on the couch and struggled fruitlessly to get away. He grabbed him by the throat and ripped off his dirty shirt with his other. Grabbing the dagger, drew a long line starting from his sternum and ending a little below his navel. The inmate screamed and writhed as blood began to flow down his torso. He straddled him and held him still as he ran the knife starting from his right nipple and ending on his left. He relished the man's screams and vanished the knife before subjecting him to the cruciatus. The man bucked and writhed uncontrollably under him and continued to scream at the top of his lungs.

He licked his lips when he imagined how Harry would react when he would teach him the curse. He lifted the curse with a flick of his wrist and wrapped his fingers around his throat. He closed his eyes as he felt the inmate's pulse thrumming underneath his fingertips. Such power. He squeezed and the man's mouth opened and closed like a dying fish, struggling to breathe. He felt his hands grip his, trying to pry away his fingers and he laughed. He could end it all with a curse, but that would be over too soon. He needed to get his frustration out. He would make Bella pay for that little stunt. How dare she challenge him? He relinquished his hold on the man's throat and allowed him a minute to breathe before closing his fingers around his throat again. And then there was Harry.

Harry…so bloody infuriating…Why wouldn't he just admit it? He had seen the desire in his eyes…he had seen the way his body responded to his touch. Why was Harry so adamant on denying them both the pleasure they craved so much? He could tie him up and take him by force but he did not enjoy Harry's tears and his despair like he once had. Harry had the innate ability to brighten up a room with his smile. He was beautiful and never failed to astound him with his innocence. He imagined what would have happened if he had managed to kill him and shuddered. He couldn't imagine the castle without Harry's light now and he yearned to claim it and make it his own.

He shook away his thoughts as opened his eyes to be met by the sightless ones of the inmate. He shoved him away and rose to his feet. In a way, he understood Bella's protectiveness and admired it but her insolence needed to be punished and he would make a public display of it. Come to think of it, it had been far too long since he had gathered all the creatures together. He was certain Harry would be utterly captivated by it.
Harry woke up feeling extremely warm. He pressed a kiss to Bella's cheek and stepped out from the coffin. He stretched and felt the stiffness in his arms and legs. Pulling on his shoes, he stepped out from the dark room and began making his way towards the lake. A swim was exactly what he needed right now.

Just like the last time, he took off his shoes before he stepped onto the velvety soft grass. The sky was awash with various shades of grey, in places a chink of light managed to break through, but otherwise it was almost as dark as pre-dawn. The air was humid and smelt of storms. He walked over the grass and towards the forest. The forest was darker than last time and Harry felt the uneasy sensation of being watched. He remembered those dark horse like creatures he had seen here last time and continued winding his way through trees. A twig snapped somewhere behind him and he whirled around. Standing between two trees, their white eyes gleaming eerily, were two of those creatures, watching him.

His curiosity screamed at him to take a step closer and touch them and as usual, he gave in to the urge and took a step closer. He extended his hand and when the creature didn't move, he gained a little more confidence took another step closer. They tossed their reptilian heads, throwing back long black manes, and Harry stretched out his hand eagerly and patted the nearest one's shining neck. How had he thought that they were dangerous? It was beautiful, utterly beautiful. There were more sounds of twigs snapping and Harry turned. No fewer than six or seven of the creatures were picking their way through the trees now, their great leathery wings folded tight to their bodies, their eyes gleaming through the darkness. But he didn't feel afraid anymore.

He looked at the wings and an idea struck him. They could probably fly. Could he ride them? He squashed the crazy idea as soon as it formed in his head but he was hopelessly reckless and had a knack of following through on his crazy ideas. He patted the creature again and moved his hand over the mane just to reassure himself that it wouldn't toss him off as soon as he would attempt to mount it. He scoffed at himself. He had never even ridden a horse before and here he was, thinking of riding a potentially dangerous magical creature. Nevertheless, he buried his doubts and fears and garnered the courage to take another step closer to the creature.

Harry wound his hand tightly into the mane of the nearest creature, placed a foot on a stump nearby and scrambled clumsily onto the horse's silken back. It did not object, but twisted its head around, fangs bared. Harry patted its head uneasily and it faced forward.

He found there was a way of lodging his knees behind the wing joints that made him feel more secure. He looked down at the back of his creature's glossy black head and swallowed. For a moment, the creature did nothing at all. Harry was forced to wonder if they could really fly. Maybe, he had to talk to it, "Ummm…fly…"

For a moment, the creature stood still but then, with a sweeping movement that nearly unseated him, the wings on either side extended, the horse crouched slowly and then rocketed upward so fast and so steeply that Harry had to clench his arms and legs tightly around the horse to avoid sliding backward over its bony rump. He closed his eyes and put his face down into the horse's silky mane as they burst through the topmost branches of the trees and soared out into the cloudy sky.

Harry did not think he had ever moved so fast: The creature streaked over the castle, its wide wings
hardly beating. The cooling air was slapping Harry's face; eyes screwed up against the rushing wind, To witness the aerial view of the castle was like being hailed by the angels, the view stole his breath away in the most magical way possible. It was so enchanting, so beautiful, so worth living in. He looked around and he saw the mountains and gullies below him.

But then, as soon as the creature crossed some invisible point, his bliss turned into pure agony. The pain wasn't sharp like a needle point or a knife, it burned around his innards better than boiling water. Everything felt scorched and, move or not, he was in more pain than he could have ever imagined was possible. He had enough sense to wrap his arms tightly around the creature's neck as he willed it to turned around. Harry's face felt stiff and cold, his legs numb from gripping the creature's sides so tightly, but he did not dare shift positions lest he slip...His mind screamed out as the pain drove through his insides and increased tenfold. Every thought he just had became confused as the burning pain licked up his body like scorching fire. He was deaf from the thundering in his ears and his mouth was dry and frozen from the rush of cold air. He had lost all sense of everything, all his faith was in the beast below him, still streaking purposefully through the air, barely flapping its wings as it sped ever onward Harry's stomach gave a jolt and he opened his eyes despite the blinding pain. The creature's head was suddenly pointing toward the ground and he had actually slid forward a few inches along its neck.

Harry gripped the creature with every last ounce of his strength, braced for a sudden impact, but the horse touched the dark ground as lightly as a shadow and Harry slid from his back and directly to the forest floor. He didn't have the strength to get up even though the pain was beginning to dull now. He knew what he would find upon lifting his shirt so instead he just curled up on the cool and damp ground and allowed the waves of pain to lull him into unconsciousness.
Chapter 61

Harry awoke with a gasp as something cold landed on his forehead. He opened his eyes and another rain drop landed on his nose. It wasn't long before gentle drops of water were falling over him and soaking him bit by bit. Oh, how he loved and adored the rain, the feel of it in his hair and on his skin. The scent of it in the air before and after it falls from the clouds.

This rain brought a freshness, each drop a heaven-given gift for each part of creation. He lay still but raised his hand up and tilted his face toward the sky, allowing the rain better access to his face. It was utter joy, a happiness that felt too pure.

Then the lingering burning pain reminded him of what had made him pass out and he lifted his shirt and caught a glimpse of his bruised skin. He could never leave this castle. Today had proven it. He thought he had accepted that but maybe some part of him had still hoped that he would be able to leave and explore the world someday, but that hope had been crushed to smithereens today and it hurt more than he had expected it to hurt. He closed his eyes as the tears threatened to flow. He had the right to mourn the loss of his hope, didn't he? So, he cried just like the sky was crying. The rational part of him told him to return to the castle, but he didn't want to return. He wanted to feel the rain. He wanted to experience each drop together and apart, same and different. He wanted to see the droplets soaking his eyelashes before they joined their brethren on the ground like saltless tears. He needed to be in this, chaotic and wild, just like his mind and soul...It was like nature had looked right into him and pulled the weather out.

The rain began pouring down and rumbling of the thunder clouds reached all the way down to his core. He smiled to himself. The pouring rain stopped his thoughts from buzzing, calmed him, but at the same time excited him. The waves of rain pattering over the leaves and the forest floor created a melancholic song. He waited for the rain to wash all of the misery away. He rose to his feet and stood there, his gaze burning into the horizon, staring at the beauty of the upcoming storm and the crying clouds.

He held out his hands to the steady drops and smiled in a way he knew came from deep within. Though the ground became wet and his skin cold, he was invigorated, alive and content.

The rain stopped. Kissed by the rain and glistening, the wet ground was cold under foot but that didn't bother him one bit. He started making his way towards the lake instead of returning to the castle and felt the squelch of the mud beneath. The water rose up and ran between his toes. The birds busied themselves around him, not caring about his presence, all they wanted were the worms that had come up for air. So, Harry finally got a good look at them and realized how different they were from normal birds, their colours absolutely magically vivid, their song was the most beautiful melody, but one large bird stood apart from the others, perched on a branch, it had an air of superiority to it...a sense of pre-eminence. It was a large swan-sized scarlet bird with red and gold plumage, along with a golden beak and talons, black eyes, and a tail as long as a peacock's. Its scarlet feathers glowed faintly in darkness and Harry found himself yearning to touch it but before Harry could take a step closer to it, it vanished in a flash of fire and Harry found himself utterly mystified.

It took him a moment to shake off the daze and resume making his way to the lake. The rain started pouring again and Harry laughed. He loved it. Absolutely loved it. The view that greeted him stole his breath away. He settled on a stone at the edge of the lake and stared ahead. He didn't know what time it was. The sky was dark. It was probably sundown, but he couldn't be sure. He could probably check. He need only take out his pocket watch, but he didn't want to know the time. He
didn't want to miss a moment of the sight playing in front of him. The drops were only rain until
they reached the surface of the lake, then they become a part of the azure water. He guessed
starlight was the same, shining as scattered seeds of perfect light until the return of the sun. Perhaps
he should seek the shelter of the castle, seek out Bella's warmth and share these moments with her
or perhaps he could drag Voldemort out. Would he appreciate the beauty just like he did? Would
he feel the joy that rain always seemed to bring him? Perhaps not. Maybe some other time he
would test his theories. Today, he just sat there, mesmerized by the patterns the rain made on the
lake's surface, countless ripples overlapping in choreographed chaos. He heard each watery gift,
sparser than the patter on a rooftop, the rain moving in subtle waves of its own according to the
wind. He wondered if this is how music began, how mankind thought to conjure song and dance,
by hearing the natural rhythms of nature.

Closing his eyes, he focused on the sounds and the beautiful scent. It was absolutely magical and
with every breath he took, his body relaxed further, and the pain dulled until it was almost non-
existent. He stood from the stone, pulled off his heavily soaked shirt and slipped into the utter. The
gentle waves lapping against his skin felt amazing and he was content to just drift in the water
since he didn't have the strength to swim.

After sneezing thrice, he realized that he had probably caught a cold and lingering in the water was
no longer an option. He dragged himself out of the water and without bothering with his shirt
began making his way back to the castle. On the way to his room, he sneezed several more times.
He expected to see Bella when he stepped through the threshold of his bedroom but instead he
found Voldemort seated on the bed with his head bowed and his hands clasped together and he
cursed internally. Why did he always have to be the one to see him wet and semi naked? He
considered walking away from here since Voldemort looked like he hadn't seen him but that plan
went out the window when Voldemort raised his hand and the sight that met him was enough to
 crush him.
Chapter 62

Harry took a few staggering steps back and covered his mouth with his hand as a cry nearly escaped from his lips. He stood there, as he felt his heart cracking like glass, spreading its pieces throughout his body. I could hardly bear the sight. Voldemort rose to his feet and his eyes—crimson eyes—darkened with concern at, no doubt, the sight of bruises crisscrossing his chest. That thick, viscous darkness clung to him and the snakes were back. Voldemort took a step closer to him and Harry stumbled back,

"No…"

He felt so bloody hopeless in that moment. Everything…Everything he'd been trying to do was in vain. The waves of helplessness and anxiety that hit him, didn't catch him unaware. He knew that they had been silently building up and gaining momentum while he had been getting soaked in the rain and floating in the lake. The receding waves dragged him into the sea of abysmal darkness. The despair was a heady blackness; the ways forward he had thought possible had vanished to black, not blocked, but like they had never been there at all. Without sound, his mind plummeted downward into less and less light, and darkness beyond measure. Was there a bottom to this pain? Was there any branch of hope, or something to catch or hold onto? Was there some rescuing idea that could come into his thoughts and save him? How much darkness was he capable of taking?

This curse couldn't be broken, and he couldn't leave either. The notion of hope became meaningless. Voldemort took another step closer to him and Harry couldn't hold his tears back anymore. He slumped back against the wall of the hallway and his voice broke when he spoke,

"Please don't touch me…"

The darkness surrounding Voldemort suffocated him and made his bruises ache worse. He felt like they would catch on fire as soon as Voldemort would touch him. He squeezed his eyes shut and his nails scrabbled at the wall behind him as he wished he could dig through it and get away from the smothering darkness.

Instead of retreating, Voldemort grabbed him by the neck and Harry gasped in a breath before his air passage closed completely. Voldemort dragged him away from the wall and growled,

"What happened to you?"

Harry kept his eyes shut and kicked his legs as his body starved for oxygen. Voldemort's grip relented, and he pinned him against the wall. The back of his head hit the wall with a sickening crack and the breath he had managed to regain whooshed out of his lungs. His bruises felt like someone had doused them with kerosene and set them alight.

"Tell me!"

He bit his tongue, but the scream burned its way up his throat and burst out before he could stop it. Voldemort's hold on him was unyielding. He withered under his touch and struggled to get away, to put as much distance between them as possible but it wasn't working. Nothing was working. Voldemort leaned forward and demanded,

"Open your eyes!"

Harry turned his head. Voldemort gripped his wrists and pinned them over his head with one hand while he gripped his chin with the other and roughly turned his head back,
"LOOK AT ME!"

Harry shook his head and felt a trickle of something warm run down the back of his neck. He managed to choke out through the overwhelming burning pain and the thick darkness that was gradually consuming him,

"Kill me."

Voldemort released his chin and growled out,

"Do not think that I shall hesitate in taking your life."

Harry's head rolled back to the side as the blackness grew darker. He pressed his cheek to the cold stone wall and another hoarse scream escaped from his lips. Death was better than all this. Death would free him from all this. His knees softened, and he would have collapsed on his knees if Voldemort wasn't holding his wrists so tight. He repeated weakly,

"Kill me."

Voldemort released his wrists and he slid to the floor. The pain receded as soon as Voldemort stopped touching him. The reprieve was short lived, and he didn't stay on the floor long though because Voldemort grabbed him by the locket and dragged him back to his feet. Before he knew it, he was being led through the corridors. His legs gave out several times, but Voldemort didn't halt or allow him to regain his footing. The chain dug painfully into his skin.

He kept his eyes firmly shut throughout the way. Voldemort shoved him, and Harry fell. He felt the damp earth between his fingers and breathed in the rain-washed scent of the forest. It soothed him to some extent and he rested his forehead against the cool ground. Bella's cry startled him,

"Harry!"

He opened his eyes, but his vision was groggy. He couldn't really focus on where Bella was. Bella cried out his name again and Harry forced himself up on his knees, willing his vision to stabilize.

The sight that met him made him wonder if he was hallucinating or if this was all a horribly lucid dream. He was kneeling in the very center of a clearing in the forest and he was surrounded by werewolves, death eaters, dementors and several other nameless creatures, he would have been fascinated by under normal circumstances. His sight was drawn to Bella who was chained to a tree trunk and blood was flowing down her arms in a steady stream. She looked deathly pale, her lips were colourless, and her eyes looked dull. She was crying for him. In these circumstances, she was still worried about him. He looked down and saw that the ground around her feet had darkened with it,

"Please stop."

Leaves rustled, and Harry felt Voldemort grip his hair and yank his head back. Harry instantly closed his eyes and Voldemort pressed the tip of his wand to his throat,

"Harry, look at me."

Harry couldn't force his eyes to open up. Voldemort grip tightened on his hair and he snarled,

"Look at me or I shall be forced to show you just how much of a monster I am."
Harry forced his eyes open and was instantly met with the sight of Voldemort's crimson eyes and the black snake wrapped around his throat,

"Let Bella go please…"

He felt no shame in begging. He would fall at Voldemort's feet and kiss them if that ensured Bella's wellbeing. Voldemort's wand dug deeper into his throat and he snarled,

"Tell me that I am a monster, Harry."

Harry struggled to keep his eyes open and shook his head,

"You're not."

He cried out as Voldemort yanked his hair back more forcefully and hissed,

"Liar."

Harry held Voldemort's gaze despite how much his eyes were watering with the pain,

"I'm not lying."

He bit his tongue when Voldemort tugged at his hair again,

"That revulsion in your eyes says it all, Harry."

Harry buried his nails in the damp soil and a wave of pain rushed up his spine. He knew Voldemort was causing it, punishing him for something he had no control over. He wasn't revolted by Voldemort, he was revolted by the snake around his neck and the darkness that continued to cling to him despite his best efforts to banish it. He had thought he had succeeded when he had seen the distinctive brown colour of Tom's eyes return but maybe he had celebrated his victory a little too early. It broke his heart to see those eyes with that inhuman shade of crimson and he didn't know how to explain that to Voldemort. He screamed out amidst the jeers and wolf whistles. Voldemort finally released his hold on his hair and Harry slumped to the ground on his side.

Bella's feet and the blood-soaked soil around them were directly in his line of sight and his heart lurched in his chest,

"Please let her go. She hasn't done anything."

Voldemort chuckled darkly and came to stand in front of him. The sight of his bare feet blocked his view of Bella's and he pleaded again,

"Please…"

Voldemort tsked and spoke,

"No, Harry. I think Bella deserves to die today."

Harry gasped and reached forward to hold Voldemort's feet,

"No…No…She doesn't."
Voldemort stepped closer to him and Harry was willingly to kiss his feet just to make him free Bella,

"Kill me instead. Just let her go."

Voldemort laughed again, and the sound chilled him to the bone. It was so difficult to think that Tom was trapped in that body,

"Death is not punishment enough for you."

Harry closed his eyes and spoke as bravely as possible,

"Then punish me. Why are you punishing Bella?"

Voldemort tsked,

"As brave as ever, Harry, but you are a master manipulator. I cannot believe I fell for your false innocence."

Harry laughed hoarsely into the soil and inhaled it in deeply,

"I manipulated you? What did I gain from it? Did I ask you to release me?"

Voldemort growled but said nothing. Giving himself up to reckless abandon, he forced himself to his knees and spoke,

"I'll do anything you want. Just let her go."

Voldemort crimson eyes flashed with undiscguised lust and he spoke,

"Anything?"

Harry nodded his head silently and spoke,

"Anything."

The chains clinked, and Bella collapsed on the ground. Harry didn't know where he got the strength from but he lurched forward and in the blink of an eye, he was holding her close to his chest. She was unbearably cold and nearly translucent. Her eyes were closed, and Harry couldn't stop the fear that tore at his heart. He bit into his wrist until he felt the metallic taste of blood fill his mouth. He held his wrist to Bella's cold, colourless lips, willing her to drink,

"Please, Bella…wake up…I need you…"

For a moment, Bella didn't move and Harry couldn't hold back his tears,

"Bella, wake up…"

A soft moan escaped Bella's lips and Harry held his wrist firmly to her lips as she began to drink from him greedily. He watched utterly mesmerized as the colour returned to Bella's cheeks and her familiar warmth returned. Her lips were painted with his blood and she looked more alive as she continued to suck on his wrist,

"Open your eyes, Bella. Please…"

Bella's eyelids fluttered open just as Harry's vision swam. For a moment, confusion clouded them,
then realization dawned in them and finally her eyes widened with horror,

"Harry!"

She healed his wrist instantly and cradled him close to her chest just as his eyes closed and he felt utterly relieved to see her well again,

"Such sentimental moments."

The jeers and wolf whistles grew ear piercing. Harry couldn't force his eyes to open up or his body to move, no matter how much he tried. He felt Voldemort's oppressive presence draw closer to them and he wanted to shield Bella from him, but he couldn't move and Bella's hold on him was relentless,

"You are fortunate that Harry offered himself up to protect you."

Bella's grip on him turned slack and she sounded aghast when she spoke,

"You did what?"

Harry fisted her dress and murmured against her neck soft enough that no one could hear him,

"He hates me, Bella. He would have done it anyway."

Bella moved her fingers through his hair and kissed his head,

"Harry, take it back."

Harry shook his head and pulled away from her, but she refused to let him go,

"No, Harry. Take it back, now!"

Harry stopped trying to move away as darkness consumed his vision for a moment and he slumped against her. She was crying and Harry wanted to reassure her that he couldn't open his mouth let alone form words. He felt Voldemort's darkness loom over his head,

"Get up, Harry."

Such a simple order but Harry felt incapable of following it. He didn't have an ounce of strength left in his body.

Are you getting up or must I carry you?"

Being carried seemed like an appealing idea even if Voldemort was going to carry him to his doom. Harry closed his eyes and groaned,

"Can't get up."

Bella's tears kept falling on his cheek and he spoke,

"Please, stop crying, Bella."

Voldemort grabbed Harry's wrist and picked him up into his arms. Harry fisted his robes and shivered uncontrollably as the darkness wrapped around him and suffocated him. It weighed heavy on him and he found it incredibly difficult to breathe. He certainly was doomed because if this was how it was going to be, he was going to be dead by the end of the night. We, at least, he wasn't
dying in vain. Bella was alive. That was more than enough for him.
The breath whooshed out of his lungs and he practically bounced up a bit on the soft mattress as Voldemort dropped him roughly on the bed. He opened his eyes and stared up at the black velvet canopy of the four-poster bed. This was it. Voldemort was going to take him. Something inside him urged him to fight it but he drowned it out. He had agreed to this in exchange for Bella's life and since Voldemort had held up his end of the deal, it was obligatory that he fulfil his end too. So, he wouldn't fight it. He doubted he'd feel anything though. His body felt too cold, numb and broken. His head felt like it had been stuffed with cotton and thoughts came slow.

The bed was unbelievably soft and felt amazing underneath his battered body. He managed to breathe out as his eyes slid shut,

"I think I'm going to pass out so please hurry up."

He felt the mattress shift and failed to bite back a laugh as Voldemort ran his fingers over his bare chest. Feeding Bella most of his blood had definitely left him delirious. He resisted the urge to move when Voldemort's fingers came to halt a little above the waist of his pants. He could hear his own heart thudding in his ears. Could Voldemort hear it too? Before he could stop himself, the words slipped out,

"Can you hear my heartbeat?"

Voldemort didn't reply and that caused him to frown. He opened his eyes and saw him staring down at him with an odd intensity. His mouth was pursed and his crimson eyes looked extremely thoughtful. The snake was hanging off his shoulder and its yellow gaze was focused on him. Harry looked away from it and back at Voldemort's face,

"Is something wrong?"

Voldemort growled and shook his head. He couldn't keep his eyes open any longer and they slid shut again. Voldemort's fingers moved away from his pants and Harry couldn't stop giggling as Voldemort began tracing the bruises over his skin with the barest brush of his fingers. He twitched and tried to move away but Voldemort grabbed his shoulder and held him in place as he continued to explore the bruises. Harry managed to rasp out breathlessly,

"Oh! Stop…Stop…"

Voldemort's fingers halted over his Adam's apple and he finally snarled,

"I do not understand you!"

Harry's forced his eyelids to lift up again and looked at Voldemort,

"I'm an open book."

Voldemort leaned over him…they were so close…so close that their breaths intermingled. The snake slithered closer to him and Harry instinctively pushed his head back in the mattress,

"Did you return to the cavern today?"

Harry frowned before it started to make sense. Voldemort had forbidden from going there and Voldemort had been extremely angry when he had sleepwalked there a second time. Is that what
Voldemort had thought when he had seen the fresh bruises on his skin...that he had been back at the cavern? Was that why he had been so mad? He shook his head and spoke,

"I was at the lake."

Voldemort's fingers closed around his throat and he growled,

"Do not lie to me!"

Harry fist the thick covers and cried out,

"Why do you keep accusing me of lying? When have I ever lied to you?"

He saw stars for a moment and his cheek stung when Voldemort struck him hard across the face. The spinning in his head worsened and he couldn't keep his eyes open,

"You know you can hit me as much as you want. I don't have anything to lose. But you...you need to start thinking more logically. I haven't done anything wrong. I haven't lied to you. You said that you don't understand me. Well, I can say the same about you."

Harry's cheek continued to sting but Voldemort's fingers loosened on his throat as he demanded,

"Explain the bruises!"

Harry exhaled and spoke,

"I went for a ride on those black flying horse like creatures in the forest."

Voldemort's fingers fell away completely, and he whispered sounding aghast,

"You did what?"

Harry repeated his statement,

"I went for a ride..."

Voldemort clamped a hand down over his mouth to stop him from finishing the sentence and spoke,

"You rode a Thestral?"

Harry nodded his head and Voldemort finally pulled away his hand,

"I don't believe you."

Harry couldn't stop himself from smiling,

"I could show you."

Harry felt Voldemort pull away from him and then spoke,

"I left my shirt on the shore of the lake. You'll find it there. That should be proof enough for you."

He struggled to open his eyes again and found that Voldemort had vanished. His body protested as he pushed himself up on the bed and buried his face in the soft pillow. He felt a pang of guilt for sullying the bed because he was practically covered in dirt, but he didn't dwell on it as sleep beckoned him. He wondered where Voldemort had gone. Maybe he had gone to check whether he
was telling the truth. He had nearly dozed off when the swish of a cloak made him jump. He opened his eyes, raised his head a little and found Voldemort standing a little distance away from the bed. The snake was gone, and Harry saw something like remorse on his snake like features. He noticed that he was clutching his shirt in his hand. So, he really had gone to get confirmation. Well he didn't expect Voldemort to apologize for hurting him or Bella, so he let his head fall back onto the pillow as his eyelids fluttered shut once more,

"I told you I was telling the truth."

Voldemort grip grew white knuckled on the shirt and Harry prepared himself for another onslaught of pain, but it didn't come,

"You did not explain the bruises."

Harry nuzzled his head deeper into the pillow and spoke,

"I told you I went for a ride on a…"

He paused as he tried to pronounce the word Voldemort had used for those creatures. Voldemort provided,

"Thestrals."

Harry repeated,

"Yes, Thestral. I guess it flew a little outside the castle's boundaries and this happened…"

He paused as the thought of never being able to leave this place made him bleed inside all over again and he whispered as fresh tears slid down his temples,

"I can't ever leave this place."

For a moment, there was nothing but silence. He didn't even have the strength to raise his arms and wipe away his tears,

"And now you hate me once again, so..."

He wasn't able to finish the sentence because he was suddenly enveloped by the incredible warmth of a wonderfully soft blanket that Voldemort had probably pulled over him. He clutched the soft fur between his fingers and forgot all about what he was going to say,

"Sleep."

Now that was one order he was more than happy to oblige.
Chapter 65

When he woke up his head felt as if someone had shaken it until his brain was thoroughly bruised. Shooting pains stabbed chaotically through his muscles and there was a ringing in his ears. He licked at his parched and cracked lips feeling the thickness of his saliva. He pulled the blankets in closer about his neck and shivered in the heat. He knew full well he had caught a cold.

He kept his eyes closed and snuggled deeper into the warm blanket as he remembered where he was and the events that had led him to be here. He kept his eyes closed and ran his fingers over the soft silk sheets as he contemplated how close he had come to losing his soul last night…more than that…how close he had come to losing Bella. He shuddered uncontrollably at the thought and fisted the silk sheets. He had saved Bella last night but what would have happened if Voldemort had taken him up on his offer and claimed him in this bed? He would most definitely have been dead by now because he couldn't stand his touch when those snakes and that darkness surrounded him. The burn he had felt in his bruises last night seemed to awaken just at the thought of it.

He sneezed, and his body began to shiver uncontrollably. Water… he needed water. He opened his eyes and tried to sit up straight, but his aching body didn't allow it and he slumped back on the soft mattress with a groan. He opened up his burning eyes and saw Voldemort sitting in an armchair by the window, bathed in moonlight. How long had he been asleep? His fingers curled into the soft blanket when he saw that Voldemort was wearing an unreadable expression on his snakelike face and was still holding his shirt.

It was night, Bella must be awake. He had to check up on her. What if Voldemort had hurt her again after he had fallen asleep? He pushed back the blanket and trembled uncontrollably when the cold air hit his bare torso. It took him all the energy he possessed to push himself off the bed and get on his feet. Wrapping his arms around himself, he took a step forward and staggered as his vision swam. And then Voldemort was there, in front of him, his arms outstretched to catch him, but Harry took the support of the side table and found his own balance. Once he felt centered enough, he spoke in a low, hoarse voice,

"I still stand by what I said last night. You're welcome to take me anytime you want. I haven't gone back on my word."

Voldemort let his arms fall and took a step backward. Harry left the support of the side table and straightened up,

"You're not frightening…you're not a monster… You could hurt me a thousand times more and thousand times worse and I would still say that."

Voldemort looked into his eyes and Harry refused to look away even though his eyes burnt and watered because of the cold. He only closed his eyes because he had to sneeze and after that his body started trembling anew. He gripped the edge of the table to keep himself steady and spoke,

"You were frightened last night. All of that rage, all of the pain that you caused Bella and I. It was all to hide your fear."

Voldemort took another step away from him and Harry knew he was right,

"Tell me what frightened you?"

Voldemort stood silent and Harry tipped his head back and slumped against the side table as his
vision blurred. It took a moment for his vision to clear up again and he spoke,

"What is in that cavern? What are you terrified of?"

His knees nearly gave out and it was sheer force of will that kept him upright,

"Tell me! Tell me and I can help you."

He refused to give way, he refused to fall weak in this moment when he was close to Voldemort telling him that he was Tom. He wanted to hear him say that. Maybe that would make him realize that he'd been an innocent child once. Maybe that realization would return his humanity. It was plainly obvious that the only reason Voldemort had lashed out last night was because he had feared that he had been in the cavern and found out more about his past and made the connection,

"I want to break this curse. Tell me how and I will do it even if it means losing my soul…I will do it."

Voldemort had turned his back to him and Harry trembled and collapsed on the thick rug,

"Don't walk away…don't you dare walk away from me…"

Voldemort halted but remained silent,

"I am begging you…please…tell me how to break the curse…I want to free you and everyone else in this castle."

Voldemort said nothing and the silence agitated him. He forced himself back to his feet and bit out,

"I'll do anything you want. I'll do anything you wish. Please…Let me help you…"

He shivered uncontrollably and wrapped his arms around himself tightly. The only source of warmth was the locket around his chest and he wrapped a hand around it, trying to soak in as much warmth from it as he could. When Voldemort still didn't speak, the futility of his words began to frustrate him. Voldemort wasn't going to admit it. Harry's grip turned white knuckled on the locket and he spoke,

"You're nothing but a bloody coward and incredibly selfish."

Voldemort turned around to face him and Harry coughed before speaking,

"I wanted you to admit it. I wanted you to tell me but it seems that you don't have what it takes to say it, do you?"

Harry saw the fear that suddenly crept into Voldemort's eyes and he spoke,

"I guess it's not your fault. You buried him so deep that I bet you think that he doesn't exist anymore."

His eyesight blurred, but not because tears were welling up. Everything became fuzzy; then he saw nothing at all. His consciousness was floating through an empty space filled with a thick static. Throughout the inky space his heartbeats pounded loudly, echoing in his ears. Harry forced the words out as darkness consumed him,

"He's still inside you…Tom's still there inside you… Let him out…He's desperate to be free…"
Chapter 66

Harry woke up again, wrapped up in a warmth that could only belong to Bella. He opened his eyes and found her asleep next to him, her arms wrapped around him and her legs entangled with his. He yawned and stretched. The fever felt like it was gone, and he recalled bits and pieces of Bella nursing him through the worst of it. But he couldn't recall how he'd ended up with Bella in the first place. Voldemort should have killed him after what he had revealed.

Harry gulped and came to realize how dry his throat was. He stumbled out of the coffin and poured himself a glass of water from the side table. Settling down on the bed, he gulped down the glass in one and then poured himself another. His mouth tasted incredibly bitter and the water wasn't doing anything to wash away that flavour. His stomach grumbled noisily, and he groaned. The fever had left him with an appetite. Looking down at himself, he set his priorities in order. Bath first and then food.

He discarded his clothes on his way to the bathroom and filled the bath tub with luke warm water and the lavender vanilla scented bath salts before stepping in. The warm water made him sigh in relief and he closed his eyes as he revelled in the exotic scent surrounding him. His mind faded into dullness and everything was a foggy illusion. The sensation of the steamy water calmed him; it took his mind off Voldemort and everything else…all the things he honestly shouldn't care about. Voldemort's curse wasn't his concern. He should be more worried about himself but he just couldn't turn his back and ignore everything especially because Bella was suffering from the same curse.

He ran the wash cloth over himself, careful to avoid the fading bruises that didn't hurt that much but still stung when he touched them. After he felt clean enough, he rose to his feet and dried himself off with a towel before dressing up in a fresh pair of pants and a shirt. He stood in front of the mirror and ran his fingers through the tousled mess that was supposed to be his hair. There was no hope for it so he gave up trying and ran a finger over the bruise on his face where Voldemort had struck him and the fingerprint sized ones on his neck. He had a feeling there were going to be many more of these before Voldemort saw sense and started trusting him.

His stomach grumbled again, and Harry chuckled,

"Okay…okay…I'm going."

He grabbed the map and the pocket watch from the side table and navigated his way to the kitchens. The kitchens were huge and were equipped with about a thousand pots and pans along with every kind of cooking utensil imaginable. The pantry was his favourite though because he had never seen so many ingredients before. There were things that he didn't know the names of but was utterly intrigued with.

The last time he'd been here, he'd been cooking a meal to impress Voldemort, so he had gone a little over the top. Today he was cooking for himself, so he decided to keep it simple. He grabbed some flour, water, olive oil, eggs and salt and began kneading his pasta dough. He waited for it to rest for half an hour and decided to explore more of the kitchens. His stomach whined again and that's when he saw the strawberries in the pantry and his mouth started watering. He instantly knew he was going to ruin his appetite, but the temptation was difficult to resist. He popped one into his mouth and moaned as the exquisite sweetness assaulted his taste buds. They were definitely something special because they tasted too good and were packed full of flavour. They were sweet and sour and tasted like the very essence of spring. He relished their distinct fragrance as he popped another one in his mouth.
He checked the time on his pocket watch. It was nearly dark. He felt guilty for not leaving a note for Bella but he figured that she would find him. He hoped that she would because he wanted her to taste these strawberries. In fact…a better idea struck him and he whipped up some cream, tossed the strawberries in a bowl and heaped it up with the cream, topping it with a bit of brown sugar. He set that aside and decided to check on his dough.

Rolling it up, he passed it through the machine, watching with extreme excitement as it grew longer and thinner. He turned the dial to change the roller thickness and sent it in again, over and over until it was long and papery. He could almost taste it already covered in a tomato basil sauce and sprinkled with parmesan. After cutting it up into long thin ribbons, boiled it, set it aside and began working on the sauce. He was almost done with it when Bella's panicked voice rang through the kitchens,

"Harry! Harry! Are you in here?"

Harry grinned as he turned off the flame and called out,

"I'm back here."

Bella's hurried footsteps echoed in the otherwise silent kitchen and when she saw him, Harry watched as the tension physically drained from her being. She smiled and pulled him into a hug,

"It wouldn't kill you to leave a note."

Harry laughed and kissed her cheek before pulling away and stirring the sauce. Bella inhaled deeply and licked her lips,

"You know the scent of your cooking is spread throughout the castle, that's why the kitchens were the first place I checked."

Harry laughed and plated up the pasta,

"Really?"

Bella watched him as he grated the parmesan over the plates and handed one to Bella,

"Tell me how it tastes?"

Bella smiled sadly as she looked down at the food and Harry frowned,

"What's wrong?"

Bella shook her head and spoke,

"Nothing."

Harry put down his plate and cupped her cheeks,

"You're a terrible liar."

Bella held his gaze and spoke,

"I wouldn't know what it would taste like. Food holds no flavour for us."

Harry felt tears well up into his eyes and kissed her forehead,
"I'll free you, Bella. I'll free you if it's the last thing I do."

Bella hugged him tight and when she pulled away, Harry was about to take the plate away when she snatched it back,

"I'm still going to eat this."

Harry held her gaze,

"You don't have to."

She smiled and patted him on the cheek,

"I want to."

They settled down around the small three legged table and Harry was about to take his first bite when Bella screeched.
Chapter 67

Harry dropped his fork with a loud clatter, rose to his feet and rushed to Bella's side. Bella had her hand clamped over her mouth and a look of utmost shock on her face,

"What's wrong, Bella?"

He wrapped his arm around her shoulder and Harry could feel her trembling as she turned and buried her face in his stomach. He couldn't help but run his finger through her hair,

"What's wrong, Bella? What happened?"

A thousand different thoughts rushed through his mind, each one more horrible than the last. What if the food had been poisonous for her? Bella pulled away from him and whispered in a barely audible voice, 

"I can taste it…"

Harry's eyes widened, and he pulled away from her to look at her face,

"What?"

Harry wiped the tears from her face as Bella smiled,

"I can taste it! I CAN TASTE IT!"

Harry couldn't help but laugh. It was working. His attempts were working, and this was all the proof he needed. Bella rose to her feet and pulled him back into a hug,

"You're the best thing that happened to this place."

Harry buried his face in her shoulder and spoke,

"This is fantastic! This is just…"

Waves of happiness and relief washed over him, and he felt it soak right into his bones. Dizzy with exaltation, he closed his eyes and savoured the felicity that fizzled in his heart. Happiness flowed through him, warming his skin like the rays of an early summer sun. He couldn't contain his joy. Bella released him and just laughed delightedly. The sound echoed off the walls and Harry just relished the beautiful sound. It made the kitchens seem brighter, it made everything feel better. Bella's laughter rekindled the fire in his soul and brought fortitude to his resolve to bring an end to this curse.

He sat Bella down and spoke,

"You have to eat, Bella."

Bella looked down at her plate with so much adoration and spoke,

"This is the best thing I have ever tasted. Do you have more?"

Harry smiled and nodded before bringing the bowl of boiled pasta and the sauce pan and setting them on the table in front of her,
"We have plenty."

Harry settled back in his seat and just revelled in the sounds Bella made while she ate. The happiness she was radiating was absolutely infectious and it made the meal, the most special thing he'd ever done. Harry listened to Bella while she praised him and talked about how wonderful the meal had been while Harry collected the dishes and put them on the counter. He knew Bella was absolutely going to explode with happiness when he would show her the strawberries and cream. The thought of her reaction just made butterflies flutter in his stomach. He picked up the bowl and set it down in front of Bella on the table.

For a moment, Bella just stared wide eyed at the bowl and then just as expected, she shrieked in joy and Harry laughed as she pulled him down into her lap and smothered him with kisses,

"You have no idea how amazing you are."

Harry closed his eyes and just revelled in them. It was amazing how fast yesterday's despair had turned into ether and vanished. Everything seemed so simple and the way forward seemed so crystal clear. They fed each other the strawberries and by the end of it, they were both covered in whipped cream and juice. Harry rose to his feet and handed Bella a napkin to clean herself with while he started doing the dishes,

"I can help you."

Harry shook his head and spoke,

"No, I can handle this. Why don't you go and get cleaned up, I'll see you later."

Bella pressed a kiss to his cheek and Harry leaned into it,

"Thank you for everything."

She was about to walk away when Harry asked,

"Bella, how did I come to be with you? Did Voldemort leave me with you?"

Bella ducked her head, but Harry saw the fear that crept into her eyes,

"What happened, Bella?"

Bella looked up and held her gaze,

"He said that he didn't want to see you again."

Harry dropped the plate in the sink and spoke,

"What?"

Bella nodded silently and spoke,

"He told me to tell you that you were not show your face to him again or else he would tear you from limb to limb."

Harry scoffed and picked up the plate again,

"Fine."
Bella stepped closer to him and gripped his shoulder,

"You really do have to stay away from him, Harry. He looked one second away from murdering you."

Harry nodded but didn't say anything. Voldemort was in denial and Harry knew that he would have to shake him out of it. Bella pulled the plate away from his hand and spoke,

"Harry, I mean it. He will kill you."

Harry looked into Bella's eyes and spoke,

"Just pretend that I didn't ask you that question and you didn't tell me that."

Bella frowned,

"But why?"

Harry looked away from her and back to the sink,

"Because you wouldn't have told me that if I hadn't asked."

Bella sighed and rested her forehead against his temple,

"I was going to tell you that sooner, but I didn't want to disturb you...you seemed happy and then you made me so happy that I forgot all about that."

Harry patted her on the cheek,

"It's fine, Bella. Just relax."

Bella grabbed his hand and spoke,

"Please, don't go to him. He wants you dead."

Harry kissed her hand and spoke,

"Then I'll die but not without freeing you...He's a selfish bastard and he doesn't see that he's keeping you all chained here with him...he won't see past himself and I need to correct that. I'm the only one who can correct that."

Bella buried her face in his shoulder and cried,

"No, you can't...you just can't...please don't..."

Harry closed his eyes and comforted her,

"It's going to be fine. Everything's going to be alright...I'll make it alright..."
Chapter 68

Getting Bella to let him go had been the hardest thing he'd ever had to do. He'd cleaned up, changed his shirt and was now standing outside the door that led to the library and Voldemort's chamber. It only took him a second to get the door open and step inside. He made his way straight past the library to realize that the door was closed. He knocked once, twice, three times but Voldemort didn't open up. He hadn't come here to give up and he just knew that Voldemort was in there. He banged on the door with his knuckles until they started to hurt,

"I'm not leaving here until you come out."

He picked up a book on thestrals from the library, settled down on the floor, leaned back against the door and banged on the door once again just to remind Voldemort that he was here before starting the book.

He spent hours on the cold, marble floor but he was obstinate when he wanted to be. He had banged on the door after every ten minutes regularly and finished his book on thestrals before starting another one on Phoenixes. That was what that bird he'd seen in the forest had been called, a Phoenix…He was utterly engrossed in the book when the door opened and Harry fell backwards and looked up into Voldemort's furious gaze. He didn't even have the chance to blink before Voldemort had pulled him up to his feet and had him pinned against the nearest wall.

Harry stared defiantly into rage filed crimson eyes and Voldemort struck him hard across the face,

"Did I not make it abundantly clear to Bella that I shall kill you if I see you again?"

Harry was about to reply when Voldemort backhanded him,

"Do not open your mouth or utter a single word if you value your life."

Harry couldn't help but grin at that,

"I don't value my life and I won't die before I say what needs to be said. You're not a bad person, Tom. You did the right thing…. you did the right thing when you killed Albus. You did the right thing but what happened to you wasn't right. It wasn't right. You didn't deserve it…"

Voldemort clamped a hand down over his mouth and whispered,

"Not a word more…I shall have to silence you permanently."

Voldemort conjured a knife and held it over his throat as he grinned wickedly,

"Look into my eyes. I wish to see the life drain out of them."

The knife sat precariously on his skin, soft enough to not pierce his neck, hard enough to enforce the intended message. The harsh metal should have been cold and raw against his bare skin, but his numb body could not feel anything. His throat and heart held in a silver grasp, and all he could do was stare defiantly at the crimson eyes that belonged to the man who held the blade and saw a terrifying coldness he had never seen before. The snake grew larger around his throat and the darkness grew impossibly darker. Harry saw no trace of the innocent boy…no trace of Tom…no hope…Tears flowed from his eyes as despair welled in his heart.

Trembling, he tipped his chin up into the sharpened edge, tempting him to end his anguish, half
hoping he would. A small stream of blood trickled from the feeble cut he could not feel. Voldemort didn't flinch or remove his eyes from his, a cruel smile stretched out across his gaunt features. Harry's bruised and broken heart shifted at the sight of his merciless gaze, his legs almost failing beneath him. Voldemort's steadfast grip on the polished weapon shifted, causing more crimson liquid to flow from the raw wound he had inflicted. A choked sob escaped Harry's lips and was muffled by Voldemort's hand still clamped tight over his mouth. Voldemort's grinned widened and he tilted his head as he asked,

"You do not wish to die? Is that what the tears are for?"

Harry wanted to shake his head, but the knife was already digging into his skin and all his survival instincts kicked in and forced him to remain still. Despite his strong wish to die, his body absolutely refused to go along with that. Voldemort chuckled darkly, and Harry turned his gaze away from him to look at the mammoth of the snake. It was large enough to swallow him whole and Harry closed his eyes as the sight of it made him shiver involuntarily,

"Open your eyes."

The knife dug deeper and Harry opened his eyes to look into Voldemort's crimson one's imploring him with his gaze to end it. He was tired...so tired of this endless cycle of hope and despair. His heart couldn't take any more of it. Voldemort grinned viciously and moved the blade another inch and Harry saw how much pleasure he took in his torment. Harry could feel his life flowing down his skin in tiny rivulets, but his gaze remained fixated on Voldemort's. His heart beat a steady rhythm in his chest and he relaxed against the wall as everything grew dim and foggy. His knees were about ready to give out but Voldemort kept him pinned against the wall with his body. When he spoke, Harry detected an undertone of pain in it,

"Do you feel it, Harry?"

Voldemort vanished the blade and Harry noticed that he was wearing leather gloves as he held him up. How curious...

"Do you feel your life slipping away?"

Harry's head lolled to the side and he would have replied if Voldemort would just remove his hand from his mouth. Voldemort turned his head back, making him face him. Harry had to blink to bring Voldemort's crimson eyes into focus and he saw how ashen he looked. It almost looked as if it wasn't his life that was draining out but Voldemort's. But the pleasure in those crimson eyes was unmistakable. The image was so contradictory that Harry's head spun. Why did Voldemort look like he was in pain when he was obviously enjoying his death? What was happening? His eyelids fluttered close and Voldemort laughed maniacally as he patted him on the cheek,

"Harry...Open your eyes...let me see you off."

Harry forced his eyes open and held Voldemort's gaze again. Voldemort finally pulled away his hand from his mouth and spoke,

"Any last words?"

Harry shook his head. No words would ever be enough to bring Tom back. He had lost. He was truly and utterly defeated. His breaths hitched in his throat and he rasped out,

"Bye, Tom."
Chapter 69

He screamed out as the burning pain inside him grew beyond the point of tolerance. It was like someone reaching inside him and pulling his guts out with their bare hands. He bit down his tongue to hold back his scream but that was in pain because the pain forced him to relinquish his hold on the blade and take a few staggering steps back. Harry's limp frame slid to the ground as well but his eyes were still open and he could practically see the life draining out from those emerald orbs. His gaze moved down to the thin cut adorning Harry's neck like a gory choker of blood.

His hands balled into fists as he struggled to fight the pain. Just a few moments more. The boy would be dead then, all his troubles would be gone. He should have done this, the first day he had arrived. He should have never let him live. The prophecy had mentioned him to be his downfall and he had ignored it. The boy had been nothing but trouble since the day he had arrived, but he had ignored the signs. He had allowed himself to grow attached. How could he have been such a fool?

A whimper escaped his lips and Harry blinked. There was nothing but sadness in his eyes and he resisted the absurd urge to heal him and comfort him. The boy was finally dying. He had to let him die. He had to let this end so that he could return to his hassle-free existence...so that order could be restored to the castle. The pain grew worse and he clutched himself. It was probably because of the fact that a piece of his soul was dying with the boy, but it was a price he was willing to pay just to be rid of him.

He saw silent tears streaming down his pale cheeks and he cursed as the impulse to wipe away those tears tore at his insides. It was worse than the pain, worse than the agony of his dying soul shard. Another cry escaped his lips as the pain forced him to curl into himself but still, he forced himself to hold Harry's gaze that had grown unfocused. It was nearly over. It perturbed him that even in his last moments, Harry didn't have a sliver in his eyes...there was only sorrow.

And then it happened. Harry's last breath left him in a shuddering gasp and he saw the exact moment the life disappeared from Harry's eyes and his gaze grew empty, dark, devoid of light. He was gone...finally gone... Harry had finally left the castle. Instantly the castle felt ten shades darker and ten degrees colder. The lingering pain still remained but he forced himself up on his knees. Harry's lifeless eyes stared back at him and crushed his insides with guilt...guilt...something he shouldn't be feeling...This was what he had wanted. He had done this for himself...for his peace of mind. Harry had brought his past back to life and now that he was gone, his past was gone too... Everything was as it should be...Everything was back to the way it had been before that boy had set foot in this castle.
Chapter 70

Bella's screams were loud enough to reach the heaven's above as she knelt by Harry's lifeless body. His eyes were still open. He didn't have the strength to close them. Harry still had the locket on but he was too weak to approach him and pull it off him. He disguised his inability to touch him as disgust and contempt and contented himself with it,

"Take him away and bury him in an unmarked grave in the forest."

Bella screamed louder and the sounds she was making were enough to rend his heart. It took him everything he had in him to keep his voice from quivering,

"Get him away from here, Bella. Or I shall cremate his body right here."

Bella's howled,

"HOW COULD YOU? HE ONLY WANTED TO SAVE US, AND THIS IS WHAT HE GOT FOR HIS GOOD INTENTIONS?"

He didn't have an answer for her. Harry had been the personification of everything good and pure. He'd been the epitome of bravery and beauty. He'd destroyed all that. He'd finally killed him. Harry was dead…He was gone forever...

Bella's howls of agony continued to reverberate around the chambers and he'd never heard a more desolate sound. He rose to his feet and Bella must have gotten the warning because she bent over Harry's lifeless and finally closed his eyes with trembling hands. But even when those emerald eyes were out of his sights now, they hadn't left his mind. He could still see them sparkling with life and vitality. He could still hear Harry's soft, carefree laughter, he could feel the softness of his skin, he could still taste his lips on his….

Enough…One more thought about Harry and he was certain that he would lose his grip on sanity. He watched as Bella gathered Harry's lifeless form in her arms with the utmost care and carried him away.

Everything would go back to normal now…. Everything would be as it once had been…

He lay face down, listening to the silence. He was perfectly alone. Nobody was watching. Nobody else was there. He was not perfectly sure that he was there himself. A long time later, or maybe no time at all, it came to him that he must exist, must be more than disembodied thought, because he was lying, definitely lying, on some surface. Therefore, he had a sense of a touch, and the thing against which he lay existed too.

He lay in a dark, hazy mist, though it was not like mist he had ever experienced before. His surroundings were not hidden by cloudy vapour; rather the cloudy vapour had not yet formed into surroundings. The floor on which he lay seemed to be pure black, neither warm nor cold, but simply there, a flat, blank something on which to be. He sat up and ran a hand over his throat. The locket was gone, along with the cut. He touched his face. He was not wearing glasses any more.

He'd died, hadn't he? Voldemort had slit his throat and watched him as the life had drained out of him. The sound of a child crying, reached his ears and he rose to his feet and walked a little distance to investigate it but there was nothing there except for that fog and then a voice, he recognized called his name. He spun around and saw that hateful man walking towards him. Albus
Dumbledore…The crying grew worse…more shrill and desperate…Harry felt overcome by the need to soothe whoever was crying. He scanned his surroundings but saw nothing. Despair welled in his heart. He hated this helpless feeling. He was forced to focus on the evil that stood in front of him…the man who had ruined Tom…sullied him…taken away his innocence…

Dumbledore grinned and the expression forced him to shiver,

"Harry Potter…"

Harry took a step back and Dumbledore strode forwards. Harry's back hit something solid and he turned and realized that it was an immaculate black wall. He was trapped. He turned around and saw the way Dumbledore's eyes twinkled with glee. He took another step closer and raised a bony hand to touch him. Harry's breaths came in short, shallow pants as he plastered himself to the wall and tried to avoid his touch, but it was futile. Dumbledore's fingers caressed his cheek and he whispered,

"You have fought valiantly, my boy."

Harry turned his head and Dumbledore chased his cheek with his fingers before grabbing his jaw and making him face him. The crying turned into begging and Harry's heart thudded in his chest. It was Tom's voice…Tom…where was he? He looked over Dumbledore's shoulder, his gaze searching for the little boy,

"Please…No…Please, Professor…Please…Don't…Don't do this to me…"

Dumbledore forced him to face him again and Harry watched his smirk widen,

"You hear it."

He had to save him…he had to save Tom…Harry struggled against Dumbledore's grip but he held him immobile. The begging turned into jarring, agonizing screams,

"NO….NO….STOP…PROFESSOR STOP….IT HURTS….IT HURTS…MAKE IT STOP…"

Harry squeezed his eyes shut as his brain conjured everything that the man standing in front of him had done to Tom. White hot rage burned his insides and his hands balled into fists. The grip on him vanished and he opened his eyes to find a surprised look on Dumbledore's face and his blackened hand…He'd been holding him with that hand, hadn't he? Harry tasted the sweet taste of victory, but it was short lived because Dumbledore's malicious grin returned, and Harry finally saw Tom appear through the dense fog. He wasn't wearing a shirt, only a pair of white shorts…his pale skin was covered in purple bruises, his lips were bloody and swollen, his brown eyes were barren and lifeless, his dark hair were tousled, and Harry saw a track of dried blood running down his inner thigh and disappearing into the blood-soaked shorts.

Harry's heart broke into a million tiny pieces and he was about to lurch forward when Dumbledore came to stand in front of Tom,

"You had your opportunity, Mr. Potter. You failed. Tom has proven that he belongs to me and me alone…"

Harry took a step closer and shouted,

"No! No, he's not yours."
Dumbledore laughed darkly,
"My darkness won. Tom murdered you, did he not? Your light lost…You lost, Mr. Potter…"

Tom whimpered behind Dumbledore and Harry shook his head,
"No, I haven't… I haven't lost… I won't give up… I'll save you, Tom… I swear I will."

Dumbledore laughed again, and the sound echoed around the fog,
"You have died, Mr. Potter. How do you ever hope to come back to life?"

Tom sobbed again, and Harry ground his teeth,
"No… He's not yours… You ruined him, and I'll do whatever it takes to get him away from your evil clutches…"
Harry took a step closer to Dumbledore. Courage, recklessness abandon, anger and a fierce protectoriveness towards Tom sang through his blood and fuelled him,

"Let him go."

Dumbledore retreated, and Harry couldn't help but look down at his blackened hand and smile,

"You fear me. You're afraid that I'll burn you again."

A wicked grin twisted Dumbledore's features and he stepped closer to him once again,

"No, Mr. Potter. You are the one that should fear me..."

Dumbledore raised his hand and the fog began to swirl around him, turning darker and darker… suffocating him, steadily making it difficult for him to breathe. He struggled to draw in air…his lungs screamed, and his knees gave out, bringing him crashing down on that floor of pure black. Dumbledore's malicious laughter echoed around the space and steadily grew deafening. But somewhere buried underneath Dumbledore's laughter were Tom's scream and they lent him the courage he needed to fight. He struggled against the smothering darkness and finally managed to draw in a deep, rasping breath.

The laughter vanished…so did the screams…there was only silence as he lay curled on the ground and drew air into his starved lungs. Finally, Dumbledore's hateful voice broke the silence,

"I am beginning to see why you are not dead"

Harry opened his eyes and pushed himself up into a sitting position,

"I'm not dead?"

Dumbledore leaned over him,

"You were a vessel for a piece of his soul. He did not kill you…"

Harry covered his mouth his with hand. A piece of his soul…inside himself? The shock was overpowering, and he felt perturbed as to how that come to be. Had Voldemort known? Surely, he mustn't have. If he'd known, he wouldn't have tried to kill him. Maybe Dumbledore was lying… Maybe he was merely trying to unsettle him. But something about Dumbledore's words rang true and made sense. He finished Dumbledore's sentence through numb lips,

"He killed himself."

Harry rose to his feet and looked at Tom's tiny quivering form behind Dumbledore. He felt nothing
but compassion for that child. Nothing that Voldemort had done to him mattered in the face of what Dumbledore had done to him and continued to do to him. Tom was trapped…Dumbledore was holding him captive. That day when Tom had murdered Dumbledore and his colleagues, Dumbledore had latched onto him through his darkness and had continued to live on. He had leech away all the kindness, all the love and innocence that Tom must have had as a child…He had influenced his decisions, compelled him kill and perform unspeakable atrocities…It had all been Dumbledore and his darkness…It had always been Dumbledore and his darkness…

"I will get him back. I will free him."

Dumbledore picked Tom up in his arms and he instantly began to flail and cry. His screams of terror rended the hazy fog but Harry could just there and watch helplessly as the darkness poured out of Dumbledore's mouth and consumed him. Soon enough Tom had disappeared completely, and Dumbledore laughed,

"You may have survived once…you will not survive again. Tom will murder you again and this time I shall ensure that he does it in the most painful way possible."

Harry was about to retort when the fog began to enclose him. He didn't fight it because he knew it was taking him back...back to Bella...back to Voldemort...He was getting one more chance...

He came to with a silent gasp and the first thing he registered were Bella's mournful screams. He felt the weight of her head on his stomach and her tears soaking his shirt. The cool ground felt soothing underneath his back. He tried to speak but nothing came out. He tried again and a low rasp escaped his lips. Bella's head instantly lifted and she regarded him with puffy red eyes and flushed cheeks. Her black curls were in disarray and she looked shell shocked, awfully terrified and slightly deranged,

"Bella..."

She clamped a hand over his mouth and closed her eyes,

"This isn't real...he's not alive...I've lost my mind...I've finally lost my mind..."

Harry pushed her hand away and forced himself to a sitting position before pulling her to his chest,

"You're not crazy...you haven't lost your mind...I'm here, Bella...I'm really here..."

She remained still in his arms and Harry continue to reassure her, weaved his fingers through her dishevelled curls and comforted her. Finally, she stirred in his arms and pulled him away. Her dark gaze ran all over him and drank in the sight of him greedily. Her hand came to rest on his chest as she felt her heartbeat. It didn't seem to be enough for her because she suddenly had her ear against it, listening eagerly to his heartbeat. He allowed it. He allowed her to do whatever she wished to do to him to reassure herself that he was really alive. She pulled her head away from his chest and gripped his wrist, feeling his pulse,

"I'm alive, Bella...I'm alive..."

She brought her hand up to her lips and kissed his knuckles,

"You're alive..."

Harry pulled her back into a hug and this time she wrapped her arms around him and held him tight,
"You're really alive."

She pulled him away and kissed his head, his cheeks, his hands, his forehead,

"You're alive…you haven't left me…"

Harry buried his face in the crook of her neck and couldn't stop the tears that flowed from his eyes. How had he ever come to deserve someone as special as her? He felt like the luckiest person alive,

"Why would I ever leave someone as special as you?"

Bella hugged him tighter and then whispered,

"You must."

Harry struggled to pull away from him, but she held him tight,

"You have to leave…you have to go…he'll kill you…"

Harry shook his head,

"No…I can't, Bella…I can't leave…He needs me to save him…"

Bella gripped his shoulders tightly and shook him slightly,

"Have you lost your bloody mind? I will not let you sacrifice yourself again…That man does not deserve your love…your light…he'll squander it again. He'll crush you again…"

Harry was about to speak when Bella spoke,

"Harry, I love you. Please, don't do this… He doesn't value you at the moment but there will come a time when he will realize what he has done and he will regret it."

She smoothed a hand through his hair and kissed his forehead,

"You're too pure and innocent for this castle…too selfless…too good…You can't stay here. I won't let you."

Harry rested a hand on her shoulder,

"I can't leave even if I want to…You know that I can't…"

He pulled away from her and ran a hand over his throat. There was no cut,

"Did you heal me?"

Bella nodded.

"I couldn't…I couldn't bury you like that…I just couldn't…"

Harry wiped her tears away. He unbuttoned his shirt and pulled it off, expecting to see the bruises that criss crossed around his torso but there was nothing. His pale skin was smooth and flawless… there wasn't even a sign of them left. Bella traced the skin where the bruises had once been and a triumphant look crossed her features,

"They're gone."
Harry knew what that meant. He could leave...He could probably leave but he didn't want to. He couldn't leave without saving Tom first. He looked up and met Bella's joyful gaze,

"You can leave."

Harry fingered the locket and thought about what Bella had said. There was logic in her words. Voldemort would kill him again if he went to him now but maybe with time, he would regret his decision...maybe with time, the guilt and remorse would overpower the darkness and weaken it...

Bella pulled him up to his feet and Harry finally took in his surroundings. He was in the forest and Harry saw a hole dug there, which was probably meant to be his grave. He only had one chance left and he needed to be wise about it. He buttoned his shirt back up,

"Don't think too much about it. You have to go now."

She was about to hurry him to the edge of the forest when she paused,

"You'll need supplies."

She pushed him into the trees and spoke,

"Don't move a muscle. I'll be right back."

Harry wrapped his arm around himself and waited for her to come back. Somewhere the wolves howled, and Harry reconsidered his decision. Ten minutes passed, and Bella was back, holding a rucksack,

"This has everything you'll need."

She handed him the rucksack and Harry nearly fell down because it was far heavier than he had imagined,

"What's in it?"

Bella grabbed his wrist and began pulling him through the trees,

"We don't have time to talk."

When they reached the border, Bella hugged him again,

"I'll find a way to talk to you. We'll stay in touch...We'll see each other again but only when the time is right."

Harry nodded and held onto her tight,

"I'll be back, Bella. I swore I would save you...I still stand by it...I'll always stand by it..."

Bella kissed his forehead and spoke,

"Go now. Take care of yourself. I love you...I love you so much."

Harry kissed her forehead and wiped away her tears,

"I love you too, Bella."

He felt unsure as he stepped out of the forest...almost expecting the barrier to stop him, the pain to
flare up, the bruises to appear again but nothing happened…nothing stopped him. Once he'd
crossed, he turned around and saw the happiness on Bella's face. She waved him goodbye and
Harry waved back before turning back around, steeling himself and walking away. He felt like this
was the beginning of another adventure and that both thrilled and terrified him.
Harry awoke to soft sheets and the morning light trickling in through the thin curtains. Shedding himself of the remaining glimpses of a dream, his eyes were still shut as he soaked in the warmth of his covers before letting his emerald eyes see the sun's rays. Harry opened his eyes and smiled as he looked at the glowing and radiant sun peaking above the horizon out of his window. It extended its vivid light across the deep crimson sky. Its dazzling and inviting rays flowed through the window providing warmth to his body, seeping into his skin. The sun relaxed him. Eventually, he got out of bed and walked to the bathroom.

After he was freshly bathed and dressed in clean clothes, he made his way to the small kitchen of his cottage and began making breakfast for himself. It had been two months since he'd left the castle and every day he'd died just a little to go back. Something about the castle called to him and on some days, it became so difficult to ignore it. Tom's anguished screams echoed in his ears twenty-four-seven and they only served to strengthen his resolve to return and make everything alright.

Tap...Tap...Tap...

That was his favourite sound these days. Harry immediately rushed to the window and opened it. The snowy white owl swooped in and settled down on his table. Harry instantly untied the letter from its leg and hugged it close to his chest. The owl hooted indignantly, and Harry laughed softly before opening the jars of treats, he kept specifically for her and offered one to her, "Here, Hedwig."

Hedwig took the treat with her beak and made a pleased sound. Harry smoothed a hand over her feathers and offered her another before settling down in a chair and opening it up. Bella wrote to him once very week and her letters mostly consisted of warnings for him not to come back yet and sentences in which she expressed how much she missed him and loved him. Other than that, she gave him feedback on the anecdotes he sent her and gave him advice if he ever asked for it. This letter was almost the same. He breathed in the parchment and smiled as Bella's familiar scent greeted him. It was beautiful, and he could almost feel that she was close to him. This was his most favorite part about her letters. He leaned back in his seat and allowed the illusion to consume him for a few moments.

Hedwig's hooting shattered it though and he was forced to get up and grab an envelope which he had just sealed a night before. It was stuffed with papers on which he had written about everyone and everything that he had encountered in the past one week. Harry was sure, it would keep Bella entertained. He tied it to Hedwig's leg, pressed a kiss to its beak and watched it as it flew out the window and disappeared into the flawless blue sky.

Once Hedwig was gone, Harry had his breakfast, grabbed his bag and started making his way towards the small school building that he'd bought. Bella had stuffed so much gold in that tiny rucksack and that had turned him into the richest person in town. He had spent some of it to buy the cottage he lived in and the building that he'd converted into a school for underprivileged children. He spent most of his day there and his evenings volunteering at the local orphanage. He liked children and he found comfort in helping them out. Somehow, he never felt like he was young himself. It was only when people pointed it out that he noticed but he never paid it much heed. He just liked seeing people happy, be it children or anyone else that he assisted.

He entered the school and settled down in his chair. Class was due to start in ten minutes so he
pulled out the book and began rifling through it towards the topic he was supposed to discuss with the students today.

Waking up was no longer the pleasure it had once been. There was a fleeting moment when he felt whole again but it evaporated faster than summer rain off the burnt earth. Waking up was harsh, especially because his dreams were better than reality. The saddest part of it was, though, that eventually even the memory of his dreams faded and then he was left with this lonely feeling of detachment, left to explore in the empty void of emotions and the equally empty castle...

An odd sadness had settled over the castle and its walls ever since he had killed him. The walls that once rang with the sound of Harry's laughter...his cries...his screams were now incredibly silent. The rooms that had brightened up with Harry's smiles were now dark and desolate. The corridors that had once filled with the aroma of Harry's cooking now smelt musty and old. The lake seemed cold and depressing. The forest was hushed. Harry had left his mark over everything he had touched, every path he had trodden and him...especially him.

It had been two months but nothing had returned to normal. On most nights, he heard Bella mourn him in seclusion and sometimes he wished he could do the same...sometimes he wished he could cry. The sight of those emerald green eyes...so cold and lifeless...was burned into his sight. He haunted him every night...every day...every living, breathing moment...It killed him. He hadn't visited his grave yet. Maybe...Maybe visiting it would relieve some of this guilt.
Harry watched with satisfaction as the students filed out of the classroom. One of his students… Collin… came to stand in front of his desk and spoke timidly,

"I…I need to talk with you, Sir."

Harry rose to his feet and walked around the desk towards Collin,

"What is it, Collin?"

Collin was an orphan but he'd been taken in by a family… Something about Collin's circumstances reminded him of his own before his uncle had sent him off to die… He cupped Collin's cheek and asked,

"Tell me what's wrong."

Collin looked up at him with wide, tear filled eyes and spoke,

"I can't come to school from tomorrow."

Harry frowned and made him sit down before leaning over him,

"Why not, Collin? I talked to your guardians. They had no problem with your school routine."

Collin buried his face in his chest and started crying and Harry couldn't help but pull him close and rub his back,

"Collin, what happened?"

Collin continued to sob into his chest and Harry continued to soothe him, but his heart was beating out of control. What could have happened to make Collin cry so much? He felt extremely anxious and concerned for the little boy crying so desolately in his arms. When Collin had calmed down some, Harry spoke,

"Let me take you home. I'll take to your guardians and ask them what's going on."

Collin stiffened in his arms and began pulling away from him,

"No… No… I don't want to go home… I don't want to go back… Take me with you, please… please…"

Harry held him close and spoke,

"Okay… Collin… Calm down… I'll take you home with me."

He didn't know how to soothe the little boy. He picked him up into his arms and carried him to his cottage. He only had one bedroom, so he laid Collin down on the bed, took off his shoes and pulled the covers over him,

"Try to get some sleep."

Collin nodded softly, nuzzled his head in the pillow and fell asleep. He looked peaceful now but Harry needed to know what had happened. He got up from beside Collin, grabbed his bag and
headed for his house.

The door was opened on the first knock by Mrs. Harrison, Collin's guardian,

"What are you doing here? Where's Collin? He hasn't run off, has he?"

Harry smiled up at her politely,

"May I come in and talk with you for a minute?"

She stepped inside reluctantly, and he walked into the house. She sat him down on a settee and sat opposite him in an arm chair,

"Where is Mr. Harrison?"

Mrs. Harrison glared at him,

"He's at work."

Harry nodded and then spoke,

"Has something happened regarding Collin? He told me that he couldn't come to school from tomorrow?"

Mrs. Harrison rose to her feet sharply and spoke,

"Our private matters are none of your concern, Mr. Potter. If you do not know Collin's whereabouts then I will have to request you to leave."

Harry rose to his feet,

"I do happen to know where Collin is, but you must tell me what has happened to make him fear returning to his home."

Mrs. Harrison glowered at him scornfully and then spoke,

"He's a grown boy…grown enough to go out and earn us some money. He'll be working as a servant starting tomorrow."

Harry stared at her in disbelief,

"He's eleven. You can't do this to him."

She scoffed,

"You have no business interfering in our matters."

Harry picked up his bag,

"Collin is my student and his well-being is my business."

Mrs. Harrison laughed derisively,

"Have you looked at yourself in the mirror? You're just a kid yourself. Leave the important matters for the adults."

Harry was about to walk out of the house when she grabbed his arm,
"Where is he?"

Harry stopped and spoke,

"He deserves his childhood. I will not allow you to steal it from him."

He headed towards the door again, but his path was blocked by Mr. Harrison standing in the doorway with none other than his uncle Vernon…

He stood at the edge of the forest and debated whether he should go in or not. He had to go in. Visiting his grave was the only way to get rid of this guilt. He drew in a deep breath and stepped into the woods. He weaved his way through the dark trees…the rustling of the leaves teased him…the murmur of branches…the soft susurrations of the trees…they were laughing at him, teasing him, haunting him…They were questioning him…asking him why he'd murdered him, why he'd slit his throat and stolen the light from his beautiful eyes…why he'd deprived the world of his purity? Why…Why…WHY! The questions grew deafening and the tumultuous uproar brought him down to his knees.

He covered his ears with his hands and screamed,

"NO…NO... HE HAD TO DIE!"

Everything inside him began shouting against him as well and he wanted to escape from his skin. He curled up on the forest floor and cried,

"HE HAD TO DIE…HE HAD TO DIE…HE HAD TO DIE!"

Tears streamed down his temples and he couldn't stop them from flowing. Why was he crying? Why wasn't he happy? Killing him was supposed to bring everything back to normal. Why wasn't it back to normal? Voices echoed inside his head and he cried out,

"Make it stop! MAKE IT STOP!"

Harry's laughter echoed all around him. The way he had laughed when he'd caught him after chasing him down the forest and tied him up to a tree. He sat up straight and looked down at his bare feet. It had always amused him. His lack of shoes had always amused him. Was he laughing now? Was he laughing at him from the heavens above? He would be…He was sure of it…

He took the support of a tree and pushed himself to his feet. He couldn't bear it. He couldn't bear to visit the grave…It would most certainly be the end of him.
An expression of utmost shock crossed his Uncle's face and Harry took a step backward. What was his Uncle doing in this town? When he'd picked this town, he had imagined that he would never be seeing his relatives again. Fate definitely had something else planned.

His uncle took a step forward and Mr. Harrison barked,

"What the hell is he doing here and where is Collin?"

Mrs. Harrison squeaked in a fearful voice,

"He…He…"

Harry wrenched his gaze away from his Uncle's face and looked Mr. Harrison in the eye before speaking,

"I came to inquire about what had happened to make Collin so fearful of returning home. I got my answer so if you'd excuse me, I have to be somewhere."

Mrs. Harrison spoke up,

"He knows where Collin is and won't tell."

Mr. Harrison narrowed his gaze at him and gripped his arm,

"Is that right, Mr. Potter?"

Harry tried to wrench his arm out of Mr. Harrison's hold but failed,

"In that case, you really must stay."

Mr. Harrison dragged him back to the living room and pushed him back on the settee. Harry sat up straight,

"Take a seat, Mr. Dursley. I'm sure this will be resolved in a few minutes and you can be on your way."

His Uncle's gaze was fixated on him and he finally spoke,

"Did he let you go?"

Mr. Harrison spoke up,

"Do you know him, Mr. Dursley?"

His Uncle frowned,

"Yes, he is my nephew."

Mr. Harrison gasped,

"He's your nephew. The richest person in our town is your nephew? You should have mentioned it, Mr. Dursley."
Harry lowered his head and resisted the urge to shake it. This was going wrong. He heard his Uncle laugh,

"That is a very good joke, Thomas. The boy has nothing to his name."

Mr. Harrison laughed nervously,

"Surely, you're the one that's joking, Mr. Dursley."

Harry was about to get up when Mr. Harrison got up and rested a hand on either side of his head, effectively trapping him,

"Where is Collin?"

Harry looked up at him and smiled,

"I'm not telling you."

Mr. Harrison raised his hand to strike him and Harry turned his head and braced for impact. It didn't come though, and Harry looked up to find him looking towards his uncle. His uncle spoke,

"Don't stop on my account. I never liked the boy anyway and I have my own set of questions to ask him."

Harry closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. He was in trouble. He could feel it. Mr. Harrison grinned, and he was struck hard across the face. The blow made him see stars and made his jaw ache. Blinking away the momentary darkness, he was about to touch his jaw when Mr. Harrison gripped his arm in a vice like grip and growled,

"I'm going to ask you one last time. Where is Collin?"

Harry closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath,

"I'm not telling you."

The next blow came to his stomach and knocked the breath out of him. He curled up and fell off the settee and on the rug. No...he wasn't telling them where Collin was. The dots weren't difficult to connect. Mr and Mrs. Harrison were selling Collin off to Uncle Vernon. He wouldn't let this happen. He would never let this happen. His stay at the castle had given him a high tolerance for pain and managed to lift himself to his feet. But he didn't stay on his feet for long. A sudden rush of pain jolted throughout his body. His stomach ached, his arms lost tension and his legs weakened. He dropped to the ground again. His tongue was soaked in the taste of blood. Bruised and winded, he grabbed Mr. Harrison's foot and pulled him to the ground. His head was pounding. He brought a fist to his face, snapping his nose into a grotesquerie. Before he could throw another punch, strong hands closed around his throat and dragged him away. He knew they belonged to his uncle. He closed his eyes and relaxed in an attempt to conserve his oxygen, but his lungs were already beginning to scream and he couldn't help but writhe against his uncle's hold.

Just when he thought he was going to black out, his uncle released him and he slumped back on the rug, drawing in large gulps of air and trying to regulate his breathing. He was grabbed by the hair and his uncle spoke,
"Is there someplace private in your home?"

Mr. Harrison must have nodded because he was suddenly being dragged by his hair. He fought against the hold and was punished by a kick to his chest. Harry's back screamed as he was dragged down stairs and then tossed roughly on the cold stone floor. His uncle's voice echoed around in the space,

"Where is the boy, Harry?"

Harry failed to get a single word out but shook his head. After that he couldn't recall how long the beating had gone on for, only the final kick and the sound of his uncle's laughter. His face wasn't too bad, just a cut above his eyebrow, the scarlet blood flowing into his eyes. It was his body that was damaged almost beyond the point at which recovery was possible. Everything inside him was aching and he felt too close to death...but he couldn't die now...not here...not at his uncle's hand...He had to save Tom. He had to save Bella. He felt Mr. Harrison or was it his uncle tie his hands behind his back and his ankles together. He tried to resist but every single action caused him unimaginable pain so for the moment he was content with just laying still. Mr Harrison finally spoke up,

"I'm going to go check his house."

His uncle spoke,

"I'll come with you."

He knew why his uncle was going along...He was going to steal his gold but that didn't matter to him Only Collin mattered. He was certain that Mr. Harrison would find Collin there. He tried to protest but couldn't. A hard kick to his head was all he felt before his world was drowned into darkness.
Harry woke up to the sound of his uncle's laughter. He didn't bother fighting against the bonds and remained as still as possible,

"Are you awake, Boy?"

Harry mouth felt incredibly dry. He needed water. How long had he been out? Every inch of his body was aching, but he wasn't worried about himself. He was more worried about what had happened to Collin. Had they gotten him?

He gasped when someone doused him in icy cold water. He opened his eyes and his uncle's grinning face came into view. That wasn't good…That wasn't good at all. He looked away from him and ran his gaze around the small, dingy basement. There was no sign of Mr. Harrison,

"Did you steal all that gold from him?"

Harry closed his eyes and shook his head silently,

"DO NOT LIE TO ME, BOY!"

Harry finally spoke out,

"I'm not lying."

His stomach roiled as he thought about Collin and what would have happened to him. It was apparent that his uncle had gotten his gold which meant that they had gotten Collin as well. His already aching jaw hurt worse when his uncle leaned over him and struck him hard across the face,

"Tell me…Tell me how you got that gold. I know you stole it. He would have never left you alive. No one gets out of that castle alive."

Harry pressed his cheek into the cold stone, trying to relieve some of the ache and breathed out,

"I didn't steal it."

His uncle grabbed him by the collar and lifted him up,

"Tell me how you got out. Was there a secret door? A tunnel…some hidden passageway to get in."

Harry opened his eyes and saw the greed burning in his uncle's small, mean eyes. He wanted more. It was so obvious that his uncle wanted more,

"There's nothing."

His uncle growled and threw him hard against the wall. The fall was made worse because of his bound hands and feet. His head hit the wall with a sickening crack and his vision blurred before blacking out altogether. His head screamed as his uncle clenched his fingers around his hair and bellowed,

"TELL ME, BOY!"

Harry couldn't even open his mouth to reply. His inability to reply must have ticked his uncle off because the next moment, he felt like his cheekbone had been shattered. The pain only served to
push him down deeper. The darkness grew denser and his uncle's shouting grew distant until he couldn't even hear it.

He must have passed out because when he awoke next, there was no one there with him. Somewhere upstairs someone was crying…Collin…It was Collin's voice and he was crying and begging.

He tried to take into account all of his injuries, but he was forced to stop before he even started. There wasn't a part of him that wasn't sore. Collin's distant voice reached his ears and he was able to make out the words,

"Let him go, please. Sir…He hasn't done anything…"

His pleading was cut short by Mr. Harrison's incoherent shouting. Harry hoped like hell that they weren't hurting Collin up there,

"Please…I'll do anything you want…I'll go quietly with Mr. Dursley…I'll work hard…Just let him go…Please…Just let Mr. Potter go…"

Harry struggled against the bonds and tried to think of a way out of this. He could get out of this. He just had to think…Voldemort had been able to summon objects just by snapping his fingers. He could do it…He could do it…He could do it…He just had to think about what he wanted. A knife…He needed a knife to cut through the rope. A knife…He visualized it in his head and then snapped his fingers. Nothing happened. He kept trying…He kept visualizing… Accio knife…Accio knife…Accio knife…Collin's begging kept egging him on and then…he felt it…

Triumphant joy filled his heart and he couldn't help but grin as he felt the cold handle of a knife in his hand. He began cutting through the bonds immediately and as soon as his wrists were free, he began working on his ankles. He was on his feet in an instant and rushing up the stairs. Collin was kneeling at Mr. Harrison's feet,

"You're not going anywhere, Collin."
Chapter 76

He knew that the only thing currently keeping him on his feet was the adrenaline coursing through his veins. He also knew that the adrenaline rush would not last forever. Mr. Harrison gripped Collin by the hair and pulled him to his feet. Collin struggled and cried, and Harry was about to lurch forward when his uncle spoke,

"He dies if you take a step closer."

Harry stilled and then asked,

"What do you want?"

His uncle grinned,

"We want you to take us into the castle, help us gather the gold and get us out."

Harry took a step back and shook his head,

"Absolutely not."

His uncle grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and spoke,

"Kill the boy."

For a moment, he didn't think that Mr. Harrison would do it but when he tilted Collin's head at an uncomfortable angle, he couldn't help but scream,

"NO!"

His uncle's smirk widened, and he spoke,

"Will you do it?"

Harry shook his head,

"I can't…I can't go back…"

His uncle snarled,

"Liar…You're lying, boy."

Harry fought for control as the adrenaline rush began to wear off and all the aches and pain started to return ten times magnified. His head spun and he struggled to keep his eyes open,

"Say it. Say that you will do it and we will let the boy go."

Harry couldn't…He couldn't lead his uncle into the castle to steal Voldemort's gold. It was the worst kind of treachery. He shook his head again,

"I won't…"

His uncle released him and he sagged against the wall,

"Kill him…"
Collin cried, and Harry couldn't bear it,
"Okay…Okay…I'll do it…Just let him go…"

His uncle stepped closer to him and patted him on the cheek,
"Say that again."

Harry closed his eyes and breathed out,
"I'll do it…"

His uncle's jubilant laughter filled the space and all the remaining energy left him. He slid to the ground and felt Collin kneel by his side,
"Sir…Sir…wake up…"

He struggled to open his eyes and heard his uncle speak,
"Tell your wife to get him some water and tie him up again."

Collin shouted,
"NO! No, you can't tie him up again…Please…Don't…"

Harry heard his uncle sneer,
"Oh and lock this little brat up in a separate room."

He heard Collin being dragged away but was too powerless to do anything. The next thing he felt was a glass of water being held to his lips. He drank it down in one and moaned,
"More…"

Mrs. Harrison scoffed,
"No."

Harry heard her walk away and the next thing he felt was being dragged down the stairs. He was thrown unceremoniously on the ground and once again his wrists and ankles were tied up. He felt way too drained and just thinking about what he'd agreed to do, killed him inside. He lay still on the floor. He could get out of these bonds again if he wanted to. But what was the point? As drained as he was, he was in no state to run away with Collin.

He had no idea how long he'd been out but when he came to, he heard his uncle talking with Mr. Harrison, a few feet away from him,
"Do you think he'll really lead us to the gold?"

His uncle chuckled.
"He will. He knows that if he doesn't, the boy dies. He wouldn't risk that."

Harry bit back a scream as his uncle brought his shoe down over his back,
"You will, won't you, Boy?"
A little more force and Harry was certain that his spine would shatter. He squirmed and rolled onto his side as soon as his uncle removed his foot,

"Good boy."

His uncle spoke,

"We'll leave tonight."

Harry didn't like how broken he sounded,

"Tonight?"

Mr. Harrison laughed,

"Yes, tonight."

Harry closed his eyes. No…It was much too early. He hadn't recovered enough to come up with a plan. No matter what happened, he needed to ensure Collin's safety,

"I have a condition."

His uncle grabbed him by the hair and snarled,

"What?"

Harry looked his uncle in the eye and spoke,

"I have a condition and…and if you don't fulfill it then I'll kill myself and you'll never be able to get to that gold again."

His uncle glared at him for a moment and Harry did his best to hold his gaze. Finally, he ground out,

"Let's hear it."

He drew in a deep breath and spoke,

"I'll leave Collin with someone I trust before taking you to the castle."

Mr. Harrison spoke,

"No bloody way."

His uncle leaned over him and spoke,

"That will not be happening."

Harry turned on his side and closed his eyes,

"Fine."

He was kicked hard in the stomach and endured it silently. His stomach ached, and his body curled in on itself as he felt the metallic taste of blood on the back of his throat. He was kicked again and again and by the end of it, he felt like he was tethering on the edge. One more and he was certain he would die. The pain throbs in his guts, it was deep and warm, but not in a nice way. It felt like someone had their hand in there and were squeezing his organs first gently and then as hard as they
could. At this rate, he wouldn't have to commit suicide. His uncle took a step back and Harry willed the pain to go away. His body was bruised and battered, and he knew that he wouldn't be able to take anymore. A few minutes later, the pain had faded away to an icy numbness. Black filled the edges of his vision and the only thing he could hear was his own heartbeat. His breath came in ragged, shallow gasps and darkness crept over him until it dominated him.
"Wake up, Boy!...Wake up!...You can send the boy wherever you want to but wake up!"

He came back to his senses feeling incredibly sore. The first thing he noticed was the absence of the cold, hard ground. He was laying on a bed and shrouded in warmth. His head was aching like hell and he found it incredibly difficult to open his eyes because his eyelids felt like they weighed a ton. The fear that his uncle might retract the offer forced him to open his eyes. His vision was blurred. Someone slammed his glasses on his face roughly and he saw his uncle and Mr. Harrison come into clearer focus. The relief was visible on their faces, but Harry knew that they were only relieved because they were going to get their precious gold. He was given water to drink and some nasty tasting medicine that made him black out again.

The next time he woke up, he felt stronger and a little more alert. He wanted to sit up straight, but his body protested, and he bit back a cry. He was all alone in the room and the house was extremely silent. He turned his head and looked at the window. It was dark outside. Was everyone asleep? Possibly. He pushed himself into a sitting position. The sound of muffled sobs reached his ears and he realized that they were coming from the next room. Collin...He had to be strong for Collin. He swung his legs off the bed and taking the support of the bed post rose to his feet. His legs trembled underneath his weight but he willed them to remain still and took a step. He stumbled and collapsed on his knees with a loud thump. Cursing his weakness, he crawled to the wall and rapped his knuckles on the wall,

"Collin...Collin...Tell me you're alright..."

For a moment, the sobs died down but then they returned worse than before,

"Mr. Potter...They told me you were dead...They told me they killed you..."

Harry closed his eyes and rested his head against the wall. He was grateful, he hadn't died because there was no telling what his uncle and Mr. Harrison would have done to Collin if he'd died. Mr. Harrison would have sold him off to his uncle and his uncle...his uncle would probably have sold him to someone else for profit,

"I'm alive, Collin...I'm alive...I promise I'll save you..."

Collin cried more and Harry continued to comfort him through the wall,

"Try to get some sleep, Collin. Everything will be alright...Just go to sleep..."

After a few minutes of whispered reassurances, Collin's sobs died down and Harry was sure he'd fallen asleep. He forced himself back to his feet and nearly screamed out as every cell in his body ached. Taking a deep breath, he took a few stumbling steps towards the door and checked it. He wasn't surprised to find it locked. Momentary darkness fell in front of his eyes and when the veil lifted, he found himself curled up on the floor, next to the door. He just wanted to lay there undisturbed but that wouldn't get him anywhere. He crawled back to the bed and climbed into it with all the strength he had.

If only he could get Collin a way to escape from here. If Collin left then half of his worries would disappear. He didn't trust his uncle to keep his word. In fact, he wasn't sure who to trust. He was beginning to realize that the world was a very cruel place where nothing, but money mattered.

He must have blacked out again because when he woke up, the room was filled with sunshine and
his uncle was sitting by the bed,

"Finally awake?"

He blinked to stabilize his vision and then nodded silently. His uncle rose to his feet and he
couldn't help but flinch as his uncle raised his hand. But the blow he was expecting didn't come.
Instead, his cheek

"You're afraid that I'll hit you again?"

When he didn't reply, his uncle laughed,

"Good…You should be afraid…"

He winced when his uncle pressed hard on the bruise on his cheek,

"If you try to deceive me then Collin will be the recipient of the next beating."

Harry turned his head and his uncle spoke,

"Tonight, you will lead us to the castle."

Harry took in a deep breath and spoke,

"You…You said you'd let Collin go…You said you'd let him go."

His uncle leaned over him, pushed a stray lock away from his forehead and spoke,

"If you can get up then by all means take the boy away and leave him with whomever you trust."

He stared hard at his uncle and his uncle smirked and took a step back, giving him room to get up
from the bed. Could he manage it? He had to manage it…for Collin's sake. It took him a minute to
bring his spinning head under control and push himself to a sitting position. He hoped that he didn't
have another black out. He couldn't afford it.

It took him everything he had in him to raise himself to his feet and take a few steps forward. For
Collin…This was all for Collin…He had to get him to safety. Collin's sobs from last night echoed
inside his head and spurred him on. It became easier to regulate his breathing and put one foot in
front of the other.

His uncle opened the door and led him to the room next door. Pulling out a set of keys, he
unlocked the door and the sight that met him broke his heart. Collin lay curled up against the wall
that met the wall of the room he'd been locked in. He forgot all his aches and pains at the sight of
him and rushed towards him. He knelt at his side and pulled him into his lap. He rested his hand
on his cheek and realized that he was freezing cold,

"Collin…Collin…wake up!"

Collin wasn't responding and his heart was beating out of his chest,

"COLLIN!"

His chest wasn't rising and falling. He leaned over him and tried to listen for breathing sounds but
heard none…His hands were trembling uncontrollably as he rested his head on his chest and took
his wrist to feel his pulse. Nothing…There was nothing…
Chapter 78

Harry clutched Collin's lifeless body to his chest and screamed,

"NO…NO…COLLIN…NO…COME BACK!"

How could Collin just die? How could he just leave him like this? Harry only held him tighter and wept his heart out. His cries resounded around the room. Their conversation from last night resounded in his ears. He wished he hadn't asked him to sleep last night. He wished he'd just talked to him, comforted him more, assured him a little more. If he'd known…If he'd known this would happen, he would have done something, anything to get Collin out last night,

"I'm so sorry, Collin…I'm so sorry…"

He'd failed to keep his promise. He'd failed, and Collin had left him. Tears streamed down his cheeks and he checked Collin's pulse once again, hoping against hope that was just asleep rather than…No, there was no hope. Collin really was gone. He closed his eyes and buried his face in Collin's hair as he screamed louder. The pain was too much. Collin had trusted him, and he'd let him down. He'd depended on him to save him and protect him, and he'd disappointed him.

He cried hoping the ferocity of it might bring him back; as if by the sheer force of his grief, Collin's demise would be undone, and time would reverse itself. His screaming sobs reverberated around the room and resonated deep inside his soul. Collin couldn't be gone…he just couldn't be gone…

And then he was being dragged away by his hair and he cried out louder and struggled with everything he had in him,

"You killed him…all of you killed him…"

He was tossed roughly against the wall and his vision went black for a split second. It took him a moment to regain his sight and find his uncle and Mr. Harrison standing over Collin's limp form,

"Leave him alone…Get away from him…You're monsters…"

His uncle sneered,

"Good riddance."

Harry was about to crawl towards where Collin was laying when Mr. Harrison pinned him back against the floor and straddled him,

"He's gone now, Boy, so, you'd better get your wits about you."

Harry turned his head away as tears streamed down his temples,

"You're wrong if you think that I'll still help you after this. I'd rather die than help you monsters. You killed him…you…"

A hand was clamped over his mouth and nose muffling the rest of his sentence along with his air supply,

"Listen very closely because I will not repeat myself. You are going to get us the gold otherwise Collin here, doesn't get a proper burial and his corpse will rot in this room."
He kicked his legs as he struggled to inhale some much-needed air. His uncle finally spoke,
"Let him breathe."

The hand was removed, and he drew air greedily into his oxygen deprived lungs,
"Do you understand who things will go from here?"

Harry shook his head defiantly as his vision blinked in and out of focus. He felt so utterly and completely broken. No way in hell would he help these monsters get into the castle. He would never let them anywhere near Voldemort's gold. His uncle glared at him for a moment before speaking.

"Lock him up with the corpse. He'll understand in a few hours."

He watched as Mr. Harrison walked out of the room followed by his uncle and then the door was slammed shut. He forced himself to his hands and knees and crawled towards Collin. He sat up supported by the wall and pulled Collin into his arms again.

All he could do now was mourn. He held onto him tight and screamed out at the injustice of it all. Collin wasn't supposed to die. He was so young…so pure…He'd had just a bright future ahead of him. How could they take that away? How could they simple snuff out Collin's light and feel no remorse and regret?

He had no idea how many hours he'd held Collin into his arms but he could feel that his body had gone stiff. His mind and heart were utterly numb as he stared at Collin's lifeless face. Somewhere between those hours, some part of his brain had provided the idea that he leave Collin and escape but he'd shot it down as soon as it had emerged. Leaving Collin here with those monsters was unthinkable. He would never find peace if he left Collin and ran. Taking a deep breath, he screamed at the top of his lungs,
"I'LL DO IT!"

A moment later, the door was opened and his uncle's grinning face came into view. He looked away because he couldn't stand the sight of him and repeated emotionlessly,
"I'll do it...I'll do it…"

His uncle laughed and Harry wanted to cover his ears,
"I knew you would understand the situation, Boy."

Mr. Harrison came into sight, holding a shovel,
"The grave's ready."

His uncle stepped into the room and took Collin's stiff form away from his arms and into his own. He was pulled to his feet roughly by Mr. Harrison and shoved out of the room and downstairs where a small wooden box lay. It was bare…without any cushioning and the sight of it nearly brought him down to his knees. Collin didn't deserve that…he didn't deserve this….

Mr. Harrison wrapped an arm around his waist and held him still as his uncle approached the coffin. But instead of laying Collin down into gently, he dropped him into it roughly and Harry cried out and struggled in Mr. Harrison's hold. A gag was forced into his mouth, muffling his screams and his wrists were chained behind his back. When his uncle started nailing the lid on the
coffin, he sagged against Mr. Harrison's chest and wept silently.

The small coffin was hauled out by his uncle and Mr. Harrison began pushing him out behind him. He was led down the hill towards the trees that lined the river. It was extremely dark, and the only light was from the lantern that preceded them, held by Mrs. Harrison. They reached a spot in the dense cover of the trees and Harry saw the hole that had been dug which was meant to be Collin's final resting place. His knees gave out and he fell on the damp ground.

Mr. Harrison walked towards his uncle and Harry watched powerlessly as the coffin was lowered into the grave. He was half unconscious by the time the grave had been filled. He wanted to die.

But death wasn't on the cards because Mrs. Harrison fed him water and a piece of bread. An oversized coat was wrapped around his shoulders and a hat was forced atop his head, before he was roughly pulled to his feet again,

"Time to get to work, Boy. Lead the way."
Chapter 79

He drifted into consciousness. And then back out. The world was a blur, and random images seemed to float aimlessly around in the pool of his thoughts, as though they were being blown about viciously by a hurricane. A slap to his face momentarily brought him back to the outside world, but after a second, he was once again lost. He could feel somebody trying to look at him, staring him dead in the eye, but he couldn't focus. Confusion blossomed in his heart and he knew that sooner or later he would need to wake up. To stare reality in the face. But for now, he lay down his heavy head, and retreated into wallowing blackness. He could feel the tiredness inside him like a worm, slowly but deliberately draining his life. He was alive, but he wasn't really living. He heard, but he wasn't really listening. Everything seemed to move in a dragged pace, all submerged into a hazy fuzz.

A hard blow to his face followed by a cold splash of water forced him to gasp and brought him to his senses. He blinked up at his uncle and Mr. Harrison staring down at him and the pain came crashing back. Collin was dead. He'd been killed by these cruel men. He was grabbed by the collar and placed roughly on his feet.

It took him a minute to get his bearings and he realized that they were at the outskirts of the dense forest…the forest that surrounded the castle. The trees seemed more sinister in the dark and the soft rustling of the leaves in the midnight breeze were like haunted whispers. His hands balled into fists as he summed up his strength. He didn't want to take them across. He couldn't betray Tom like this. His body felt utterly broken. He wondered how he was standing on his feet. His uncle pushed him, "Get a move on, Boy."

He took a step forward and instantly the wind picked up. He took another step amidst the howling wind and shuddered involuntarily as a shockwave passed through his body. His knees were about to give out when two strong hands were holding him up and dragging him forward through the thick cover of the trees. A soft rustling in the trees forced them to halt. It was taking him everything he had in him to stay on his feet and try to discern the direction of the sound. The rustling grew louder and Harry heard a low rumbling growl right infront of him.

He leaned against the tree and watched as Greyback emerged, followed by about ten more werewolves. His uncle and Mr. Harrison huddled closer to him but he didn't care. He just hoped that Greyback would kill them all and end it. Greyback eyed him for a moment but Harry figured that because of the coat and the cap, he didn't recognize him. He watched as he ran his gaze over his uncle and Mr. Harrison greedily and licked his lips, "Well…Well…Well…look at what we have here?"

He kept his lips sealed shut lest his voice give him away. He needed Greyback to kill them. He just needed him to end them. His uncle spoke, "Who the hell are you?"

Greyback barked out a laugh and spoke, "I should ask you that."

Mr. Harrison took a step forward and spoke boldly, "We don't have anything of value on our persons so there is nothing you can gain from us."
This time the collective laughter of the entire pack was enough to raise the hair on his arms. His uncle and Mr. Harrison thought that these were robbers. They couldn't be more wrong. He was already preparing himself for death and meeting Collin and his parents Greyback stepped closer to them and the snapping of a twig underneath made his uncle and Mr. Harrison twitch in fear,

"Let me introduce myself. My name is Fenrir Greyback…"

There was a pause in which his heart threatened to beat out of his chest. Apparently it wasn't ready to stop beating and currently it was looking for a way to escape because his body was sure to be ripped open and torn to shreds in the next five minutes,

"Now, let me introduce you. You three are going to be our feast for the night and I simply cannot wait to sink my teeth into you."

Greyback looked at his uncle and grinned,

"Especially you, since you seem so juicy and oh so delicious."

He could feel his uncle trembling right next to him. Greyback laughed,

"I can smell your fear in the ear and it is intoxicating."

The sound of Greyback dragging his nail over the tree bark made him cringe but his uncle spoke out,

"You can keep the boy…just let us go…"

Harry hadn't expected anything other than this from his uncle. Greyback was now standing mere feet away from them now,

"Why would I let you two juicy meals go for him? He's all skin and bones…"

He kept his head ducked and continued to track Greyback's movements from the corner of his eyes. His uncle continued to tremble next to him and he began saying his last prayers. He was content with his death. It was better than betraying Tom. He was just in the middle of his thoughts when Greyback spoke,

"Is the boy mute? So far, I haven't heard his voice."

He felt his uncle shake his head and speak,

"No, he can talk."

His uncle jabbed him in the ribs and he bit back a cry. He bent over and wrapped his arms around his aching chest,

"Talk, boy!"

He bit his lower lip and refused to talk. Greyback crooned,

"Interesting…"

Suddenly, he was being dragged away from the tree. Greyback pulled the cap away from his head, gripped his chin and forced his head up,

"Let's take a closer look at you."
The look of shock that stole over Greyback's features at the sight of his face was enough for him to
know that he wouldn't be dying anytime soon. Greyback released his chin and murmured softly,

"Well, I'll be damned…"
Chapter 80

The overwhelming smell of blood and sweat filled his nostrils and he wanted to pull back but Greyback held him still and touched his cheek, as if he couldn't quite believe that he was real. He bit back a hiss at the contact because Greyback's finger was exactly over the bruise on his cheekbone,

"You're supposed to be six feet under."

He dropped his gaze and stared at the ground,

"What's your name?"

He contemplated lying. If he lied about his name, then maybe he could convince Greyback that he was a lookalike. But his hopes were crushed by his uncle,

"Harry…His name is Harry."

Greyback inhaled sharply and dragged him to a nearby tree, pinning him efficiently to it. His head spun a bit at the impact with the trunk and he closed his eyes,

"How are you alive?"

He wanted to speak but words eluded him. He couldn't focus. Suddenly the sound of one of the werewolves growling forced Greyback to release him and he slumped to the ground. One of the werewolves shouted,

"They're running away."

He heard Greyback laugh,

"They won't get far. Catch them and bring them back here alive."

When the werewolves had scurried away after his uncle and Mr. Harrison, he heard Greyback crouch down in front of him. He felt him grip his chin and heard him ask,

"Should I inform the Dark Lord of your resurrection? I'm sure he would love to kill you all over again."

He knew Voldemort would kill him again in a heartbeat. There was no way he was going to emerge from this victorious. He remembered Collin's cold and stiff body in his arms and felt the tears start anew. He'd failed him and now he was going to fail Tom and Bella too. He was a failure…an absolute disappointment. He should have died that first time. He shouldn't have come back to life in the first place. Despair clenched his heart as he pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around himself. It wouldn't take too much effort on Voldemort's part to kill him. He was already half dead. His uncle had seen to that. All Voldemort would need to do was suffocate him…stop his heart from beating and his lungs from breathing and then it would be over.

He felt Greyback wipe his tears away with calloused fingers. His touch was rough but Harry sensed tenderness in the gesture. That was the last thing he'd expected from someone as vicious as Greyback. He forced his eyes open and saw the anger in Greyback's eyes as he assessed him,

"Did those two men do this to you?"
He nodded shakily. Greyback cupped his cheek as gently as possible,

"Why?"

He tried to hold back his tears but they still burst free along with that one cursed word that had resulted in Collin's death,

"Gold."

Greyback cursed verbally and rose to his feet. The sound of howls and growls informed him of the pack's return. His uncle's snivelling pleas and Mr. Harrison's begging confirmed that the pack had caught them. He blinked back tears and saw his uncle and Mr. Harrison being bound to a tree. Greyback spoke to a nearby werewolf before walking away,

"Keep an eye on the boy. None of you is allowed to harm a hair on his head."

He buried his face in his knees and closed his eyes. Greyback had no doubt gone to summon Voldemort. In a few minutes this was all going to be over. He was going to under the ground, where he belonged. He just hoped that his uncle and Mr. Harrison joined him. Those monsters couldn't be allowed to go scot-free. He drew in a deep breath. He was ready to die. He'd made peace with that in that room when he'd held Collin's lifeless form to his chest.

His uncle and Mr. Harrison continued to plead for the next ten minutes and he just listened to them, feeling a vindictive kind of satisfaction because he'd begged them exactly like that to free Collin. He'd begged and pleaded but they hadn't listened and now Collin was gone.

Approaching footsteps caught his attention and he squeezed his eyes shut tighter as he willed his breathing to calm down and his heart to slow down. He kept his face buried in his knees and waited with abated breath to hear Voldemort's voice and feel his suffocating dark presence.

That didn't happen though. Instead a shrill, pain filled cry reached his ears and forced him to look up. Greyback stood beside a grief-stricken Bella. She looked him up and down and then launched herself at him. Just feeling that familiar warmth wrapped around him broke him down and he howled in misery. Bella held him tight, rubbed his back and whispered assurances and comforts to calm him down but none of it worked. He buried his face in Bella's shoulder and cried harder and louder, letting out all the pain, all the agony that he'd had bottled up inside him after Collin's death and funeral,

"Harry…Harry…What happened to you? Talk to me…Just tell me…"

She hugged him tighter, pulled him as close as she possibly could. He was sure, she would hide him inside herself if it were possible. He could feel Bella's despair, her warm tears. He tried to calm down enough to speak but it was just impossible. He'd written about Collin in one of his letters when he'd successfully managed to convince Mr and Mrs. Harrison to let him study. He'd described him in great details. Bella would remember him. He was sure she would know him,

"Collin…"

Bella was silent for a while and then she smoothed her hand through his hair and spoke,

"The kid whose guardians you talked into letting him study? Your student?"

He nodded inconsolably, and another cry escaped his lips,

"Harry, what happened to him?"
Harry's breath hitched in his throat as he whispered,
"They killed him…"

Bella gasped softly before regaining her wits and asking,
"Who?"

He pulled away from Bella and looked at where his uncle and Mr. Harrison were tied to the tree. She followed his gaze and Harry saw the way her eyes burned with rage,

"Are they the ones who did this to you?"

He nodded silently and Bella spoke,

"I'll make them pay…I promise…They will pay…"
Chapter 81

She couldn't begin to imagine the pain Harry was going through. He was covered in bruises and the way he'd been crying…it just broke her heart into a million tiny pieces. He was silent now and his steady breathing was the only sign that told her that he had passed out. She smoothed her hand down his back and pressed another kiss to his forehead. She had missed him… truly missed him… but Harry wasn't safe here. She didn't know where she was supposed to hide him in this castle. The Dark Lord would kill him if he found out that he was alive, and she couldn't endure that.

Greyback cleared his throat and spoke,

"What do you propose we do with these two?"

She glared at the two men and spoke,

"Let me talk to them and then you can have one of them."

She was about to pull away from Harry when he murmured something incoherently and a distressed expression twisted his ravaged features. Greyback spoke,

"Maybe, you ought to take care of him first. He doesn't look good."

She pulled him back to her chest and Harry's body relaxed once again. She couldn't bear to fathom what would have happened if Greyback had gone to Voldemort instead of her. She knew somewhere deep down, Greyback had grown to care for Harry and that was the only reason he'd come to her. She ran her fingers through Harry's unruly matted hair and murmured,

"Yes, he isn't fine."

Greyback stepped closer,

"You do know that the Dark Lord will find out what about him sooner or later."

She knew that and the prospect was terrifying her. There was no place that was actually safe for Harry inside the castle,

"Could you keep him with you?"

Greyback's eyebrows rose,

"Are you serious, Bellatrix? Where will I keep him?"

She held him tighter in her arms and spoke,

"In your den, of course."

Greyback scoffed,

"I won't take responsibility for him in the state he's in. The only reason I called you here is because I knew you could take care of him."

She didn't care if she had to beg Greyback…she was willing to go to any lengths for Harry's safety,

"Please, Fenrir. I'll heal him. Just keep him with you for one day. Tomorrow night, he'll be fine"
enough to leave this forest again and that'll be the end of it."

Greyback rubbed his chin thoughtfully and then spoke,

"Fine."

She conjured a thick blanket and wrapped Harry up in it,

"Harry…sugar…"

Harry didn't respond and Greyback bent down beside her and pulled Harry's limp form in his arms. Werewolves were known for their immense body heart and that was probably why Harry snuggled against Greyback's warm chest. Greyback looked uncomfortable but she didn't miss the fondness in his eyes as he corrected the blanket,

"Bring these two along, Silas. Make sure that they are secured."

Silas nodded and Greyback began making his way through the forest and she fell in step with him. She'd never been to the wolves’ den. Small, loose stones littered the floor as they got closer to the rock face. The entrance of the cave was so small she almost missed it. The cave was built into the muddy brown rock of the cliff, the stone guarding the entrance was jagged and uneven, arranged in such a way, that it would be difficult to spot. The insides of the cave was enveloped and lost in the blackness. She had to move around by following the damp wall of the cave with her hands. All of a sudden, flaming torches sparked to life, lighting up the tunnel ahead and bathing the entire cavern in a flickering orange glow. Greyback led her through the tunnel and she noticed several small alcoves that were probably rooms for werewolves.

Greyback walked straight past them to a point where the tunnel divided into two separate pathways. One of them was lit while the other was pure darkness. The sound of those two yelling and screaming reverberated around the cave. She wanted to torture them into oblivion…she yearned to kill them in the most painful way possible for what they had done to Harry and that boy…Collin… Greyback paused and watched as Silas dragged the two of them down the darker path and shouted after them,

"Gag them. I don't want their noise."

Harry whimpered in his senselessness and Greyback gave her an uncertain look. She assured him with her eyes and he began walking towards the lit tunnel and into an alcove that was larger than all the others she'd seen. A pallet was set up on the floor which was supposed to be a bed. Greyback laid Harry down on it and straightened up,

"You said you would heal him."

She nodded and knelt on the pallet beside Harry's limp body. Pulling the blanket away, she unbuttoned Harry's shirt and growled… behind her she heard Greyback's growl as well. There wasn't an inch of his body that wasn't covered in marks or injuries,

"Oh, Harry…"

Fresh tears slid down her cheeks and a sob escaped her lips,

"Calm yourself, Bellatrix. Clearly this is not the worst state he's been in."

It wasn't. He'd endured worse and survived but the fact that those two swines had done this to her Harry set her insides on fire. No, she would certainly make them pay and Harry would watch it
happen. Greyback's voice snapped her out of her thoughts,

"Heal him. It'll be dawn soon."

That was enough to spur her into action. Half an hour later, Harry looked far more alive…far more like the Harry she remembered. She'd changed his clothes and cleaned him up. She pressed a kiss to his forehead as she rose to her feet,

"Feed him when he wakes up, please."

Greyback nodded and she tucked Harry back into the blanket,

"I'll be back tomorrow night, Sugar. Just get better."

And with that she walked away.
The boy was burning up and he didn't know what to do. He stood a little distance away from the bed and watched him shiver uncontrollably. He'd already thrown two blankets over him, but it seemed they had had zero impact on banishing the cold. He sighed. How had he gotten stuck with this? Why had he even let Bellatrix talk him into this?

The boy moaned weakly and his heart lurched in his throat. He cared about him...he actually cared about the boy. Taking a deep breath, he switched to his wolf form and settled down on the pallet beside the boy. The boy...Harry instantly wrapped his arm around his and nuzzled his head in his fur. He rested a paw on his chest and felt his steady heartbeat. It was important that this heart kept beating.

He'd been a little sad when he'd heard of the boy's death, but he'd expected it. The way The Dark Lord had treated him in front of everyone had proved that he would kill him very soon. Bellatrix would have surely died that day if the boy hadn't stepped up and offered himself. The way he'd saved Bellatrix was a step beyond noble...It was something he had never witnessed before and it had touched him deeply.

Harry woke up to something incredibly soft and wonderfully warm. He ran his fingers through the fur blanket and moaned softly. It was only when the blanket moved that he opened his eyes and raised his head to look into blue almost human eyes. There was concern in those eyes and he hitched up a smile,

"I'm fine now."

Any normal person would have been terrified out of their mind, but he wasn't because he knew who it was. He continued running his fingers through the fur and Greyback closed his eyes. Harry finally took in Greyback's wolf form. He was larger than a normal wolf. The fur was white-silver, glossy and thick. It was shorter over the body and longer at the neck. He ran his hand over his muzzle. Greyback nuzzled his head in his palm and he laughed softly,

"You're beautiful and extremely warm."

Greyback's paw was rested over his chest, exactly over his heart and he ran his finger over it. It wasn't difficult to see the sharp claws that had probably torn apart so many people. He should have been intimidated by them, but he wasn't. They were beautiful just like the rest of Greyback. He buried his face in Greyback's neck and kissed the fur. Gently Greyback ran his paw over his chest and he spoke,

"Thank you for everything you did for me last night. I...I probably would have died if you hadn't..."

Greyback whined and Harry found the sound adorable. He continued running his fingers through the soft fur and pressed another kiss to it before pulling away. He tried to sit up straight but cried out in pain. His body felt sore and every part of him ached like hell. He looked down at himself and realized that he was dressed in fresh clothes. He pulled his shirt up and smiled,

"Bella healed me then?"

He stared up at the stone ceiling and then ran his gaze around his surroundings,
"Where am I?"

Out of the corner of his eye, he watched as Greyback shifted back to his human form. It was truly mesmerizing, but he closed his eyes when Greyback rose to his feet to pull up a pair of pants,

"You're in my den."

Greyback must have noticed his closed eyes because he spoke,

"You can open your eyes now. I'm decent."

He opened his eyes and found that Greyback was buttoning up his shirt,

"Where is this den?"

Greyback poured some water in a cup and settled back on the pallet beside him. He helped him sit up and then held the cup to his lips,

"Drink."

He drank the water in one and Greyback refilled the cup before holding it back to his lips. He drank that down too and slumped against the pillows,

"Bella asked me to feed you. What do you want to eat?"

He shook his head,

"I'm not hungry."

Greyback seemed concerned so Harry spoke,

"I'm fine. I'm just not hungry. When will Bella get back?"

Greyback pursed his lips,

"Two hours…"

He stretched his legs and winced when they ached,

"You didn't answer my question."

Greyback spoke,

"It's in the forest."

He chewed on his lips as he thought about it and then spoke,

"Where are my uncle and Mr. Harrison?"

A dark look crossed Greyback's face,

"Your uncle?"

Harry ducked his head and nodded. Greyback's voice was a bit louder when he spoke again,

"One of that men is your uncle?"
He nodded again and Greyback cupped his face,
"Your blood relative?"
He nodded and Greyback sucked in a breath before rising to his feet and pacing the cave,
"Why would he do that to you?"
He pulled the blankets up till his chest and spoke,
"He was greedy."
Greyback snarled and then turned to face them,
"No one treats their own blood like that…not even animals…"
He laughed softly,
"They're monsters."
Greyback sat back on the pallet beside him and spoke,
"You really should eat something or Bellatrix will eat me alive."
He shook his head,
"I'm really not hungry. It feels like I'll throw up any second."
Greyback was about to say something when someone cleared their outside,
"Come in, Silas."
Silas was a well-built guy, tall and dark and with matted brown hair that reached his shoulders,
"You requested a pack meeting. Everyone has gathered and are awaiting you."
He nodded and dismissed Silas with a wave of his hand. He turned to him and spoke,
"Will you be fine if I leave you alone?"
He nodded and Greyback spoke,
"You should sleep for a while until Bellatrix gets back. It'll be good for you."
Greyback gently helped him lay back and pulled blankets over him. He closed his eyes and then spoke,
"Where are they?"
Greyback smoothed his hair away from his forehead and spoke softly,
"They're locked away. We'll deal with them when you get better."
He nuzzled his head into the pillow and whispered,
"I want them to die for what they did to Collin."
Greyback patted him gently on the head and spoke,

"They will."
Chapter 83

Chapter Notes

The track is Incomplete and Alone by Blood on the Dance Floor...Check it out!!!

Eternal pain, something I will take to my grave
Your memory is an image I just can't erase
I spend my life always walking in the shadows
Scared, alone, locked away inside my castle
And when you love something, they say set it free
If it don't come back, it wasn't meant to be
I destroy everything I touch
Even things I love too much
I am cursed with these hands
They will never understand
I don't want to let you go
Incomplete and all alone
Here I am waiting for my sacred true love
With these hands that hold me trapped like a steel glove
When you love something, they say set it free
And if it don't come back, it wasn't meant to be
I destroy everything I touch
Even things I love too much
I am cursed with these hands
They will never understand
I don't want to let you go
Incomplete and all alone
Uh oh uh oh
I'm incomplete and all alone
Uh oh uh oh
I don't want to let you go

She stared dispassionately at the new victims they'd hunted from the forest an hour ago. She had no appetite...no wish to feed...All she wanted was to be back with Harry and know that he was fine. She dismissed them, and her fellows dragged them away with greed and hunger apparent on their faces. She was about to turn around and head back to the forest when The Dark Lord's cold voice made her freeze,

"What is the matter, Bellatrix? You seem anxious."

The Dark Lord was an expert in detecting lies but she just couldn't let him know about Harry. She wouldn't. Gathering her wits about her, she turned around and knelt down in front of him. Kissing the hem of his robes, she murmured,

"No, My Lord. Nothing is wrong."

The Dark Lord hummed thoughtfully before speaking,
"Are you certain, Bellatrix?"

She nodded silently, keeping her eyes glued to his feet. She expected The Dark Lord to retreat after that but when he didn't move she asked,

"Do you require something, My Lord?"

For a moment, there was no reply but then he spoke,

"Yes, I wish for you to take me to his grave."

Suddenly, it felt like the ground had vanished from underneath her feet. Would The Dark Lord know that the grave was empty? Would he be able to tell? Certainly not. According to him, Harry was dead so she was very certain that he wouldn't be able to tell whether the grave was empty or full. She spoke,

"As you wish, My Lord."

She rose to her feet and began leading the way. In less than fifteen minutes, she stood in front of the mound of dirt that was supposed to be Harry's grave. Flowers had grown all over it in the past six months and it looked beautiful. What would she have done if Harry had really died that night? The pain would have most certainly killed her. She collapsed on her knees beside it and ran her hand over the delicate flowers thinking about how much she'd nearly lost that day. Harry meant the world to her and she could never afford to see him in pain. The sound of sobs caught her attention, but she kept her head bowed. Could it be that the Dark Lord was crying…actually crying? Did he really regret what he had done? Was he really remorseful?

He knew he shouldn't reveal his sentiments in front of Bellatrix, but he couldn't hold them back…he just couldn't. Tears streamed down his eyes as he stared at the flowerly grave in front of him. It was beautiful, just like Harry had been. He slumped back against the tree as all the memories played in front of his eyes. Harry's smile that could light up the room…his laughter that could pierce through any darkness…those expressive emerald green eyes…his untainted innocence…his insatiable curiosity…his thirst for adventure…his unequivocal goodness…everything about him had been the epitome of beauty and he'd squashed it all, mercilessly like the beast he was. He stared at his hands and remembered the moment, he'd used them to hold the knife to Harry's throat…the moment when he'd sliced into his skin…the blood…the moment, the light had left his eyes forever. The look in Harry's eyes when he'd been dying…there had been no fear…only sorrow…

His knees gave way and he slid to the ground with his face buried in his hands. Why wouldn't the guilt leave him? Why couldn't he just forget his existence and move on? Why did he feel this way? Why did it hurt so much? He clutched his chest as it felt like it would explode with the agony. He drew in a deep breath and spoke,

"Leave, Bellatrix."

He closed his eyes and waited for Bellatrix to retreat before drawing closer to the grave. For a moment, he was afraid of touching the grave but he needed the closure. He needed this to end. He rested his hand on the grave and spoke,

"I am sorry, Harry…I am truly sorry..."

But it only made him feel worse. What was the point of apologizing now? What was he apologizing for? There was no peace for him…He was never destined for it. He ran his hand over the grave and whispered,
"I want you to come back…"

He choked on his tears and rested his forehead on the grave,

"Please come back…"

He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath. It wasn't possible of course. His wishes were foolish and pointless. He shouldn't have killed him in the first place. He shouldn't have stolen his life. He should have known this would happen. He would have to live with the consequences for the rest of his wretched immortal life. He pressed a kiss to the grave and rose to his feet. He was destined for darkness. Harry's light was never meant to be his. He was certain that Harry was happy, up in the heavens above. He must be very happy.
He woke up feeling extremely dizzy and utterly sick but the warmth that surrounded him instantly made him feel better and put a smile on his lips,

"Bella…"

Bella answered his greeting with a kiss to his forehead and murmured,

"Your fever hasn't gone down a bit."

He opened his eyes and saw the immense concern on her face,

"I'm fine…I'll be fine now that you are here."

Bella ran her fingers through his hair and frowned,

"Greyback told me you refused to eat. How are you supposed to get better with an empty stomach?"

He nuzzled his head in her lap and spoke,

"I'll eat something in a while. Let me just enjoy this for now."

Bella pulled him closer to her and pressed another kiss to the top of his head,

"You have no idea how much I missed you."

He looked up at her,

"I missed you too, Bella. I missed you a lot."

Bella pulled a wooden box from beside her and showed it to him,

"I kept all your letters in here."

Harry sat up straight and hugged her tight,

"I'm not happy about the circumstances that led me back here but I'm glad I'm back. I won't leave again, Bella."

Bella's hold tightened on him as she smoothed her hand over his back,

"No, Harry. You can't stay. You have to go back as soon as you get better."

He pulled away from her and asked,

"Why, Bella? Why can't I stay here?"

Bella eyed him despairingly,

"He'll kill you, that's why."

He took her hand and spoke,
"So, I'm supposed to let the fear of being murdered by him keep me away from you and this place?"

Bella nodded silently and he cried,

"No, I won't go back... Gold and riches are the only thing that matter out there... People are savages... The world is a cruel place and I won't make it out there either. So, it's better that I die here where there are people who'd at least mourn me."

Bella clamped a hand over his mouth,

"Don't say things like that... Don't you dare say things like that..."

She pulled him back into a hug and wept on his shoulder,

"I love you so much... I can't stand the thought of you being hurt or worse..."

He soothed her gently and then spoke,

"I promised I'd break the curse. I have to keep my promise."

Greyback cleared his throat and Harry saw him standing a few feet away,

"You should really eat something now."

Harry rested his head on Bella's shoulder and groaned,

"Do I have to?"

Bella nodded and Harry saw Greyback smile which looked absolutely stunning on him. Bella fed him some bread and broth and he had no option but to eat. Once he felt fit to burst, Greyback spoke,

"Now, what do you want us to do to those two?"

Bella wrapped an arm around him protectively and spoke,

"They're going to die, of course. Isn't that right, Harry?"

He stared at the stone wall of the cave and nodded silently. His own choice bothered him. How could he order someone's death so calmly? But they weren't just someone. They were monsters... They'd killed Collin. They needed to die because if he let them go, he was certain that they'd hurt someone else. It was better this way.

"Can I see them?"

Greyback cupped his cheek gently,

"Are you sure about that?"

He nodded resolutely and Greyback spoke,

"Very well. Would you like to see them now?"

He nodded again and Greyback rose to his feet,

"Can you walk?"
Bella released him and he tried to push himself to his feet but a veil of darkness fell in front of his eyes and he would have collapsed if Bella hadn't caught him,

"You need to rest, Harry."

He shook his head and forced himself back on his feet. This time he managed to stay on them for a few seconds before his legs went boneless once again. Bella sighed,

"Harry, please."

She was about to lead him back to the pallet, but he absolutely refused. The sooner he got this over with, the better it would be. Greyback moved towards him and swept him up in his arms effortlessly. He wrapped his arms around his neck and blushed. He must really look pathetic. Some of his embarrassment must have shown on his face because Greyback shook his head,

"It's fine, Harry."

He carried him outside and Bella followed them. Harry could only stare in wonder at the dark caves. He shivered uncontrollably when the tunnels got darker and colder. They came to a halt inside a huge cavern which had iron bars fitted around all its walls. He located his uncle and Mr. Harrison shackled to the wall behind the bars. Greyback set him down on his feet and wrapped an arm around his waist to hold him up.

He stared intently at the two monsters and felt the unimaginably hot flames of rage lick up his insides and make his blood boil,

"You starved Collin, beat him and then locked him up. What should be a fitting punishment for you?"

They were gagged so of course they couldn't reply. Greyback signalled one of the guards to release them. Five minutes later, his uncle and Mr. Harrison were clutching his feet and begging him for mercy,

"You didn't have any mercy to spare for that innocent boy. Why should I spare you some then?"

He took a step back and his uncle crawled forward and began kissing his feet,

"Please…Please…Think of your aunt and your cousin. Who will look after them if I die?"

Greyback's hold tightened around his waist and he spoke,

"They'll be better off without you. Dudley probably would have turned out like you if he'd spent anymore time with you and I'm sure Aunt Petunia will manage just fine without you."

His uncle continued to grovel at his feet but during that time the entire pack had gathered in that cavern and Harry could tell that they were lusting for blood. He spoke up,

"I would do what you did to Collin…I'd starve you, have you beaten up and then lock you away and leave you to rot but…"

A hopeful look crossed his uncle's and Mr Harrison's faces but that hope was snubbed out when he spoke again,

"But my friends here can't wait that long."

Greyback stepped aside and it was Bella that was holding him then,
"What did you say when Collin died?"

His uncle continued to cry and beg but he repeated,

"What did you say?"

His uncle muttered,

"Good riddance…"

He nodded as he retreated to the farthest wall,

"You're right. Good riddance."

Greyback was the first to turn and then everyone followed suite. Low rumbling growls echoed around the cavern until Greyback pounced on his uncle with all the grace of a skilled predator. He buried his face in Bella's shoulder as his uncle's and Mr Harrison's screams echoed around the cavern followed by the sound of the flesh being ripped from the bones and the smell of blood that permeated the air. Bella held him tight and rubbed his back as the werewolves feasted upon the two monsters…

Good riddance indeed.
He was absolutely restless and he didn't know what to do about it. He'd been trapped in this cave for the past three days and he felt like he was going to suffocate. He needed sunlight, he needed fresh air… he needed to walk and feel the damp forest ground underneath his feet…between his fingers…

He had no idea where Greyback was, so he rose to his feet and pulled on his shoes. There was no point in asking for permission or informing him anyway because he would definitely say no. He started walking through the tunnels and tried to act as nonchalant as possible in front of the wolves he passed. Carefully, he slipped out and was instantly assaulted by that distinct forest scent. A mixture of moist dirt, damp leaves, forest flowers and rain. The sky was a stormy grey. It was going to rain soon. He toed off his shoes near a tree and began walking barefooted through the trees. He wanted to giggle with delight as he felt the coolness of the damp soil on the soles of his feet and between his toes. He'd certainly missed all this.

He weaved through the trees and listened to the melody of the birds, trying his best to whistle a tune but he sucked at whistling. That didn't stop him from trying though and he kept it at it until he came to a halt in front of a very familiar grave…his grave to be exact…He bent down beside it and ran his fingers over the delicate flowers blooming over it. Had Voldemort visited it? Did he regret what he'd done. A pair of approaching footsteps forced him to take refuge behind a thick bush. He peeped through the branches expecting Greyback but when he caught sight of the bare feet, a smile formed on his lips. Guess that answered that question. Voldemort did visit his grave. He couldn't see his face since that would mean he would have to get up so he contented himself with looking at his feet and feeling his heart fill up with an odd kind of joy that made him giddy. Voldemort's sorrow filled voice however saddened him,

"I thought I could stay away from your grave…"

He stopped breathing altogether and listened to Voldemort avidly,

"I thought I could find closure by visiting your grave…"

There was a moment of silence in which a soft pain filled sob escaped Voldemort's lips and the sound broke his heart. It was so familiar to Tom's sobs...

"I thought I could find peace…"

A soft thump signalled that Tom had fallen on his knees and Harry finally caught a glimpse of his tear streaked face. The features were still snake like but those tears made him look so vulnerable… so human...

"I have not found peace, Harry…"

He was tempted to walk out of the bush and go to him. He wanted to comfort him and wipe away his tears but that just wasn't possible. Not yet…

"I have not slept a wink ever since I killed you…Food tastes like ash…Everything seems so pointless…"

He watched Voldemort run his fingers over the flowers that he'd just touched minutes ago. For a few minutes, Voldemort's sobs were the only thing that punctuated the silence. Harry couldn't stop his own tears from flowing. Why did there have to be so much pain? Why couldn't they just have
their happily ever after now? Voldemort spoke again,

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE TO ME?"

He closed his eyes as a fresh river of tears streamed down his eyes. He bit down on his knuckle to hold back his own sobs,

"Give me back my peace, Harry…I implore you…Please…"

He tasted the metallic taste of blood on his tongue as he bit a little too hard on his knuckles. It was taking everything he had in him to stay still and hold in his sobs,

"Come back…Haunt me…I need you back…"

Thunder clapped deafeningly and Harry felt the first drop of rain land straight on his forehead. He tipped his head back and stared up at the sky, opening his mouth for the falling drops and soon enough a few of them landed on his tongue. The rain tasted so sweet, so absolutely wonderful. Soon enough the rain began to pour and he felt it wash away his tears. He took another peek at Voldemort and saw him still kneeling there. His head was rested on the grave and he was the perfect picture of misery. A scheme stewed in his head and when the lightening flashed, he whispered in a low pitched ghostly voice,

"Look up at the sky."

He saw the way Voldemort's head shot up from the grave and he looked around. He ducked his head and savoured the exhilaration rushing through his blood. He'd needed this. He'd definitely needed this… This rush of adrenaline… For a moment there was nothing, but silence and he chanced another peek. Sure enough, Voldemort was staring up at the sky. The rain was falling directly on his face and his eyes were closed. The lightening flashed again, and he whispered,

"Open your mouth."

For a moment, Voldemort didn't comply, and Harry had almost lost hope but then he did…slowly, reluctantly, he opened his mouth and Harry did the same. He tipped his head back opened his mouth and drank the rain pouring down. When he'd had his fill, he chanced another glance at Voldemort, who was drinking in the rain with the ghost of a smile curving his lipless mouth. It was good enough for now. It would have to suffice for now. He closed his eyes and smiled…enjoying the rain…loving it and watching Voldemort love it as well.

When the rain stopped. Voldemort got up and walked away. He was glad to see that the smile was still on his face when he'd departed. He sat there long after Voldemort had left. He just sat there until night fell. He had dozed off when Greyback's panicked voice brought him back to his senses.

"What have you been doing here?"

He yawned and stretched as he rose to his feet. His clothes were still damp from the rain, but he found it pleasant instead of uncomfortable,

"Soaking in the rain."

Greyback shook his head fondly and began dragging him back to the cave,

"Come on. Bella has been going crazy."
Chapter 86

Harry tried to focus on the book that was open in front of him. These days books were his only source of entertainment. Ever since Greyback had found him in the forest, he'd planted a guard outside the alcove so that he couldn't sneak out. It had been three days since he'd seen the light of day and he was getting pretty tired of being trapped.

The isolation had given him all the more chance to process what he'd witnessed and done that day in the forest. Tom had been crying at his grave. He'd been so unhappy. Did that mean he repented his decision? Was Tom really feeling guilty for killing him? He couldn't stop thinking about how miserable Tom had looked.

He'd wanted to step out of the bush and reveal himself. He'd wanted to console Tom but that hadn't been the right time for it. It hadn't been Tom, that had murdered him that day. It had been Dumbledore that had ensnared Tom's soul and was leeching off his vitality…channeling his wickedness through him.

What was he supposed to do? How was he supposed to break the curse? How was he going to free Tom from Dumbledore? The riddle had been playing in his head over and over again and he couldn't make sense of it.

Embrace the darkness, lose your soul.

Accept the curse and become whole

He'd already lost his soul once, hadn't he? What else was he supposed to do? He ran his hand over his face as he exhaled. This was going to be the end of him. He closed the book and rose to his feet. He couldn't deal with this. He was about to walk straight out of the alcove when the guard stopped,

"You're not allowed to leave."

He was about to say something when Greyback walked towards them,

"What's the matter, Harry?"

He moved closer to Greyback and spoke,

"I want to go out, Fenrir. I'm tired of staying here."

Greyback cupped his cheek gently ad spoke,

"Harry, you know it's not safe for you outside."

He sighed,

"I know but I'm tired of hiding."

Greyback wrapped an arm around his shoulder and led him back inside the alcove before sitting him down on the pallet,

"Harry, if you want to leave this forest then you're free to go. You have the liberty to leave and never come back."
He shook his head,

"I told Bella that I'm not leaving this castle...not until I break the curse and free you all."

Fenrir patted him on the shoulder,

"Harry, you're not honour bound to do this. Your safety is all that matters."

He rested his head on Greyback's shoulder and Greyback gently rubbed his back,

"I want to do this for you and Bella."

Greyback patted him on the back and spoke,

"The best thing you can do for us is to stay safe."

He nodded quietly but he'd already made up his mind. He was leaving these caves as soon as he could and confront Tom. Greyback fed him lunch and left to deal with some matters. It took him all the stealth he possessed to sneak out of the room and the caves. Once he was out in the forest, he weaved his way through the trees as fast as he could until he found himself in the garden of the west wing. It was partially cloudy but he savoured the sunlight as much as he could and soaked it in. He might not get the chance to feel it if Dumbledore killed him again. He ran his gaze around the garden and committed the sight to his memory. The sunlight conjured the most brilliant of mosaics, reflecting from each leaf and wisp of cloud. It was as if there was a pure joy in the light, as if it were happy to create art where it shone, warm and steady. It was so beautiful. Each tree was a masterpiece, each wand of grass something magical.

He could stand here all day. It had been days since he'd seen the sun... The warm rays came as an elixir. The air he breathed in was sweeter than anything in the world. The birds' chorus beautified the atmosphere further and he wanted nothing more than to lie back on the cool grass and take a nap.

Unfortunately, he didn't have the time for that. If Greyback discovered that he was gone, he'd come looking for him. So, without further dilly-dallying, he hurried inside the castle and made his way through the corridors. There was something incredibly soothing about being inside the castle's walls again. The corridors were as dusty as he remembered them and just as vacant. He imagined what these walls would like when they were resonating with voices, music, laughter... life... It would truly be a sight to behold. It didn't take him long to find the statue of Salazar Slytherin.

He stood in front of it and just stared at it for a minute as he battled that nagging feeling, he was going to die again. Well, not that easily... This time he was not going to present himself to be murdered... not before, he got Tom to see sense... not before, he told Tom all about Dumbledore and the conversation he'd had with him.

Taking in a deep breath, he spoke,

"Open."

Had he spoken that in english? It had sounded like it. He closed his eyes and tried again,

"Open!"

But the statue didn't budge and he realized that he was probably speaking in English. And then it dawned on him. The piece of Tom's soul inside of him had been responsible for his ability to speak in parseltongue. Now that it was gone, he didn't have that ability anymore. But, he couldn't allow
that to stop him. He rapped his knuckles against the statue…once…twice…He was going to knock a third time when the statue moved out of the way and he stumbled forward.
He stumbled and would have fallen face first on the ground if strong hands hadn't gripped his forearms and held him up. He looked up and the sight that met his eyes stole his breath away.

Tom's eyes were a hickory as rich as the earth's soil; stained with the colour of hot chocolate on a cold, winter night that wrapped around him like a blanket; engulfed him in its warmth and made him feel at home. Those deep pools of dark-cinnamon swirls seized the depth and heaviness of one thousand untold stories, which imprisoned the sweetness of saccharine chocolate and the bitterness of strong coffee. They consisted of raw emotion and when he observed them closely, they revealed to him the exact thoughts that were crossing the marvels of his ominous mind.

On the other side of all that... His brown-mahogany orbs scintillated with shock that could be noticed next to the umber that rimmed his iris. They possessed a sorrow that placed a melancholic veil, which cloaked his eyes.

His irises were a large stain of wood and ebony pigments... Their size gave them a sense of innocence and purity. This was the part where he could see all the buried kindness eclipsed behind the saturated colour of fine, exquisite oud. There was the slightest hint of goodness in his eyes, which told him that no matter what Voldemort did, Tom was still alive inside of him. The kindness that Voldemort never showed or exposed was all there. Those eyes revealed Tom.

Tom eyes remained trained on him for a few moments. His eyelids a fraction too slow to blink, his irises too stationary. It was as if his brain was suffering a massive short circuit and was struggling to compute. Harry touched his cheek with the side of his thumb, his lips forming a pensive grin. Tom's head tilted upward to his face, his eyes sliding into focus and Harry watched the change happen.

The grip on his forearms vanished and Tom stumbled backwards,

"You are not real...You are not real..."

He advanced closer to him and opened his arms,

"Tom..."

Tom shook his head erratically and closed his eyes as he staggered further back and slumped against the wall,

"Tom...look at me...touch me...feel me...I'm real..."

Tom opened his eyes, turned around and hurried away from the chambers. Harry ran after him but as soon as he stepped into the chambers, a gasp escaped his lips. The wall where Tom had slit his throat was still painted with his blood. He stepped closer to it and ran his finger over the stain before turning around and looking at Tom who was facing the fireplace and staring at it with mirth,

"I guess you came here to haunt me."

He stepped closer to him and spoke,

"No...I am not here to haunt you, Tom...I want to save you..."

Tom laughed derisively,
"Yes, I have been contemplating death with extreme seriousness. I believe that is the only thing that can save me."

He stared wide eyed at him for a moment. Had Tom really been contemplating suicide? He grabbed his arm and turned him around to face him,

"Look at me, Tom."

Tom held his gaze and then broke free of his grasp with a chuckle,

"Nothing you can say can change my mind. You are nothing more than a mere apparition…a ghost…"

Tom bent over as he laughed deliriously,

"When you were new in this castle, you believed me to be a ghost and I longed to see you afraid… I yearned to see fear in your eyes."

He could only stare at him despairingly because he didn't know what to do to make Tom believe that he was real,

"Is that what you want now? Is that the reason why you have returned?"

He shook his head and spoke,

"No, that's not why I'm here, Tom."

Tom only laughed harder at that before turning around and facing him. He conjured a knife…the same blade he'd used to slit his throat, and spoke,

"Revenge then? Come…slit my throat…kill me like I killed you…"

He dropped the knife and it landed on the floor with a loud clatter that resounded around the chamber,

"NO!"

He made a frustrated sound and spoke,

"Why won't you see that I'm here to save you, Tom? I don't want to hurt you…I don't want revenge…I'M NOT A GHOST!"

Tom stared at him for a moment and just when Harry thought that he was seeing sense, he turned away from him again and chuckled darkly. He bent down and picked up the knife from the floor before holding it to his throat and Harry felt his heart lodge in his throat at the sight,

"Will you prefer it if I kill myself? Is that what you desire?"

He didn't know what to do. The manic intent in Tom's eyes told him that he was just on the verge of doing it,

"Stop, Tom…I don't want that…"

Harry watched in horror as the Tom sliced a bit into his neck and beads of blood appeared,

"Stop it…Tom…Stop this madness."
He snatched the knife away from Tom's hand and tossed it as far away as possible before inspecting the wound on Tom's neck and wiping away the blood with his fingers.

He cupped Tom's face and brought it down before kissing him, not rough, but so thoroughly that every inch of his mouth was involved. Tom's lips parted slightly in shock and he took advantage of that and slid his tongue inside. The kiss made him breathless and dizzy when he couldn't get air but it felt like he was floating. Harry swore his fingertips were tingling from it, hell even the tips of his hair, and he wanted…needed…something more… Every part of him rejoiced when Tom gripped the back of his head and wrap the other arm around his waist, pulling him close and growling before taking complete control of the kiss.
And then he was shoved back. Every inch of him wept at the abrupt loss of Tom's warmth and he could only stare at him in disbelief. Tom ran his fingers over his lips and then laughed,

"I am more convinced than ever now that you are nothing more than a ghost… Your sole purpose is to torment me."

He sighed in exasperation and spoke,

"Fine. Why don't you call everyone and ask them if they can see me or not?"

Tom looked at him incredulously before speaking,

"That is actually a very good idea."

He walked straight past him and Harry followed him. He knew Bellatrix and Fenrir were probably going to be horrified by what he was doing but this needed to be done. He needed Tom to believe that he was real. He needed to break this curse.

Tom went straight to his grave and stood there before rolling back his sleeve and pressing the mark on his forearm. He leaned back against a tree and crossed his arms over his chest,

"Are you going to dig the grave as well?"

Tom stared silently at the grave and the tears in his eyes were so obvious. They stood there in silence for hours… They stood there until the sun set and darkness surrounded them. Harry stared up at the canopy of trees and the strands of moonlight that were filtering through the gaps. They were soft, silvery and emanated a divine aura of everlasting magic and hope. They coiled their glowing tendrils upon whatever they came across, dipping everything in a radiant, hypnotic glow. It showered down as sprinkles of allure and pearly hues, casting shadows that bathed in their intrinsic charm. But then, in a trice, a cloud-grave and purposeful, moved stolidly with a gust of the invigorating breeze, and mercilessly concealed the moon, thus leaving the world austere, miserable and dark.

He tore his gaze away from the dark sky and looked at Tom who was staring at him intently. He was about to speak when the snapping of twigs informed him of several presences. Tom looked away from him and stared at the trees from which Fenrir emerged with his pack in tow. Harry saw the way he froze at the sight of him but he didn't get the time to react because Bellatrix walked into the clearing and instantly turned to stone.

He saw the way Tom ran his gaze over the crowd that had gathered and spoke,

"Can you see him? Can you really see him?"

Fenrir and Bellatrix equally puzzled and he decided to speak,

"He thinks I'm a ghost… Tell him I'm real… Tell him that you can see me."

It was Fenrir who reacted first and spoke,

"I can see the boy, My Lord."

Tom turned to Bellatrix and stepped closer to her,
"Can you see him, Bellatrix?"

He couldn't help but commend Bellatrix on her acting skills as she took several steps back and cried,

"Yes… Yes…Yes…"

Tom gripped her shoulders,

"You buried him…You buried him, Bellatrix, did you not?"

He nodded his head vigorously to convince Bella to go along with that story because he couldn't afford her or Fenrir to get involved into this. She nodded her head and spoke,

"I did."

Tom pushed her towards the grave and shouted,

"DIG IT NOW, BELLA!"

Harry stepped forward and was about to pull Bellatrix into a hug when Tom grabbed him and pinned him against the tree,

"Let her work…"

He stared into Tom's eyes and watched the way the crimson seeped back into the brown. He closed his eyes and relaxed against the tree,

"Do you believe now that I'm not a ghost?"

Tom didn't say anything, and Harry listened to work Bellatrix on her own. It felt like hours until the sound of digging stopped, and Tom relinquished his hold on him and walked away. Harry finally opened his eyes and watched as Tom walked toward the vacant grave. Tom was about to grab Bella by the hair when he lurched forward and gripped his wrist,

"Don't…"

Tom pried his fingers away before gripping him by his upper arm and forcing him down on his knees,

"How is this even possible?"

He tipped his head back and stared up into Tom's eyes that were now speckled with bright crimson,

"I don't know how it happened…I don't know how I came back but I'm here now…I'm back now and you should cherish me."

Tom struck him hard across the cheek,

"I can see that you have lost none of your impertinence."

Harry cradled his stinging cheek and was about to raise himself to his feet when Tom gripped his hair to keep him down,

"I should lock you up somewhere this time and let you rot."
He laughed softly at that,

"But you did, didn't you? You slit my throat, had Bella toss me into a grave and buried me six feet under before leaving me to rot. That didn't work out that well, did it?"

Tom glared at him venomously and Harry saw that he wasn't Tom anymore… The beautiful brown was completely gone now and all that remained was a deep dark crimson… He saw Voldemort now… He could almost see Dumbledore if he looked hard enough. The snake finally made an appearance and Harry shuddered involuntarily at the sight of it,

"Are you going to kill me again?"

Voldemort's lipless mouth curved into a vicious smirk,

"No… Not this time, Harry."

He was pulled up to his feet roughly and then felt Voldemort drag him back to the castle.
Harry was tossed roughly on the cold hard stone floor of the chamber and it took him a minute to recover from the hard fall but as soon as he did, Voldemort was holding him by the hair and tilting his head back as far as it would. He closed his eyes as his scalp burned from the abuse and grabbed Voldemort's hand with both of his, trying to pry his fingers away from his hair.

It was futile though and Voldemort was just too strong. He was lifted up to his feet by his hair and thrown against the wall before he was pinned there by Voldemort's body,

"Look at me…Open your eyes and look at me…"

He obeyed wordlessly and opened his eyes meeting Voldemort's crimson gaze head on. The snake's huge triangular head was rested on his shoulder and his yellow gaze was fixed on him. He trembled and Voldemort pushed his knee between his thighs and smirked wickedly,

"You should have stayed dead, Harry."

He tipped his head back and squared his jaw defiantly,

"And why is that?"

Voldemort held both of his hands over his head with one of his and moved his other hand down his body,

"Because I shall steal your innocence now."

A moan involuntarily escaped his lips as Voldemort pinched one of his nipples through his shirt. Voldemort hummed with delight and pinched the other one. Harry tried to move but Voldemort's grip turned bruising on his wrists and he tsked,

"Relax…Harry… You brought this upon yourself."

He had just closed his eyes for a second when Voldemort spoke angrily,

"Open your eyes, Harry."

He shook his head and Voldemort hand's travelled lower and rested on his stomach,

"I shall not ask again."

He opened his eyes again and Voldemort spoke,

"Are you ready to be defiled?"

He nodded and whispered,

"I won't be defiled if I agree to it…I…I love you, Tom."

Voldemort hissed like he'd been burned and stepped away from him. Harry's arm fell down to his sides and he repeated in a louder, stronger, more resolute voice,

"I love you, Tom…I love you…I love you…I lo…"
He couldn't finish the sentence because Voldemort had a hand clamped tight over his mouth.

"Not another word."

He held Voldemort's gaze and said it with his eyes over and over again until Voldemort hand moved from his mouth to his throat,

"Lies…All lies…"

Harry shook his head exhaled shakily when Voldemort tightened his hold on his throat,

"I'm not lying…"

He coughed and sputtered but didn't fight Voldemort's hold. Voldemort let go on his own and spun him around so that his forehead was rested against the wall. Voldemort's front pressed to his back and he shuddered involuntarily,

"How can you love a monster? How can you love someone like me?"

Harry closed his eyes and laughed shakily,

"You're not a monster. Dumbledore is…You thought you'd killed him but he's been living inside you…feeding off your soul…commanding your body…poisoning your innocence and purity…You're not a monster, Tom…I see the real you…Even if you don't, I do."

Tom's hold softened on him for just a second before it tightened again,

"You are mistaken, Harry. I am a monster…I killed you once, I shall kill you again."

He smiled,

"You can stab my heart a million times, Tom. I'll lick up the blood and smile…Don't you see it? We're meant to be together."

Voldemort's body vanished from behind him and Harry turned around and opened his eyes. Voldemort was standing a couple of steps away from him and Harry saw the way the darkness that surrounded him was speckled with glittering gold. He took a step closer to him and spoke,

"Think about what I've just said, Tom…Just…please think about it…"

He walked towards where Voldemort's bedroom was and began pacing it nervously. He just hoped that his words got through to Voldemort. He looked down at his muddy clothes and stripped them off before heading into the bathroom and running a bath.

When he emerged half an hour later, the fireplace was going and Voldemort was staring into it. The darkness was still there and the snake was coiled around his chest. He didn't seem to notice as he moved between his knees and stood there, looking down at him. When his view of the fire was blocked, only then did he look up at him.

He loved it when Voldemort looked at him. The pits of his soul were so dark that when he looked at him, he could feel his body ache. He'd never questioned if his ability to see a Tom's soul was a gift or a curse. But right then, as he stared up at him like that and he could see a glimmer of black scales and golden lights in his eyes, he knew it was a gift.

The wet towel made a quiet thud as he dropped it to the floor. Voldemort's eyes didn't leave his face. He reached out slowly and pressed the tips of his fingers against his jaw. Voldemort closed
his eyes and whispered his name and Harry murmured,

"I love you…I really do…"
The wet towel made a quiet thud as he dropped it to the floor. Voldemort's eyes didn't leave his face. He reached out slowly and pressed the tips of his fingers against his jaw. Voldemort closed his eyes and whispered his name and Harry murmured,

"I love you…I really do…"

He crawled on top of him, his legs on the outsides of his thighs. Tom wrapped his arms around him instantly. He pressed his palms against his shoulder blades and then slid his hands lower, slowly, down his back. The warmth of his hands and the warmth of the fire behind him felt like a soothing embrace.

He leaned forward and kissed him. It was tentative, sweet. The kiss was slow, unlike the one they'd shared in the forest all those months ago or the one from a few hours ago. Where that kiss was hot and hungry, this kiss was reserved. Tom's lipless mouth felt soft pressed against his. When he put his hands against the hardness of his chest and pressed his tongue into his mouth, Tom groaned, pulled him closer, and deepened the kiss.

Goosebumps broke out all over his skin. His senses flew into overdrive. He could feel everything and knew nothing but where Tom's mouth and tongue touched his, his hands against his back. Tom pulled back and Harry noticed that his eyes weren't pure crimson…they weren't pure brown either…It was a mixture of them both…a deep cinnamon…Tom cupped his cheeks and spoke,

"Harry…Do you really want this?"

The room was dark except for the light at his back. The corners of the room were blacker than ever. The air was hot, humid, full of electricity and magic.

"Yes. I want you."

He swallowed hard, his Adam's apple bobbing in his throat before he added,

"Anything you'll give me."

He reached down and pulled off Tom's robes before working on the buttons of his black silk shirt, Tom opened his arms. He tossed it off to the side and looked at him. His chest was hard, solid, his skin imperfect and scarred. White scars glistened in the firelight. Harry knew where they were from…He knew who'd inflicted them on him. He reached out and touched one, running his finger across his skin, and felt him shiver.

Tom leaned forward and began kissing his neck. He tongued the spot beneath his ear, then nipped and bit his skin as he worked his way down to his collarbone. He moved his hands down to his hips, squeezing, holding him still.

He tossed his head back, living for nothing but the feeling of Tom's mouth against my skin. When he dropped his head lower, taking one of his nipples into his mouth, biting gently, he moaned. Tom made a noise deep in his throat that made his skin tingle.

He reached down between them, unlatching his belt, whipping it free from his pants and tossing it to the ground. When he popped open the button fly of his pants and dipped his hand inside, Tom pulled back from him and groaned.
"There's oil on the vanity…"

Harry loved how much his voice was strained. He got up and grabbed the oil from the vanity. Tom was suddenly behind him and grabbed him by the hair. He tugged and when he turned around and looked at him, he grinned wickedly and yanked on his hair harder,

"Come here."

Tom dragged him to the bed and kissed him again, immediately slipping his tongue into his mouth. He moaned, pressed his hands against his chest, loving the feeling of his bare skin against his own.

Tom's erection strained against the soft material of his pants between his thighs. He rubbed his hand against him, relishing the sound of his deep groan. When he went to pull the waistband of his underwear down, Tom loosened his grip on his hips and lifted himself enough to help him shove his pants and underwear down his legs. Tom's hands immediately returned to his after he eased his pants off.

Tom took the oil from his hand. At the same time, he began kissing his neck again, biting harder now, lapping at his sensitive skin after he bit. The popping sound of the cork could be heard somewhere far in the distance, but he couldn't tell where. Eyes closed, he could focus on little but Tom's touches, the feeling of his hot cock pressed against his own between their bodies.

He reached behind him, one hand roughly grabbing his hip and spreading him open. A moment later the cool petting of his slick finger…He yelped and Tom used that opportunity to slowly push his cool, wet finger inside him. He moaned breathlessly,

"Oh…"

Tom chuckled but kept pressing his finger inside, deeper,

"Have you done this before with someone?"

Unable to do anything else, he leaned forward, rested his forehead against his shoulder, and shook his head. After the briefest of pauses, Tom asked,

"Not even yourself?"

He could barely find his breath. Tom's finger pressed all the way inside him, stretching him, an invasion to his body. And then, just as slowly, he pulled back out. And then in again. The slow burn of the push and pull stole all his attention, every last thought he could muster. Just when he thought he couldn't take it anymore, Tom pulled his finger out, only to push another one back in alongside it before he spoke quietly, patiently…Harry could hear the smile in his voice,

"Harry…Answer me…"

Breathing heavily, he spoke,

"No… Why?"

Tom pressed both of his fingers deep inside him. When they couldn't go any farther, he curled his fingers, brushed the small bundle of nerves inside him. He gasped. Tom licked up his jaw to his ear and whispered,

"No one shall ever touch you again. You are mine now, Harry…Just mine…"
He closed his eyes and moaned Tom's name. He wasn't sure if it was supposed to come out as a plea or a whine, but right then, to him, his name was gospel. Tom spoke quietly,

"You look prettier when you moan."

Tom grabbed hold of his erection with his free hand and rolled a finger against the drop forming at the tip. He began to pump up and down to the painfully slow melody his fingers set.

The moment he thought he wouldn't be able to take the slow torture any longer, Tom pulled away from him. Harry breathed out shakily when Tom laid him back on the bed and then the rounded end of him pressed against his entrance, pushing carefully inside. He groaned deep in his throat as Tom slid into him, inch by inch.

When he was fully inside, Tom kissed his jaw, whispered his name. His hand began stroking him again to the same rhythm his hips rolled. He breathed heavily, looking inside his clear brown eyes, him looking back into his.

He tipped his head back and he pressed his palms flat against his chest and began kissing a trail from the divot in his collarbone up to the bottom of his jaw. His fingers flexed a little more tightly, and his pace quickened. He whimpered and moaned.

Keeping the slow, methodical stride, Tom leaned forward and pressed his mouth to his. The kiss was hotter than the fire. It was unhurried, sure of itself, as though they'd kissed like that every day since the dawn of time. He slid his tongue into his mouth, brushed against his lips.

Among all his kisses, touches, and the deep-rooted feel of all he drove into him, something else crept, tracing after his touch. Smooth, gritty shards raked against his skin, scratching in the wake of a gentler touch.

Tom deepened the kiss, whispered crude comments sweetly in between breaths.

It started as a tickle on the side of his thigh. A gentle kiss, feather, light and delicate. Then the watery feeling of scales moving against his bare flesh. It travelled from his thigh up to his hip bone, pausing there. Then around his stomach, against his belly button, higher still.

The end of its tail brushed the side of his hip. A gasp escaped that Tom stole for himself.

"Tom…"

He said as the serpent moved up, trailed across his nipple, to the top of his shoulder,

"There's not a part of me that doesn't want you."

With a shift of his hips, he moved a little quicker, pressing against the spot inside me that made his throat close and showed him stars…

He tossed his head back, his eyes still closed. The snake slithered its way around his neck, once, twice, the edges of the scales sweeping across his bottom lip. The pressure inside him began to build, like a volcano about to erupt. Tom gripped his hair and hissed,

"Damn, Harry…"

Tom pressed his forehead against his throat. He cracked his eyes open, and even in the darkness of the room, he watched the black serpent move from his throat to Tom's, wrapping around both of them, squeezing them together.
It was the coldness of the scales, the feel of Tom's ragged breath against his chest, the almost painful constriction around his throat that tossed him over the edge. He came with a small cry, Tom's hand on him speeding, then slowing. And then he felt his body tense below him, and he followed close behind. When his ability to speak returned, he murmured,

"I love you, Tom…I love you so much…"

Tom ran his fingers through his hair and whispered,

"I love you too."

It was like the crackling of electricity…a clap of thunder…. something broke….something shattered and Tom screamed.
Harry tried to understand what was going on. He wrapped his arms around Tom's waist and pressed kisses after kisses on every part of Tom he could reach,

"Tom…fight him…you need to fight him…"

Tom thrashed against him senselessly and continued to scream like every nerve in his body was on fire. He reversed their positions and straddled Tom's body, pinning him to the bed with all the strength he had and continued to speak to him softly…telling him he loved him over and over again.

And then all of a sudden, Tom went very still and then his body went completely limp under him. He hurriedly checked his pulse before ascertaining that he was alive. Had Tom won? He patted him on the cheek softly and whispered,

"Tom…"

There was no reply. He carefully got off from over him and laid down beside him before pulling the covers over them both and holding him tight. He was hoping that Tom was alright…He was hoping with everything he had in him that he was fine. He smoothed his fingers over Tom's chest and pressed a kiss to his lips,

"I love you, Tom…I love you so much."

There was nothing but silence and stillness for the next few minutes and that lulled Harry to sleep. He awoke with a gasp and felt an unbearable weight suffocating him. When he opened his watering eyes, he realized that it wasn't just the weight. There were fingers wrapped around his neck and they were squeezing the life out of him. He kicked and struggled…trying to pry the fingers away but that wasn't working.

Voldemort's eyes were blazing crimson and the snake was ten times bigger than he last remembered it. The room was filled with his suffocating darkness and then he spoke…It wasn't his voice…It was Dumbledore's,

"This time you shall not be returning from the dead."

He kicked his legs and shook his head as he remained every ounce of breath left in his lungs to shout,

"TOM…TOM…I KNOW YOU'RE THERE…LISTEN TO ME!"

The fingers loosened for a moment and Harry took that opportunity and breathed in lungs full of air greedily before getting up and running to the farthest corner of the room. He was very aware of the fact that he was completely naked but that didn't matter in the face of what Dumbledore intended to do to him,

"TOM…YOU HAVE TO FIGHT HIM…IF YOU LOVE ME THEN YOU HAVE TO FIGHT HIM…HE'S GOING TO KILL ME…HE WILL KILL ME…PLEASE DON'T LET HIM…TOM, SAVE ME…"

Dumbledore laughed wickedly using Tom's mouth and advanced closer to him. There was nowhere
he could go…He was completely trapped. Tom came to stand in front of him but it wasn't Tom…It was Dumbledore…Dumbledore eyed him hungrily and Harry wanted to cover himself.

"Killing you will be such a waste…I should defile you first."

Harry closed his eyes and Dumbledore closed his fingers around his throat once again,

"TOM…FIGHT HIM…PLEASE…"

He could feel his breath leaving him and his body going still. His lungs screamed for oxygen as Tom…No Dumbledore slid a leg between his and kicked his feet apart,

"No!"

Dumbledore laughed louder, and Harry only fought harder until he couldn't fight anymore. His windpipe was on the brink of being crushed and he couldn't afford to waste any more energy on struggling and fighting so he gave up and collapsed back against the wall.

Dark spots popped up all over his vision and he knew that he was fading fast. He was dying again…He couldn't believe it…This time he had no hopes of returning. This time he had certainly failed. The spots grew bigger and bigger until darkness was all he could see and then it happened.

The hands disappeared, and Tom collapsed on his knees. He collapsed with him and crawled closer to him. Tom's eyes were closed, and the darkness was swirling around him like a tornado. It was killing him slowly…It was killing Tom slowly. The strain was so visible on his face and he reached towards him and pulled him to his chest in a tight hug,

"Tom…I love you…I love you…I love you…"

A broken sob escaped Tom's lips and Harry held him tighter,

"It's going to be fine…It'll be alright…"

Tom continued to sob in pain and the sounds broke his heart,

"It'll be okay…Tom…Just be strong…"

Tom's body instantly grew limp against him and Harry held onto him tight, rubbing his back and cradling him to his chest,

"Just breathe, Tom…Keep breathing…I love you…It will be fine…I'll make it alright."
Chapter 92

Tom was burning up and Harry couldn't understand what he could do to make it all better. He tried placing wet rags on his forehead to bring down his temperature. He'd tried feeding him water. He'd done everything he could possibly think of but nothing had worked. The occasional spasms accompanied by agonizing moans and whimpers just drove him to tears.

He was fairly certain that Tom was fighting against Dumbledore's influence and he wanted to help...he wanted to know how he could help and make it easier for Tom. He just couldn't bear to see him in this state.

Another darker thought just consumed his mind. What if Tom lost? What if Dumbledore regained complete control of him? What would happen then? If he had a shred of self-preservation, then he would probably run away. But he wouldn't run away. He wasn't going to leave Tom alone. He wasn't afraid of what Voldemort slash Dumbledore would do to him...What would he do to him? The way he'd been eyed earlier, he would assume that he was going to be violated in the most painful of ways and then Dumbledore would probably kill him...Or he might decide to let him live and keep him as his sex slave.

His own calmness about his possibly dark and bleak future bothered him but he was fine with it. He was fine with everything because he was with Tom. Tom's head was resting in his lap and he leaned over and pressed a kiss to his sweat damp forehead,

"Tom...just stay strong. If you lose then we both lose."

He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath and smoothed his thumb over Tom's forehead. He was in pain again and soon enough the spasms started again and Harry held on to him as tight as he could and Tom cried and whimpered in his chest. He made sure that he kept speaking words of encouragement to him and told him exactly how much he loved him with every breath he took.

Tom's lipless mouth was twisted in a grimace and he traced it with his finger before kissing him. He kept lips pressed to his as he held him tight and kept talking to him...He wasn't even sure, Tom was listening to him but he needed to do it. He needed to keep talking because it was all he could do. He was hoping that it would be enough to help Tom in his fight against Dumbledore.

For a moment, he'd contemplated getting Bellatrix and Fenrir here so that they could help him but he couldn't risk their lives as well if things went south. Dumbledore was vicious, vile and cruel and he couldn't put Bellatrix and Fenrir in danger.

Tom had relaxed once again and Harry closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath before leaning back against the headboard. His own exhaustion finally caught up to him and he fell asleep once again.

He woke up to Tom's screams and instantly sat up straight. Tom was thrashing on the bed, his nails were digging into the mattress, and every inch of his body was taut with pain. He wrapped his arms around him and hugged him tight,

"Tom...I love you...I love you...Please, wake up."

But nothing about Tom's condition changed and Harry wished he could take his pain upon himself. He was willing to do anything to save him.

It was a while later that Tom went still again and Harry just stared at his face...it almost looked
human…the snakelike resemblance had been reduced to a bare minimum. He traced his finger over Tom's flat nose and then his hollow cheekbones and then his lipless mouth. He was hoping it would all change... He wanted Tom to look like Tom...the handsome young man he'd seen in that memory...

Reluctantly, he got out of bed and went to the bathroom to relieve himself. He was washing his hands when he caught his reflection in the mirror. For a moment, he couldn't recognize himself. His raven black hair was all mussed up and sticking on their ends. His eyes were surrounded by dark circles and swollen red by all the tears he'd been shedding. He looked as pale as a ghost. He almost thought he was a ghost.

He splashed cold water over his face and then drew in a deep breath. It was going to be fine. It had to be fine. He closed his eyes and leaned back against the tiled wall. He decided that he needed a cold bath and made his way to the tub. Filling it half way up, he threw every bath salt he could get his hands on and tossed it in the tub before getting in himself. The cold water made him shiver involuntarily but his body quickly grew accustomed to it and soon enough he found himself relaxing.

The scented salts just put him in a daze and he felt utterly and truly lost. It wrapped around his body, dragging him into hazy oblivion and he fought it. He cursed his own stupidity for throwing in all the bath salts and forced himself to his feet. He didn't want to fall asleep in the bath. Tom was all alone in bed. He needed to be there for him.

He grabbed the towel and dried himself off thoroughly before pulling on his clothes and stepping out of the bathroom. He came to a sudden halt when he realized that the bed was vacant. He looked around the room, searching for him. The door was still closed. He would have heard Tom open it if Tom had walked out through there. His heart was beating at a million miles per second and he felt like he couldn't breathe. Where could Tom have gone to? He tried to feel for his soul…that suffocating darkness…something…anything…But there was nothing.

He was just about to rush out of the room to go look for him when an arm wrapped around his waist and he gasped loudly as he felt the huge snake coil tight around his chest and squeeze asphyxiatingly. Warm breath tickled his ear and then he heard Tom's…no…Voldemort's high-pitched voice whisper in his ear,

"You should have run when you had the chance."
Harry wanted to speak but the snake coiled tight over his mouth and nose effectively cutting off his air supply and suffocating him. His knees softened and he would have collapsed if the snake hadn't been holding him up.

He fought against it with everything he had in him until the snake released him and he crumpled to the floor. His cheek was pressed to the cold stone floor as he drew in several deep gulps of air greedily. The respite didn't last for long though because he was grabbed by his hair and dragged back to his feet. His scalp ached and he reached out and grabbed Voldemort's hand to ease some pressure on his hair.

Nothing was making any sense. Tears filled his eyes as he thought about what was going to happen to him next. How could Tom have lost? He'd only left him for a few minutes… He shouldn't have. He really shouldn't have left him alone. Where the hell had he gone wrong? He couldn't figure it out. He felt Voldemort's warm breath on his cheek and then heard him growl in his ear,

"You smell exquisite."

Harry bit on his tongue when he felt Voldemort's tongue lave the line of his throat,

"I could just eat you up."

He wanted to speak but Voldemort held a finger to his lips and spoke,

"Not a word, Boy…If you speak, I shall hurt you worse than I already intend to."

He kept his eyes closed and Voldemort shook him,

"Do you understand me, Boy?"

He could only nod as tears streamed down his cheeks. Voldemort's grip on his shoulders turned bone crushing and he spoke,

"Open your eyes and look at me."

He opened his eyes hesitantly and Voldemort chuckled darkly. His crimson eyes were dark and dilated with lust. The darkness that surrounded him and filled the room was thick and suffocating. Voldemort raised his hand andstroked his cheek,

"I should kill you now..."

His hand moved from his cheek and gripped his throat,

"I should squeeze the life out of you."

Harry closed his eyes again and the hand vanished,

"Killing you does not seem to work though. You always find a way to get back."

He closed his eyes again and let his body go limp,

"Why can you not stay dead, Harry?"
Harry kept his eyes squeezed shut and Voldemort spoke,

"Answer me, Boy!"

Harry opened his eyes but remained resolutely silent. Voldemort glared at him and then struck him hard across the cheek,

"Answer me!"

Harry finally spoke,

"You told me not to speak."

Voldemort's eyes widened a bit in surprise but then the rage returned and he was struck hard across the cheek once again. This time, the impact made his head spin and his cheek burn,

"I shall find immense pleasure in breaking you down, Harry."

He was tossed roughly to the floor and he landed on his back, his head hitting the floor with a sickening crack. Voldemort pressed down on his chest and he ground his teeth against the pain and grimaced,

"I shall definitely enjoy silencing you."

Harry cried out in pain as Voldemort brought his foot down with more force than necessary and for a moment he thought his ribs had snapped but that wasn't the case because Voldemort removed his foot and leaned over him before gripping his chin,

"I have not broken anything yet but I shall."

Voldemort stepped away from him and Harry curled up and wrapped his arms around himself. For a moment, there was nothing but silence and then Voldemort spoke,

"Get up, Harry."

He didn't have the strength to move. Disappointment and hopelessness weighed him down and made his limbs heavy. He didn't want to get up. He thought he was prepared for any contingency, but he wasn't, so he voiced the question that was eating away at him internally,

"What will you do to me?"

Voldemort chuckled darkly and spoke,

"Whatever I wish to."

Harry buried his face in the crook of his elbow and Voldemort spoke,

"I will kill you every day."

He heard Voldemort step closer to him and heard him speak,

"You will wish you had never stepped into this castle."

He just listened silently and then spoke,

"I'll never wish that."
He screamed out in agony when it felt like someone had set his insides on fire. He writhed on the floor and tried to distract his mind from feeling the pain, but it didn't work. It didn't work at all. The pain only intensified, and Harry wanted nothing more than to rip his insides out. At that point he was willing to do anything to get rid of the pain.

The pain ended though and Harry lay on his side, staring blankly at the legs of the vanity. He didn't even have the fortitude to wrap his arms around himself again. He just couldn't. Finally, Voldemort ordered,

"Get up!"

He tried but failed. It felt like his limbs had turned to jelly,

"Harry, get up or I shall give you another dose of that pain."

He didn't want more of that pain so he willed himself to sit up straight. Voldemort laughed,

"Good boy…Now on your feet…"

He rested his palms on the wall and tried to raise himself on his feet but his legs absolutely refused to stand his weight. He tried over and over again until he managed to get to his foot. His legs trembled but he took the support of the wall. Voldemort was eyeing him hungrily and crooked his finger in a come-hither motion. He didn't want to obey…He didn't want to go…

"Refusal is not an option."

He lowered his gaze and took a staggering step forward and then the next and the next until he was standing inches away from Voldemort. Voldemort's lipless mouth twisted in a wicked satisfied grin and he cupped his face,

"You are exquisite in your submission."

His eyelids fluttered shut as Voldemort smoothed his fingers through his hair,

"I have decided to keep you after all."
Harry jolted awake, gasping for air as his nails dug into the skin on his chest where his heart drummed under his fingers and threatened to collapse any minute. His hitching, shallow breaths, accompanied by small sparks flickering in front of his eyes, screamed of hyperventilation. Clasping his mouth with his hand he forced himself to breathe through his nose. When his vision cleared, he threw the covers off and looked around, trying to clear his head of screams of pain and torture that echoed in his ears. They were of course his own.

Weak moonlight streaming through the window licked the bumpy leather of Voldemort's favorite ostrich chair. The mirror reflected the tall four poster bed, decorated with chains and restraints. Closing his eyes, he sucked in a deep breath, then held the air in until his lungs burned, begging for the next breath, before slowly letting it out. When the pressure in his ears dropped a tad, he slapped the bed sheets with his palm, but instead of another body's warmth he only found the coolness of silk.

No wonder… He chewed on his lip as disappointment unfurled its black wings in his chest. Somewhere deep down he'd hoped to find Voldemort sleeping by his side so he could carefully press his palm to Voldemort's warm skin and know there was still someone by his side…. He needed to believe that Tom was still there. At moments like this, the warmth of Voldemort's body always calmed him down, but Voldemort wasn't there.

Over the past month, he'd grown used to nightmares. They had begun that first night Voldemort had tossed him on the bed and claimed him relentlessly…over and over again until he'd passed out from the pain. And then it had happened every day.

Harry rolled to his side, spreading his heavy limbs over the bed sheets. He didn't want to move, just lie there, resting on the silky surface that soothed his feverish skin with its blissful coolness. The window stood open, but no wind broke in; only his breathing disturbed the idle air. Harry rolled again, trying to bring some relief to his buzzing body that still burned with Voldemort's kisses.

Mind comatose saturated, not a single thought disturbed his emotional numbness, but it didn't last long. Blue silky sheets, absorbing his heat, quickly warmed up, and he had to roll again, seeking the comforting chill. Then again and again, until his face met Voldemort's pillow. His heavy scent, wafting in, disturbed his calmness. He shivered, then lifted his head, blinking away the drowsiness.

Heavy, hot air suffused the room. It weighed so much that a groan struggled to push out of Harry's throat. He sat up and put his feet down on the cool, stone floor, rubbed his eye with a lazy hand, then reached for the nearest chain that hung from the top, horizontal bar of the four-poster bed. Squeezing it, he tugged his body upright and stumbled to the bathroom.

Leaving the door ajar, he leaned against the marble sink that took half of the right wall and turned on the cold water. His hand found the resilient stream, and he closed his eyes for a moment, enjoying the heat seeping out of his fingertips down the drain. Bending over, he splashed some water on his chest and face; when he straightened, his gaze fell upon his reflection.

His hair had grown so long that he had to brush it off his face every now and then. Dark circles framed his eyes as if he hadn't sleep for ages, except, sleeping was all he did. Dirty red marks spotted his body. Clustering over his neck and chest, they trailed down his stomach and scattered about his hip bones. Harry still felt Voldemort's teeth, jumping from one spot to another only to leave a throbbing, darkening bruise, outlined by the imprints of his teeth. His hot hand landed on his chest as his fingers trailed the contour of one biting mark. Fresh and tender, it felt sore under
Harry bit his lip remembering Voldemort's mouth; his body instantly responded with inner heat. Trying to avoid the conditioned reaction, he shook his head and turned away from the deceptively frail mirror. Harry had been trying to break the mirrors for days, smashing them with his fists and wooden furniture, but he hadn't managed to even scratch the surface, let alone break it to pieces.

He made his way toward the bath tub at the end of the room; his sole almost seethed when he stepped on the chilly, dark emperador marble floor. He turned on the cold water, and evil, icy streams hit the top of his head and pierced his skin, forcing him to gasp for air. Every cell in his body shrieked in shock, and he enjoyed it. This was what he wanted...to feel pain, to feel alive again, to escape the saturated numbness that became a part of his boring life.

Slapping the beige tile wall with his palm, he let a breath out and watched water circle around his feet. The memories of the last night surfaced in front of his eyes. Voldemort had been rough. His fingers had crushed Harry's ribs as his mouth left one bite mark after another, painting his body in dirty red. The snake was always there...wrapped up tight around him.

Voldemort had been gentle. He soothed the disturbed skin with flicks of his tongue. His fingers, entwining with Harry's, pinned the his hands on either side of his face, preventing any movements as Voldemort again and again attacked his mouth with greedy, demanding kisses. He left so many possessive marks, as if he wanted to imprint into Harry's consciousness that he forever belonged to him.

Harry wasn't sure what he preferred more, the relentless attention of Voldemort's hands and mouth and his forceful requests to return the favour, or long, exhausting sex session after which Harry felt so sore he could barely get up without help. His hands mechanically grabbed the soap and lathered up his chest, washing off the sticky layer of perspiration.

Sparkling drops flew around when Harry shook his head and turned his back to the door. He leaned against the cold tile wall, crossing his arms on his chest as he thought about everything that he'd endured for the past month. The thought that Tom was forever dead grew stronger day by day and his will weakened. Bella and Fenrir were nothing but distant memories in his head now. He could barely remember their faces. What had Voldemort told them? Had he told him that he was dead? That made more sense. He wanted to die. Harry bumped his head against the tile wall and closed his eyes. It was going to be the same when Voldemort would return. There was no point to his existence anymore. All of this was utterly pointless. Icy lead substituted his blood and even simple blinking drained him of the last drops of energy.

He wanted to die...He just wanted to die...

Gathering his willpower, using the wall for support, he stumbled his way back into the bedroom. No thoughts of sex disturbed his exhausted mind when he smashed face down on the bed and closed his eyes.
Chapter 95

A cool palm caressed his cheek. Reaching deep into his sleep it fused dream and reality. Having no energy to crack even one eye open, Harry groaned and rolled onto his back. A wave of exhaustion washed over, gluing his limbs to the mattress.

A warm breath tickled his temple when cool lips pressed to the side of his face and painted a long wet trail down his jaw which was quickly followed by the sensation of watery scales running smoothly over the skin on his stomach. The air hitched, curled in his air passage. Harry had to swallow to suppress his unborn moan. Inclining his head to the side he revealed his neck, and a soft chuckle vibrated against his carotid artery before a greedy mouth attacked his protruding collarbone.

"Mmm…"

Pleasure flared when warm lips brushed over his chest, forcing a weird noise out of his throat. Snaking under the small of his back, wide palms flipped him onto his stomach, and Voldemort's distinct faint scent, coming from the fluffy pillow, invaded his system. Rough fabric scraped his skin when a heavy weight landed on the back of his thighs.

Harry's muscles flexed and every cell in his body tightened with anticipation when two cool palms cupped his shoulders. Gently massaging them they moved lower, followed by the wet hotness of a greedy mouth. When sharp teeth sunk into his shoulder blade and a warm tongue soothed the pain away, Harry let out a shaky breath, only to gasp when Voldemort's hands came to rest on his hips, "No!"

Reality slammed in, kicking him out of his slumber. Harry twisted around, and his forearm lashed across Voldemort's cheek. With his face whipped to the side, Voldemort drew back, his palm rubbing the corner of his reddening mouth.

"No?"

Anger wrenched its way into Voldemort's low voice when the man faced Harry, displeasure dripping out of his every pore and the darkness turned heavy and suffocating…swirling behind him like a hurricane. His chest rose and fell under the white shirt in a controlled breath.

Peering into the impenetrable, crimson eyes, Harry swallowed as the gravity of the situation daunted him. He ran his fingers through his hair and cringed as the awareness of his sticky skin brought back the immense disgust.

"Sorry about that."

He lifted his chin toward Voldemort's cheek.

"I had a nightmare. You woke me up."

Voldemort seethed.

"A nightmare? You moaned when I kissed you. Your body begged for more. What kind of a nightmare was that?"

The physical need to wash the filth off himself crawled under his skin, forcing Harry to move. He
tried to get up, but a stubborn hand pressing against his chest pushed him back onto the mattress. Voldemort's irritated face loomed above his own when his spare hand slammed against the bed sheet inches away from Harry's ear.

"I did not excuse you yet. Where do you think you are going when I am talking to you?"

Voldemort's words vibrated against his lips as the man leaned closer. Harry croaked, as the thought of what was to come seared his cheeks.

"Shower… I'm sweaty."

Voldemort held him,

"It does not bother me."

He turned his face away and spoke,

"Listen… I feel dirty. Let me take a shower first, and I will be back."

Harry cringed, betraying his inner contempt. Voldemort's eyes obscured, and Harry realized that the man was reading his expressions. Trying to subjugate his facial muscles into obedience, Harry forced a mask of dispassion onto his face,

"I will be back in five minutes."

Staring into the soul-consuming depth of the boy's emerald eyes, where revolt tangled in a web of confusion, Voldemort felt darkness splashing in his chest. The boy's wish to escape him cut through his skin better than any blade. He itched to clasp that white throat and squeeze it so hard, the boy's bones would crush and turn into dust under his fingers.

Granting the boy a sharp smile, he pulled back, freeing him from the cage of his attention,

"Go."

Relief released the tension from the boy's lips when he nodded and got up.

Pure, boiling, agonizing rage exploded in Voldemort's chest, demolishing everything inside him. His chest tightened as his lipless mouth stretched into a smile he didn't feel. Watching Harry's back disappear in the bathroom, he got up. He grabbed the collar of his shirt with a furious hand and tore down, buttons scattering across the polished wooden floor before turning toward the bathroom.

With his forehead and forearms pressed against the cold wall, Harry sucked in a deep breath. Seconds ticked in his brain, reminding him that Voldemort wouldn't wait forever, and for the first time in captivity he prayed for time to run slower. The mere thought of sex reanimated in his memory the circles of hell he'd been through in the past month and he couldn't stand it. He wouldn't be able to stand it again.

His heavy breathing misted the tile, and he closed his eyes, hoping that the darkness would provide him with some comfort, but seconds kept ticking, and he still hadn't found how to escape Voldemort's touch.

_There is no use… He will not stop tonight_, he thought remembering Voldemort's cruel eyes. Giving up, he reached for the faucet, but the sound of the slamming door stopped his hand halfway.
Slowly turning around, he watched Voldemort peel his shirt off his shoulders. Torn and depreciated, the expensive garment landed by his bare feet. A painful feeling of horror stormed through Harry's chest. Harry said, trying to control his voice,

"I didn't finish yet,"

Voldemort stepped forward. His heel hit the marble floor, and the echo picking up the footfall multiplied the ringing sound.

Harry swallowed as his focus left his foot and trailed up the length of Voldemort's pants, pale stomach, and chest, until it met his cruel smile and the frost of his crimson eyes. Chilly waves washed down Harry's back and raised small hairs on his arms and legs as he watched the man approach step by step,

"I will wash you myself."

The words fell heavy into Harry's stomach as he realized that the man didn't joke. His muscles tensed when Voldemort's shoulders eclipsed the light, and the warmth of another body hit his face.

Rudiments of disappointment and irritation settled in his spine. A demanding hand cupped the side of his face, tugging him into a rough kiss; the other hand squeezed his hips. Voldemort's movements didn't seek satisfaction but imprinted the message into Harry's brain that he was a mere outlet and had no right to reject his master.

From within, where vibration transformed into the core-shaking earthquake of annoyance, something dark spread from his heart, tainting his soul and blood. The snake coiled tight around his body and Harry stepped forward, returning the roughness of the kiss. His teeth scraped Voldemort's mouth taking the man aback and the metallic taste bloomed on his tongue.

Voldemort's lips disappeared into a thin line and Harry felt a knot of tangled emotions grow in his stomach, hooked his fingers into the waist of Voldemort's pants and jerked them open. Forcing his hand into the pants he grabbed Voldemort's half-erect cock, watching irritation twist the man's features. Do you know how it feels to be used, abused, powerless? Let me show you... Harry's gaze never broke contact with Voldemort's dilated pupils as his hand moved up and down, roughly jerking him off.

"Enough."

Thunders of warning flashed in Voldemort's crimson eyes when he slapped Harry's hand away,

"You want it rough today? I will grant your wish."

The bathroom spun in front of Harry's eyes as Voldemort's palm collided with his shoulder, and he got turned around. His temple whacked against the wall and bright sparks flickered in front of his eyes. A few inches away from his nose his own reflection, caricatural, distorted, mocked him from the golden shower valve.

Voldemort's panting filled his ears as the weight of the other body pressed him to the chilly stone. Fingers shaking, Harry put all his strength into the effort and pushed back twisting his way around until his back was safe against the wall.

Leaning his forearm to the beige tile, Voldemort slanted forward, eyes trained at Harry's lips. He was so close Harry could taste his bitter-sweet breath on his tongue. The arousal splashing in the depth of Voldemort's pupils brought to his bloodthirsty expression something raw and wildly sensual.
Harry swallowed. Adrenaline, anger, and Voldemort's worked up face triggered his depravity, and he mindlessly inched forward, colliding their lips in a greedy kiss. The desire to drown Voldemort in the same pain and pleasure the man granted him poisoned his blood. He grabbed his shoulder tight as he snaked his free hand into the man's pants and grabbed his hips. The image of Voldemort moaning under him, rolling his head and biting his lip in painful pleasure crashed Harry's heart against his ribcage. Harry's cock jerked for attention. Rubbing against Voldemort's crotch it marred his pants with the first drops of desire.

Arms wound around Harry's torso. Voldemort pushed his knee between Harry's legs and attacked his neck with a stinging swarm of kisses; his hips moving, rubbing against Harry's erect flesh. Cool palms burned their way down the small of Harry's back, spread his butt cheeks; Harry tensed when Voldemort's fingers found his entrance.

The blizzard of rejection hit Harry's skin and chilled the air around them as Voldemort pulled back, his face drained of blood. The tension of crimson eyes and the almost painful twist of his lipless mouth made Harry nervous.

With time, Harry had gotten used to be naked around Voldemort, but at this instant the acrid awareness of his nakedness and defenseless against the man's blunt touch crashed down, and he pushed Voldemort's hand away.

Voldemort's face darkened. With a guttural roar the man shouldered Harry into the wall. His toes collided with Harry's ankle, kicking his feet apart. Harry hissed as two rough fingers forced their way up into his body.

"No, stop!"

For a second, Harry's every muscle cramped as an acute pain shoot through his core. His vision tainted, and his breath caught up when he felt Voldemort's fingers moving inside, searching for something.

Hopeless, defeated, and hurt, Harry closed his eyes. The seizure gradually let go, and his insides resounded with a dull ache of disturbance. He lifted his face to Voldemort and spoke,

"I want to die…I just want to die…Kill me, please. I promise I'll stay dead this time."
The change was immediate…Voldemort's grip slackened on him and he stumbled away but Harry saw the brown bleeding into the crimson, muddying it up. He took the opportunity and stepped forward before wrapping his arms around Tom and hugging him tight,

"Come back…Please…Come back…I need you, Tom…Can you hear me? I need you so much…"

Tom squirmed in his arms but Harry held on tight. He refused to let go. He absolutely refused to allow Tom to fall back into captivity. This opportunity would not come again and he needed to make the most of it,

"Tom…Just listen to me…Focus on my voice…You need to get out…Don't let Dumbledore tie you down again…Don't let him hold you."

Tom began writhing in his arms and it took Harry all the vestiges of his strength and will to hold him. He screamed like he was being burned and the sound echoed around the bathroom. Harry felt exhausted…he hadn't been eating or sleeping. He barely had any energy in his body and whatever he had was being spent on holding Tom's writhing, screaming form. Every muscle in his body cried in protest, telling him to let go but he couldn't…He couldn't let go. If he let go today, Tom would be lost forever and he, himself would be enslaved to Voldemort for an eternity.

He couldn't bear that. He'd thought that he could but now that he had lived through it, he knew that one more day under Voldemort would destroy him. He couldn't…He just couldn't…

Tom screamed again and there was so much agony in it that Harry wished that he could take Tom's pain upon himself. But that wasn't meant to be so he did everything he could by speaking. He encouraged Tom with his words…encouraged him with his voice…He hoped that it was enough to help Tom win.

Eventually though, his body couldn't handle the strain and Harry collapsed to his knees and brought Tom down with him. Pulling Tom's head in his lap, he spoke,

"Wake up…Please…Tom…Wake up…"

He had no idea how many times he repeated that but he kept at it even when his throat was raw and his eyes were swollen with tears…He kept speaking…kept holding him because he knew that he was the only one who could free Tom…he was the only one who could truly get him out of Dumbledore's clutches and he was not going to get another chance at it.

He was practically on the verge of passing out, but he held onto his consciousness like his life depended on it because it did…It truly did. His life…his future was intertwined with Tom's. Tom's fate was decisive for his. They were both dependent on each other so it was imperative that Tom emerge victorious in this battle,

"Tom…Tom…I know you can hear me…I just know you do…Don't let him win…Don't let that monster win…He'll ruin both of us…"

Tom's form went utterly limp in his arms for a moment. Harry stared at his face for a moment feeling a mix of anxiety and trepidation that made him nauseous and dizzy. And then it happened. Tom's fingers wrapped tight around his wrist and a wave of pain coursed through his body…burning his nerves…fraying them…He couldn't breathe…couldn't think…couldn't move…It was pain beyond imagining, pain past endurance – He was gone from the bathroom, locked in the coils
of a creature with red eyes, so tightly bound that Harry did not know where his body ended and the creature's began: they were fused together, bound by pain, and there was no escape – And when the creature spoke, it used Harry's mouth, so that in his agony he felt his jaw move,

"Kill yourself."

Blinded and dying, every part of him screaming for release, Harry felt the creature use him again. He felt his arm moving…felt his fingers close around something cool and metallic…He struggled to stop his fingers from moving but he had no control over himself…Someone else was controlling them…

He felt himself life whatever it was and then his breath hitched in his throat when he felt the sharp edge right over his wrist…

No…No…No…

It was a knife…Dumbledore was making him slit his own wrist,

"This will all be over, Boy…This is all going to be over…"

He struggled against the suffocating hold but it was no use. The pain worsened and he tried to scream but couldn't because Dumbledore had control over that too. He felt trapped…he was suffocating and on top of that the pain was killing him. If Dumbledore didn't make him slit his wrist then the pain would surely be the end of him.

He made another effort but it was useless. He couldn't breathe at all and his muscles were ready to give up the fight. The darkness was closing in and all he could do was hang on for as long as he could. It felt as if his lungs weren't there as he tried to bring air in. he could feel his nerves straining and the thoughts in his head turning to a dizzy confusion.

The pain could stop if he just slit the wrist. Death was nothing compared to this. But Tom…

He would die but Tom…Tom would be trapped forever. How could he abandon him to that fate? And as Harry's heart filled with emotion, the creature's coils loosened, the pain was gone; Harry was lying face down on the tiled floor, his glasses gone, shivering as though he lay upon ice, not wood … Harry opened his eyes, saw his glasses lying by the claw foot of the bath tub along with the knife gleaming wickedly in the bathroom light. He put them on and raised his head a little to see Voldemort lying face down a few feet away. Harry was shaking so violently he couldn't hold his head up properly but he had to move… He couldn't just lie here…He had to get up.
There's a kind of tired that needs a good night's sleep, and another that needs so much more. For Harry, one became the other. It was ever present like a heavy weight on his shoulders. It was then he knew that this tiredness would wear out his emotions too. If Tom didn't come back, then it would come together with his tired body, and become an ingrained part of his life that wouldn't be lived but survived…endured. He wasn't born for that and neither was Tom. They hadn't come to be on a world of such beauty and abundance to live like this, so drained, so trapped, too thin to cope with life's storms and help others with theirs. Time was meant for dancing, for play, laughter and long evenings of happy chatter. Because that was the medicine they both needed, love, friendship, good times. Harry couldn't think of anything he'd rather spend his last ounces of energy on other than with Tom.

Forcing himself to his hands and knees, he crawled to where Tom lay face down. He caught sight of the dark hair and a flicker of hope sparked in his chest. This was it…This was the moment…

He breathed in and out but air wouldn't enter his lungs. Starved for air, his heart raced at tremendous speeds, and his lungs shallowly rose and fell in time. He knelt there for what felt like an eternity but was actually only five minutes. Satisfaction of security was nothing but a distant memory, and an invisible force crushed him from every possible direction. Each second submerged in fear and anticipation made a permanent mark on his heart.

Slowly, carefully, he reached forward and turned Tom over. What he saw made him gasp and he wondered if it was his vivid imagination and his mind playing tricks or reality. It takes a second or two for the image to sink in, even though it was right there before his eyes, larger than life.

The snake like features were gone…erased…like they'd never been there in the first place. The face was so new but so familiar at the same time. Sharp, high cheek bones, an aquiline nose, soft lips…Tom was gorgeous…He was the most handsome man, he'd ever seen.

But there was something wrong, he could sense it. He touched Tom's face and gasped at how cold he was. He crawled closer to Tom and took his wrist in his hand with trembling fingers, trying to feel his pulse but there was nothing there…

No…No….No…Not again…

He pulled Tom's limp form up into his arms and clutched him to his chest,

"TOM!"

His brain had shut down. He was clammy, and his skin glistened with cold sweat. His eyes were as wide as if someone had come to deliver the fatal blow. Yet what he saw…what was happening…no-one else could ever affected by it as much as he was. He was trapped in his own psychosis. This just had to be a living nightmare, tailor made by his own brain to play on his deepest fears.

He wouldn't believe it…. He just wouldn't believe it…This wasn't happening…Soon, he would wake up in that bed and find Voldemort's naked body wrapped up around his bruised one. He
closed his eyes and willed himself to wake up.

Wake up…Wake up… Wake up…

He would gladly accept all the abuse…He would happily take all the pain… But he would not accept this… He couldn't accept this…

"Tom…Please…Wake up… Wake up…"

He gathered Tom closer to his chest and buried his face in his inky black hair,

"WAKE UP! DON'T LEAVE ME LIKE THIS…"

The grief surged with every expelled breath, always reaching higher peaks, never sufficiently soothed by his long stuttering intakes of air. Tears began to spill from his helpless eyes as he desperately wished that this wasn't real. It was like an emptiness in his heart, a shear of nothingness that was somehow taking over and held his soul. It threatened to kill him entirely. It gave him this heavy feeling that was like the weight of the world was resting on his shoulders and there was nothing he could do to get out from under it.

"TOM…TOM…WAKE UP…"

The grief came in waves and threatened to consume him entirely. It was his master, for now. He was at the mercy of its whims and it bit at him with such ferocity he feared it would leave him an empty shell.

He smoothed his fingers over Tom's back and just wept and screamed at the top of his lungs. This was too much. Death was preferable to what he was feeling… Death…He was certain that this pain would be the death of him.

He kissed the top of Tom's head and then spoke softly,

"Come back…Come back to me…There's so much to live for…You and I are meant to be together forever…Please…Come back…"

But there was nothing…No movement…No sound…Not even the slightest tremor….

How could fate do this to him? After everything he'd endured…This couldn't be his destiny. They always said that patience bore sweet fruit. Was this his reward for all the pain, life had dealt him up to his point. Was this his payment?

If it was, then he didn't want it any part of him. He was good with the pain and the torture,

"Tom, please…Wake up…I'm begging you…Don't let Dumbledore take you away from me…"

His cries resonated around the bathroom as he held Tom tight to his chest. But the grief had drained him of the last drops of energy. He had nothing left. Carefully, he laid Tom down and carefully ran his finger over his cheek,

"Tom…"

His tears continued to spill down his cheeks as he leaned over him. Tom wasn't going to come back… He was never coming back…Just that thought was enough to kill him a little inside. Slowly, he pressed his lips to Tom's and whispered against his lips,

"I love you, Tom…I always have…I always will…"
"And so we're almost at the end. One or two more chapters left. I wanted to thank you all for your incredible love and support... for all your encouragement... for all your wonderful reviews. You guys kept me going through it all and if it weren't for them, I would have given up long ago. You guys are truly amazing. Love you all a lot."

Right when Harry was about to give up, right when he was about to let go of the dwindling ray of hope that flickered dangerously inside him, the blanket of pure black despair was replaced by bursts of light that pierced through it. Tom's eyelids fluttered, and he stirred. It was like the heavens had given him another chance. His heart soared, mending itself once more. Tom was saved! Waves of happiness and relief washed over him, and he felt it soak right into his bones. Dizzy with exaltation, he closed his eyes and savoured the felicity that fizzled in his heart.

Harry let out a high-pitched squeal of joy, the happiness was too overwhelming. It started as a tingle in his fingers and toes, much like the feeling he'd had when he'd been anxious, but instead of worrisome it was warm and oh so magical. He felt it pass through him like an ocean wave, washing away the despair and the misery... washing away everything he'd been through up to this point and left him refreshed inside.

Tom's eyelids lifted revealing his beautiful brown eyes and Harry stared at them with utter wonder as his heart overflowed with joy. The colour of Tom's eyes was as breath-taking, as what was inside them. They were bright. Oh, how bright they were, shining with the tears that had yet to fall in trickling lines, streaking down his cheeks. Finally, he spoke, a slight crack in his melodic voice.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

It was the sweetest symphony... so different from Voldemort's. He smiled slightly,

"Because you are the most beautiful thing I know."

A flush crept up Tom's pale cheeks and Harry leaned over and cupped his face,

"We won..."

Tom's soft lips curved up into a smile of their own and it was as if the world had brightened up to a new extreme,

"We won."

Harry pressed a kiss to Tom's cheek and helped him sit up straight. He couldn't contain the joy that he was feeling. It was too much. It was irrepressible. Tom looked slightly disoriented and Harry helped him to his feet. Tom's eyes grew sad as soon as he saw the marks and bruises covering his skin, Tom's lips par

"I did that."

It wasn't a question, just a statement. Tom held his hands up in front of his face and stared at them
distastefully. Harry instantly grabbed them in his and kissed them,

"It wasn't you… You didn't do anything… All these marks mean nothing now that you're back."

Harry watched as Tom pulled him into a tight embrace and buried his face in his shoulder. Harry felt his tears on his bare skin and smoothed his fingers over his back,

"Its okay, Tom…It's okay… Everything's going to be fine."

Tom held him tight but there was a cautiousness in his manner. It was almost as if he was scared that he was made of glass and would shatter with the slightest bit of pressure. He pressed himself closer to Tom and spoke,

"If I was breakable…I would have shattered days ago…maybe months ago…"

Tom pressed a kiss to his neck and Harry melted into it. Tom's lips felt absolutely heavenly against his skin. This was all so new….so beautiful…so absolutely miraculous…

Miraculous…Yes…That was the perfect word to describe them…this bond…their relationship…Everything about this was a miracle…Tom could have been gone today…He could have lost him forever today.

He mentally shook his head as he tightened his hold on him. No…Tom hadn't left him. Nothing had gone wrong. They were both still alive…They both had their entire lives ahead of them. They both had so much happiness in store for them and Harry couldn't wait to get started. Tom finally voiced the question,

"Am I truly a monster… a beast?"

Harry shook his head as he ran his fingers through Tom's silky black hair,

"No…You're not…You're not a monster, Tom. You were born with perfect love in your soul and that love is what kept you alive and well…that love is what made you strong enough to defeat Dumbledore."

Tom let out an anguished cry as he clung to him and Harry let him cry. He knew Tom needed it. All those years of entrapment and suppressed emotions…all those years of physical and emotional suffocation… all the torture Dumbledore must have put Tom's soul through…It was over… all over…

He lost track of time in between Tom's sobs and finally regained it when they stopped, and Tom just held on to him like his life depended on it. Harry coaxed him to walk and led him to the bedroom. He sat him down on the bed and then swung his legs on the mattress before settling down beside him. Tom wrapped his arms around him again and Harry imagined how lonely Tom must have been all these years. How starved he'd been for the simplest and briefest affectionate contact. He hugged him tight and Tom nuzzled his head into his chest. Harry couldn't help but smooth his fingers over Tom's back,

"I love you, Tom."

Tom's reply was muffled but it was enough for Harry. He pressed a kiss to the top of his head. How long had he waited for this day? How long had he waited for these moments? Even now, when they were here, there was tiny part of him that feared that it was too good to be true. It kept whispering that he would wake up and all of this would be over.
He pinched himself slowly and winced. Nope…This wasn't a dream. Tom was really here, in his arms. They had really won. There was an explosion in his brain... the good sort... the type that carried more possibilities than he could be conscious of... but there were hundreds of ideas there in that buzz of electricity... he could feel it. It was the calling card of adventure, of paths awaiting his feet… their feet… Whatever was ahead would be a great challenge, and there could be tears, but it was his adventure to take…his and Tom's and so he smiled.
Harry woke up to an empty bed and immediately the alarm bells began to go off in his head. He rushed to his feet and looked around the room. Tom was nowhere in sight so he all but ran to the bathroom and found him in the bath tub with his head underneath the water. Harry instantly hurried forwards and launched himself into the bath tub before pulling Tom's head above the water. Tom gasped and sputtered, and Harry cried,

"Why, Tom?"

Tom rose from the water and Harry got up with him. Tom pushed his hair back from his face. His eyes were dark, wild and he spoke quietly,

"Leave me alone, Harry…"

Harry shoved him hard, but his feet were planted in place. He barely swayed. His arms hung heavily down at his sides,

"What the hell were you doing?"

Tom closed his eyes and ducked his head but didn't say anything. Harry grabbed him by the shoulder and finally asked,

"How can you be so selfish?"

Tom's jaw tightened,

"Selfish? I'm doing this for you, Harry. Whenever I'm around, you crack, you crumble, you begin to break apart."

Harry spoke hoarsely,

"But if you leave, all the pieces of me will blow away!"

Tom pointed towards the door,

"Leave."

Harry shook his head,

"No."

Tom grabbed his arm and wrenched him back, tugging him toward the bathroom door. This time he let Tom drag him along. He would let Tom take him anywhere.

Tom wrenched open the bathroom door and shoved him inside the bedroom. They both dripped water from their soaked clothing, their hair, their skin. Tom turned toward him, put his hands out to stop him, but he didn't let up. He pushed him backward into the wall. He tried to calm Tom, but he was transfixed, staring into his eyes, his jaw working, his fists clenched.

Harry's heart thrashed in his chest. Tom breathed deeply, once, put his hands over his face. Finally, he pulled his hand away from his face and pressed into him, shoving him backward until his back hit the wall. He stared up into his deep, soulful eyes. And those eyes glistened down at him.
Tom knuckles brushed his stomach gently. His hand moved higher, his knuckles dragging against the wet fabric of his shirt. He paused at his throat, reached under his shirt, and palmed his throat. He looked at him for a moment, cocking his head to the side.

"Why do you not hate me? I ravaged you…hurt you…caused you so much pain…"

Harry held his gaze resolutely and then spoke,

"You did no such thing. It was all Dumbledore…You…You've always been pure and innocent…You've always been beautiful."

Tom leaned forward and kissed him, slowly, deeply, languidly, as though every moment until the end of time belonged to him and he'd decided to share it with him. His tongue pressed inside his mouth. Hot, cool, wet. His body went limp and he closed his eyes and wrapped his arms around Tom's neck.

Not a moment later, Tom grabbed him by the shoulders, spun him and pushed him against the wall gently. His teeth clanked together. His cheek pressed against the cold stone. Tom crowded him, pressed his body against his so there wasn't a place they weren't touching. He pressed hot kisses to the side of his neck as he reached down and pulled the hem of his shirt over his head.

"Harry…"

Tom purred into his ear. His hands went for his pants. With one hand he pulled open the buttons on the fly. With his other he pushed his pants down to his knees, leaving him bare. Harry stepped out of his pants, and Tom instantly kicked them away.

Tom whispered his name into his hair. He ran his hand down his flank, his hips. He shivered and pressed his forehead against the wall. Tom kicked out his feet, forcing them apart with his own.

Tom leaned forward, bit down hard on the flesh where his neck met his shoulder. He hissed at the sting, squeezed his eyes shut and rut against him.

"Harry…"

Tom whispered again, his lips against his ear,

"You are absolutely irresistible."

He groaned when Tom reached around and grabbed the weight of him in his hand. He was hard already, painfully so, waiting for nothing but the coarse feel of his hand around him. Tom pumped him up and down, up and down. His breath exhaled hot against the back of his neck.

The feel of scales against his bare back startled him…

Hadn't the curse lifted…Why wasn't the snake gone?

Harry felt utterly distressed but Tom leaned forward and brushed his lips against his temple,

"Relax…Dumbledore is gone…He is gone, and the curse is broken."

Harry choked out,

"The…The snake…"

Tom laughed softly, and Harry swore that the sound was the most beautiful melody he'd ever
Harry relaxed, and the scales moved upwards. They did nothing to quell the thirst he had for Tom. If anything, it propelled him forward. The snake…Tom's soul, brushed against his skin. It was ice-cold and dry to the touch…so dissimilar to how it had felt before. He remembered how it had used to burn him and scorch his skin. It felt foreign and strange as it weaved around him until its head peered over his shoulder and then brushed against his throat. Tom whispered,

"Even my soul wants you…"

Harry breathed,

"Yes."

The snake coiled snugly around his neck. It squeezed, pinched, enough to make him see a dark sky full of bursting speckles of light.

Behind him, he heard a bit of shuffling, rustling. He kept his open palms flat against the wall and his eyes squeezed shut.

He gasped quietly as Tom's cool, slick fingers pressed against him, and then into him. He murmured almost unintelligible words into his ear. Sweet promises, dirty things Tom wanted to do to him. Even dirtier things he wanted Harry to do to him.

Tom opened him for him carefully, unhurriedly. They were both gasping for air. It felt like time itself was about to fall over the edge of existence and all they had left were these shared moments together. His skin sparked everywhere he touched. It burned so hot, He could almost taste ash in his mouth.

Tom's fingers pressed far inside him. He could feel his knuckles against the tightness of his body. In, out. In, out. A slow tempo he set for them both. When he curled his fingers and pressed against the bundle of nerves he'd been searching for, Harry body quaked.

When Tom pulled his fingers back, he reached up and laced his fingers gently through his hair. Harry turned his head to the side to look at him. Tom's gaze was on his profile, his eyes still filled to the brim with emotions.

He was about to say something but swallowed the words the moment he felt the smooth head of Tom's cock press against him. The snake around his neck coiled tighter. Its tail flicked against his lower back, his hip bone. Harry bit his lip.

The coolness of the wall pressed against his chest, but Tom's warm skin against his back burned hot, even through the fabric of Tom's shirt. As Tom began to slowly shove inside him, he said,

"I shall never let anyone hurt you again, Harry."

Harry replied breathlessly,

"I know."

Tom licked up the back of his neck, pressed his lips to his ear,

"No one... not even me"
Harry closed his eyes and gasped,  
"You can hurt me…I can take it…"

The second the last word left his lips, Tom thrust all the way inside. He cried out from the roughness of it, the fullness of it, the way it felt to have Tom buried deep inside.

They shared heavy breaths, pausing a moment. Tom pulled back and pushed back in again. The tight pressure, the friction, all of it set his heart aflutter.

He made a noise that made Tom chuckle, his lips pressed against the back of his neck. He set a leisurely rhythm between them. That easy push and pull. He couldn't move even if he'd wanted to. But he didn't want to. Every part of him wanted to stay right there with Tom as their bodies heated and their breathing grew hasty.

Nothing mattered then but Tom and him and the way they fit together. When Tom touched him, he didn't care about anything. He didn't need anything any longer.

He had Tom. He only wanted him.

"You're so gorgeous."

Tom reached around to the front, grabbed the backs of his hands with his palms, laced their fingers together, and pressed them hard against the wall,

"So gorgeous and so pure. Nothing matters now that I have you to light up my world."

Tom squeezed his fingers entwined with his own. When his name came out as a whisper on his lips, his pace quickened, his breathing rushed.

He shifted the way he stood, changing the angle somehow. The moment he had, with each sweet press inside him, He could feel the head of his cock rub against the place that stole his breath away. A small gasp escaped each time he pulled back.

Tom chanted his name, rested his forehead on his shoulder.

When he came, he immediately let go of his hands. Tom wrapped his arms around him, crushing him against himself like he couldn't fathom even an inch of their bodies not touching. He felt him pulsate inside him as he listened to the stark silence of his pleasure and then the ragged, uneven breaths that followed.

He shuddered once, then twice. Releasing him for a moment, before he spun him around so he was facing him. Tom crowded him, looked down into his eyes the moment his hands wrapped around his cock and squeezed.

His own breaking point was so close. He knew Tom could tell because he reached out one hand and tangled his fingers in his hair once again. The other, slick already, pumped him up and down, up and down. He closed his eyes and let his head fall back, hitting the wall.

There was nothing in this great universe, but the feel of Tom's warm body pressed so securely against his, and the way his thumb traced the small slit at the tip of his cock.

Tom said his name the moment before he broke apart. Harry stared up at him, into those gorgeous brown eyes of his. They glimmered with something that shone so damn bright, just in those moments when he needed to see it most.
He came all over his hand, and his bare stomach. Tom's hand slowed as he watched his face, his throat as he breathed heavily. When he'd finally fallen back down to earth, he did something so unexpected, an almost silent sob slipped out of his mouth.

Tom hugged him.

It was so simple. He wrapped his arms around him, pressed his entire body to his, and hugged him. Tom said nothing and didn't move for so long he might've thought he'd fallen asleep had it not been for the pounding of his heart he could feel at his collarbone.

That was how the volcano of them erupted. Hot, heavy, slow. And then wrapped in each other's arms, they told each other silent stories of understandings, thanks, and companionship with something as simple as a hug. Sweet words, gentle touches. Not-so-gentle touches. Promises they would always keep. Tom murmured into his hair,

"You saved me, Harry."

Harry closed his eyes and nestled his head into his chest,

"I love you, Tom…I will love you forever."

Tom kissed his lips softly and breathed softly,

"I love you too so much."

Harry sighed contentedly. Whoever had said that happily ever afters didn't exist had probably never suffered enough to attain it. Happiness demanded suffering. Love demanded sacrifice. There was no easy path to attain true joy.

And it seemed that all his suffering…all his sacrifice had finally won him his happily ever after. It was finally here, and it was all theirs.
Chapter 100

Tom swung off his horse with ease. Newly won ease. The moment his boots touched the dirt he felt it thrumming in him. He found the castle to be just as he had remembered it, dismounting in the flower-bordered quadrangle. The scent of blossom, of high clear air, of sweet oils, and the delicate earth, all combined, here where shallow steps lead up to the first of the entrances, and the first of the arcs of branches that led to the gardens.

Now Tom felt the bright, heady set of new desires that had had him breaking from his royal entourage in the last miles spurring his horse to gallop ahead alone as he wished...as he so giddily wished.

He tossed his reins to a servant, was told, 'By the east fountain,' and pushed his way past the branches of myrtle hanging low over the paths to the marble flags, to a balconied garden where a figure stood, looking out.

Tom looked too...at one thing only: the breeze playing with a strand of raven black hair. He felt his own rising happiness, the speeding of his pulse. Some part of him, absurdly, wondered how he would be received: the fluttering, enjoyable anxiety of a new lover. It was nice to just look, to see him when he thought he wasn't being observed, even as the familiar voice spoke,

"Tell me as soon as the King approaches, I want to be informed right away."

Tom felt a burgeoning delight when he spoke,

"Not a servant... Unless I was not informed of my demotion."

Harry turned.

He was standing before the view. The breeze that was playing with his hair was also playing with his loose white shirt. Finally, a smile curved Harry's lips,

"I was watching the road."

Tom spoke softly,

"Hello."

Behind Harry the glimpse of the road, where the arrival of Tom's large retinue would have been seen, but not his own approach, a single rider, a speck on a quicker route. Harry's cheeks were slightly flushed, though it was not clear whether it was from summer heat or his admission.

Harry lowered his gaze shyly and spoke,

"Hello."

Tom couldn't help the spill of feeling at how close they had come to not having this at all,

"You've been gone for months."

He ducked his head and nodded. He hadn't wanted to part with Harry but it had been necessary to reclaim his kingdom but now that was done and everything was back to normal,

"I am yours forever, Harry."
Harry traced his finger over the stone balcony but didn't say anything. He knew he wanted him to woe him. It was Harry's right to be upset. He stepped closer to Harry and ran his finger over the soft fabric of Harry's shirt,

"Oh, how I have missed you."

Harry stood still but he noticed the subtle increase in his breathing rate. They weren't alone, of course. A castle had an army of servants to take care of it. On top of everything, Bellatrix and Greyback...his most trusted and proficient generals played the part of nettlesome guardians to Harry to perfection. It was one of the reason he had broken away from his retinue and reached here early. He knew Greyback and Bellatrix would get straight to coddling Harry as soon as they would reach and he would have missed the chance to have him all to himself. Despite the army of servants, here on the edge of the gardens, it was as if the birdsong and the hum of cicadas were their only adjunct.

He unbuttoned Harry's shirt and spoke softly, into Harry's ear,

"I am going to take my sweet time with you."

He pulled off the shirt as Harry spoke barely above a whisper,

"I was just thinking about what it would be like here, with you."

Tom kissed the top of Harry's bare shoulder, then his jaw and inquired softly,

"Like this?"

Harry's eyelids fluttered shut and he muttered dazedly,

'No, I...thinking about you and being with you are different, you're always so powerful, more..."

Tom felt a wellspring of pure pleasure and laughed against Harry's neck.

"Go on."

Harry shook his head and spoke,

"Stop my mouth. I don't know what I'm saying."

Tom lifted his head and kissed Harry tenderly, found him flushed, warm like summer. He could feel Harry's hands sliding up over his body, an unconscious mapping that was new...well not new...it just felt new every time Harry touched him like that.

Tom held Harry's waist, liking how little stood between him and skin: just Harry's light cotton trousers that moved with the movement of his was hard to think beyond the curve of Harry's shoulder, the long line of his thigh. Tom finally asked him, his voice warm and pleased,

"Have I ever told you how gorgeous you are?"

Harry chuckled softly and spoke

"Take off your armour."

He said it with the beautiful view at his back. He stepped back, leaning slightly on the marble behind him that balconied the view, a barrier where the cliffs looked out. Overhead branches of myrtle shaded them from the sun, shifting light and casting shadows over Harry's body.
A diffused excitement at the idea of having the view as their witness stirred in Tom.

He felt a possessive desire to see and be seen but it was transgressive and outside the bounds of his own nature, even as the gardens felt private enough that it might be possible.

He unbuckled his armour and dropped it before speaking. His voice was low,

"The rest can wait."

Harry put a hand against the under cloth pressed warm against Tom's chest by his armour. Kissing felt much more intimate when the armour was discarded on the path and it was body against body. Harry's mouth opened to him, and he tongued inside in the way he liked. Harry encouraged it, fingers curling around his neck.

Dressed like that, it was like having him naked; there was so much skin, and nothing to remove except for the pants. Tom pressed Harry back against the marble and ran his hands down Harry's bare torso.

It could have happened then, pushing down Harry's pants, turning him and thrusting into his body. Instead, Tom thought, with indulgent slowness, about taking his time, about the delectable pink nipples. The restraint was part of it, the competing desires of wanting everything all at once, and wanting to savour each increment.

When he pulled back his skin felt flushed, his whole body much more hotly engaged than he realised. He managed to pull back further, to see Harry's face, his lips parted, his cheeks heated, his hair slightly disordered by Tom's fingers. As if Harry was only now noticing this, he spoke,

"You're here early."

He laughed softly,

"Yes."

Harry rested his head on his shoulder and wrapped his arms around him,

"I was planning to greet you on the steps."

He skimmed his fingers over the contours of Harry's smooth back and spoke,

"Come out and kiss me in front of everyone later."

Harry burst out laughing and spoke,

"I don't think Bella and Fenrir would approve of that. How far behind did you leave them?"

Tom said it, his smile widening,

"I have no idea. All I know is that they are far away and cannot stop me from having my wicked way with you."

Harry giggled excitedly and he started kissing him senseless to absorb that delectable sound as best as he could.
The Castle was beautiful, nestled in a series of gardens, with flower sprays and fountains, and meandering paths that offered startling views of the mountains. Its marble colonnades were simple and led inside to atriums and further gardens, and cooler spaces where the heat of summer was distant, like the outdoor hum of cicadas. The strolled through the paths that wound through the gardens, through the trees of orange and almond. Harry had yet to coax him into swimming in the lake which was by far his favorite pastime. There were marble steps down to the lake, and a beautiful spot for diving. He had gotten a silk awning set up by the lake for Harry, cool shade for when the sun was at its height because Harry had absolutely no regard for his personal well being.

For now it was the simple pleasure of Harry beside him, their hands linked, with only sunlight and fresh air about them. Here and there, they stopped, and everything was a delight: the leisure to kiss, to linger under the orange tree, the bits of bark that clung to Harry's trousers after he was pressed up against it. The gardens were full of small discoveries, from the shaded colonnades, to the cool waters of the fountain, to a series of balconied garden outlooks.

They stopped at one of them. Harry plucked a white flower from the low-hanging branches, and lifted his hand to tuck it into Voldemort's hair,

"Are you courting me?"

He felt foolish with happiness. This was still too new to him,

"I think we are way past that point."

Voldemort took a flower of his own. His pulse sped up, his fingers felt clumsy as he tucked it behind Harry's ear. The blush on Harry's cheeks was absolutely beautiful.

Harry looked away and stared at the flowerbed that seemed fairly new.

"I planted these a month ago. Do you like them?"

He stared at the vivid violet blossoms and nodded,

"I like them. I think they're beautiful…Just like you…"

Harry's fingers found his again, a small intimacy that had him overbrimming.

"I missed you. Half of the time, I didn't know what to do with myself… It's been so lonely."

He tugged on Harry's end and they came to an arched open garden,

"I missed you too, Love. Every day that I was away from you was pure agony."

Harry moved away, to a place where the shifting shade once again opened out into a view of the lake and the mountains. After a moment, Voldemort came to stand beside him. He could see the patterns of light and shadow on Harry's face.

The sun above them felt too exposing. Voldemort found that couldn't look away from Harry…Not even for a second. He had been so starved for the sight of him…So absolutely famished for his touch…his warmth…his love…Harry finally turned back around and smiled softly,

"You must be exhausted after your ride. Let me attend to you."
Bright and open, the baths were in sunny atriums, and the water was of different temperatures, warm in some, cool in others. Each bath was a sunken rectangle, with steps carved into the marble leading down into the water. A few of the more private baths were under shaded colonnades, others were open to the sky, and parts of the bowered gardens.

Attendants had already opened and readied the baths. Elegant pitchers, soft cloths and towels, soaps and oils, and the baths filled with exquisitely clear water. He was glad that these baths were not underground. Of course, Harry never used these. He preferred the lake. There were no attendants waiting for them. They were alone.

Harry stood in his boots and simple cotton trousers, a white-petalled flower in his dark raven hair. He was the perfect image of aristocracy, royalty in his every movement, in the tilt of his chin, in the sweep of his gaze. He might have been extending a signet ring to be kissed or tapping his boot with a riding crop. His gorgeous emerald eyes gave little away, his full lips that Voldemort had recently kissed were most often seen in that simple radiant smile. He had strolled into the baths as though they belonged to him. They did,

"I've never done this before so lead me through it."

He looked Harry from head to toe and spoke softly,

"Undress."

Harry undid his trousers and pulled them off so that they pooled at his feet. It was a shock, to have him stand naked. Harry had gained a healthy amount of weight and all the swimming he did kept him in perfect shape. He was so utterly gorgeous. Harry had not taken the flower from his hair or the boots off his feet,

"And then?"

He spoke,

"Test the heat of the water."

Harry took up a pitcher and let the stream of water fill it, then lifted it and deliberately poured it over himself, so that water splashed down over him, and over his still-booted feet.

"Harry…"

Harry asked softly,

"And then?"

He was wet, from his chest to his toes, though the slight steam from the closest of the pools was a sheen that seemed to wet his lashes and the petals of the flower behind his ear. The heat from the baths infused the air,

"Undress me."

Harry came forward,

"Like this?"

They stood under one of the colonnades, in light shade, close to the open, sunny place where steps led down to the largest of the outdoor baths.
Voldemort nodded once. Harry was very close. He unlaced his shirt and pulled it over his head with practiced ease. Harry, then attended to his pants and pulled them down over his thighs, past his knees and then nudged him slightly so that he could step out of them.

Harry stood still, awaiting the next instruction and he spoke through numb lips,

"Kneel for me."

Deliberately, Harry went to his knees. All the breath left Voldemort. The rise and fall of Harry's chest was shallow. His lips were parted, but he didn't speak. His body was relaxed as if kneeling for him was the most natural thing to do. It should be the other way around. He should be worshipping Harry after everything he'd done for him. Harry stared pointedly at his feet and he reluctantly extended his foot.

His heart was pounding. Harry unlaced his boot and drew it off…first one, then the other. Beside him was the pitcher, oils, and a sponge.

Slowly, he began to wash Voldemort's foot. It was the action of a bath attendant. Something Harry shouldn't be doing for him but Harry seemed to enjoying every second of it.

Voldemort could see the faint flush that heat and steam gave to Harry's cheeks. He could see the camber of his lashes. He could see each delicate petal of the white flower in his hair.

The water was hot. It streamed from the sponge as Harry dipped it, then lifted it, and ran it down Voldemort's legs, leaving them clean and wet. Heel, sole and ankle were lathered. Then back up his calf, his shin. Harry knelt up to soap behind Voldemort's knee, then the long muscles of his left thigh. He rubbed each surface to a lather, then rinsed it.

Another tilt of the pitcher: water splashed the marble, and splashed Harry's thighs where he knelt, legs slightly apart. It wasn't finished. Harry was rising.

Washing Voldemort's hands first, Harry used only fingers, no sponge, massaging thumbs across Voldemort's knuckles, his thumb and fingers working a lather between Voldemort's. Voldemort's arms were lifted, soaped, the curve of his bicep, the crook of his elbow.

Harry didn't look up into Voldemort's eyes as he soaped Voldemort's upper thighs and then between his legs, where his cock hung part-roused, feeling thick and heavy as it was pushed around by the sponge. Then Harry raised the pitcher and poured water all the way down Voldemort's body.

A stream of heat. He knew what was coming. His whole body felt like it was changing, even before Harry moved to his back.

Silence; he was too aware of his own breathing. Harry was behind him. He couldn't see him but knew he was there. He felt exposed, vulnerable as if blindfolded: to be seen while unseeing. It was an effort, not to turn his head. Neither of them spoke.

He wondered what Harry was seeing. He wondered what Harry was remembering, if it had happened in Harry's mind the same way it had happened in his own. Water hit the marble as Harry squeezed the sponge. He experienced it physically, the sound loud, a crack.

He shuddered when it touched him, because it was so warm, and gentle. He felt the heat of the water and the soft touch of the sponge, softer than he had imagined, so that a second shudder, a tremor, passed through him.

Nothing could wash away the past, but this took them both there, touching a painful truth,
acknowledging it.

It was gentler between his shoulders than it had been against his chest. Flesh and self were linked. The cleansing was slow, attentive, drizzling water, then soaping his skin. It was healing something he hadn't known needed to be healed. Like breathing, it was necessary, even as the tenderness of it was too much, gentleness like he'd never known. Harry finally spoke,

"Bow your head."

He closed his eyes. Water streamed over him. His hair and face were wet. This was usually done seated, on the long bench by the sluice with the attendant standing behind...he didn't say it, as Harry reached up to push soap into his hair, standing in front. Long fingers kneaded a lather from his temples to the back of his head, and the massaging of his scalp felt like comfort.

A fresh scoop of the pitcher: rinsed, the warm water engulfing him, he looked up at Harry through wet eyelashes, and knew that everything was in his eyes.

It was in Harry's too. Harry, who looked as he had never looked, his body wet, where he'd been splashed, the dark tendrils of his hair wet too,

"What's next?"

He took Harry's wrists in his hands gently and spoke,

"I want to make love to you."

Harry flushed scarlet and it was endearing,

"Can I wash myself first?"

He nodded,

"You can wash while I soak."

The water in the soaking bath was hot, made for unknotting muscles, and relaxation. It was unexpectedly hot, considering that the day was hot, and that this bath was open-air, with sunlight glinting across its surface. Voldemort descended the six steps, and waded, at waist height, to the opposite edge where he turned and sat on the submerged ledge, his shoulders out of the water, the edge of the bath at his back.

He had wanted to consummate this closeness, to bring their bodies together while they were both wide open. But the water felt good too. And Harry was an education in the pleasure of delay, of suspension and recommencement. Voldemort watched him.

After a moment, Harry picked up the pitcher and used the last of the water to wash himself. He just cleaned himself, each motion useful; then rinsed, water sluicing briefly over his body. How little he looked like an attendant, and how much he looked like himself, carrying out his ordinary routine, was its own form of enjoyment, an easy access to Harry's private self.

Then Harry came forward. The flower was still in his hair. He was still wearing the boots. Voldemort had a brief vision that Harry was going to descend into the soaking bath wearing them, but Harry stopped at the shaded edge.

He didn't get in. He folded himself on the side, in a relaxed, elegant posture, one knee drawn up, his weight resting on one hand. He trailed the fingertips of the other in the water,
"It's hot."

He didn't clarify whether he meant the water, the sun, or the marble. He was slightly flushed even from the steam. If he came into the pool he'd be cooked. In all other ways, he looked cool, his long white thighs, his elegant recline, his male torso with its pink nipples, his cock, part-visible in that posture.

Voldemort wanted to push off the side; if this were the lake, he would swim three strong strokes to push himself out of the water alongside Harry. He'd run a proprietary hand over Harry's body, over his thighs, his flank and chest. He imagined himself coming up dripping out of the baths to take Harry there on the marble,

"I'm glad you're finally back."

Harry's voice wound lazily. He made absolutely no effort to get up. The words were at odds with his aristocratic pose, draped all over the marble.

Fingers trailing in the water. He closed his eyes and let himself sink a little deeper into the water. The past played in front of his eyes. All the cruel treatment, he'd dealt Harry. All the pain he'd caused him. He remembered the time when this castle was nothing but dust just like his insides and how Harry had revived them both. None of this would exist if Harry hadn't existed. He wouldn't exist.

The sunlight was brighter than he expected when he opened his eyes, sparkling across the water. Harry was still sitting behind the shade line but he knew he was thinking back to the same time. Harry shook his head and finally spoke,

"Come out."

He emerged hotter than steam, overheated like one boiled, his pale skin turned ruddy by the water. Harry filled the pitcher from the secondary sluice, approached, and shifted his grip. Voldemort threw up his arms instinctively.

"No, Harry, that's cold, it's…"

Gasping….Shock of the frozen water. Ice cold on superheated skin, like plunging into a river, a too-sudden revitalisation. Instinct propelled him to grab Harry in revenge, to drag him forward, their bodies colliding.

Cool body plastering against hot. Harry was unexpectedly laughing, his skin warm as sunlight. The struggle took them both to the slippery marble.

It was unthinking to get on top, to pin Harry with a wrestler's move. Voldemort progressed through three simple positions in his enjoyment of that sport before he realised that Harry was responding to his wrestling holds with counters.

"What's this? You've been learning?"

Harry moved,

"Yeah...How am I doing?"

"Wrestling is like chess."

Harry moved, he countered. Harry moved, he countered. Beneath him, he felt Harry try out all the
variations that he knew, a beginner's set, but well executed. The part of Voldemort's mind that liked wrestling above all sports took note, appreciatively, of Harry's form. But he was a novice: Voldemort countered him again easily, wise enough to keep his own hold strong and ready, even when he had Harry fully pinned. And then he thought about it,

"Who is teaching you?"

Harry smirked,

"Fenrir taught me some before leaving and he left the rest to Silas. He's a surprisingly good teacher."

Then you'll never learn effectively. Instead, he found himself frowning, saying,

"I'm better than Silas."

He wasn't sure why that returned him Harry's laughter, but it did, soft and breathless, saying,

"I know. You have vanquished me. Let me up."

Voldemort stood, held out his hand and hoisted. Harry snagged up one of the soft towels and draped Voldemort's head in it. Engulfed, Voldemort let his hair be rubbed about, then let Harry dry the rest of him, the softness of the towel against his skin as unexpectedly tender as any touch Harry had offered him. It wasn't sensual, it was coddling, comforting, and so unlooked for that it made him feel strange, lucky, part of the summer scents, the sunlight and wonder of this place.

"The truth is you're very sweet."

He took Harry's fingers in a tangle of towel. He dumped a towel over Harry's head before he could answer, and enjoyed watching Harry emerge from it with his hair mussed.

Harry stepped back. To dry himself, he used the same unconcerned motions with which he'd washed himself: he swiped the towel over his torso, under his arms, between his legs. Before he did any of this, he unhooked the flower from his hair and bent to unlace his boots. Leave them on, Voldemort wanted to say. He liked the piquant way they drew attention to Harry's nudity.

Harry began to look around for a wrap to wear, but Voldemort took his hand instead,

"We don't need one. Come on."

Harry ducked his head and shook it,

"There are servants around...I don't..."

He felt a hint of possessive jealousy when he imagined anyone seeing Harry in this state. He snapped his fingers and conjured a robe for Harry and himself. They stepped back into open sunlight and Harry let out a breathless laugh, as Voldemort tugged him towards the eastern entrance, hands linked. They made their way through the corridors. Here they weren't alone: the servants who had absented themselves from the baths were waiting for any sign they were needed, and guards stood on ceremonial duty.

Voldemort would have walked through without noticing them, but he could feel Harry's over-awareness of each person they passed.

Entering the royal chambers, the view was of gauzy white, and of marble and sky, the wide,
graceful interior opening out onto a balcony. Harry walked right out onto it and allowed the robe to drop. Leaning his naked body against the marble balustrade and closing his eyes with the sun full on his face. He let out a breath that was pure blissful happiness.

Voldemort came out and fitted himself lazily alongside Harry, enjoying the sunlight too, and the air, that winked in an expanse of blue. Harry's eyes opened. Voldemort felt breathless, as he trailed a touch down Harry's arm. Harry turned in towards the touch and they kissed just as he'd imagined, Harry's arm hooked around his neck. The simple intimacy from the baths changed to something else, at the feel of Harry naked against him, skin to skin.

The kiss deepened. Harry's hand in Voldemort's damp hair. Half hard since the baths, it didn't take long to rouse fully, but what made the blood beat against the inside of his skin was feeling Harry rousing against him in turn, as his hands slid slowly over Harry's body.

His own cock, hard and heavy, was rubbing deliciously between them and the feel of it was as good as the feel of the sunlight on his skin. He wanted to keep going, his body thrusting slowly to please himself, and to please Harry, who liked it slow and lazy like this. A push, a few deliberate steps, and they were back in the shade. He felt the brush of gauze hangings, the cool stone of the wall at his back. His hands slid down past the small of Harry's back, palming the curves there. The features of the room became a series of stations on the way to their destination, the journey neither urgent nor hurried. A period of separation when Harry poured a cup of water and drank from it, Voldemort watching with his shoulders against the opposite wall. A long interval where Voldemort braced a palm against stone and kissed Harry's sensitive neck. Then he turned Harry so that he was belly to the wall, and kissed his neck again, from behind.

Intentionally, he did not drive towards a conclusion, but simply let himself explore, the softest kisses to Harry's neck, sliding his palms over Harry's chest, slowly over the nipples, which were sensitive and which, later, he would take into his mouth. He liked the feel of Harry's back against his torso, the dip of Harry's head. Harry leaned into the gentlest touch as though starved. He stroked along Harry's flank, slow, slower. Again.

"Tom…I…"

Caught up in the way that Harry's skin responded to him, he had missed the quickening pulse, the subtle signs of a body's approach to its brink. He slowed further.

Harry made a soft sound, and Voldemort slid his hand up the inside of Harry's thigh, stopping right at the juncture, thumbing the join between thigh and torso as he kissed Harry's neck again, slowly. Harry groaned, his forehead touched the stone.

His desire to explore Harry and to enjoy this pleasure was transforming into a desire to mount, to be inside him, and to claim him this way, slow, their breaths flickering into one another's mouths as they kissed. Harry was pushing back against him rhythmically now. Voldemort's cock was sliding continually over the place where he wanted it.

Voldemort turned Harry and kissed him, Harry's back against the wall, the kiss like consummation, hard and deep. Harry made that slight sound again, right into Voldemort's mouth.

When they broke apart again it was to look at each other with uneven breaths, and it already felt like he was inside,

"I want you."

He watched the flush rise up over Harry's skin.
"On the balcony?"

He was leaned against the wall. Voldemort had taken a step back,

"We're not quite on the balcony."

Harry closed his eyes,

"I've lost track of where we are."

He had returned into Harry's physical space, irresistibly. He drew closer to him and whispered softly into Harry's ear,

"I want do it slowly, the way you like."

Harry melted against the wall and sighed,

"Yes."

The number of times that they had made love were still finite enough that Voldemort could remember each one of them. None of them had been like this, half sprawled on the bed looking up at Harry. Harry's hands smoothed over his chest, up to his neck, then down over the planes of his torso, his abdomen. In the streaked sunlight, they were kissing. He loved the way that Harry kissed, as if Voldemort was the only person that he had ever kissed or would ever want to.

The openness from the baths lingered. Voldemort could hear his soft exhalations of breath; once or twice, a sound passed his lips that he didn't seem to be aware of. Time unslid the knot of any last ribbon of tension, letting it slip, letting him go further and further into his own pleasure.

Their bodies tangled together, touches blending and blurring. Voldemort gave himself over to the feeling of Harry in his arms. It was an age before he put his hand between Harry's legs, and felt his legs part.

When he finally slid inside, it felt like time had stopped in the small, intimate space between them, after a sweet forever of deep kisses, of opening Harry up with oiled fingers. He didn't move but stayed where he was, in breathless silence. Everything felt connected, open. Their movements were more like nudges than thrusts, their bodies pushing together without the long, sliding separation of withdrawal.

He could feel Harry drawing closer and closer to his climax, not, as it was sometimes, like he was pushing past the gnarl of his own barriers, but hotly, inevitably. The thrust were longer now, Voldemort's body moving to seek out its own gratification.

He heard a choked off sound as Harry dissolved under him, and Voldemort was lost to the feel of it, the hot, liquid pleasure of claiming Harry as his, the closeness, near as a heartbeat. His own body pulsed and flared, an interval of flooding pleasure, and it almost didn't seem to end but to transform into the sweet, heavy feel of his limbs entangled with Harry's, pleasure still between them, the throbs of it ebbing.

Harry didn't immediately leap up to clean himself off, but stayed, their bodies collapsed onto one another, the sounds of summer coming in from outside.

He reached out and moved a curl of hair from Harry's face.

'Tomorrow, let's go riding,'
Thinking of the gift he had already waiting in the stables, a proud five-year-old with a curved neck and a waterfall of mane. He'd lead her out and give her to Harry, and they'd ride out through fields of wildflowers, the air sweet with summer. When they reached a clearing, Voldemort would draw their horses together, lean over and kiss him.

Before Harry could answer, there was an unmistakable knock on the door.

The sound made Voldemort groan, because he knew what Harry was going to do,

"What?"

Called Harry, pushing himself up on an elbow. The servant who entered was no one Voldemort knew, and showed a remarkable lack of reaction to Harry with the marks of lovemaking still on him,

"Your Highness, you asked to be notified when the King's retinue reached the Castle. I'm here to inform you that it has finally reached."

A grin curved Harry's lips,

"Thank you, I can be said to be faintly aware of that."

Voldemort started laughing. He lifted his head and said,

"Bring refreshments, something cool to drink. And if the King's retinue really has arrived, tell his squires that the King's armour is in the east garden."

The servant nodded,

"Yes, My Lord."

Harry closed his eyes and snuggled close to him,

"We can go riding if I can move tomorrow."

Voldemort spoke,

"All right."

Harry buried his face in Voldemort's chest and spoke,

"You know Bella and Fenrir are going to be here any second."

He ran his hand over Harry's back and spoke,

"I'll have a servant inform them that you're resting. I'm sure they can wait a few more hours to see you and dote all over you."

Harry nodded sleepily and spoke,

"That sounds good."

It only took a minute for Harry to fall asleep when he had, he couldn't help but thank the stars above for blessing him with someone as pure and innocent as Harry.
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