

Entwined

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/21345259) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/21345259>.

Rating:	Not Rated
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling
Relationships:	Harry Potter/Tom Riddle , Harry Potter/Voldemort , Harry Potter/Tom Riddle Voldemort
Characters:	Harry Potter , Tom Riddle Voldemort , Voldemort (Harry Potter)
Additional Tags:	Angst , Hurt/Comfort , Emotional Hurt/Comfort
Language:	English
Collections:	Mystery_sb Want to Read
Stats:	Published: 2019-11-07 Updated: 2023-07-11 Words: 96,152 Chapters: 83/?

Entwined

by [Quillbreaker](#)

Summary

The Japanese believe that people are predestined to meet through a red string tied to the fingers of those who find each other in life. The two people connected by the red thread are destined lovers, regardless of place, time, or the beauty of the story is that although the strings can sometimes stretch and become tangled, those ties will never be broken.

Notes

This is one of those ideas that just woke me up in the middle of the night and compelled me to write. It takes place after the duel Harry had with Voldemort in the graveyard and the Priori Incantatem incident in the Goblet of Fire. Hope you all enjoy all... Give me your feedback through the reviews and I'll definitely continue this... Hope you enjoy this as much as I enjoyed writing it.

Chapter 1

He heard Voldemort scream,

"Stun him!"

Ten feet from Cedric, Harry dived behind a marble angel to avoid the jets of red light and saw the tip of its wing shatter as the spells hit it. Gripping his wand more tightly, he dashed out from behind the angel and bellowed, pointing his wand wildly over his shoulder at the Death Eaters running at him.

"Impedimenta!"

From a muffled yell, he thought he had stopped at least one of them, but there was no time to turn and look; he jumped over the Cup and dived as he heard more wand blasts behind him; more jets of light flew over his head as he fell, stretching out his hand to grab Cedric's arm as Voldemort shrieked,

"Stand aside! I will kill him! He is mine!"

Harry's hand had closed on Cedric's wrist; one tombstone stood between him and Voldemort, but Cedric was too heavy to carry, and the Cup was out of reach.

Voldemort's red eyes flamed in the darkness. Harry saw his mouth curl into a smile, saw him raise his wand.

"Accio!"

Harry yelled, pointing his wand at the Triwizard Cup. It flew into the air, and soared towards him... His heart jackhammered in his chest as he caught it by the handle...

But nothing happened...

His last hope of escaping was gone... The handle slipped out of his numb fingers and his head fell in defeat. In the background, the death eaters jeered and shouted as he heard Voldemort approach him,

"Are you quite done with trying to escape, Harry?"

Harry closed his eyes as he let go of Cedric's lifeless arm... The sense of failure weighed heavy on his soul. He'd failed him... He'd failed Cedric...

The despair that filled him was a heady blackness; the means of escape he'd thought possible had vanished to black, not blocked, but like they had never been there at all. The notion of hope became meaningless, and if his mind tried to linger on such ideas they started to feel like cruel tricks, as cruel as any desert mirage. The bonds he had, the ones that kept his heart beating, felt so thin and frail and even they were a terrible weight.

At least, he wouldn't have to live with his sense of failure... He wouldn't have to face Cedric's parents... Voldemort was going to kill him... He was going to die.

And that didn't bother him. It should but it didn't. His mind felt oddly calm and relaxed even though his treacherous heart was trying to escape his body. It was struggling to beat its way out of his chest.

He could still feel the warmth of his wand between his fingers but what good would it do him now? He could fight but it would only serve to prolong his death. There was no escape from here...Not for him at least...

He felt the tip of Voldemort's wand touch his forehead. Any minute now he was going to see the green flash of light. Any minute now he was going to be gone from this world. This was the last chance he had to honour Cedric's wish. The words finally left his lips,

"I have a request."

The death eaters shouted insults at him, but a hush fell as, no doubt, Voldemort silenced them. The tip of the wand receded from his forehead and he whispered hoarsely,

"Cedric... Could you... Could you have his body delivered back to his parents?"

Voldemort was silent for a moment and then he chuckled darkly,

"What a selfless request, Harry. Even now, when you are minutes away from death... You continue to think of others... You should be more concerned about what will happen to your body once you are dead."

Harry opened his eyes and looked up at Voldemort...Meeting his crimson gaze head on as he spoke,

"I don't care about what happens to me...Not anymore... All I'm asking is that you honour my request... Please..."

Please... Why had he said that? Was he really that desperate? Now the death eaters would probably boast that he'd begged before he'd died. But he was desperate... Cedric had died because of him. He could have lived a long healthy life if it hadn't been for him. This was all his fault and he needed to make it right. He just had to make it right before he died.

There was utter silence in the graveyard and then Voldemort spoke,

"It shall be done."

The relief those words filled him with was indescribable. It felt like a huge weight had been lifted from his shoulders. He didn't know why he trusted Voldemort's words... For all he knew, the man could be lying but everything inside him was screaming that he wasn't. Voldemort was really going to honour his request.

He could die in peace now. He dropped his wand as his final act of surrender and spoke,

"Thank you."

The wand returned to his forehead and Harry closed his eyes as his life flashed in front of his eyes. All those terrible years with the Dursleys... The time he'd read his Hogwarts acceptance letter... The first time he'd held his wand... The first time he'd seen Hedwig... The time when he'd met Ron and Hermione... All the moments he'd shared with them... He remembered his first time on a broomstick... He remembered the twins... He saw their smiling faces... Remembered all their jokes... He saw Sirius and Remus... He saw Hogwarts... All the corridors... The grounds... Hagrid... Professor Dumbledore... Professor McGonigal... Even Snape...

It was strange how many memories he'd accumulated in his short life span and yet how fast they'd flashed inside his head. He was glad that he'd met the people he'd met... He was glad that he had people who cared about him... Who would probably be sad at his demise... Who would look for him if Voldemort burnt his body or left him to rot in this graveyard or worse... A decent burial was out of the question for him. Voldemort hated him too much and Harry was certain that his death would not be enough to satiate his desire for revenge.

He drew in one last shaky breath and then a flash of light behind his closed lids threw everything into immaculate darkness.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

I am seriously overwhelmed with the response I got on this. Thank you soooooooooooooo much for your love and support. It's the only thing that keeps me motivated enough to write. You guys are the best. Hope you continue to enjoy this. Love you all.

Harry felt so warm, so very sleepy, that he didn't open his eyes. His head felt like it was filled with cotton and his body...well he couldn't feel it at all. Was this what death was supposed to feel like? Had he already been buried?

Voices, dim and distant, reached him. That wasn't right... Couldn't be...

And as the fact that he was alive registered in his mind... He instantly felt the aches and pains... There wasn't a part of him that wasn't aching. And those aches were enough to bring him to full alertness. A cold sweat washed over his face and chest... his heart trying desperately to escape through his throat the first chance it could get.

Voldemort... The death eaters... Cedric... The graveyard... All that torture and pain...

It all flashed in front of his eyes in quick succession and he struggled to breathe as the memories constricted his chest...

He felt someone patting his cheek,

"Harry... Harry, wake up... It's okay... It's just a nightmare..."

Harry eyes flew open and the first thing he saw were Sirius's intense grey eyes. The fear seeped out of his body, giving way to confusion as he sank back on the bed. Sirius cupped his face,

"What happened, Harry?"

Harry looked away from Sirius and took in his surroundings. He was in the hospital wing at Hogwarts. Madam Pomfrey, Professor Dumbledore and Professor Moody stood behind Sirius and were regarding him concernedly. Harry closed his eyes as he drew in several deep breaths.

There were too many thoughts running through his head, and it was difficult to pinpoint just one. How was he still alive? Voldemort had been hell bent on killing him. Where was Cedric? How had he gotten here? What was going on?

Had it all been a nightmare?

No...He remembered it too vividly. It couldn't have been just a nightmare. Voldemort was really back. He had to tell Professor Dumbledore. He had to tell everyone.

He was just going to say it when something stopped him and he cursed himself internally. Why was it so difficult?

Sirius's voice brought his thoughts to a pause,

"You bled a lot, Harry... It's okay to feel a little disoriented."

He'd bled a lot? How did that happen? It didn't make any sense...

Harry opened his eyes and stared at Sirius in confusion. Sirius frowned as he probably realized he didn't remember and then spoke,

"The spider injured your leg. You passed out from the blood loss."

Harry pulled the covers away from his leg to take a look and sure enough his leg was bandaged. Sirius reset the covers and took his hand,

"Harry... Are you okay?"

Harry could only nod as he tried to discern fiction from reality... Nothing was making any sense and it was making his head spin...Had he really just dreamt about Voldemort's resurrection?

No.

It had been too real... The pain had been too real. Voldemort had been too real. He'd felt him... talked to him...

He could still hear Voldemort's voice inside his head...The feel of his wand pressed against his forehead... The conviction in his voice when he'd agreed to fulfil his request...

He finally asked,

"Who won then?"

Silence greeted his question and Harry watched the way everyone's expressions changed. Finally, Professor Dumbledore spoke,

"No one won."

Harry looked at Sirius so that he could elaborate, and Sirius didn't disappoint him,

"No one managed to reach the cup."

Harry furrowed his brow as he struggled to comprehend the meaning behind Sirius's words. The cup had been in its place then,

"Not even Cedric?"

Even saying his name out loud hurt but Harry was hoping against hope that everything had just been a nightmare and Cedric was still alive. Sirius gripped his hand tight as Professor Dumbledore spoke,

"Mr. Diggory died from a fatal blow to his chest by the spider."

Harry could only gape in surprise. Cedric was dead... Cedric was still dead and they were saying that he'd died because of the spider when that wasn't the case. Cedric had died because of a killing curse. Cedric had died because of him and he wanted to scream that fact out for the world to know.

But something kept him quiet...Something kept him silent...

Where had all these lies come from? Why had Voldemort spared him? Why had he returned him? Where was Voldemort?

His head ached from the questions...from the uncertainties... from the lies and false stories that he was slowly becoming a part of.

He couldn't understand why he was protecting Voldemort because that was what he was doing by not speaking up. Or rather, maybe he was protecting himself...Protecting himself from the blame that he would have to shoulder when the world would find out that Cedric had died because of him. Maybe he was just being selfish.

He closed his eyes as Madam Pomfrey spoke,

"He needs rest. You lot need to give him some space."

Harry felt Sirius touch his cheek,

"You're going to be okay, Harry."

Harry doubted it. Nothing was okay. Everything felt like it was in tatters. His morality was in tatters. What had Voldemort done to him?

He covered his face with his arm as he heard Sirius get up and walk away, followed by Professor Dumbledore and Mad Eye. Harry focused on the clunking of his wooden leg against the floor as he walked away until he couldn't hear it.

The silence was even more jarring, and he couldn't stand it.

Madam Pomfrey spoke softly,

"I can get you something to help you with your sleep."

Harry removed his arm from his face and looked at her,

"That would be nice, Madam Pomfrey."

Harry watched as she conjured a bottle filled with purple liquid and a goblet. She filled the goblet and handed it to him. Harry sat up straight steadily and took the goblet with both hands before downing the contents and handing the empty goblet back.

He felt himself becoming drowsy at once. Everything around him became hazy; the lamps around the hospital wing seemed to be winking at him in a friendly way. He laid down and his body felt as though it was sinking deeper into the warmth of the feather mattress.

It was some hours later when he felt someone patting his cheek and speaking,

"Its good that you kept your mouth shut, Potter. Make sure that you keep it that way. The Dark Lord will not be pleased if you announce his return... He did take mercy on you and spare you after all."

Harry struggled to open his eyes, but his eyelids felt like they were made out of lead and his tongue felt like it was made of stone. His head was swimming from the effects of the potion and everything still felt foggy. But he still remembered what Voldemort had said in the graveyard...

One of his death eaters were here at Hogwarts. He'd put his name in the Goblet of Fire... He'd turned the cup into a portkey... He'd delivered him to Voldemort...

"Sleep, Potter... I'm supposed to ensure your well-being now."

Before Harry could dwell on that anymore, his exhaustion had carried him off back to sleep.

Chapter 3

When he looked back, even a month later, Harry found he had few memories of the following days. It was as though he had been through too much to take in any more. The recollections he did have were very painful. The worst, perhaps, was the meeting with the Diggorys that took place the following morning so that they could inquire about his health. Mr Diggory sobbed through most of the interview. Mrs Diggory's grief seemed to be beyond tears, even though they both were trying very hard to hide it.

And Harry found himself battling the urge to tell them that he was the reason their son was dead. He was the cause of all their grief. It was so difficult to bear how nice they were being to him. How concerned they were about his health. He didn't deserve it. He felt so unworthy of it.

After that he'd been thoroughly interviewed by Dumbledore and he'd lied his way through it. The smoothness with which the falsehoods flowed off his tongue bothered him, and he wanted nothing more than to die at that point, but he didn't of course.

The words he'd heard in that hazy state of mind somehow kept echoing inside his head all the time and he couldn't get rid of them,

"It's good that you kept your mouth shut, Potter. Make sure that you keep it that way. The Dark Lord will not be pleased if you announce his return... He did take mercy on you and spare you after all."

It felt like they were etched inside his head and he couldn't get rid of them no matter how hard he tried. But that was not the only thing that bothered him...

The real thing that bothered him was that the death eater at Hogwarts had been told to ensure his well-being by Voldemort. Why would Voldemort want him to be fine? What would he gain by it? The man was supposed to hate him... He was supposed to kill him and he had the chance to kill him. Instead, here he was...Alive and well...

It didn't make any sense...None of this made any sense...

His utter confusion and self-loathing had caused him to grow detached from everyone. He couldn't bear being around Ron and Hermione because they always badgered him about what had happened that night and he was sick and tired of telling them the same lies over and over again. He couldn't bear being around people in general now.

He preferred solitude and silence to the constant questions that followed him everywhere he went. They asked him if he'd seen Cedric get killed by the spider and he'd always said no... And saying that no took him all his strength and left him feeling drained and powerless. He was sick of reiterating the fact that he'd passed out from the blood loss before Cedric had arrived there. He was sick of the lies...He was sick of deceiving everyone...But most of all, he was sick of deceiving himself...

Voldemort hadn't left him alive out of the goodness of his heart... There had to be a reason... And he was very certain that he was going to find out what it was very soon.

The normality of everything further added to his frustration and he couldn't help but think what would have happened if he'd told everyone that Voldemort was back and Cedric had died from the killing curse...

Everything would have been in chaos... Everyone would have been scared... Well maybe not quite everyone. He wasn't delusional enough to think that everyone would believe him but most people probably would since he was the bloody boy who lived and all that rubbish.

If it were up to him, he wished he'd died that night as a baby. Maybe then Cedric would still have been alive now and he wouldn't be going through this confusion and guilt.

His classes went on usual and the end of term just flew by until it was time to go back to Privet Drive for the summer.

His trunk was packed; Hedwig was back in her cage on top of it. He, Ron and Hermione were waiting in the crowded Entrance Hall with the rest of the fourth-years for the carriages that would take them back to Hogsmeade station. It was more out of compulsion than out of friendship. He just wanted to be left alone but being alone would make him more noticeable and so he struggled to act as normal as possibly could without raising too much suspicion.

It was another summer's day. He supposed that Privet Drive would be hot and leafy, its flowerbeds a riot of colour, when he arrived there that evening. The thought gave him no pleasure at all.

Nothing gave him any pleasure at all... It was as if Voldemort had sapped every drop of happiness from his body and replaced it with guilt and puzzlement. The weather could not have been more different on the journey back to King's Cross than it had been on their way to Hogwarts the previous September. There wasn't a single cloud in the sky. Harry, Ron and Hermione had managed to get a compartment to themselves. Pigwidgeon was once again hidden under Ron's dress robes to stop him hooting continually; Hedwig was dozing, her head under her wing, and Crookshanks was curled up in a spare seat like a large, furry ginger cushion. Harry managed to participate in the conversations that were going on between them as the train sped them southwards and he was certain that he'd managed to convince Ron and Hermione that he was okay...

Something weird happened though that significantly increased his doubts and reservations... He ran into Draco who was accompanied by Crabbe and Goyle as usual, when he stepped out of the compartment to buy snacks from the trolley. He knew for the fact that all their fathers had been present had Voldemort's rebirthing ceremony and it seemed they knew that he knew. Harry expected them to insult him or throw some snide remarks his way but the fear that crossed their faces at the sight of him was something he'd thought he'd never see. The way they rushed away from him bothered him more than their insults ever had. He was glad that Ron and Hermione hadn't witnessed that.

The train reached the station and Uncle Vernon was waiting beyond the barrier. Mrs Weasley was close by him. She hugged him very tightly when she saw him, and whispered in his ear,

"I think Dumbledore will let you come to us later in the summer. Keep in touch, Harry."

No...As much as would have loved the idea a year ago...He didn't find it appealing now. Being around Mr and Mrs Weasley was only going to add to his guilt and make him feel more like a traitor than ever. Ron, clapped him on the back,

"Bye, Harry!"

Hermione did something she had never done before and kissed him on the cheek,

"Take care of yourself."

When he was done with goodbyes, he turned to Uncle Vernon, and followed him silently from the station. Somehow, now he felt more vulnerable than ever as he got into the back of the Dursleys' car. Every nerve in his body was screaming that Voldemort wasn't going to leave him free.

Chapter 4

It was a grand structure; all shiny, pitch black until he lifted the fall. And then the row of pure ivory keys marched into view. They shimmered in the sparkling light as if they were the moon on a starry night; bright, beautiful, and breath-taking. And the sound they created... oh the music they sang... It was more magical than magic itself.

He took a seat on the red velvet cushioned stool and ran his fingers over the keys... It was a while since he'd played... Thirteen years to be exact... He wondered if he remembered how to play...

It turned out that he did because only minutes later, his fingers were flying over the keys, producing a hauntingly dark melody that echoed off the stone walls and grew more impactful.

It was so easy to lose himself into the music... So easy to simply set everything aside and focus on the composition that he was playing. It was almost cathartic as he poured all his darkness into the keys and watched the piano turn it into something mesmerizingly beautiful.

He felt melancholic as the composition began to wind down and as he struck the final note, he felt anywhere near satiated, but it would have to suffice for now. There were things that he needed to tend to... Matters that he had to handle... Plans that needed to be made and issues that needed to be resolved...

Issues...

There were several of them but there was only one among them that truly irked him. He rose from the stool and strode out of the room. He had been about to turn this castle into his headquarters when fate had intervened.

He had declared this castle as his headquarters two days ago. But in addition to being his headquarters... this was his home and he preferred the silence that inhabited it to the noise of the death eaters. That was why... they were not allowed to be here unless summoned.

He made his way to his library that also served as his study room. It was perhaps his most favorite part of the castle. His ebony desk shone in the light from the crystal chandeliers but that was not what caught his attention... No... His attention was claimed by the glass flask filled with the silvery contents that swirled inside and gleamed wickedly.

The memories he'd taken from the boy before sparing him.

He wondered why he had done that? Taken his memories and then spared him... It hardly made any sense, but he had learned long ago that not all decisions needed to make sense.... In fact, some of the most sensible decisions made no sense whatsoever...

And that had been proven correct when he'd gone through the boy's memories. He had not been expecting Dumbledore to leave him at the mercy of his muggle relatives, who by the looks of it, despised magic with a passion... If anything, he had presumed that the boy would

have been raised as nothing less than a prince. The boy's miserable childhood had disappointed him and somewhat dampened his need for revenge.

But his need for revenge had only been dampened...it had not been erased completely. He had plans for him. So far, the boy had proved that he could keep his mouth shut and he had also proved that he had not taken his mercy lightly. Barty had been keeping an eye on him at Hogwarts and had provided him with regular updates on him. He had strictly ordered him to ensure the boy's well being and silence him if he even attempted to speak up about his return.

He had been pleased to know that the boy hadn't even attempted to say anything... Not even once... He was slightly impressed with the boy's ability to lie. It proved that he wasn't in Dumbledore's power as much as he'd originally assumed, which would only serve his plans all the more in the long term.

Another thing that he'd learned from the boy's memories was the destruction of one of his horcruxes... His Diary... He'd left it in Lucius's care expecting him to protect it with his life. He had hugely misjudged his loyalty and had vowed never to make that mistake again while he'd punished Lucius for his carelessness.

The boy had returned to his muggle relatives today to spend his summer holidays. He had all the intentions to keep him under surveillance there as well. The boy would prove to be very useful to his cause in the future.

He walked towards the desk and picked up the glass flask, running his finger over the cold, smooth surface as he stared at the silvery contents. He was going to make the boy pay for all the years he'd lost... He was going to make him suffer for every day he'd spent as a shapeless, formless creature... He was going to change him...distort him... corrupt him... so much so that he wasn't going to be able to recognize himself... He already had a head start on that front. The boy had gone against his inherent nature as he'd forced himself into silence and deceived everyone into believing the lies that he had planted.

He was well aware of the turmoil the boy was going through and that was his first punishment...The mental torment, his deception was causing him would continue to gnaw at him from the inside. He had successfully stolen the boy's peace of mind, but this was only the first step. He intended to steal a lot more from him...He was going to strip him bare of anything that brought him comfort. He was going to snatch away every thing, every person, every moral value that he held so dear and the best part was...

The best part was that the boy was going to aid him in it... He was going to cooperate with him... He was going to actively partake in his own destruction...

Chapter 5

He had hidden himself behind a large hydrangea bush this evening, he was quite invisible to passers-by. In fact, the only way he would be spotted was if his Uncle Vernon or Aunt Petunia stuck their heads out of the living-room window and looked straight down into the flowerbed below.

On the whole, he thought he was to be congratulated on his idea of hiding here. He was not, perhaps, very comfortable lying on the hot, hard earth but, on the other hand, nobody was glaring at him, grinding their teeth so loudly that he could not hear the news, or shooting nasty questions at him, as had happened every time he had tried sitting down in the living room to watch television with his aunt and uncle.

The opening notes of the music that heralded the seven o'clock news reached Harry's ears and his stomach turned over. Perhaps tonight...after two weeks of waiting... would be the night,

"Record numbers of stranded holidaymakers fill airports as the Spanish baggage-handlers' strike reaches its second week..."

Uncle Vernon snarled over the end of the newsreader's sentence,

"Give 'em a lifelong siesta, I would, but no matter..."

Outside in the flowerbed, Harry's stomach seemed to unclench. If anything had happened, it would surely have been the first item on the news; death and destruction were more important than stranded holidaymakers.

He let out a long, slow breath and stared up at the brilliant blue sky. Every day this summer had been the same: the tension, the expectation, the temporary relief, and then mounting tension again ... and always, growing more insistent all the time, the question of why nothing had happened yet... Why was Voldemort so quiet?

It wasn't as if he wanted to do something because surely if he did, the blame would all be his... If Voldemort decided to go on a killing spree with his death eaters... That would be entirely his fault because he'd sealed his mouth shut like a coward and failed to alert everyone to the threat just looming out of view in the shadows.

Voldemort was out there, and Harry was fairly certain that his silence wasn't because the man had decided to denounce his old ways and gone into retirement... Evil Dark Lords didn't do that... No... Voldemort was planning something big and Harry feared the day he would put his plans into action.

Harry opened his eyes. there was going to be nothing else worth hearing. He rolled cautiously on to his front and raised himself on to his knees and elbows, preparing to crawl out from under the window. He had moved about two inches when several things happened in very quick succession.

A loud, echoing crack broke the sleepy silence like a gunshot; a cat streaked out from under a parked car and flew out of sight; a shriek, a bellowed oath and the sound of breaking china came from the Dursleys' living room, and as though this was the signal Harry had been waiting for he jumped to his feet, at the same time pulling from the waistband of his jeans a thin wooden wand as if he were unsheathing a sword... but before he could draw himself up to full height, the top of his head collided with the Dursleys' open window. The resultant crash made Aunt Petunia scream even louder.

Harry felt as though his head had been split in two. Eyes streaming, he swayed, trying to focus on the street to spot the source of the noise, but he had barely staggered upright when two large purple hands reached through the open window and closed tightly around his throat,

"Put – it – away!"

Uncle Vernon snarled into Harry's ear,

"Now! Before... anyone... sees!"

Harry gasped,

"Get... off... me!"

For a few seconds they struggled, Harry pulling at his uncle's sausage-like fingers with his left hand, his right maintaining a firm grip on his raised wand; then, as the pain in the top of Harry's head gave a particularly nasty throb, Uncle Vernon yelped and released Harry as though he had received an electric shock. It was as some invisible force seemed to have surged through him, making it impossible to hold him.

Panting, Harry fell forwards over the hydrangea bush, straightened up and stared around. There was no sign of what had caused the loud cracking noise, but there were several faces peering through various nearby windows. Harry stuffed his wand hastily back into his jeans and tried to look innocent,

"Lovely evening!"

Shouted Uncle Vernon, waving at Mrs Number Seven opposite, who was glaring from behind her net curtains. He had decided that this was his chance to escape. Before the Dursleys could call him back, he had wheeled about, crossed the front lawn, stepped over the low garden wall and was striding off up the street. He was in trouble now and he knew it. He would have to face his aunt and uncle later, but he didn't care very much just at the moment; he had much more pressing matters on his mind.

Harry was sure the cracking noise had been made by someone Apparating or Disapparating. It was exactly the sound Dobby the house-elf made when he vanished into thin air. Was it possible that Dobby was here in Privet Drive? Could Dobby be following him right at this very moment? As this thought occurred, he wheeled around and stared back down Privet Drive, but it appeared to be completely deserted and Harry was sure that Dobby did not know how to become invisible.

A darker possibility crossed his mind... Was Voldemort here? Harry snorted at his own naivety. If Voldemort was here, he'd probably feel his presence. No... Voldemort wasn't here but maybe he was having a death eater follow him. Maybe he'd sent a death eater to get him.

He walked on, hardly aware of the route he was taking, for he had pounded these streets so often lately that his feet carried him to his favourite haunts automatically. Every few steps he glanced back over his shoulder. Someone magical... Possibly a death eater had been near him as he lay among Aunt Petunia's dying begonias, he was sure of it.

But if it was a death eater then why hadn't they done anything? He couldn't understand why Voldemort would send a death eater to simply follow him around... It didn't make any sense.

And then, as his feeling of frustration peaked, his certainty leaked away. Perhaps it hadn't been a magical sound after all. Perhaps he was so desperate for the tiniest sign of contact from the world to which he belonged that he was simply overreacting to perfectly ordinary noises. Could he be sure it hadn't been the sound of something breaking inside a neighbour's house?

Harry felt a dull, sinking sensation in his stomach and before he knew it the feeling of hopelessness that had plagued him all summer rolled over him once again. Tomorrow morning, he would be woken by the alarm at five o'clock so he could pay the owl that delivered the Daily Prophet... He only ever looked at it to ascertain if Voldemort hadn't surfaced. The fear he felt when he unrolled the paper to look at the first page was indescribable and the relief that washed through him when he saw that it was only normal news was pure bliss.

But that bliss never lasted long because the fear came back...stronger than before and all the more potent as it overwhelmed him. Voldemort was going to act one day. What would he do then?

Ron and Hermione wrote to him regularly, but their letters brought him no comfort. If anything, they only served to alleviate his guilt and left him feeling horrible.

His mind drifted back to the question that had been haunting him since the night he'd woken up in the hospital wing and realized that Voldemort had allowed him to live... What was Voldemort going to do to him?

For a moment all the memories from the graveyard flashed in front of his eyes.

Don't think about that

He told himself sternly for the hundredth time that summer. It was bad enough that he kept revisiting the graveyard in his nightmares, without dwelling on it in his waking moments too.

He turned a corner into Magnolia Crescent and turned into Magnolia Road and headed towards the darkening play park.

Harry vaulted over the locked park gate and set off across the parched grass. The park was as empty as the surrounding streets. When he reached the swings he sank on to the only one that Dudley and his friends had not yet managed to break, coiled one arm around the chain and stared moodily at the ground. He would not be able to hide in the Dursleys' flowerbed again. Tomorrow, he would have to think of some fresh way of listening to the news.

In the meantime, he had nothing to look forward to but another restless, disturbed night, because even when he escaped the nightmares about Cedric he had unsettling dreams about long dark corridors, all finishing in dead ends and locked doors, which he supposed had something to do with the trapped feeling he had when he was awake.

The sultry, velvety night fell around him, the air full of the smell of warm, dry grass, and the only sound was that of the low grumble of traffic on the road beyond the park railings. He didn't know how long he had sat on the swing before the sound of voices interrupted his musings and he looked up.

The streetlamps from the surrounding roads were casting a misty glow strong enough to silhouette a group of people making their way across the park. One of them was singing a loud, crude song. The others were laughing. A soft ticking noise came from several expensive racing bikes that they were wheeling along. Harry knew who those people were.

The figure in front was unmistakably his cousin, Dudley Dursley, wending his way home, accompanied by his faithful gang. Dudley was as vast as ever, but a year's hard dieting and the discovery of a new talent had wrought quite a change in his physique. As Uncle Vernon delightedly told anyone who would listen, Dudley had recently become the Junior Heavyweight Inter-School Boxing Champion of the Southeast. 'The noble sport', as Uncle Vernon called it, had made Dudley even more formidable than he had seemed to Harry in their primary school days when he had served as Dudley's first punchball.

He wasn't remotely afraid of his cousin any more but he still didn't think that Dudley learning to punch harder and more accurately was cause for celebration. Neighborhood children all around were terrified of him... even more terrified than they were of 'that Potter boy' who, they had been warned, was a hardened hooligan and attended St Brutus's Secure Centre for Incurably Criminal Boys.

Harry watched the dark figures crossing the grass and wondered who they had been beating up tonight.

Look around...

Harry found himself thinking as he watched them.

Come on ... look round ... I'm sitting here all alone ... come and have a go ...

If Dudley's friends saw him sitting here, they would be sure to make a beeline for him, and what would Dudley do then? He wouldn't want to lose face in front of the gang, but he'd be terrified of provoking Harry ... it would be really fun to watch Dudley's dilemma, to taunt him, watch him, with him powerless to respond ... and if any of the others tried hitting Harry, he was ready – he had his wand. Let them try ... he'd love to vent some of his frustration on the boys who had once made his life hell.

As they got closer, Harry could hear snippets of their conversation,

"He squealed like a pig, didn't he? "

"Yeah, brilliant punch, Big D."

"Did you see his face?"

"This one deserved it."

And then they were standing inches away from him and Harry couldn't resist as he spoke,

"Hey, Big D!"

Dudley turned his attention to him as he grunted,

"Oh... It's you."

Harry grinned cheekily,

"How long have you been "Big D" then?"

Dudley snarled as he turned away and back towards his friends.

"Shut it."

Gordon spoke up,

"Maybe you ought to teach your cousin a lesson, Big D."

Harry's grin widened,

"It's a cool name... but you'll always be "Ickle Diddykins" to me."

Dudley turned back to face him,

"I said, SHUT IT!"

Harry noticed that his ham-like hands had curled into fists. Harry looked past him, towards his friends before getting up from the swing and approaching him. Then he whispered conspiratorially in his ear,

"Don't the boys know that's what your mum calls you?"

Dudley snapped,

"Shut your face."

Harry teased,

"You don't tell her to shut her face. What about "Popkin" and "Dinky Diddydums", can I use them then?"

Dudley said nothing. The effort of keeping himself from hitting him seemed to demand all his self-control. He allowed his grin to fade as he inquired,

"So, who've you been beating up tonight?' Another ten-year-old? I know you did Mark Evans two nights ago..."

Dudley snarled,

"He was asking for it."

Harry batted his eyelashes as he feigned confusion,

"Oh yeah?"

Dudley bit out,

"He cheeked me."

Harry stepped closer to him,

'Yeah? Did he say you look like a pig that's been taught to walk on its hind legs? Because that's not cheek, Dud, that's true."

A muscle was twitching in Dudley's jaw. It gave Harry enormous satisfaction to know how furious he was making Dudley; he felt as though he was siphoning off his own frustration into his cousin, the only outlet he had... His friends were yelling at him to beat the living daylight out of him, but Harry knew that Dudley was too scared of his wand. Maybe that wasn't prepared for the dark smirk that crossed his face as he spoke,

"Well, you're one to talk. Moaning in your sleep every night? At least I'm not afraid of my pillow...*Don't kill Cedric*... Who's Cedric, your boyfriend?"

Harry felt his cheeks warm up. He hadn't known he'd been loud enough in his nightmares that Dudley had been able to hear him,

"Shut up."

Dudley chuckled darkly as he grabbed him by the front of his shirt and continued his taunting,

"He's going to kill me, Mum... Where is your mum? Where is your mum, Potter? She dead? Is she dead?"

Harry felt absolutely mortified. Just how loud had he been during his nightmares? How much had Dudley heard?

He was about to retort when he felt Dudley's friends restrain him. He struggled to break free...struggled to move but their hold was just too strong...If only his arms were free so that he could get to his wand.

Dudley raised his fist and was about to punch him when Harry closed his eyes reflexively... But the pain he'd been expecting didn't come as an unfamiliar voice spoke loudly,

"You'll leave him alone if you know what's best for you."

Chapter 6

Harry saw the look of absolute fear that crossed Dudley's face as his arm fell. That look could only be caused by one thing... The person standing behind him was holding a wand. Dudley took a couple of staggering steps back and spoke hoarsely,

"Let's go guys."

Gordon yelled,

"I say that we beat the hell out of him."

Dudley's face was flushed with a mixture of humiliation and rage as he spoke,

"LET'S GO NOW!"

Harry was dropped roughly on the ground as Dudley ran out of the park with his friends trailing behind him. Harry rose to his feet and dusted off his clothes before turning around and coming face to face with an ethereally handsome man.

He had sharp cheekbones, dark brown eyes, voracious red lips, an aquiline nose and dark inky black hair that was tied at his nape with a black silk ribbon. He was dressed in a royal blue three piece pinstripe suit that looked like it had been sewn on him.

He should have looked out of place in this dusty park, but he stood there like he owned it. The man was exuding pure power and Harry felt that power resonate throughout his body. He had an air of regal supremacy about him and Harry couldn't stop the words that tumbled out of his mouth,

"Who are you?"

The man's lips curled into a smile and he simply regarded him for a moment before speaking,

"We have already met."

His voice was velvety smooth and so very deep. Harry broke free of the trance; the voice had cast over him and tried to make sense of the words. He would have remembered meeting someone like him. The man took a few steps closer to him and Harry resisted the urge to take a few steps back,

"I don't know you."

The man chuckled in amusement like he'd just heard a really good joke and then said,

"Have you truly forgotten me? Do I not plague all your thoughts? Do I not haunt your nightmares?"

Harry couldn't hold back the gasp that escaped his lips as realization struck him like a bolt of lightening and turned his thoughts to ash... Fear took control of his body and every part of him was yelling at him to run but in between his flight and fight instinct...fight won and Harry damned his own foolish bravery,

"V..."

Voldemort clamped his hand clamped tight over his mouth as he closed the remaining distance between them and grabbed him around the waist as he held him in place. The pain Harry had been expecting at Voldemort's touch didn't come...In fact, his scar was supposed to hurt just by being in his presence, but it wasn't... Voldemort looked like a normal human being... He sounded like a normal human being... He felt like a normal human being... Except for there was nothing normal about him or this. He felt more powerful than he had that night. He was no longer the snake like human he remembered unless...

"You will address me as Sir or Master."

Voldemort's words dragged him out of his thoughts and he shook his head mutely. Voldemort laughed darkly before Harry felt the overwhelming pain that sparked to life inside him. It started like a small burning, tingling sensation in the pit of his stomach and spread throughout his body, growing all the more intense and all consuming. It felt like his insides were being doused in acid and he couldn't breathe...

His screamed but they were muffled by Voldemort's hand. His knees gave out but Voldemort held him up. He kicked his feet involuntarily as his body writhed in Voldemort's hold while he screamed in agony. Voldemort held on tight to him through it all and then the pain ended as soon as it had started and Harry found himself leaning completely against Voldemort's body as he fought to catch his breath,

"Must I repeat myself, Harry?"

Harry tried to push away from Voldemort, but his knees weakened, and he was about to fall when Voldemort grabbed him again,

"Harry... It shall give me immense pleasure to repeat that."

Harry managed to stand up on his feet as he panted,

"What do you want from me?"

A truly demonic grin lit up Voldemort's face as he spoke,

"I believe the more relevant question is... What do I want *for* you?"

Harry ran a hand over his face shakily as he struggled to compose himself. His body was trembling uncontrollably, and he was having a hard time standing upright. He struggled to speak but his head was spinning, and it was difficult to grab onto a single thought let alone put it into words. Voldemort grabbed him by his upper arms and spoke,

"Harry... Look at me."

Harry closed his eyes but forced them open when his brain replayed the pain, he'd just experienced. Voldemort patted him on the cheek and whispered softly,

"Good boy... Now how shall you address me?"

Harry gnashed his teeth as he bit back the insults that were sitting on the tip of his tongue. A pleased smirk lit up Voldemort's face as he spoke,

"You're more sensible than I originally thought."

He released him and Harry felt himself sway on the spot before he reached blindly and grabbed a hold of the swing pole,

"You must wonder why I spared you that night..."

Harry couldn't help but nod reluctantly as his curiosity took control of him. Voldemort tapped his finger against his lips before speaking,

"That is something for me to know and you to find out, Harry."

Harry glared at him and focused every bit of disdain he felt into it. Voldemort merely shrugged as he spoke,

"I am not a slave to your whims, Harry... Rather you are a slave to mine now."

Chapter 7

He was skinny, bespectacled and had the pinched, slightly unhealthy look of someone who had grown a lot in a short space of time. His jeans were torn and dirty, his T-shirt baggy and faded, and the soles of his trainers were peeling away from the uppers. The only thing mildly attractive about him was his emerald green eyes and his raven black hair. He had grown slightly weaker and looked paler than the last time he'd seen him in the graveyard.

He watched him as he stood there, leaning heavily against the swing pole as he fought to catch his breath after the pain he'd inflicted on him. He stepped closer to him and felt satisfaction blossom in his heart as he watched the way the boy flinched.

He hadn't meant to confront him today... He had simply wanted to watch him. But the situation had forced him to reveal himself. The right to hurt the boy belonged to him and him alone... Physically, mentally and emotionally. He was not going to allow anyone to steal that right from him.

The boy attempted to back away as he stepped into his personal space but the pole kept him in place long enough for him to grab a hold of his chin and tilt his head back to reveal his neck and the purplish finger sized bruises that had blossomed there.

He didn't have a doubt in his mind regarding the identity of the person to whom those fingers belonged to. He had seen the boy's memories enough time to know that his uncle had a knack for strangling him. The boy's cheeks flushed with humiliation as he no doubt realized what he was examining and squeezed his eyes shut.

He traced the bruises with his free hand and pressed on them slightly just so he could savour the way, the boy's features scrunched up with pain. The boy's breath hitched in his throat as he moved his hand away from his neck and then without warning, he snatched his wand from the back pocket of his jeans.

That seemed to have penetrated the web of fear he'd spun around the boy because the boy immediately protested,

"You can't have that... Give it back."

The boy's naiveté was endearing. The fact that he still believed he had some control over his circumstances told him everything he needed to know about the boy's ignorance.

He spun his wand between his fingers as he grabbed the boy around his throat,

"What did I just tell you, Harry?"

The boy's eyes were glowing with helpless frustration as he no doubt struggled to decide his next course of action. He applied a little pressure on his throat to constrict his breathing and spoke,

"Choose your words very wisely."

The boy's Adam's apple bobbed underneath his palm as he gulped. When it became evident that the boy wasn't going to say anything, he spoke,

"Good... Your well-being relies heavily on your silence."

He loosened his grip on his throat and then inquired,

"What caused these bruises?"

Uncertainty flashed through the boy's eyes and flitted across his face. It was amusing... The way the boy's thoughts showed on his face was highly amusing,

"I expect an answer now, Harry."

The boy cleared his throat before speaking hoarsely,

"Nothing."

He feigned disappointment and tsked,

"I want the truth."

Once again, he saw a mixture of helplessness and frustration flood the boy's eyes before he spoke,

"My Uncle..."

It was not difficult for him to act surprised as he spoke,

"Your Uncle did that to you?"

The boy nodded slightly as he looked utterly embarrassed. He waved his wand in front of his eyes and then inquired,

"Why did you not use your wand to protect yourself?"

The boy mumbled nonsense about magical laws and he resisted the urge to strike him. It seemed he had a lot of work to do before the boy was anywhere near what he had imagined for him,

He closed his eyes as he tightened his hold on the boy's wand and felt it... The trace that had been placed on it. It would certainly alert the ministry if the boy cast any spell in the muggle world. It would also alert them if he attempted to remove it.

Opening his eyes, he slipped the wand between the boy's numb fingers and spoke,

"Why do you even keep it with you when you cannot use it?"

The boy lowered his gaze in defeat and then sighed,

"It's not my fault that I have to spend my summers here..."

He gripped his chin tight just to remind him what he had missed, and the boy quickly realized his mistake and added,

"Sir..."

He loosened his hold and chuckled darkly,

"You are a fast learner. That shall definitely help."

He took a step away from him and regarded the boy again. Everything about his posture screamed that he'd admitted his defeat and surrendered to his will.... At least for the moment. That was more progress than he had intended.

He released his chin altogether and took a couple of steps away from him. The boy hastily replaced his wand in the pocket of his jeans and then inquired,

"Help with that, Sir?"

He laughed at that,

"You shall know everything in due time. In the meantime, I want you to ponder why you are here."

Puzzlement clouded the boy's expressions as he asked,

"Here?"

He nodded,

"Yes... You just stated that it is not your fault that you have to spend your summers here... I want you to think about whose fault it actually is. I shall expect an answer with logical reasoning, the next we meet."

The boy twisted his hands nervously and it was so easy to see the fear that overtook him.

Good...He wanted him to be afraid...

Leaving the boy to his thoughts, he disappeared.

Chapter 8

It had been incredibly difficult to shake off the sheer terror that had gripped him in Voldemort's presence after his departure... The main thing that absolutely terrified him was that Voldemort had told him that he would meet him again. That couldn't happen... He couldn't see the man again. He couldn't stand being near him again.

Getting back to Privet Drive had been a battle in itself... Weakened by the pain Voldemort had inflicted on him, he felt close enough to fainting. He considered it nothing short of a miracle when he managed to haul himself through the front door and was about to make his way up the stairs when Dudley came to stand in front of him and grabbed him by the collar of his T-shirt. The ugly grin on his face was the one cats usually had when they caught a hold of a practically juicy mouse,

"Not so brave now, are you Potter?"

As much as he wanted to shove Dudley away, he couldn't... His arms felt too heavy and his vision kept swimming in and out of focus. The pain that blazed up his jaw as Dudley's fist connected with it shook him out of his weakened state. And he raised his arms up to defend himself instinctively.

He felt the weight of his wand in the back pocket of his jeans, but he wasn't going to pull it out. He didn't need magic to defend himself. He slammed his fist into Dudley's face. That seemed to have taken him off guard. Harry tasted the bitter, metallic taste overwhelm his senses as blood pooled in his mouth and he gagged. They stumbled apart for a brief second to catch their breaths before diving back at each other, eyes narrowed in determination.

He dodged his fist and came up with his own; for a brief instant, Dudley's cerulean blue eyes widened before he managed to tilt his head back and slammed it into his. Stars burst in his vision, but he shook it off, blinding throwing a sloppy kick. He stepped back, easily evading the kick and crowed, smirking infuriatingly at him

"Is that all you got, Potter?"

He growled and threw himself at him, changing direction at the last minute. His blood hummed in my veins as determination and anger took over...

"What the bloody hell is going on here?"

His uncle grabbed him by the back of his T-shirt and slammed him head first against the wall as he growled into his ear,

"You ungrateful little bastard. You eat our food, live under our roof and have the audacity to raise your fists against us."

He was having a hard time getting over the ringing in his ears and the pain that was just throbbing in his head. The darkness that crept up at the corners of his eyes seemed to grow as

the adrenaline drained out of his body, leaving it weak and lifeless.

He hadn't even recovered fully from the first hit, when he felt his uncle grip the back of his head by the hair and slammed it once again into the wall. Something warm trickled down the side of his head as the darkness finally took over.

His uncle let go of him and he simply melted to the floor...His aunt's horrified gasp rang in his ears as she whispered,

"Vernon...What...what have you done? Is he... Oh my God...Is he dead?"

Harry hazily wished he was... He wanted to die... He craved the eternal peace that death promised....No Voldemort, no Dumbledore, no bloody expectations or lies... He was sick and tired of everything. He was tired of breathing...

There was the sound of thudding footsteps as his uncle no doubt stepped closer to him. He felt his fingers probe his neck and then heard him grunt out,

"He's alive."

He almost sounded relieved and Harry felt disappointed. His death would have been the best revenge. The Dursley's would have been accused of murder and they all would have been sent to jail. It would have been so right but it was nowhere close enough to what they truly deserved. They just deserved to die...He wished they were dead... It would only take one curse...Just one...

His thoughts came to a halt as he realized what he'd been thinking...

No...

Darkness enveloped his thoughts, and everything drowned into oblivion...But that didn't last...He heard snatches of unfamiliar conversations... swatches of lights and colours.

Everything inside his head felt too twisted...It was like his thoughts were silk strands that had been tangled hopelessly but through all that entanglement came a clarity...

Voldemort's question rang in his overstuffed head over and over again. It felt as he was trapped in a labyrinth and Voldemort's voice was beckoning him to the exit...

Whose fault was it? Whose fault was it that he was stuck here...trapped with people who had never treated him as a human?

Voldemort

That was the answer that his brain came up with. If that man hadn't tried to kill him as a child, if his parents had been alive, he wouldn't have been here. He wouldn't have had the life he had now. He would have been happy.

But somehow, a part of his brain refuted that. What Voldemort had done had been done. He'd been vanquished so it had been Dumbledore's job to take care of him. It had been

Dumbledore's job to ensure his wellbeing... But what had the man done? He'd left him at the doorstep of these monsters and then claimed that he'd done it for his own good. He'd said that he was safe here. Dumbledore had said that Voldemort or his followers couldn't hurt him here but what of the people that resided in the house. He refused to believe that Dumbledore wasn't aware of what happened to him during the summers. The man knew everything. He just pretended to play dumb.

He wasn't even sure if the house could protect him from Voldemort.

It probably couldn't... That had been a lie, just like everything else.

What the hell was he thinking?

Voldemort had been manipulating him and he was playing right into his hands by thinking like this....

The darkness grew stronger once more and enveloped his thoughts as everything simply faded back into oblivion.

Chapter 9

He walked over the lush green grass of the lawns of his castle as something niggled at him. The night was darker with thick, heavy clouds. He couldn't help but compare the night with his own state of mind. Something was bothering him. Something was hurting him. Something ached inside him. Something felt so wrong, so invalid but he could not tell what. He tried to pin point the cause for this unexplained pain but failed. He tried to reason this unbearable burning but didn't find any. Everything felt so disordered, just like a jumbled set of a puzzle. A puzzle that he didn't quite know how to solve.

He closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. He'd been feeling this way since he'd returned after visiting the boy. He had to assume that it had something to do with him.

Well... There was no other solution than to visit the boy again. Perhaps this restlessness would leave him then. He could send a death eater to check up on him...Barty would be a good choice but he didn't quite trust him. He could not trust any of his death eaters with the boy because he knew they would be inclined to harm him and he could not blame them... Sometimes, the urge to torture the boy preceded all his common sense as well. But the boy was an asset and he was valuable to his cause for the time being and therefore ensuring his well being was absolutely essential.

No, he would simply have to go personally.

It took him a minute to apparate himself to the street where the boy lived. He walked over the pavement until he was standing in front of the house. It had rumoured that blood wards surrounded this place so that he could not enter. He smirked to himself as he felt the boy's blood sing in his veins. Maybe Dumbledore really had intended to keep the boy safe but all the measures he'd taken would prove futile now since he had acquired the boy's blood... No protective spell...no ward...nothing could ever keep him from the boy anymore... He was his for the taking.

If he wished, he could make a dramatic entrance, but he wanted to be as discreet about this as possible. He walked up the driveway to the main door and silently unlocked it with a snap of his wrist. He had just cast a disillusionment charm over himself when he heard the voices from inside...They were hurried and hushed but he could still make out the conversation that was happening...A woman spoke,

"Vernon...What...what have you done? Is he... Oh my God...Is he dead?"

And suddenly it was like all the pieces of his jigsaw puzzle came together... The pain, the wrongness... It had been the boy's pain he'd been experiencing... Was the boy really dead? That couldn't be possible... That could not happen... The boy was meant to die at his hands...His thoughts came to a standstill as the man grunted,

"He's alive."

He drew in a deep breath and felt everything inside him relax. He was alive. That was good enough for now. He was curious about what was happening inside but if he was hearing correctly, the conversation was happening at the entrance so opening the door would not be prudent. There was silence for a moment and then the man spoke again,

"We have to get rid of him, Petunia... If he dies in this house, it could cause problems for us."

The woman gasped in horror but he knew perfectly well that she would agree with whatever her husband was going to say. The man continued talking,

"We could toss him out on the road, a few miles away from here... It would seem like an accident then. Later we could file a report for the boy's disappearance and if the police find him dead, we could act distressed."

He felt a twinge of pity for the boy... maybe even a smidgeon of sympathy... But they were both gone in the blink of an eye. The woman's voice quivered with fear as she inquired,

"What if... What if his kind comes looking for him? What will we do then?"

The man snapped,

"We'll deal with that later... Just go check if there's anyone on the street."

He stepped away from the door as he heard the woman approach and then the door was opened a fraction of an inch as the woman looked around the street nervously. He could see the way she was practically trembling with fear... the sheen of sweat on her forehead... She left the door open as she hurried back inside and he took that chance to peer inside.

The boy was sprawled out on the floor. His face was turned away from him but the small pool of blood that surrounded his head was unmistakable. He watched as the man picked him up roughly in his arms while the woman retrieved something from a basket on a table.

His gaze flew to the car and he smirked as he walked towards it and unlocked the back door wordlessly. It took him a second to get in and close the door. After that he waited.

Sure enough, the woman rushed towards the car and unlocked it. The man followed behind and the woman opened the back door before the man tossed the boy in... right beside him...

Perfect.

The woman stepped away from the car and the man spoke,

"I'll be back in fifteen minutes, Petunia."

The woman nodded shakingly as the man stepped into the front seat and began to drive. He took that moment to take in the boy's face. He looked almost translucent now... as if he would simply dissolve in the seats in the next few minutes. A bruise covered the left side of the boy's jaw but that was the least of the concerns. The blood was coming from a deep cut on the boy's temple and he knew that if he wanted to keep the boy alive, he needed to staunch

the bleeding. He wordlessly cast a healing charm and watched as the blood flow steadied and then stopped altogether...But that was nowhere near enough to save the boy.

He had seen the blood that he'd lost already so he would need to get him a blood replenishing potion as early as possible. He saw the way, the man cast nervous glances in the rear view mirror and then looked ahead at the road.

The boy already looked so lifeless and that did something to him that he didn't enjoy. He convinced himself that what he felt was simply anger at the boy's inability to protect himself. He was a wizard... The boy was a wizard and he'd been reduced to this state by a bunch of muggles. This was unacceptable.

He was going to kill them in the most painful way possible... No.... He was going to have the boy kill them in the most painful way possible. It was only fair.

Chapter 10

He leaned casually against the wall, as he watched the boy. His pale blood stained skin stood in sharp contrast to the black sheets. His dark hair was matted with blood. The covers were pulled up to his chest and they rose and fell in time with his breaths.

He hadn't even stirred once and that was certainly cause for alarm. He had healed his wound externally but there was no telling about the damage that had been caused to the boy's brain. He was not too troubled about that... He only needed the boy to be functional... Any damage to his mind was none of his concern. In fact, if what he had read about head trauma was true, it might even help his cause.

He pushed away from the wall and stepped closer to the bed. Leaning down, he ran his fingers through the matted hair and over the newly healed wound. There was no movement from the boy, and he felt a twinge of disappointment. He wanted him to awaken now. He wished to see his reaction to his new circumstances.

His fingers danced over the soft skin of the boy's forehead and came to rest over his scar. He traced his finger over it as he contemplated what his next move was going to be.

The boy couldn't stay here. His sudden disappearance would raise suspicions and that would be highly detrimental to his plans. He moved his finger lower and touched the boy's dark eyelashes that fanned over his pale cheeks.

He had to admit, albeit reluctantly, that the boy possessed beauty. It was unrefined and unpolished, but he was certain that with a little effort, he would succeed in bringing it out.

He traced the purplish bruise and pressed on it slightly, but the boy did not even stir. His continued unconsciousness was beginning to irritate him. He could have cleaned the boy up, but he had not because seeing him so battered and broken brought him peace.

He rose to his feet and began pacing the room restlessly.

What was he going to do with the boy?

He could not leave him with his relatives again and he could not keep him...at least not yet... The boy was more trouble than he was worth, but he could not get rid of him. He would need to be very cautious about how he proceeded now.

Taking a deep breath, he looked at the boy once more and as the beginnings of what could be a plan formed inside his mind. He was just lost in his contemplations when he heard a soft susurrantion behind him. He couldn't help but grin as he inquired softly,

"Nagini, how was your meal?"

Nagini wrapped herself around his shoulders and nestled her head in the crook of his neck,

"It was wonderful, Master."

He ran his fingers over her iridescent green scales and Nagini hummed in satisfaction as she burrowed her head deeper,

"Will he be my next meal, Master?"

He shook his head,

"No, Nagini... You shall guard him for me while I get some things done."

Nagini made a disappointed sound but spoke nonetheless,

"It shall be done, Master."

He stroked her head gently and then spoke affectionately,

"Good."

Nagini slithered off his shoulders as he snapped his fingers and cuffs appeared around the boy's wrists. The silver chains attached to them were fastened to the headboard. He knew that the boy wouldn't wake up anytime soon, but he just could not risk the boy escaping in his absence.

Nagini settled down on the rug by the bed and he spoke,

"I shall be back soon."

Nagini nodded her head obediently. He cast a glamour over himself to change his features and changed out of his robes into a pinstriped black suit before he disappeared.

For the second time in the past twenty four hours, he found himself at Privet Drive's door. The only thing that differed was that it was morning rather than night. The distant sound of conversation coming from the kitchen indicated that the Dursleys were up and about. Why wouldn't they be? They had nearly killed their nephew last night and then they'd left him out on the road to die to avoid the blame. He rapped his knuckles on the door thrice. The conversation from the kitchen halted and then he heard the sound of approaching footsteps before the door was opened by a very haggard looking woman.

Her hair was in disarray and the dark circles underneath her eyes indicated that she had not slept a wink last night. He put on his most charming smile and spoke gently,

"Madam, how are you doing this fine morning?"

The woman looked at him apprehensively and he wordlessly comforted her with his gaze and smile,

"I'm doing rather well...May I ask who you are and what you're doing here?"

He continued smiling as he spoke,

"Oh yes, you may. My name is David Bordell and I'm here to ease your strains."

Confusion clouded the woman's eyes and her features as she inquired,

"Pardon me?"

He looked past her at the hallway and for a moment, he saw last night's scene play in front of his eyes. The boy's unconscious body sprawled out on the floor...The pool of blood that had surrounded his head like a grotesque halo,

"May I come in? It shall take me more than a minute to explain this to you."

She shook her head,

"No...That won't be necessary. We don't need whatever you're selling."

She was just about to slam the door in his face when he cast a wordless Imperio on her. Her eyes glazed over and her features relaxed as all the tension and anxiety melted away,

"Oh, I disagree... You urgently need what I am selling... Be a dear and open the door for me."

She obeyed wordlessly and he sauntered past her towards the kitchen. This was certainly going to be amusing.

Chapter 11

He stepped into the living room and watched the way, the man's beady eyes widened in surprise before narrowing in hostility,

"Petunia... Who is this?"

The woman merely stood in the doorway and stared ahead blankly, awaiting his next order,

"Sit."

She walked past him and settled down in on the couch while he took the seat opposite the man so that they were face to face. The boy cowered in fear in the background and was about to creep out the door when he slammed it shut wordlessly and spoke,

"Sit down, Boy!"

The man's face purpled with rage and he watched as a vein throbbed in his temple. He looked ready enough to explode as he spoke,

"Who the hell are you?"

He smiled his most charming smile,

"I am the only one that can assist you in your situation."

The man's moustache twitched as a touch of fear crept on his face,

"We don't have a situation, Mister... So just get out of my house."

The boy was pulling on the knob and trying to open the door. He sighed before snapping his fingers. The boy collapsed on the ground with a loud thud as his wrists and ankles were bound and he was gagged.

He turned his attention back to the man who was regarding him with a mixture of horror and fear and spoke,

"You should be grateful that I have merely bound him... I can do far worse..."

He paused for dramatic effect and then added,

"I shall do far worse if you do not comply."

The man was visibly trembling now and he smirked,

"I am aware of the fact that you left your nephew, out on the road, to die last night..."

A trickle of sweat ran down the man's pudgy face while the boy's muffled cries for help played in the background. He opened his mouth to speak when he shot him off,

"Do not attempt to deny it... Your lies cannot deceive me."

The man snapped his mouth shut as he stared in his lap and twisted his meaty hands nervously,

"I can assure that there is need for you to be afraid. I am willing to make you an offer that shall free you from this situation once and for all."

The man's gaze shot up as he inquired hastily,

"An offer?"

He nodded,

"Yes... The boy's sudden disappearance might garner attention, therefore I want you to inform me immediately if Dumbledore or anyone else for that matter comes looking for him... As for your neighbours... You may lie to them about his whereabouts... Rest assured... You shall face no legal consequences regarding the boy's disappearance."

The man was eyeing him suspiciously,

"What will you get out of this?"

His grin widened,

"The boy is precious to me... I shall be keeping him until he recuperates."

The man looked at his wife, that was still immersed in staring blankly at the opposite wall and then at his son on the floor,

"If you're like him then why don't you want Dumble..."

He paused as he tried to get the name correct before continuing,

"Why don't you want him to know?"

He reclined back in the chair casually as he spoke sympathetically,

"Let's just say that I despise the old man... I am certain that you despise him too. After all, he left the boy at your doorstep all those years again and did not even provide compensation for your trouble... I find that very unfair. The boy was never your responsibility and yet the old man forced you to take care of him..."

He paused and then spoke,

"I, on the other hand shall offer you adequate compensation if you accept my offer."

He snapped his wrist and a briefcase laden with muggle currency appeared on the table in front of him. The man's eyes widened in shock and he saw greed written all over his face as he stared at the briefcase. He vanished it with a snap of his finger and the man blinked in disappointment,

"All of that can be yours if you cooperate with me."

A greedy smile lit up the man's face as he spoke,

"The boy is all yours and so is our cooperation. Just tell me where to sign."

He conjured a piece of parchment on the table and the man fished out a pen from his pocket with a flourish before signing it happily. He was about to pull away his hand when he gripped his thick wrist and spoke,

"I shall also require a drop of your blood."

He pricked the man's thumb swiftly and watched in satisfaction as a few drops seeped out and dropped on the parchment. The parchment glowed an eerie golden colour as it soaked up the blood. He finally released his wrist and placed a black leather journal on the table,

"This is how you shall inform me. You will write in it whenever someone from the magical community comes here to ask about him."

The man looked at the journal before nodding. He rose to his feet and spoke,

"Excellent... It was a pleasure doing business with you"

He conjured back the briefcase on the table and watched as the man pounced on it like a starved man on food,

"There shall be more of that if you stay loyal to me. If you do not... You shall die along with your wife and child."

The way the man's face paled told him exactly how much he feared him and that filled him with extreme satisfaction. These people were going to die anyway but only when the time was right and only when the boy was ready to kill them.

He removed the curse from the woman and vanished the restraints from the boy before strolling out of the room and then the house.

It took him a second to apparate himself back to the castle and another to be back in the room, the boy was occupying. The boy was still unconscious and Nagini was curled up next to him. She slithered off the bed at the sight of him and he dismissed her from the room before sitting down next to the boy himself.

He ran his finger over the cuff around the boy's wrist as he watched him in his unconsciousness. He had just moved his hand to touch the boy's hair when a soft barely audible groan escaped the boy's lips and his eyelids fluttered.

Chapter 12

When he came to his senses and the agony struck, Harry was its prisoner and felt quite helpless in his cage of pain. He was blinded with flashing colourful spots and craved darkness, quiet and stillness once more. He wished he hadn't woken up. The nausea overwhelmed him, and he felt like vomiting. Pain throbbed so violently around his skull that he wondered why it didn't just crack open.

He tried to thrash around, trying to curl up, trying to somehow move, trying to grab his hair and wrench them out... It hurt so much that he couldn't lay still but something was keeping him still...something was restraining him but he was too far lost in the excruciating agony to know what it was... He didn't even know where he was...All he knew was that he was alive and he didn't want to be... He didn't want to be alive...The pain was too much...Too all consuming... He just wished he could die because dying was the only thing that could end the pain. It was the only thing that could bring him peace.

He distantly became aware of screaming and the realization that they were his screams followed soon after... He was screaming but he wasn't aware of his lips moving... He wasn't even aware of his body...

He had no idea how long the pain went on for...Every time he felt like it was fading away or lessening...it would suddenly peak and grow worse... Every time he felt like he was fading away, something would just drag him back to awareness... back to the agony...

Eventually, the pain went away, leaving him panting, exhausted and utterly drained...

A trickle of sweat ran down his temple and he attempted to move his hand to wipe it away when he heard the chains jingle and that's when he knew the reason, he hadn't been able to move earlier. His heartbeat quickened as he tried to understand why his wrists were restrained.

Where was he?

He steadily opened his eyes to take in his surroundings and stared blearily at the dimly lit room. Everything was a blur without his glasses so he couldn't quite make out the details but the room looked expensive... That combined with his restrained wrists could only mean one thing.

"I am pleased to see that you are finally awake."

Harry gulped as he closed his eyes and fought the waves of fear that threatened to overwhelm him. The mattress shifted and he felt Voldemort's finger brush against his cheek,

"How are you feeling now, Harry?"

Harry didn't trust his voice. He was certain it would betray him and tell Voldemort exactly how afraid of him he was in this moment. Voldemort's finger traced over his cheekbone and

Harry involuntarily hissed out in pain when Voldemort pressed on a bruise,

"I expect a reply whenever I ask you a question, Harry."

Voldemort removed his finger, taking the pain away with it and Harry drew in a deep breath before speaking,

"I'm fine..."

His voice sounded unrecognizable... He'd never heard it so weak before. Voldemort's finger returned to the bruise and he pressed on it once again. He quickly remembered what he'd missed and added,

"Sir..."

Voldemort chuckled softly as he pulled away his finger,

"Good boy... Now... You must be wondering what you are doing here..."

Harry kept his eyes closed as he nodded slowly,

"Your relatives left you out on the road to die. They did not wish to be accused of your murder."

Harry wasn't surprised that he didn't feel any disappointment at that. He hadn't expected anything good from the Dursleys. His heart ached when he realized how close he'd come to dying. He wouldn't be here if Voldemort had just allowed him to die.

He felt cheated... For the second time, Voldemort had kept him apart from death... It wasn't fair. It really wasn't fair. He didn't deserve this. He attempted to move his hands and felt a surge of resentment towards Voldemort... Towards the Dursleys... Towards Dumbledore... Towards his parents...

Why had he even been born?

Why couldn't Voldemort have just killed him properly as a child?

Why couldn't Voldemort have just killed him in that graveyard?

Why couldn't the Dursleys have just ended his life?

Life... What was his life going to be now anyway? He was enslaved to Voldemort... His bound wrists were testament to that. He was certain, he wouldn't be allowed to return to Hogwarts. He would probably never see his friends again. Voldemort had said he had plans for him. What were those plans?

Was Voldemort going to turn him into one of his death eaters? No... That simply couldn't be his fate... He couldn't let that happen... He'd rather kill himself than let that happen...

"I want to die..."

Voldemort laughed derisively,

"What you want does not matter anymore. It shall bode well for you if you align your wishes with mine."

Harry opened his eyes finally and inquired,

"And what do you want, Sir?"

Voldemort was silent for a moment and then he spoke,

"You shall know that when the time comes."

Harry drew in a shaky breath as the fear and uncertainty overwhelmed him. His future seemed so dark. It felt like he was trapped in a cage and the walls were slowly closing in on him.

Pain, sharp and excruciating lanced through his head once again and forced his eyes shut once more. A whimper escaped his lips and Voldemort asked,

"What's wrong, Harry?"

He was trying to stave off the pain...trying to push it away but it just wasn't working. He gritted his teeth as he fought back another moan and bit out,

"My head... It hurts...."

Voldemort made a thoughtful sound before speaking,

"I am certain that you can manage it."

The mattress shifted again as Voldemort no doubt rose to his feet. Harry felt unexpectedly hurt at how easily Voldemort had refused to help him with his pain. To be honest, it really was his own fault for expecting that Voldemort would take away his pain. He loathed him. Seeing him in pain probably satisfied him more than anything else.

He felt his glasses appear on the bridge of his nose but made no effort to open his eyes. The pain came and went in waves and he was struggling to get a grip on it. He wasn't sure if Voldemort was in the room or not but he pleaded,

"Please... Release my wrists..."

Voldemort spoke sternly,

"Only if you promise to behave yourself."

Behave himself... How could he possibly act up or misbehave anyway?

"I...I promise, Sir."

And just like that the chain around his wrists vanished and his arms fell free on the pillow on either side of his head. He curled up in a fetal position immediately and buried his face into his chest as he wrapped his arms around himself.

A part of him was ready to beg Voldemort to take away the pain but the other part...The one that still had a bit of pride left, outright refused and Harry was left to fight off the pain on his own.

Chapter 13

Days bled into each other. The pain didn't stop. It morphed into something else, a fire that roasted him from the inside out. He shivered with fever and sweat coated his skin. He could smell the sickness, but the worst was the pain, so raw and dominating, he was sure it burned his mind and melted it away. He didn't know how much more pain he could endure, but he didn't stop enduring it.

Sometimes he heard a man talking to him. He barely recognized individual words, it was a murmur, but it softened the pain if only for a little while. Harry clutched onto the voice in the darkness, turned towards the source of it to hear it clearer. He mourned the voice when it faded and was relieved when it came back to him.

He accepted water and sighed when he felt something damp being pressed against his forehead, cleaning his sweat-coated skin. Hands brushed his hair back, doing their best to soothe him. He'd never had someone take care of him before, not like this, not like a child with an attentive parent. But the man with the rumble voice was looking after him, doing his best to dampen the fire roasting his insides. It was an impossible task, but Harry was glad he wasn't alone.

"Get some rest."

He gave into the voice's demand and sank even further into unconsciousness.

Harry's eyelids felt heavy, glued shut. He forced them open, blinking obsessively to adjust them to the room. A bright-white room, he was lying on a bright white bed. On his left hung a blue curtain, and when he turned his head, he saw the same on his right.

There was pain, but it was muffled, half blocked, only an undercurrent of nerves twitching. The curtain was more important, and he reached tentatively to the one on his left, pinched it in a weak grip, then slowly opened it.

He gasped when he saw what was on the other side. Cedric was in the neighboring bed, no doubt dead... His parents stood beside him. Their sobs grew louder. Harry pulled the curtain back across, hiding the family from view. The sound stopped instantly, and he was back between the blue curtains in the bright white bed.

He stared at the curtain on his right, not wanting to open it, but knowing he had to. He had to see what was on the other side, what his tormented mind wanted to show him.

Harry pushed back the curtain but this time, the scene was of a child's bedroom.

He watched as his mother begged for his life. He watched as she was consumed by that flash of green light and her lifeless form crumpled to the bed. Harry didn't sob. He wanted to but somehow, he couldn't. He just stared with at her unseeing eyes with a vast emptiness expanding inside him.

Harry yanked the curtain back again, then lay down on the bed. He sank into the pillow, shut his eyes, and slept.

"You need to drink,"

The voice told him.

So, Harry drank, small sips that felt as if they evaporated on his tongue.

"You need to eat."

So, Harry accepted the porridge spooned into his mouth. He didn't want to eat it, but the voice encouraged him. Then he was rewarded with fingers through his hair, and soft touches to his face. His whole body burned, worst of all his head, but when those fingers touched him, he got chills.

"You need to take these."

Harry allowed the potions to be slipped past his lips and swallowed them.

"You need to rest."

Harry agreed with the voice, turning his head to the murmuring sound. The man understood, and started playing with his hair, luring him into a deeper state of unconsciousness once again.

It happened over and over, and Harry found himself longing for that voice, those soothing hands, and scratching fingers more than the food, water, and potions.

He saw brown eyes. Intense brown eyes that studied him. They were wide, looking at him expectantly, almost excitedly. The fingers in his hair stopped moving, and he gave those eyes a pleading look. He didn't want him to stop touching, to stop comforting him. He needed the man with the rumble voice and the brown eyes. He croaked,

"Please..."

The man's eyes sparkled, a soft laugh breezed past his lips, and then he was stroking again, staring into Harry's eyes until the need to sleep became too strong, and he drifted off.

Chapter 14

The next time he forced his eyes open, he was in the Gryffindor common room. Ron and Ginny were over by the fireplace, talking between themselves as Hermione pushed through the door, eyes fixed on him,

"Tell me what happened, Harry."

It hurt his jaw to speak, and he tried to massage it, but couldn't move his hands. He heard tapping but couldn't work out where it was coming from,

"Voldemort."

Hermione raised an eyebrow skeptically as she crossed her arms across her chest,

"You know who?"

He nodded,

"It's him... He's back from the dead...He killed Cedric... He's keeping me somewhere..."

Ron spoke up,

"He can't be alive... You vanquished him..."

Harry turned to him,

"You have to believe me...He's back...you need to find me..."

Desperation clawed at his insides as his friends refused to believe him. He could still hear the tapping, more of a knocking. Someone was knocking, but when he looked around the room, he couldn't see anything.

He scrunched his eyes shut as Hermione asked,

"What's he doing?"

The words slipped past his lips and forced his eyes open,

"He's looking after me."

Ron let out a chuckle,

"Looking after you?"

Harry squirmed. A murderer was taking care of him, trying to put out the fire inside him, helping him, and he was about to reveal his return...

"The monster's looking after you?"

Harry didn't want to tell them anything anymore; he didn't want the pain to come back. He wanted the damp cloth on his forehead, the spoonful of porridge, the cool water... He wanted fingers rubbing circles into his temples, and hands stroking his weakened body. He wanted care and compassion, even from a monster.

Harry turned his head, caught something in the corner of his eye, and found the source of the tapping. A window, that shouldn't have been there... It faced green fields and a stormy sky...

The window was shut, and on the ledge outside sat a magpie. It was knocking a snail against the glass, trying to break the shell, trying to get to what was inside.

The unwanted hard shell, for the wanted soft interior.

Harry scrunched his brow, feeling another headache coming.

Was the magpie trying to get to the snail? Or was it trying to break the glass, help him escape? Maybe the magpie knew the hell he was stuck in, but Harry didn't want to escape. He turned away from the magpie,

"Harry!"

Consciousness hit him hard, and he lurched forward, sparking pain in his head. Someone pinned him to the bed and when they lifted their head, Harry realized that it was Voldemort. A disapproving look was plastered to his handsome face.

"I thought I told you not to make any sudden movements."

He couldn't remember when he'd said that, but he didn't want the pain to come back. Voldemort hovered over him and touched his forehead gently,

"The fever has gone down but it has taken a lot out of you."

Harry could feel it, drained, weak.

Voldemort moved away, then sat down in the chair beside the bed. Harry took in the room for the first time. The dark green walls, the black sheets, the elaborate curtains that concealed the window from view... Harry flared his nostrils, taking in the scent... tomato soup. It smelled good, and he started swallowing excessively.

Voldemort gestured to the bowl on the bedside table,

"It's a bit hot at the moment."

Harry didn't comment as he took another look around the room. There was no clock in the room, and he had no way to know how much time had passed since Voldemort had brought him here. Voldemort always looked immaculate, styled. His handsomeness mocked him while he lay there, feeling worse each day that went by.

Voldemort ran his hand through his hair,

"Are you with me?"

He didn't flinch out the way, snarl an insult, or lash out. In his muddled head he knew they were the acceptable reactions, but instead, his eyes drooped, and he moved into the touch.

Voldemort soothed him, stroked back his hair, then curled the longer strands behind his ear. The touch was intimate, and nice, and Harry was too exhausted to deny himself the sensation of touch. It was wrong, but it felt right.

He knew it had been days of drifting out. Days of messed up dreams about his friends, Hogwarts, Cedric, his parents... but for some reason it was the magpie that stayed with him after he woke.

"How long have I been out of it....Sir?"

Voldemort made a thoughtful sound,

"You have been in and out of it for fourteen days now."

Harry tugged his eyebrows together,

"Fourteen days?"

The pain throbbed in his head, a constant sensation that only softened, and loudened, never faded altogether,

"Open your mouth."

Harry parted his lips and allowed the contents of the flasks to be tipped inside. It was bitter on his tongue, but it was good. The potion made him feel dizzy, detached. It made him no longer care that Voldemort was leaning close to him and kept his fingers on his lips longer than necessary.

"How is the pain?"

Harry spoke,

"It's okay at the moment, Sir."

Harry shuddered when he remembered the first few days. He hadn't dreamed; there had only been pain. Pain, even Voldemort couldn't stop despite what he pushed through his lips. Ordinary potions had done nothing so Voldemort had resorted to feeding him potions that he, himself had brewed for him. Potions that were potent, and effective, but made him tired, sluggish and unable to do anything for himself.

Everything hurt, and Harry felt most comfortable lying in the bed, doing his best not to move, and drifting in and out of consciousness. But he didn't like the dreams. The dreams were a

different kind of painful, and he hated that Voldemort was the one to save him from them. Voldemort called his name and surfaced him from the nightmares.

Voldemort was his messed up hero.

Voldemort pulled him out of his train of thought,

"What were you dreaming about just now?"

Harry glanced at the curtains. The one thing his strung-out mind had recalled accurately while he was asleep, the green fields, and storm-gray clouds...that insistent tapping...

"There was a magpie tapping a snail against the window."

A thoughtful expression crossed Voldemort's face,

"A magpie?"

He nodded and just as he was about to speak...The tapping on the window started again.

Chapter 15

He gritted his teeth in annoyance as the incessant tapping continued. The boy had been doing so well. He had managed to make him depend on him to some extent and this could change everything. The boy croaked hoarsely,

"Can...Can you hear that too?"

He sighed softly and nodded his head. He had no intentions of relinquishing his newly formed control over the boy, so dealing with this situation rationally was the only option he had,

"Yes...I can hear it."

The boy's eyelids fluttered shut as an exhausted breath left his lips. The overexertion was starting to show on his pale face. After all, this was the longest time, the boy had been awake and lucid,

"Is it a magpie?"

Magpie... He hadn't expected the boy to hold onto that little detail. He'd been unconscious when he'd shared that incident with him, but it seemed that it had somehow gotten embedded in his subconscious and was haunting his dreams.

He rose to his feet and pulled back the curtains with a lazy movement of his wrist. A snowy white owl was flying just outside the window. Tapping its beak against the glass as if it endeavoured to shatter it. How easy it would be to simply kill the bird and extinguish its tiny life but if he did that now, the boy would surely revert to resisting him once again and he did not want that.

"No... It is an owl."

The boy's eyes fluttered open revealing emerald green irises that glowed with the light of hope... It was a light he was going to find a lot of pleasure in extinguishing. The boy would come to rely on him and only him in due time. He would soon learn that he was the only one who he could depend on,

"Hedwig!"

He opened the window and the owl fluttered in like a small hurricane and perched on the boy's chest. The boy laughed weakly as he raised a hand and ran his fingers through the owl's snowy white feathers,

"Hey, Girl."

The owl preened and revelled in the attention it was getting as it nuzzled its head in the crook of the boy's neck. The sight sickened him. He stepped closer to the bed and cleared his throat

before speaking,

"You need to eat."

The boy's emerald gaze focused on him and something like fear flickered in them. Now, that was a sight he simply adored. He caressed his cheek softly and spoke,

"The owl can stay if you continue to behave."

A relieved sigh escaped the boy's lips as the fear evaporated and he whispered,

"Thank you, Sir."

He stroked the owl's feather once again and something like understanding flashed in the owl's amber eyes as it took off the boy's chest and perched itself on the vanity.

The boy licked his dry lips, so he conjured a damp cloth and brought it to his lips, dabbing along them. The boy's eyes fluttered shut and a soft moan escaped his lips. He moved the cloth to the boy's forehead and the boy sighed out in relief.

After a while, he finally put down the cloth and picked up the bowl of soup. He stirred it, then lifted a spoonful. The boy's mouth opened readily and he couldn't help but grin at the quick submission. He spooned the soup into the boy's awaiting mouth and fed him in silence.

When he was done, he vanished the bowl and his hand automatically moved to stroke the boy's dark curl. It had become a custom of sorts and the boy usually drifted off to sleep in seconds when he was stroking his hair.

The same happened this time and when he was certain that the boy was fast asleep, he turned his attention to the latest source of his vexation. The owl was perched on the vanity and regarding him with intelligent amber eyes. For a moment, he considered feeding it to Nagini. However, the thought of losing all the progress, he'd achieved with the boy, forced him to change his decision. The owl would have to live...For now...

He made his way out of the room and locked the door on his way out. The boy was in no condition to get up on his feet but he did not wish to take any chances. It took him a minute to reach the meeting hall and he silently hummed in satisfaction as all the inhabitants went down on their knees at the sight of him.

Making his way through the crowd of death eaters, he reached the head of hall and spoke,

"Rise, my death eaters."

They rose to their feet and he ran his gaze over their masked faces. He had not informed them of the boy's presence, merely because he did not trust them. They had abandoned him once. They could abandon him again. The one's who had not deserted him...his most loyal death eaters...They were locked up in Azkaban and he was going to free them very soon...

He settled down in his throne and signalled the meeting to be commenced. The agenda of the meeting was like any other. His death eaters brought him news from the ministry and

Hogwarts, and it was discussed in detail. He had no intentions of making his presence known any time soon. The fact that the world was unaware of his resurrection was a feat in itself and the credit to that went entirely to the boy. His silence had ensured that things remained in order and a path was paved for him to rule the magical world.

Chapter 16

"You were crying out for your mother earlier."

Harry could still taste the saltiness from his tears. He wanted Voldemort to ignore the embarrassing episode, him sobbing himself awake then accepting a cradling hug from Voldemort, but he could see the curiosity in Voldemort's face and knew it was only a matter of time until he'd ask.

"You sounded like a child. Your lip was wobbling, and your face crumpled. You sounded small, fragile."

Harry remembered the earlier dream, not a dream, but a memory, one that made him feel cold, and his gut plummet to his toes. He didn't like thinking about that...Mainly because it made him remember who Voldemort really was...

Voldemort spoke softly,

"Tell me what you're thinking."

"No."

"We are going to be spending a lot of time together."

"I don't want you toying with my mind."

Voldemort leaned back in his chair,

"Tell me or, I'll leave you on your own."

Harry wasn't attached to a beeping machine, but it was obvious Voldemort's words had triggered something. His chest started to rise and fall faster. Voldemort's voice and presence cut through the dreams, dragged Harry to the surface, but when he was gone, one dream led to another, and another, until he was stuck in a merry-go-round of hell. Memories of his parents, hallucinations of Hogwarts, and the magpie, tapping on the window....

He managed to gasp out,

"Don't...Please..."

"Then talk to me."

"Will you use it against me?"

"No. I only want to get to know you, Harry, the real you. The one no one else sees. It's for my personal interest. I won't torment you with it. I won't tell anyone else. I just want to know."

Harry picked the sheet on the bed, pinching the material between his thumb and forefinger, then releasing before pinching it again,

"It was a memory of when you killed my parents"

Voldemort made a thoughtful sound before inquiring,

"How do you feel about that?"

Harry exhaled through his nose,

"I don't know..."

Voldemort lifted his eyebrows,

"That is a lie."

"I'm not lying... I really don't know... You killed them and I should hate you for that... I used to hate you for that, but I don't anymore..."

The truth rolled off Harry's tongue. He couldn't help it. It was the potions; they loosened him up. He looked down at his body... too sluggish... too heavy...

"How can I ever hate you again? I swallow whatever you feed me... I'm helpless and reliant on you to feed my addiction...."

Voldemort tsked,

"You are not going to get addicted. I will not allow it to happen."

"Would it bother you if I did?"

"Yes."

Harry frowned,

"Why?"

"I cannot let you go back into the big bad world addicted to pain relief potions. I will not destroy you like that."

"You have messed up morals."

"I have rules when I play games."

"I'm a game?"

"Yes. Now tell me... Do you like me?"

The question was so evasive, so unexpected, Harry's lips opened and closed a few times before he formed a reply,

"Do I like you?"

"That is not an answer."

"I... I like you..."

The words were sharp on his tongue, and unconvincing in his head. Voldemort narrowed his eyes, seeing through it.

"It's okay *not* to like me..."

Harry growled through his teeth,

"How can I not like you when you're all I've got at the moment?"

"Tell me the truth..."

Harry swallowed the guilty lump in his throat,

"I like you but it's not normal though, is it? You take care of me... Feed me... Look after me... But you killed my parents... You killed Cedric... You tried to kill me twice... And then you saved me twice... It's so messed up..."

Once Harry started, he couldn't stop. His mouth spoke faster than his brain could stop the words. He blamed the potions he'd been taking. They pulled down his barriers, exposing him....

"There's a very fine line between like and dislike, Harry... Do you think the lines have started to blur?"

Harry scrunched up his nose,

"Yes..."

Voldemort smiled in satisfaction,

"Do you ever wonder what your parents would think of you if they saw you now?"

Harry cried. Tears were burning in his eyes,

"Stop it!"

Voldemort touched his cheek gently,

"Have you ever felt lonely?"

Lonely... The faces of Ron, Hermione, Sirius and everyone else flashed in front of his eyes followed by the feelings he'd experienced in the past few months after Cedric's death... It took a moment for him to reply,

"Yes."

"So was I... I knew I was different. You could be standing in a crowded room, smile on your face, and still feel lonely. I knew I was twisted, wrong, and they weren't like me."

He closed his eyes,

"I don't want to talk about this anymore."

He thought Voldemort would push, keep asking questions. It wasn't like he could escape, and he'd be worn down eventually, but instead Voldemort nodded, then whispered,

"Do you want a change of scenery?"

"What?"

"I could move you into the sun-room. There is a window there... Would you like that?"

Harry nodded,

"Yes... I can't lie in this bed anymore..."

Chapter 17

He knew Voldemort had left the castle, he'd restrained him to the bed before he went, and apologized when Harry couldn't hide the distress from his face. Without him there, it meant hours of uninterrupted, messed up memories and dreams. It only stopped when Voldemort woke him, brushing his fingers through his sweat-soaked hair.

Voldemort helped him over to the armchair by the window and lowered him down. Pain flared in his head, and he gritted his teeth, riding through the pain.

Voldemort moved away then and spoke,

"There's binoculars."

"So?"

"You can look out the window..."

Harry frowned but reached for the binoculars anyway. He pressed them to his eyes and looked out the window across the fields. He didn't know what Voldemort wanted him to see. There was nothing but mud, grass, trees, and then something flashed in the distance. Something fast moving caught the sun.

Then another.

He realized it was a road...A muggle road... A road to freedom, people to help him... he could see them whizz by like sparkling dust, there but out of reach. He put the binoculars down, then stared at Voldemort,

"Message received."

"What message?"

"You want me to realize I'm helpless. I'm reliant on you. I can't escape."

"In a few weeks, you won't need to. You're a captive, that's all. My toy, my plaything, until I deem it fit to set you free and send you back to Dumbledore."

He must have dozed off because whatever he'd been dreaming about had started to fade into darkness. Harry could hear tapping, and when he opened his eyes, it took a few minutes to adjust, and realize it was rain hitting the window beside him.

Voldemort was perched on the arm of the chair, leaning into Harry's space. He stroked his cheek. Harry didn't know how many days had passed. They merged together and were only interrupted when he had to move. He slept in the bedroom at night but spent the days in the

sunroom. Voldemort stared so intently into his eyes that Harry had to look away. Voldemort finally spoke,

"You're crying..."

Harry shook his head as he tried to conceal his face,

"No..."

Voldemort cocked his head to the side, amusement glinting in his eyes,

"It's fascinating. I hardly have any emotions, but you, your face, your eyes, your voice, you're so expressive. You have so many emotions, and you don't even try to hide them."

Harry reasoned,

"It's the potions..."

Harry knew it hadn't been long since he'd last taken the potions, not because he remembered, but because of the hazy sensation at the back of his skull. The detached, cut-loose feeling that scared him. He didn't want to talk, worried what would come out, but Voldemort liked to ask. Harry could see it in his eyes. He liked for his mind to tear itself apart through dreams and memories. It was entertainment for him. Cruel bastard, but he acted so caring while he watched, wiped Harry's face, staring deep into his eyes. He looked excited, like he was putting together a puzzle, and was amazed by what he saw.

Voldemort murmured.

"Why were you crying?"

Harry bit his lip,

"Because I'm a bad person."

Voldemort's thumb paused, and he blinked, then frowned,

"How are you a bad person?"

"Because I lied to everyone..."

Voldemort's frown deepened. He looked away, then back at Harry before inquiring,

"Would you tell the truth if time was turned?"

Harry contemplated that for a moment before shaking his head imperceptibly,

"If you had told everyone the truth, you would have been blamed for Cedric's Diggory's death. There would have been people who would have labelled you as a liar or an attention seeker. Your name would have been dragged through the mud. You would have been publicly

humiliated... So believe me when I say that lying to everyone didn't make you a bad person... Telling the truth would have..."

He closed his eyes,

"But now the world doesn't know that you're back and preparing to take over... People will die and it'll be all my fault..."

Voldemort chuckled softly,

"What is going on in that pretty head of yours?"

Harry shook his head,

"Those potions... I don't want to take them anymore."

Voldemort argued,

"But they help with the pain."

He opened his eyes again,

"I'd rather take the pain than my mind unraveling like this. You enjoy it though, don't you? You like seeing me suffer."

Voldemort shook his head,

"It's not about suffering. I like learning about you, how you justify things, make sense of what's happening around you. It's interesting, but if you really don't want to take them anymore, I will not make you."

Harry remembered what it felt like to feel the pain in full, and shuddered. Voldemort watched him, then sighed.

"How about we find a happy medium, a balance so we muffle some of the pain, and let you keep your head."

Harry nodded,

"Yes."

"Half a flask every four hours, but if you need more, tell me. Understand?"

"I understand."

"Despite what you think, I do not want to see you suffering. I only want to know you, and for you to know me."

"Why?"

Voldemort shrugged,

"I just do. We're playing a game, and games are supposed to be enjoyable for all involved, even this one, oh, and Harry..."

"What?"

"You're not a bad person."

It shouldn't have made him feel better, but it did.

Chapter 18

Harry hated the indignity of being so weak he spilled his food, so weak he had to support his forearm with his other hand. Voldemort waited until it got too much for him, and he sighed in defeat.

"You'll let me do it?"

Harry nodded, dropping his arms back into his lap. Voldemort grinned, then began spooning the soup into his mouth. Home-made chicken soup, Voldemort had told him. The smell had filled the room as soon as Voldemort had conjured it...But he seriously doubted that Voldemort had cooked it himself...He couldn't imagine him standing in the kitchen and cooking... That image was too domestic to fit Voldemort's Dark lord profile, but he found himself liking it, nevertheless. After one mouthful Harry knew it was the best soup, he'd ever had... Better than anything he'd ever had at Hogwarts...Better than Mrs. Weasley's cooking...

"Did you make this?"

Voldemort chuckled softly,

"You would not believe me..."

That was true. But what he did believe was that Voldemort enjoyed feeding him. His eyes went wide, and shiny, and he usually leaned into his personal space. Harry thought about smacking the spoon away, or spitting the soup at Voldemort, but he did neither. He pushed the defiant part of him away, and accepted the situation. Voldemort grinned, and Harry hated how he seemed to know the battle going on in his head.

Finally, Voldemort spoke,

"I took the liberty of collecting your mail from Privet Drive."

Harry felt his curiosity pique,

"Really?"

Voldemort nodded as he conjured a bunch of letters, wrapped neatly with a tweed rope,

"You should go through them later and think about suitable replies. I will help you pen them down tomorrow."

Harry leaned back against the headboard as he stared at the bunch,

"Did you go through them?"

Voldemort smirked,

"I did, actually..."

Harry bit his lip,

"Then you must have thought of the replies I should send"

Voldemort nodded,

"I did..."

Harry closed his eyes as he spoke,

"Why didn't you just write them down and send them? Why are you showing me the letters?"

He felt Voldemort's fingers brush his cheek and then heard him whisper softly,

"Because I want you to stay in touch with reality... You will not be staying here forever. As soon as you recover, you will return to Hogwarts and be with your friends. It is of utmost importance that you don't arouse their suspicions."

Harry pursed his lips as the sense of apprehension overtook him. He would have to lie again. He would have to pretend to be normal again. He would have to pretend that everything was okay...that everything was fine...that Voldemort wasn't lurking in the shadows, bidding his time and preparing to strike... He opened his eyes and met Voldemort's gaze,

"I'll have to lie again..."

Voldemort raised both eyebrows, then put the bowl on the side,

"You are more than welcome to announce the truth if that is what you wish..."

The burning intensity of Voldemort's gaze forced him to lower his and he spoke,

"I can't."

Voldemort took a hold of his chin and forced him to meet his gaze,

"Why not?"

He wanted nothing more than to stop discussing the topic, but he knew perfectly well that Voldemort wouldn't let it go,

"Because no one will believe me and..."

Voldemort's grip tightened a fraction of an inch on his chin and he inquired,

"And?"

Harry closed his eyes and spoke,

"You saved my life... You're taking care of me... You're feeding me... I feel indebted to you..."

Voldemort grinned,

"I want you to remember that for the rest of your life, Harry... I want you to remember that when the time comes for you to pick a side publicly..."

Harry nestled his head in the pillow as raw and unadulterated fear gnawed at his heart. Voldemort smoothed his fingers through his hair and inquired,

"Do you consider me to be handsome?"

Harry momentarily forgot everything as he focused his attention on Voldemort's question,

"You said that to me a lot when you were drifting in and out. You kept calling me handsome, you kept thanking me for helping you. You said it so softly, like you couldn't believe someone would do such a thing... You don't say thank you as much now."

Harry scrunched his face as it came back to him,

"I remember..."

"You remembered I'm the monster than murders as well as the man that helped you."

Harry whispered out,

"The monster part outweighs the man."

Voldemort sighed,

"Well, at least you still think I'm handsome."

He grinned again, showing off his attractive face. Harry pulled his face away from the pillow and spoke,

"You're a man and a monster, handsome on the outside, but ugly down to your core."

Voldemort picked up the bowl of soup and resumed spooning it into Harry's mouth. It tasted so good; Harry couldn't deny himself. Voldemort whispered,

"Even so... You are still letting me take care of you."

He inquired tiredly,

"What's the alternative?"

A truly malicious glint entered Voldemort's eyes as he spoke,

"You know the alternative. It flickers behind your eyes, stiffens your body. You could fight against me, but deep down, that is not what you want."

Harry knew that was the truth...He wanted to fight Voldemort with everything he had in him but...He had nothing left inside of him...He felt so hollow...so weak...so utterly useless....

"Dumbledore conditioned you to hate me and the part of you that is still obedient to him wants to fight me but you...the real you...the part of you that hasn't been conditioned... Well, that part wants me to take care of you, and I am."

Chapter 19

A hand was on his face was desperately pawing away his tears. Reality came back to him, and he jolted, sparking pain in his head. He hissed, panted, then whimpered at the pain. His whimper morphed into something angry, twisted, a fierce growl as he struggled to get out of the bed, out of this place, out of his mind if he could escape it.

Someone rolled on top of him, pinning him to the mattress. Harry fought him, tried to buck him off, but Voldemort managed to avoid him. Harry's anger turned back into despair, and he whimpered into Voldemort's chest as he sank down on top of him. He released Harry's wrists from above his head but kept over him. His toned upper chest was the perfect place for Harry to press his face, and sob into.

Harry clutched Voldemort's back and dug his nails in 'til his fingers shook. Voldemort's heartbeat drummed a steady rhythm against Harry's forehead, and he soon calmed down listening, and feeling, the heart of the monster. Finally, Voldemort asked,

"Are you with me?"

Harry snuffled, still firmly glued to Voldemort's chest,

"Yes, I'm with you."

Voldemort spoke softly,

"I am going to get off you now. Do not damage yourself."

He murmured brokenly,

"Damage? I'm already broken. You've broken me."

Voldemort chuckled mirthfully,

"You were broken long before you met me. I have simply given you a small push, and you have shattered completely."

Voldemort rolled off him, but instead of taking the space beside the window, he moved to the opposite side, and propped his head up with his hand. The light from the lamp shone in his eyes, and the cast dark shadows on his features.

"I have heard you cry in your sleep plenty of times but that was something else... That was ... raw emotion. What were you dreaming about?"

"I don't remember... I wouldn't tell you even if I did..."

"Why not?"

"Because you wouldn't understand, no one understands."

Voldemort frowned,

"How do you know?"

"You said you've never loved anything."

"I haven't."

"Then how can you possibly understand?"

Voldemort looked out the window,

"I want to... I want to understand. I want to know what made you roar like that and sink your nails into my flesh."

Harry couldn't look Voldemort in the eye, so instead he spoke to his chin,

"I was dreaming about... about Sirius..."

"Your Godfather?"

Harry nodded silently. Voldemort spoke,

"I'm not judging you, Harry. Tell me about Sirius."

"I thought he'd betrayed my parents... But he'd been wrongfully accused..."

"I am aware of all that... Wormtail had a hand in it... Tell me... How is he as a person?"

Harry swallowed hard,

"He's... He's wonderful... He's witty and brave..."

Voldemort pursed his lips,

"But they are not the traits that make him so invaluable to you... Tell me what makes him invaluable to you."

Harry licked his lips, then started telling Voldemort all about Sirius in detail... how they'd met... how he'd helped him escape... how Sirius had told him that he could live with him once his name was cleared...

Voldemort smiled. It looked sinister in the flickering light, but Harry was convinced it wasn't meant to be. He lifted his chin, gesturing Harry to continue and so Harry told him how Sirius had hid in a cave last year just to provide him with moral support and advise him in his hard times,

"What happened in the dream, Harry?"

Harry pawed off the remaining tears as he spoke,

"There was a duel going on... Sirius was duelling someone, and I was watching it all from a distance but I couldn't help him even though I was dying to... And then..."

Voldemort had a look of wonder on his face,

"And then what, Harry? That was quite a sound you made ... tortured, devastated... I've not heard anything like it before."

"I watched him die and it felt so real..."

Voldemort lowered his gaze. Harry fixated on his long lashes, the smooth skin of his eyelids, the droop of his eyebrows where he was frowning. Then he looked at Harry again, and the light flickered in his brown eyes. He looked so sincere Harry couldn't breathe,

"How did that make you feel?"

"It felt like my world was ending... I screamed for him, but he wouldn't respond... He had never kept me waiting... He'd risked everything just to help me... But he just wouldn't respond when I was screaming for him..."

His lower lip wobbled as a fresh stream of tears threatened to escape his eyes again when the scenes replayed in front of his eyes. Voldemort touched his cheek gently and the images were dispelled like smoke,

"You said no one understood, but I do. Or at least as much as a man like me can. Your Godfather sees you as a person... not as the chosen one or some hero... He sees the good, the bad, and the ugly in you... and he's always there for you... He is practically the only family you have..."

Harry closed his eyes as he thought about what Voldemort had just said to him. It was all true, but it terrified him that Voldemort had been able to pinpoint all that about him so easily...

"That's not true anymore. He came to visit me when I was recovering in the hospital wing. I looked him in the eyes, and I lied to him just like I lied to everyone else... He'd probably hate me if he ever found out the truth... Everyone will hate me..."

Voldemort stroked a spot underneath his ear and then spoke,

"You have not committed any crimes... There is nothing to hate about you... You are a saint compared to me... I kill people, Harry... I take their lives because it feels good to me. Because something messed up and twisted in my mind makes it feel pleasurable to me... I enjoy it, and not only that, but the part of me where I should feel remorse, or guilt or self-loathing does not exist... I like you, Harry... I enjoy talking to you, and taking care of you, but do you know how many times I have thought about killing you?"

Harry leaned back and waited for Voldemort to tell him,

"Every day... And I know it would feel good. It is only because of the pattern, the allowance, and structure I have given my desires, that I have not gone through with it."

Harry met Voldemort's gaze and spoke,

"What happens when you conquer the magical world? What happens after you achieve everything you've ever wanted?"

For the first time Harry saw something akin to sadness in Voldemort's eyes. Voldemort pulled away his hand from his cheek and spoke,

"I have never contemplated that."

Harry blinked, shaking his head. He shouldn't feel any sympathy for Voldemort. He didn't feel sympathy for him, he repeated in his head, but the sadness in his expression made him momentarily speechless.

He looked at Voldemort's chin, then lifted his gaze to his eyes once again,

"What if you lose control someday and kill me?"

Voldemort laughed, the sombre look on his face vanishing, and he grinned warmly at him. He reached for his cheek, and Harry didn't flinch or move away. He let Voldemort touch him and didn't look away from his fond gaze. Voldemort brushed his fingers down from his forehead, closing his eyelids,

"I will never kill you... Now, sleep."

Harry didn't reopen his eyes. He stayed flat on his back as he felt Voldemort's burning heat on his side.

Chapter 20

The last couple of days had helped his recovery a lot. He could finally sit up on his own, eat on his own... He wasn't plagued by constant headaches. In fact, they'd been much more bearable these past couple of days. The only thing, he still couldn't do properly was getting up on his feet and walking. Somehow, every time he tried, his legs felt weak and lifeless and he felt dizzy.

He was just lost in these thoughts when Voldemort walked into his room and announced,

"I have something for you."

Harry couldn't stop his curiosity from seeping into his voice as he inquired,

"What?"

Voldemort grinned as he conjured a set of crutches,

"To help you move about."

Harry looked at them apprehensively,

"Aren't you worried about me escaping?"

Voldemort snorted,

"I know you will try no such thing. Now come on, let's try to get you up."

Harry took the crutches and then with Voldemort's help, managed to stand. It was an odd feeling being upright without being sprawled over Voldemort. Voldemort smiled, nodded in encouragement, and Harry swung the crutches forward, taking a step. Some sense of pride came back to him, and he smiled back, only for his smile to quickly fade when he remembered that the man that had given him back a sliver of freedom was still a murderer....

"How is the pain?"

Harry muttered,

"Manageable."

Voldemort chuckled,

"Good. It'll be nice to have an extra hand in the kitchen."

Harry had only ever been to the sunroom but he'd seen how grand the castle actually was. Voldemort led the way, while Harry got acquainted with his crutches. The castle was huge, but it seemed lonely. He couldn't understand how Voldemort lived here all by himself. Everything was perfect...from the corridors to the tapestries that adorned the walls to the

carpets that covered the marbled floors. The kitchens were nothing less. They were huge and were equipped with about a thousand pots and pans along with every kind of cooking utensil imaginable...

"Do you really cook?"

Voldemort grinned crookedly,

"Is that really so hard to believe?"

Harry shook his head as he ran his gaze around the opulent counters and gleaming pots. Voldemort pointed to the kitchen table. Harry stared at the onions and the knife, then back at Voldemort,

"You want me to chop onions?"

"Yes...It is a relatively easy task."

Harry frowned at the onions,

"You can use magic to cook, right?"

Voldemort chuckled,

"I can...But doing everything by hand is far more satisfying."

Harry snorted,

"So, you are going to torture me after all?"

Voldemort laughed, and Harry couldn't stop his lips twitching into a smile,

""I've been cooking for you for weeks, so I believe it is time for you to help out."

Harry sat down at the table, then rested his crutches on the floor.

"I hate chopping onions..."

It was obvious that Voldemort was clearly enjoying himself as he spoke,

"There is a real good technique of getting it done where your eyes don't burn...I believe there is a charm for it as well..."

Harry inquired curiously,

"What is it?"

Voldemort hummed and then shook his head,

"I can't remember."

Harry huffed,

"That's really helpful."

Voldemort grinned,

"I will tell you when I do."

Harry finally asked,

"What are you making?"

Voldemort corrected,

"What are we making? Paella, but without the prawns."

Harry couldn't help but feel relieved,

"Good, I hate prawns."

Voldemort's grin grew wider,

"I have heard that if you eat anything eight times, you start to like it."

Harry scowled at that,

"I don't believe that."

Voldemort tipped his head back, laughing. Harry hated that he had a nice laugh. He was hoping for something ugly to reveal itself from Voldemort, but apart from the words that left his mouth, he appeared perfect.

Harry begrudgingly started on the onions, and within seconds his eyes were watering, and he was constantly blinking to compensate. Voldemort watched him for a few moments, then conjured the chicken.

He started frying it, and the smell woke Harry's dormant appetite.

The knife glinted in his hand, and he stared down at his reflection in the gleaming blade. He could launch it at Voldemort, stab him in the back, stop him from ever killing again, but he didn't. He sighed and carried on chopping the onions. Harry finally asked,

"Is this something you do with other people?"

Voldemort shrugged,

"I wouldn't be a very fearful Dark Lord if I did this with my death eaters on a regular basis."

Harry frowned,

"Why do you want to be a fearful Dark Lord?"

"Because that is what I truly am..."

Harry waved his arm around,

"Then what is all this?"

Voldemort shrugged,

"There is no law that states that a Dark Lord cannot cook."

Harry couldn't help but ask,

"How can you live all alone in this castle? Doesn't it get lonely?"

Voldemort laughed,

"No... I rather enjoy the solitude."

Harry sighed,

"Haven't you ever thought of being with someone? Maybe there's someone out there that shares all your desires."

Voldemort shook his head,

"No..."

Harry decided to change the topic and gestured to the chopping board for Voldemort to see,

"Done."

Voldemort smiled,

"You're a natural."

Harry snorted,

"A natural at chopping onions?"

Voldemort nodded,

"Yes... Now for the pepper."

He threw a red pepper at Harry, and he caught it one handed. His eyes were still burning, and he was surprised he'd caught it at all. But he was relieved to know that his quidditch reflexes were still sharp.

"Wait, you let me burn my eyes out first, when I could've started with the pepper?"

Voldemort shrugged, then stilled, waving his spoon,

"Wait, I remember the technique with the onions."

Harry inquired,

"Which is?"

Voldemort smiled, a big, blooming smile that lifted his cheeks,

"The key is to get someone else to cut them for you."

Harry narrowed his eyes.

"That someone might just brush them onto the floor."

Voldemort laughed,

"No... If you do, I might just have to torture you for real."

Harry sighed and started on the pepper. He couldn't see what Voldemort was doing in the frying pan, but it smelled so good his mouth watered. Voldemort took the onions and peppers and added them into the pan. After a moment, Harry murmured,

"What are we doing?"

Voldemort replied promptly,

"Making lunch."

"No, I meant this,"

Harry said, gesturing at them both with the knife,

"Pretending this is normal."

Voldemort spoke in a matter of fact voice,

"I am not pretending anything. I am making lunch, and you are helping me."

Harry spoke out in frustration,

"But it's not...not right."

Voldemort chuckled,

"Paella will still taste good without the prawns."

Harry cried out in agitation,

"I'm not talking about the paella."

Voldemort smirked,

"I know... What would you prefer, me threatening you...torturing you?"

Harry ran his hands through his tousled hair,

"No...yes ... I don't know."

Voldemort raised his eyebrows,

"You want me to hurt you?"

Harry snapped,

"I said I don't know... At least if you were, I'd stay hating you, not..."

He bit his tongue, shaking his head.

Chapter 21

Voldemort raised his eyebrows,

"You want me to hurt you?"

Harry snapped.

"I said I don't know...At least if you were, I'd stay hating you, not..."

He bit his tongue, shaking his head.

"Not what? Like me?"

"I don't like you. You're a murderer, but this... this is just confusing."

Voldemort grinned to himself,

"You don't hate me."

"I should."

"You feel guilty because you like my company,"

Voldemort said, fixing Harry to the spot with his stare,

"But you shouldn't. What you're feeling is completely normal."

"You have no idea how I'm feeling, and it certainly isn't normal."

"Just accept it and let go. Everything will be much more easier if you do."

"You're deluded."

"So are you."

Voldemort conjured something, tucked it under his armpit, then slid onto the chair opposite Harry,

"We need to let the rice cook."

Harry eyed him, then quickly looked away. Voldemort really was handsome, especially when he smiled. He leaned back in his chair and lifted what he'd been hiding onto the table and smoothed the front page of the newspaper. It was a copy of the Daily Prophet.

"I am a murderer, but that does not mean I act cruel and sadistic all the time."

"This whole situation is cruel and sadistic."

"You are on the side that will be end up ruling the magical world."

He took in the headline that was emblazoned on the front page and reached over the table to scrunch it up, but Voldemort tutted, moving it from his grasp,

"No, you are not going to tear it."

"I hate The Daily Prophet."

Voldemort slid the newspaper towards him again,

Harry started flicking through the newspaper page. He kept going until he got to the crossword,

"Can you do crosswords?"

"I can do them just fine."

Voldemort said, getting to his feet.

"If you say so,"

Harry pretended to read,

"Arrogant murderer who thinks he can rule the world...Nine letters, begins with V, ends in T."

"No idea,"

Voldemort said. He got a spoon, took some paella out of the pan, then came towards Harry.

"Try it."

"Why, have you laced it with poison or something?"

"No..."

Harry sighed, then opened his lips to accept the spoon. The minute it touched his tongue, his taste buds cheered, and he only just held back a moan. Voldemort was watching him seriously, eyes dark and targeted, like a predator on prey.

"Good?"

Harry nodded,

"Yeah, it's good."

Voldemort brushed his thumb against Harry's lips, and a shot of electricity went through him. The touch was lingering, soft, and Harry's eyelashes fluttered. He tried to remember the last time Voldemort had touched his lips. It had been when he was too weak to feed himself.

Voldemort had fed him, always ghosting Harry's lips with his fingers after each mouthful. Voldemort whispered,

"You had a bit of rice on you."

"No, I didn't."

Voldemort smiled,

"No, no, you didn't."

He took his hand away and went back to the frying pan,

"Read me a clue, and we will see who gets it first."

Harry swallowed, then looked down at the crossword, and read the first clue aloud. "Ten letters, pleasing in appearance."

Voldemort tapped the spoon on the side of the pan,

"Got it."

"Already?"

"Yes, I think you will get it, too, if you use your head. What's the first word you think of when you look at me?"

"Murderer."

Voldemort reminded,

"Pleasing in appearance..."

Harry muttered,

"Some murderers are."

Voldemort laughed again; another laugh that made Harry's stomach feel funny.

"It's not murderer but try again."

"Killer? Deranged, crazy, heartless."

Voldemort narrowed his eyes and smiled coyly,

"I'm not sure you know how crosswords work. There's a clue, and a number of letters, neither of which you have seemed to grasp."

Harry looked down at the table, then flapped his hand, acting as if he'd got it,

"Lunatic."

Voldemort laughed again, and Harry pinched his wrist to distract himself from the flutters in his gut. The sound of Voldemort's laugh shouldn't have been alluring; it should've been like nails on a chalkboard.

"Come on, Harry,"

Voldemort said, gesturing to himself, particularly his face,

"If you had no idea who I was and I came up to you, what would you think?"

Harry's face filled with heat, and his mind filled with inappropriate thoughts. A big knowing smile brightened Voldemort's face. He laughed, linking eyes with Harry,

"After the initial thoughts about being claimed by me faded, what would you have thought of my face? How would you describe me?"

Hot, handsome, sexy, if Harry didn't know what was going on inside his head, they would've been the words to describe him. He swallowed the uncomfortable lump in his throat, ignored the prickling heat that had travelled from his cheeks to his toes, and whispered,

"Attractive."

Voldemort nodded, then winked,

"Thank you very much. You are not too bad yourself."

Harry glared angrily at the newspaper picking another clue,

"Here's one for you. 6 letters, make certain of a failure."

"It can't be sabotaged."

"If you're just going to list all the words it can't be, we are going to be here a long time."

Voldemort smirked,

"The word is doomed."

Harry chuckled,

"Correct, as in, you're doomed to fail in conquering the magical world"

Chapter 22

He was alone in the bathroom.

The first time Voldemort had left him alone in the bathroom weeks before, he'd looked at the window, judging whether he could fit through, looked at the razor, wondering whether he could use it as a weapon against Voldemort, but his mind didn't wander down those routes again. Instead he felt happy. Voldemort had left him on his own. He could undress and shower without his help, and an odd combination of excitement and relief filled his chest.

He sat down on the toilet, struggled out of the trousers and then tugged his oversized t-shirt over his head. He steadied himself on the sink, hopped closer to the shower, then grasped the chair, Voldemort had left for him

When the shower's spray hit him, he winced, leaning to avoid the first downpour of ice. It warmed fast, and he sat upright, sighing to the steam. He could feel the grime and dirt being stripped from his body, and when he started massaging shampoo into his hair, he moaned at the sensation. The hum of pain in his head became even more distant. His whole body felt refreshed, clean, and he smiled into the spray.

For the first time in weeks, he was happy, and Voldemort had given him that happiness...

Harry stopped smiling the second the thought crossed his mind. He shouldn't have been grateful to Voldemort. He was keeping Harry prisoner; he was a murderer. He should hate him and try to escape but...

Why couldn't he?

His heart began pounding beneath his chest as he thought back on the past few days. He'd helped Voldemort in the kitchen breakfast, lunch and dinner. They talked, laughed, filled in the crossword. Voldemort had even started sleeping right next to him because of the nightmares he still experienced. They lay side by side on the bed each night, never touching, but together.

Harry leaned forward in his chair, gasping for air. The steam added to the claustrophobic feeling. He was trapped, and his mind had been taken hostage, too. It had been twisted, reshaped, and he didn't recognize it. He liked spending time with Voldemort. He was touched by him gifting Harry crutches, and grateful he'd allowed him to use the bathroom alone. Voldemort had stripped down his walls, crawled inside his head, and was helping him rebuild them, with him still inside.

Harry reached behind himself and turned the dial on the wall. He gritted his teeth as the cold water poured down his back, so cold it felt painful, and his back spasmed. Harry stopped tensing, accepted the pins and needles down his spine, and started shivering.

He closed his eyes and his whole body went numb. He preferred a numbed mind to a compromised one.

"HARRY!"

Harry hadn't heard the shower door open, and his eyes felt heavy when he tried to open them. He realized his teeth were no longer chattering, and he wasn't shivering. He blinked the drops from his lashes, then looked at Voldemort. His brown eyes blazed with anger, and his nostrils flared. Before Harry could do anything, Voldemort had grabbed him under his armpits, and pulled him out of the shower.

The minute his chest was against Voldemort's, his sluggishness vanished, and he found himself clinging to the heat. He didn't want to. His clear head told him to shove Voldemort back, keep him away, but his arms wrapped around him on their own accord, and he pressed his body into Voldemort's solid chest, taking the warmth from him.

Voldemort didn't moan about getting his silk shirt wet like he'd expected him to. He didn't shun Harry for wanting affection. Voldemort wrapped his arms around Harry in return and held him impossibly closer. Harry took his warmth, cushioned himself in Voldemort's chest, and let him take most of his weight.

"You'll make yourself sick."

He was already sick, a sickness of the mind where he'd become attached to Voldemort. Where he'd seen beyond Voldemort's evil deeds and liked what was underneath. Harry mumbled,

"Why does it matter?"

"It matters to me."

Harry gasped,

"Don't... Don't say things like that. Don't act like you care."

"But I do."

"You're lying."

Voldemort's hand roamed into Harry's hair, and he gripped the strands, gently pulling Harry's head away from his chest. They stared at each other, and Harry waited for the wolfish smile he hated, but it didn't come.

"I am not lying. You are the one person in the world I have not had to lie to. That makes you special. Very special to me."

His gaze dropped to Harry's mouth. His lips burned under Voldemort's attention, the hottest part of Harry's body, but in seconds it had a rival. His cock filled, pressed to Voldemort's thigh, brushing against his pants as he clung to Voldemort's shoulders.

Voldemort tugged Harry's hair, and his scalp tingled, and a soft noise left his parted lips. Voldemort saw it as an invitation, some kind of green light, and he dropped lower, eyes still targeted, as he swooped, pounced, struck, attacked. Harry didn't know how to describe it, but

he caught the predatory glint in Voldemort's eye just before they connected and turned his head.

Chapter 23

Voldemort tugged Harry's hair, and his scalp tingled, and a soft noise left his parted lips. Voldemort saw it as an invitation, some kind of green light, and he dropped lower, eyes still targeted, as he swooped, pounced, struck, attacked. Harry didn't know how to describe it, but he caught the predatory glint in Voldemort's eye just before they connected and turned his head.

Voldemort's mouth met his cheek, he gave a quick peck, then withdrew with a soft snort from his nose. Voldemort's body that had been all tense and curled forward, suddenly relaxed, and he went back to hugging Harry again.

Harry could feel his heart pounding away, but Voldemort's heart rate was matching it. They were so close together he could feel both, completely out of time, and disorienting. He was being punched by their hearts, and the sensation made him dizzy, slightly nauseous.

Voldemort's heart started to slow, and he released Harry's hair. They stood together in the bathroom, Harry clinging onto Voldemort's shoulders, and Voldemort's with his arms secured around Harry's back, giving him warmth, taking Harry's weight, and making him feel ashamed, and comforted at the same time.

Voldemort sighed,

"Come on. Let's get you a towel, and I shall get you a warm drink."

"You tried to kiss me."

"I did. And you got aroused again."

"I didn't."

"At least I am honest with myself. Now come on..."

Voldemort moved Harry towards the sink, and he clutched on before Voldemort released him.

"Oh,"

Voldemort said, turning around and picking up a pile from the floor,

"I came up to give you these."

Harry looked at the towel, and clothes, then he frowned,

"Wait, these are my clothes."

"Yes... They are."

The warm feeling Harry despised fizzled in his stomach. He was happy, grateful, relieved, all emotions he shouldn't have felt. He shouldn't have felt any positive emotion towards Voldemort, but when he touched his shirt, he couldn't help flashing a smile.

"Thank you."

"You are welcome. I shall see you in the sun-room."

Harry sat down on the toilet, dropped his head into his hands and sighed. He couldn't like Voldemort; he just couldn't.

Voldemort inquired softly,

"How is the pain?"

Harry sighed,

"It's fine."

Voldemort sat down on the sofa next to Harry. He looked at the armchair and thought about moving, but he was comfortable, settled.

"It's warm."

Harry took the mug,

"Thanks."

They stared out the huge window together as he sipped his tea and enjoyed the view. Finally, he broke the silence,

"How was your childhood?"

Harry paused for a moment before he spoke,

"I know you were brought up in an orphanage... You told me all about your family... that night in the graveyard..."

Voldemort wrapped an arm around his shoulder and traced his scar gently with his other hand,

"My childhood..."

There was nothing but silence for a couple of minutes and then Voldemort spoke,

"I always knew that I was different from the other children. I could make things move without touching them. I could make animals do what I wanted them to do, without training them. I could make bad things happen to people who annoyed me. I could make them hurt if I

wanted to. I learned to use and control my magical abilities at a very young age, even though I wasn't aware of what they were until Dumbledore enlightened me..."

Harry took another sip from the cup and spoke,

"Did you hurt anyone when you were a child?"

A truly demonic smile lit up Voldemort's handsome features and distorted them,

"Yes... I did... I have always desired power. It was always there, simmering in my head and I never had any emotions or feelings to hinder me in my pursuit..."

Harry leaned against Voldemort's side involuntarily as he spoke,

"Did you have to pretend to be normal at Hogwarts?"

Voldemort chuckled darkly,

"I can be quite charismatic when I wish to be... It was not difficult for me to wrap all the professors around my fingers... The students worshipped me. In fact, Hogwarts was where I gathered some of my most trusted death eaters."

Harry was about to pull away when Voldemort pulled him in close,

"Tell me...How do you feel about Hogwarts?"

That wasn't a difficult question,

"It feels like home."

A sly grin curved Voldemort's lips,

"Are you sure about that, Harry?"

Harry closed his eyes as he felt his mouth turn sour. He placed the cup on the table and then spoke,

"It felt like home until..."

Voldemort continued to stroke his scar as he inquired,

"Until?"

Harry sighed,

"Until you didn't kill me in that graveyard....Everything just changed for me after that night..."

Voldemort laughed softly before he pressed his lips to his cheek,

"That night changed everything for me as well."

Chapter 24

He pressed the front page to the kitchen table, glaring at the ordinary headline. It was hard to believe how nothing had changed in the outside world. Voldemort warned.

"Do not scrunch it up."

Harry flicked through the pages to the safety of the crossword.

"Intense feeling for something, particularly something lost. 5 letters."

Voldemort hummed,

"Something you do a lot."

"You've got it already?"

"You are reading out the easy ones."

Harry rubbed his temples, willing his brain to work, but no spark lit up in his head,

"I don't know."

"Yearn."

"Oh, right... yeah. I'm tired, and it's the painkiller potions... they make me slow."

"Excuses."

Voldemort chuckled. He came closer, taking a look over Harry's shoulder,

"How about sexual gratification, eight letters."

His voice was low and rumbling, and Harry resisted the urge to shiver.

"You like picking sex related ones, don't you?"

"Well it is always bubbling underneath the surface, isn't it?"

"In your dreams..."

"So do you know it?"

Harry breathed heavily from his nose,

"Pleasure."

"Yes"

Voldemort said, rubbing Harry's shoulders,

"Pleasure."

Harry tried to find the right number on the crossword, but there wasn't one, and there wasn't a clue like the one Voldemort read out.

"It's not even on here."

"No, no, it's not."

Harry didn't protest or fuss about Voldemort rubbing his shoulders. It felt nice, too nice, and his eyes fluttered shut. Voldemort worked his neck, rubbing his muscles, firmly where he had tight knots of tension, and gently at the side of his neck.

"Does this feel good?"

"You know it does..."

He kneaded his thumbs into Harry's neck, rubbing the sore muscles until his head flopped forward, and he felt like a puppet with cut strings.

"You are very tense."

"Well you know, I'm not used to being kidnapped and held in a huge castle..."

"I did not kidnap you...I just happened to save you..."

"You should have let me die."

Harry slapped Voldemort's hand on his shoulder.

Voldemort laughed lightly, then ran his hands up the back of Harry's neck, scoring his nails against Harry's scalp. Harry couldn't help his gasp, or the excited thump of his heart. Voldemort scratched his scalp, and his nerves twitched and tingled until he relaxed, and sighed into the touches. A moan rumbled from deep in his chest, and Voldemort responded, digging his nails in harder until Harry shivered.

Harry felt himself getting hard again, a heavy heat in his crotch. It became unbearable, and he shifted his hips for the friction of his pants. He panted, then opened his eyes. Voldemort stopped rubbing, and Harry glanced up at him. He was deadly still, body frozen, as if poised to strike. The excited gleam was back in his eyes, and a slow smile spread his lips.

His hand shot down, but Harry grabbed his wrist in time, stopping him.

"Why not?"

Voldemort asked,

"It's a release, that's all—"

"No."

"You know I can make you feel good."

Harry licked his lips, inwardly begging his erection to go down, and his heart to calm.

"I know you could, but you shouldn't... you shouldn't feel good."

Voldemort sighed, backing away. He went back to the stove and stirred the pasta sauce he'd been making. He tried some, then bobbed his head,

"Needs a little more salt."

Harry's head spun. It was like the incident in the shower. Voldemort acted as if it hadn't happened, changed the subject completely, carrying on. Harry couldn't, not this time.

"Why?"

Harry asked.

"It'll improve the taste."

"That's not what I meant, and you know it. Why..."

Voldemort sighed,

"Because I want all of you."

"All of me?"

"Yes."

"Haven't you had enough? I've spilled my secrets to you. You've compromised enough of me."

"I thought so, too, but no. I find you fascinating, Harry, and I want more."

"You can't have more."

"You'll enjoy it, and so will I."

"I won't,"

Harry said through his teeth,

"It'd be wrong."

Voldemort shrugged,

"You are just being stubborn."

Harry picked his crutches off the floor, got to his feet, then left the kitchens. He felt Voldemort's gaze on his back, but ignored it, hobbling out into the vast corridor. But before he could leave Voldemort stood in the doorway,

"I can't do this anymore."

"Do what?"

"Be here. I have to get out of here, I have to sort my head out."

Voldemort didn't budge,

"Go where? You cannot apparate..."

"I have to leave. I'll walk across the fields..."

"You are not strong enough."

"Get out of my way!"

"No. You know I cannot let you go."

Harry flared his nostrils,

"Move."

"I think you should calm down. You are going to damage yourself."

"Damage myself?"

Harry laughed,

"I'm already damaged. I'm beyond repair."

"Just let yourself heal and I shall allow you to leave..."

"You think I care about your twisted fantasy. I don't care. I don't care about any of this right now... I have to get away, I have to leave."

"I am not going to let you."

Harry gritted his teeth, dropped one of his crutches, and swung his fist at Voldemort. He didn't react quickly enough, and Harry caught him. He bumped into the door-frame, lost balance, then fell to the floor.

Chapter 25

Harry gritted his teeth, dropped one of his crutches, and swung his fist at Voldemort. He didn't react quickly enough, and Harry caught him. He bumped into the doorframe, lost balance, then fell to the floor. He looked up at Harry, wide-eyed, with his lip bleeding, and the guilt was immediate.

Immediate, but confusing. Harry gawped at Voldemort on the floor, focusing on the damage he'd done. He'd knocked down his captor... a killer... the monster, but he didn't feel good about it.

There was no time to think. He had to get away.

Harry bent down to retrieve his crutch, then as quick as he could walked through the corridors and navigated his way outside until he found himself halfway across the first field. It was cold on his bare feet, and so hard each step jarred his spine. The ground was uneven and his head was starting to spin, so he staggered, struggled to stay upright, and carried on. He tripped and hit his head against a rock. The pain went straight through him, stealing his breath, spinning his head.

It took him a moment to get it back under control and get back on the way. Somewhere, Harry lost one of his crutches, dropping it while he staggered onwards with the agony surging through his head and darkness flickering just on the edges of his vision.

He was soon out of breath, rasping and tired, and ended up sinking to the cold earth, staring at the journey ahead he knew he couldn't make. Voldemort was right... he wasn't strong enough.

Maybe that's why he hadn't followed him...

His fall to the ground wasn't graceful. He couldn't land on his knees...he collapsed in slow motion, until he was lying on his side, between the molds of mud. The smell of earth filled his nose, and he looked into the distance, to the freedom he knew was there, but all he could see was gray mud, and gray clouds.

Voldemort appeared beside him, staring into the distance. He was dabbing a handkerchief on his bloodied lip, then looked down at him,

"You are welcome to continue if you wish to... I shall not stop you."

Harry closed his eyes as he shook his head subtly. He couldn't continue,

"Let's get you back in bed then."

Voldemort crouched beside him and examined his head before tsking,

"You hurt yourself again."

He helped him to his feet, slung one of Harry's arms over his neck to take almost all his weight,

"Apparating would be easier but I do not believe you can handle it in your current state."

They walked back to the castle, and instead of feeling disappointed his great escape had failed, he only felt relief when he stepped inside. The castle that smelled nice, that was warm, and somehow comforting. They passed through the corridor where the kitchens were, and Harry saw the newspaper still open on the kitchen table... The scene was domestic, strange.

Voldemort helped him into the bedroom, then laid him down gently. He just stared straight up at the ceiling, didn't speak, didn't move, just existed as Voldemort tended to the cuts on his feet and the bump on his head.

When he was done, he sat by him in silence for a couple of minutes and that bothered him. For all intents and purposes, Voldemort should be torturing him for what he'd just done...for hitting him...for trying to escape... He should have locked him up in some dungeon.

After a couple of minutes of silence Voldemort spoke,

"Here...Drink some tea."

Harry didn't look at him, but he could smell it. The rich aroma, Voldemort liked his without sugar, Harry recalled. Harry said nothing, only continued his staring contest with the ceiling wishing Voldemort would leave him alone or simply torture him...He couldn't bear his kindness...Finally he broke his silence,

"Why aren't you torturing me?"

Voldemort sat down on the bed beside him,

"Your frustration is understandable. It was due time you let it out."

Harry couldn't look at him. Voldemort's swollen lip made him feel all sorts of conflicting feelings, the ugly lump he'd put on his perfect face. Harry only just stopped himself from apologizing, but he wanted to. He wanted to say sorry despite the times Voldemort had hurt him before... Despite who Voldemort was.

"When I get in a sulk..."

"I'm not in a sulk."

Voldemort lifted his hands up in surrender,

"I did not say you were, I am just saying, when I get in a sulk, I read jokes out from a muggle joke book I have until it goes away."

Harry covered his eyes with his hands. He couldn't imagine Voldemort sulking or telling muggle jokes...It was too much...

"Please spare me."

"Why can you not hear a pterodactyl go to the bathroom?"

Harry spoke incredulously,

"Are we really doing this?"

Voldemort didn't deign his question worthy of a reply, instead he finished the joke,

"Because their pee doesn't make a sound,"

Harry pressed his lips together, refusing to smile.

"You seem to be a bit of a tough crowd... Sometimes I tuck my knees into my chest and lean forward... That's just how I roll."

Harry went from pressing his lips together, to biting them shut.

"What do you call someone with no body and no nose?"

Harry didn't answer so Voldemort spoke,

"Nobody knows."

He laughed, removing his hands from his face. Voldemort beamed a smile at him, then poked his cheek.

"Made you laugh."

"It's a pity laugh."

Voldemort shrugged,

"A laugh is still a laugh."

"I'm one joke away from asking you to torture me."

"That is harsh. They are not that bad."

"They're awful."

"They are designed to make you laugh, and they did. They have served their purpose, and I have served mine by cheering you up."

Voldemort helped him sit up,

"Why do you even care if I'm upset?"

"I do not particularly enjoy seeing you so miserable."

Harry chuckled, shaking his head. Voldemort handed him the cup of tea and spoke softly,

"Drink."

Harry whispered,

"Thanks..."

He finished his tea in silence and then Voldemort gave him a pain relief potion. He drank it down in one and then Voldemort lifted his arm, making his intentions clear, snaking it around Harry's neck to pull him closer. Harry didn't protest. He leaned into him, relaxing until the side of his face was resting on Voldemort's chest.

Why did this feel so right?

Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

Warning: There's a bit of animal cruelty in this chapter so be very cautious if you're triggered by that... I should have added this when I posted the chapter. That's definitely a mistake on my part and I'm so sorry for that

It was some time later when Voldemort pulled his arm away and his neck chilled without his heat. He murmured,

"Come back."

The haze that usually accompanied the pain relief potions filled his head and he knew he wasn't thinking straight but he didn't care. He lifted Voldemort's arm, slung it over his shoulder, then leaned his face back on his pec,

"How are you feeling, Harry?"

He slurred out,

"I'm fine... It's just the potions..."

Voldemort touched his hair,

"I should not be so careless with you..."

"I'm fine..."

Harry said again, closing his eyes because his eyelids felt like they'd turned to lead. Voldemort stroked his hair gently and he felt himself drifting off to his wonderful touches, but something kept holding him back and away from sleep. It was probably the fear of what nightmare he'd have to face tonight if he drifted off.

Voldemort seemed to have picked up on his predicament because he spoke softly,

"You should rest... I shall be here."

Harry shook his head,

"I can't..."

Voldemort touched his cheek,

"Why not?"

It was difficult to explain. There were some nightmares he understood and then there were some he didn't... The magpie... The magpie was there in all of them and he couldn't understand why,

"The magpie..."

Voldemort traced his cheekbone ever so slightly as he inquired,

"Does it bother you?"

He nodded silently because talking felt like too much effort. Voldemort sighed,

"I told you the story about the magpie when you were in absolute agony."

Harry shuddered when he remembered those initial days... The pain... The helplessness... At that time, it had seemed like it would never end. He spoke,

"Tell it to me again."

Voldemort took his hand into his,

"You asked me to kill you because you could not stand the pain and I refused so you asked me when was the first time I killed."

Harry murmured,

"When was the first time you killed?"

Voldemort traced the veins on the back of his hand as he spoke,

"I was six years old... The first thing I killed hadn't even opened its eyes. It hadn't even breathed its first breath, made a noise."

Harry inquired,

"How could you have killed it then?"

Voldemort spoke,

"The orphanage had a garden at the back and in that garden... There was an oak tree and in the oak tree, lived a magpie. Each year it rebuilt its tumbling nest, and Mr. Magpie and Mrs. Magpie made sweet love, and aw, rejoice, eggs appeared."

Harry whispered,

"What did you do?"

Voldemort chuckled softly,

"What do you think I did?"

The answer slipped past his lips,

"You destroyed the eggs."

"I climbed up that tree, sat on a branch, and squeezed every one of them."

"It's cruel."

"No... that is not cruel. Doing it year after year is the real cruelty. Sometimes the magpie watched from the roof, saw what I did, but it still rebuilt its nest in exactly the same place. It still laid those eggs knowing the risk."

"It was just a bird."

"Magpies are clever. It knew."

"What are you saying, it laid its eggs there, so you'd kill them?"

"No, it was challenging me, carrying on, each year thinking I would bend, that I would change my behaviour. It hated me, and I hated it, but neither of us could change our nature. Stubborn bird, monstrous boy."

"You're deluded. The magpie wasn't playing a game with you. They're not that intelligent. Its brain's the size of a walnut."

Voldemort chuckled again,

"Your brain is twenty times bigger and here you are, snuggled up to my chest even though you know who I really am... What I have done..."

He didn't want to think about that, so he asked,

"What happened next?"

"When I was ten, I found the magpie in the garden. I don't know what had happened to it, but it couldn't fly. It had broken its wing. I told Miss Cole, and she said it wouldn't survive. It was better if it was put out of its misery. It was the humane thing to do. She said she would end its suffering, but I stopped her. I said I'd do it myself."

"So, you killed it?"

"No. I didn't want to end its suffering. We had a game going on, so it couldn't die. I needed it alive, so I kept it in a box in the shed."

"Miss Cole didn't find it?"

"I kept it very well hidden... I kept the magpie alive. I killed snails to feed it, as well as giving it scraps of bread, ham. It even ate cheese. At first the magpie pecked me every time I tried to feed it. It squawked, flapping its damaged wing, making it worse..."

Harry thought back to the hazy days after Voldemort had saved him. He'd thrashed, cried out, moved to avoid Voldemort's hand every time he reached for him. He'd refused water, food... He could remember now... He could almost hear his own voice begging Voldemort to kill him... to take away the pain...

"Then ... something happened, and it stopped fighting me. It let me feed it, let me close. Let me ease its suffering."

Harry snorted,

"Did you brew some pain relief potions for it too?"

"No. I persisted. Fighting me was getting it nowhere, but giving in, accepting its situation, that helped it. It realized it had no control over its fate. I did."

Harry cracked an eye open and peeked up at Voldemort,

"Maybe it was biding its time, getting stronger, better. Did... did it get better?"

Voldemort looked at the ceiling, lost somewhere, and then he turned his attention back to him,

"Its body got stronger, better."

"Body? What about its mind?"

"It lost that somewhere along the way."

"How could you tell what was going on its mind?"

"I just could. I enjoyed toying with it. I found it interesting. Despite what it knew about me, the things I'd done, I still won it over. It still became... attached."

"Is that what you're doing to me?"

Voldemort grinned,

"Consider yourself warned."

His smile faded quickly though, and he reached for his hair and started stroking them again. Despite knowing he should lean away, distance himself, he didn't,

"The magpie... Did you enjoy taking care of it?"

Voldemort looked away, contemplating, and then he met his gaze,

"I enjoyed seeing it change from hating me, to relying on me."

"No, I mean... feeding it, washing it, stroking it. Did you like looking after it?"

"Yes. It was rewarding."

"Why?"

"It knew the real me... It had seen the monster when I'd hidden it from everyone else, and still, it let me look after it. It knew, and it became attached to me."

"It's wing got better?"

Voldemort nodded,

"You let it go?"

He stopped nodding, and fixed him with a cold stare,

"No."

Harry frowned,

"Then what did you do?"

"I snapped its neck."

Harry's breath caught in his chest, and a shot of adrenaline rushed to his heart and he said, breathless.

"Why?"

"Because I'm a monster."

"It doesn't make any sense."

"You are right, I don't. but I am what I am."

Harry stiffened,

"I don't understand... Why would you do that? There has to be a reason..."

"Perhaps I shall tell you about that another time... For now, you should rest."

Harry couldn't help but yawn into Voldemort's chest. He didn't want to think anymore. Knowing why the magpie made appearances in his nightmares had entangled him more than not knowing and now he wished Voldemort hadn't told him this story,

"I knew it would bother you. That is why I refrained from telling it to you again when you mentioned that you saw it in your nightmares."

Voldemort helped him lie down. That night Harry lay a little bit closer to Voldemort, not touching, but close enough to feel his heat, and smell his scent.

Chapter 27

Voldemort undid his cuffs, and the relief of him finally being back made him breathless. His only company had been Hedwig, perched on the vanity as she'd watched him. This was the first time, Voldemort had cuffed him when he'd left, and Harry knew it was his own fault. He shouldn't have tried to escape. But Voldemort had still been considerate enough and left him with Hedwig, and even though her presence was more comforting than being alone... nothing could compare to Voldemort being back,

"You took ages."

Voldemort stepped towards him, then brushed his fingers through his hair. He loved the feeling of his fingers against his scalp, parting his hair; it made him all tingly and warm. Voldemort didn't notice his dozy expression, and he seemed to be searching for something in his hair,

"What are you looking for?"

Voldemort made a thoughtful sound,

"Your wound is healing nicely."

Voldemort was silent for a moment, but Harry could hear what he wasn't saying...He was healing and soon enough he'd have to go back to Hogwarts and pretend that everything was sunshine and rainbows...when it wasn't... It wasn't...

Would Voldemort really allow him to leave though or would he simply snap his neck like he'd done with the magpie? He was surprisingly fine with the second option since he'd had some time to brood on it. Initially it had terrified him but now...now it didn't...It would actually be a mercy if Voldemort killed him at the end of this because he couldn't...he couldn't imagine going back to life again...

Voldemort brushed his fingers against his lips as he spoke,

"Come and help me with lunch."

Harry let out an internal sigh of relief as the air between them grew lighter again,

"I'm not chopping the onions."

Voldemort chuckled,

"But you are so good at it."

Harry countered,

"How about you do the onions, and I do everything else."

Voldemort frowned,

"You cannot stand for long."

He argued,

"I can stand long enough to make..."

Voldemort finished,

"Tomato Bruschetta."

"Yeah, that."

"Okay, I will chop the onion, and talk you through the rest of the dish."

Harry smiled,

"Deal."

It wasn't easy to stand in the kitchen with his head that kept spinning... After Voldemort had finished the onions, he hovered behind him, ready to catch him if he fell. A few times he held on to his hips, seemingly to steady him, but Harry suspected it was just an excuse to touch him.

Voldemort had turned the radio on today and Harry enjoyed the background noise that the music provided. It distracted him from the thoughts that lurked at the dark corners of his mind.

A song came on the radio, and then Voldemort stiffened, then flexed his hands on his hips,

"What is it?"

"I quite like this song."

Voldemort tugged him away from the counter,

"I'm chopping the tomatoes..."

"In a minute,"

Voldemort said, encouraging him to turn. He ended up wrapping his arms around Voldemort's neck, and Voldemort held on to his lower back. Voldemort's gaze found his lips, and he stared at them as they swayed to the music. Heat flared through his body, a nervousness took over him, and he thought of something to say to break the charged atmosphere,

"I didn't know the fearsome Dark Lord could dance."

Voldemort ignored him and snaked his hand up to the back of his head, applying pressure. Harry thought he was going for a kiss and stiffened in anticipation, but instead he held his head close, so their cheeks were together as they swayed.

Without Voldemort's gaze, he relaxed into his hold, allowing himself to be rocked back and forward in time with the song. Voldemort's steady heartbeat calmed his rampant one, and he ended up closing his eyes, clinging onto Voldemort's neck.

When the song finished, and the next one started, they kept holding on and swaying. It was only when the advertisements came on the radio that Voldemort lessened his grip. He kissed Harry's cheek, so close to his lips they tingled at the contact. Voldemort still had his arms around him, still held onto him as their gazes met. His heart punched into life again, and he thought about how easy it would be to lean in. To apologize for the ugly swelling on his lip by kissing it better. His stomach grumbled against Voldemort's. They both looked down, and Voldemort smirked.

"That's one way to break the atmosphere..."

Harry detached himself from Voldemort and clung onto the counter. He took a few deep breaths, feeling Voldemort's gaze on him, then managed to calm down.

"You need to stop doing that."

Voldemort asked in mock innocence,

"What?"

"Trying to kiss me, complicating things, confusing this."

Voldemort leaned back against the table,

"There are no complications on my side, but just to make it absolutely clear. I want you, Harry, all of you."

Harry shook his head,

"You can't have me."

Voldemort sighed,

"And you want me, too, so ask yourself, who is the one being complicated and confusing things?"

Harry wanted to cry out in frustration. How did Voldemort know him so well? How did Voldemort manage to unnerve him so easily? He stared at the stove,

"It's not going to cook itself."

Voldemort smirked,

"Very true."

Chapter 28

Harry fried the tomatoes, garlic, and onion, toasted the bread, then served it up with a sprinkling of rocket. He wasn't a natural chef, but it at least looked edible.

He grinned when he presented it to Voldemort, and they both sat down at the table, like they'd done every day for the past few days. They ate in silence, but it wasn't uncomfortable. He was content being near Voldemort, especially after he'd been gone for hours. Voldemort finally spoke,

"Thank you for making me lunch..."

Harry blinked out of his blissful feeling and glanced at Voldemort on the other side of the table. He'd just made him lunch and hadn't even thought about using the knives as weapons or attempting to slip something in Voldemort's meal. He'd made Voldemort a meal, because he'd wanted to. He wanted to sit down opposite him, and Voldemort to compliment him.

"Harry?"

He lurched forward, shaking his head,

"Sorry, my head..."

"Have you taken your potions yet?"

Harry frowned. It had been more than twelve hours since he'd had the last one, so he couldn't even blame his complacency with Voldemort on the potions in his system. Voldemort reached across the table, pressing his hand to Harry's forehead,

"Are you feeling well?"

"Yeah, I'm fine... Do you mind if I go back to the room?"

"You do not have to ask."

Harry got up and hurried out of the kitchen. He'd memorized the corridors now and in no time, he found himself on the bed again, staring up at the ceiling. He only had to think about all the awful things Voldemort had done to remind him of who he actually was, but he couldn't do it. The Voldemort he knew was different from the monster that had done all those things.

Harry growled out in frustration,

"No, he's not... It's all a game to him, and I'm losing."

He struggled to sort through his mash of feelings. How could he like someone he was fundamentally supposed to hate?

Harry didn't know how much time had passed, but Voldemort came into the room. For a few moments, he felt him stand in the doorway. Then finally he walked up to the bed and towered over him. He was handsome... His eyes...his lips... his sharp features...his hair...Everything about him was so refined and immaculate... Well everything except for the bump on his lip. Harry closed his eyes so that he wouldn't have to look at him; it was hard enough working out his emotions without adding lust to the mix.

He felt him vanish, and Harry let out a long sigh, reopening his eyes. He regretted it when Voldemort reappeared almost instantly and got into the bed. He shuffled up, then rolled on his back next to Harry.

"There is something I wanted to show you."

He held something up, blocking Harry's view of the ceiling, and his eyes readjusted on a photograph.

A tattered black and white muggle photograph of a dark haired boy, and a magpie perched on his hand. A boy with big eyes and a smile that showed off his teeth. Harry's lust vanished, but his curiosity doubled.

"You and the magpie."

"Yes."

He passed the picture to Harry, and he held it above them carefully, afraid that he might damage it,

"There really was a magpie?"

"What did you think I was on about?"

"I don't know, I thought you were just telling me a story to get in my head... trying to torment me."

"Not everything is about you."

Harry's lips twitched into a lopsided smile, and he snorted,

"You look happy?"

He said, with his attention fixed on Voldemort's mouth. His smile dazzled, lifting his cheeks, framing his eyes.

Voldemort whispered,

"I am happy."

"I mean the haircut is ... tragic."

Voldemort laughed,

"It was fashionable, the whole choppy, uneven look."

"Did you do it yourself?"

"No, no, I did not,"

Voldemort said, poking Harry with his elbow,

"And you have no right to comment on my hair cut. Your hair is a mess at the moment."

"Cut them short then."

Voldemort shook his head as he entwined a stray curl around his finger,

"I rather like it this way."

Harry moved his attention to the magpie. Not the battered one he'd pictured in his head, with missing feathers and sore patches. It was huge, and the white feathers of its chest contrasted with the oil-slick black ones of its tail.

"Wait, who took the picture? You said no one knew about it."

"There was a girl that worked at the orphanage...Martha... She noticed I'd been acting strangely, That I'd been disappearing to the shed at every opportunity. She probably feared I was up to something terrible, given my reputation. One day when she opened the door, and I explained, she was so relieved, then impressed."

Voldemort sighed,

"I don't know why, but her being impressed about the magpie made me feel good... I explained about how I splinted his wing with sticks, and caught it worms, and snails. I told her I washed it, stroked it, and it had become affectionate. She tried to touch it, but it squawked, scared of her, that made me feel even better. It was loyal to me. It was our bond, still wild to others, but tame to me."

"I knew it. I knew you weren't completely heartless like you said..."

"I wouldn't jump to conclusions. You know how it ends. The magpie won me over, that's all. At first, I'd wanted to heal it, so we'd continue playing our game with the eggs, but then I manipulated it, made it get attached to me. I wasn't expecting it to go both ways. I wasn't expecting to want to keep it, to enjoy it sitting on my shoulder, or it grooming my hair, or feeding it, but I did."

"Then what happened?"

"One day, I showed Martha how it could fly again, and she said it was ready to be released. I should let it go; it was the right thing to do. For a ten-year-old boy, who knew he was different, not quite right, not like everyone else, all I wanted to do was to fit in. That overwhelming desire to appear normal, to do something normal, for the right reason, but I didn't want to let it go. I didn't want to say goodbye. It was like losing a piece of me."

Harry whispered,

"I know the feeling...2

"I didn't sleep for days, caught between what I wanted to do, and what I knew was the right thing. Just because I'm different, doesn't mean I wanted to be. I wanted to feel the same way about death, love, cruelty, affection as everyone else, but I was twisted, something inside me was twisted. I wanted to keep the magpie, but I wanted to be normal as well."

"What did you do?"

"I killed it."

"Do you regret killing it?"

"What's the point in regret? I did it."

"But you cared about it."

"Still killed it though."

Voldemort sighed, taking the picture from his hand and vanishing it,

"So, there it is, there's the magpie. It was only fair I showed you this after I'd told you the story."

He spoke softly,

"Thank you."

Chapter 29

After vanishing the photograph Voldemort rolled to face Harry. It took Harry more of an effort, but he turned on his side, facing Voldemort. There was no wolfish smile, or amusement in Voldemort's eyes, only sadness. Harry focused on his swollen lip, the ugliness he'd put there. He reached tentatively, cupping Voldemort's cheek, then brushed his thumb against the puffy flesh.

Voldemort licked at the cut, catching the pad of Harry's thumb.

"I shouldn't have hit you. I'm sorry."

Voldemort smirked,

"Have you forgotten who I am, what I've done?"

"No, sometimes I wish I could, then maybe I wouldn't feel so ... guilty."

"Guilty? Why do you feel guilty?"

He didn't know. He was lying next to his captor, in a room that was decorated with the memories of his failure, and Voldemort's triumph, the most horrific kind of triumph, but when he looked at him, he saw Voldemort as an illusion, the handsome man with a monster mind, but beyond that, there was someone else, someone Harry connected with, his confidant, his secret keeper, an end to his loneliness.

"Because I like you, and I feel guilty for liking you, not hating you, and I feel guilty for lashing out at you when you were only trying to calm me down. I feel guilty lying next to you now, knowing what you've done. So yeah, the by-product of everything spinning in my head, is guilt."

The words rushed from his mouth, and only doubled his guilt, tripled it, made it so unbearable he verged on a breakdown. Voldemort seemed to notice his inner conflict and pressed his hand to his, still against his cheek,

"It's okay, what you're feeling is normal."

"Normal?"

"Well, normal for this highly unusual situation."

"Feeling guilty all the time is exhausting."

"Then stop."

"Like it's that easy."

Voldemort lifted his shoulder in a shrug,

"I would not know; I don't feel guilt. But I have heard of the phrase guilty pleasure. I think I might be yours."

Harry's throat tightened,

"Maybe you are."

"Why not indulge in it completely?"

"I'll feel worse afterwards."

"You don't know until you try."

They gazed at each other; Harry felt the puff of Voldemort's breath against his thumb and saw the pupil in the center of his soft brown eyes expand. When Voldemort leaned forward to press a kiss to Harry's lips, he didn't dodge it. He shut his eyes and accepted it, but didn't kiss back. Voldemort nudged Harry's cheek with his nose, then brushed his lips against Harry's as he spoke,

"Kiss me."

He slipped his hand down from Voldemort's cheek, to his firm chest,

"I can't cross that line."

"There's only a line if you've drawn one. I certainly haven't."

"There is a line: you're a murderer and I'm the boy who lived."

"Not here, we're not. We are just two people that want to know each other completely."

Harry closed his eyes, rubbing his nose to Voldemort's. He couldn't help it, nor could he help the frantic beat of his heart, of his blood flowing south. Having Voldemort so close felt intoxicating, his scent, his heat, his lips so close.

"It's not right,"

Harry whispered, but it didn't stop him from pressing his mouth to Voldemort's, a quick touch just to see what it was like. Voldemort's lips were soft, warm, and he returned the kiss. He could smell his wonderful distinct scent that made his gut squirm in the most addictive kind of way,

"Imagine we met in a club, you know nothing about me, and I know nothing about you."

"But that's not how it is."

Voldemort gripped his hip, and the touch burned, making him shiver and rock his body in Voldemort's direction.

"I said imagine. Now I've taken you back to mine, and we both know what we want, we both know where we're heading."

"I can't..."

Harry said, pushing his hand against Voldemort's chest. Voldemort glanced down at his hand and then lifted it. He curled each of Harry's fingers, except his ring finger, then sucked it into his mouth, all the way. Harry gasped at the suddenness, and the wet heat around his finger.

Voldemort didn't break eye-contact, and Harry felt his tongue, the slight suction and it went straight to his groin. He shivered, staring deep into Voldemort's dark eyes.

Voldemort pulled Harry's finger back out. He was panting, too turned on and frustrated to care about anything but having the wet heat of Voldemort's mouth around his finger again. Voldemort picked up on his desire because the next thing he knew Voldemort was sucking his finger back into his mouth

The hair on the back of Harry's neck stood up, and another shivery wave travelled through him. Even though he knew it shouldn't... it felt good and fuelled his arousal.

Voldemort moved his lips higher before digging his teeth in. Harry's heavy breathing got worse, and embarrassed heat surged into his cheeks. He was so horny he was hyperventilating, so desperate he was prepared to overlook all the bad, for a quick moment of something good.

When Voldemort removed Harry's finger from his lips, Harry focused on the teeth indents, right where an engagement ring would have been and he couldn't help but feel as if Voldemort had branded him, marked him, and although the marks would fade, he knew he wouldn't forget. He'd been freed from a lie but was trapped in the truth. He wanted Voldemort and he wanted him badly.

Chapter 30

Voldemort pushed his trousers down, freeing his neglected cock. The first touch was almost too much, and Harry trembled, groaning softly. Voldemort swiped his thumb against the head of his cock, applying light pressure at the slit until moisture escaped, pre-cum that he circled back into the head, making him writhe and whine. It kept coming, making him wetter, more receptive to Voldemort's circling thumb. He wasn't going to last, was amazed he'd managed to keep it together. Voldemort leaned closer to his ear and whispered,

"We both know the real us... There is no line between us."

Harry nodded, giving in. He wanted desperately to touch, and to be touched, and blocked out the niggling voice at the back of his head. He ran his hand down Voldemort's body, finding the top of his pants. It was easy to pull them down, and when he realized Voldemort wasn't wearing any underwear too, he bit his lip to stop a broken moan.

Harry took hold, and as soon as the hot weight was in his hand he swallowed and shivered at how good it felt. Voldemort's cock was silky smooth. The head was wet and wide, and his lashes fluttered when he thought of it entering him, breaching him, pressing its heavy weight on his body until it was accepted inside.

One light tug and a shudder ran up Voldemort's body, his chest hitching under Harry's testing touch, and Harry's stomach fizzled. Voldemort was panting into his open mouth. They were both staring at each other, gasping for breath, hands on each other's cocks. Harry tugged again and watched another wave of sensation travel through Voldemort. His eyes momentarily closed, then flashed open, dark and devouring.

Harry shifted closer, pushing his mouth to Voldemort's waiting one. It was a kiss of sweat and blood, and Harry couldn't get enough. Harry kissed until the tastes all blended, and it was their addictive cocktail of desire, wrongness, and relief.

Their tongues curled, slowed, until the pace was leisurely, fleeting licks and swipes across slackened lips. Harry gave as much as he got back, and they pressed their foreheads together. As soon as they were no longer distracted by their mouths, they remembered their hands.

Voldemort started fisting him, fast and unforgiving. Harry increased the speed of his touches on Voldemort, chasing him as if it were a game of who'd come first. He let his guilty thoughts dissolve away, and all he could feel was Voldemort's stiff cock, slick under his touch, his own cock tingling so intensely, so close to the edge of oblivion. It was messy, uncoordinated, full of wet gasps and desperate pants, but it was the hottest hand-job he'd ever given, hottest one he'd ever received.

Harry shoved his face forward, not to kiss, but to press himself into Voldemort's throat. He breathed deep, getting drunk on his scent as he spilled into Voldemort's hand. His moan muffled against Voldemort's muscles, but Harry heard the shudder of his voice, wrecked and devastated by the sudden release.

He could've stopped stroking Voldemort... he'd finished, Voldemort's hard-on was his problem... but Harry couldn't stop. He wanted to finish Voldemort off, wanted to feel his cum splatter against his chest and soak his hand. Harry kept his face against Voldemort's throat, closed his eyes, listening to the panting by his ear, the wet slide of his hand. It spurred him on, and when Voldemort tensed suddenly, Harry pulled back to see the orgasm wash over his handsome face.

Voldemort closed his eyes, opened his mouth wider in a silent gasp, then shivered right down to his toes. His cock spurted hot cum against Harry's shirt, and he looked down at it glistening on him, not repulsed, but pleased he'd done it.

Blissed out, satisfied, Voldemort looked even better, and when he smiled, his cheeks lifted, and the skin around his eyes crinkled. Harry stared at him, mesmerized, then smiled back, a real smile, small, but real, not a lie.

Voldemort laughed, prodding his swollen lip. Harry's shock, or amusement, or whatever it was that made him grin ended. He stared up at the ceiling, preparing himself for the tidal wave of shame, guilt, and self-loathing, but it didn't come.

The ceiling was blocked by Voldemort rolling on top of him,

"I've got you now."

He looked happy, triumphant, like he'd won a game, completed a puzzle. And Harry realized that he had finally lost to Voldemort.

Chapter 31

Harry hadn't just crossed a line; he'd taken a huge two-footed leap over it. He told himself it was only lust, arousal, finishing in relief, that's all it was, but as he gazed at the bite mark around his finger, his stomach rumbled with unease. The wound was scabbed over. It looked better than the day before, and the day before that. Four days had passed since he gave into temptation, and although Voldemort didn't press him for more, or taunt, Harry felt it bubbling beneath the surface.

He wanted more.

Harry sighed and moved his attention back to the crossword. He'd reread the clues several times, but nothing was going in. The last few days were on repeat in Harry's head.

They'd washed, they'd cooked, cleaned up; Voldemort had disappeared several times and Harry had spent that time watching the birds flying free through the binoculars. When Voldemort returned, they'd come together at night, no longer separately, but pressed together. Voldemort rubbed Harry's shoulders, played with his hair, comforted him, and frustrated him, too. Harry had no idea how to instigate more, and every time temptation almost got the better of him, he scowled at himself, and willed his desires to settle down.

The door to the kitchen opened, and Voldemort walked in... He was dressed in his black robes... The ones he usually wore when he was meeting his death eaters. Voldemort walked closer to him and leaned down to see the crossword.

"You've not done any?"

"It's hard."

"Well you're certainly not 6 letters, a person with special knowledge."

Harry scrunched his face, thought really hard, then wagged the pen at Voldemort,

"Expert."

"Maybe you are slightly improving ... slightly."

Harry sighed, leaning back in his chair,

"I've been distracted."

Voldemort flashed his confident smile and then dropped the latest copy of the Daily Prophet on top of the one Harry had been staring at. He quickly flicked through the pages to get to the new crossword, ignoring the ordinary front-page headline.

"We should have a pasta dish for lunch..."

"Sounds good."

"And this for when you're ready."

Harry looked up and saw the bottle in Voldemort's hand. His confusion must have been apparent on his face because Voldemort spoke,

"It's lube."

He didn't comment, but he imagined his face said a thousand words. He felt hot, and sweaty, and that was the mere suggestion of sex. Then he looked down at the newspaper...trying to distract himself....

Voldemort added softly,

"Only if you want to... We've not got long left together..."

Panic flared inside his chest at being separated from Voldemort. Harry scrunched his face and began massaging his temples. Voldemort came up behind him and took over.

"I did not mean to stress you out."

Harry sighed, accepting his touch,

"Yes, you did... You wanted to stress me out."

"Okay, maybe a little. Time's ticking away ... counting down."

"I'm doing my best not to think about it."

Voldemort moved his attention from Harry's temples, to his tight shoulders,

"We could have ice cream for dessert."

"Ice cream?"

"Yes...Don't you want any?"

"Let's not be too hasty."

Voldemort chuckled,

"Ice cream, brownies, chocolate sauce, cream, and a wafer."

"You're kidding right?"

"No... It's actually one of my favorite desserts."

"Your preferences are nothing akin to a Dark Lord's."

"Maybe I enjoy indulging myself in your presence..."

Harry rested his head on the table,

"You're spoiling me."

Voldemort agreed,

"I'm spoiling you, but only if you eat all your vegetables."

"You're such a patronizing bastard."

"Cursing is not allowed in my domain."

"What are you going to do, chain me up in the dungeons?"

"Don't tempt me."

Sometimes Harry thought things would've been simpler, if Voldemort had just chained him up in some dungeon. He wouldn't have started to like him and crave his company.

Voldemort let Harry's shoulders go. He moved to the sink, filled up a glass, then downed the lot in one. He conjured a set of letters and Harry recognized them as his,

"Your owl delivered them during the night when you were sleeping."

Harry clunked his wrist against the arms of the chair. Voldemort took notice and hurried to uncuff him.

"Sorry, sometimes I forget."

"Yeah, so do I."

When he was free, he leaned back in his seat and had just closed his eyes when Voldemort inquired,

"Does it bother you that I correspond with your friends whilst masquerading as you?"

Harry shook his head silently and after a while spoke,

"No...I'm terrible at lying."

Voldemort chuckled,

"You managed to lie till the end of your last term and kept my return a secret... You are a very capable liar."

He didn't reply to that and merely continued his silent brooding as Voldemort began to pen down the responses. It felt like a long time until he felt Voldemort gently cup his face and lift his chin,

"Do not get upset over what I just said..."

Harry opened his eyes and couldn't help but growl,

"It's the truth... Why would I be upset?"

He tried to turn his head, but Voldemort gripped onto him with both hands.

"Harry... You are very special to me and I do not particularly enjoy seeing you upset."

"I don't even know why I care... And for the record, I'm not special... If I were special, you'd let me say your real name, but you don't..."

Voldemort clamped a hand over his mouth, and he went silent immediately. For a moment, they just held each other's gaze and then Voldemort removed his hand from his mouth and cupped his cheek before speaking softly,

"Say it."

Harry gulped nervously as he looked down in his lap. He wasn't sure if it was a trap or not. Voldemort couldn't be serious... He'd told him in the chamber of secrets that he'd despised that name...

Voldemort caressed a spot underneath his ear and leaned closer to him until he could feel his breath ghosting over his lips,

"Say my name, Harry."

Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

I recently started being active on my Tumblr account so if you have the time then do check that out. The links here:
<https://www.tumblr.com/blog/quillbreaker>

"Say it."

Harry gulped nervously as he looked down in his lap. He wasn't sure if it was a trap or not. Voldemort couldn't be serious...He'd told him in the chamber of secrets that he'd despised that name...

Voldemort caressed a spot underneath his ear and leaned closer to him until he could feel his breath ghosting over his lips,

"Say my name, Harry."

Harry squeezed his eyes shut as he whispered,

"T...Tom..."

Voldemort's hand vanished from his cheek and Harry opened his eyes hesitantly. Voldemort had moved away from him and he was standing in the doorway...It almost looked like he was about to leave. Harry spoke,

"I'm sorry...I shouldn't have..."

Voldemort's face was expressionless...his lips were pursed in a flat line and his eyes were just blank. He was about to get up to his feet when Voldemort spoke,

"Just stay there... I'll be outside."

Harry could only watch as Voldemort walked away. He banged his forehead against the table at his own stupidity and then cursed loudly at the wave of pain that consumed his head. He closed his eyes and waited for it to pass before lifting his head off the table and wondering about Voldemort's reaction. In all this time here, he'd never seen him that withdrawn before. It bothered him and worried him. And once again he cursed himself. He shouldn't have said his name.

His head throbbed and he knew that if he thought anymore, his headache would return so he tried to refocus on the crossword that was open in front of him. He read the clue out loud,

"Depraved desire."

Lust.

The bottle of lube was still on the table, an open invitation to something completely forbidden. Harry rolled his fingers into his temples, trying not to think of sex or anything else but failing miserably. He turned his attention to the Sudoku puzzle, trying to remember what numbers were, but his blood flowing south, turned his mind to mush.

He didn't have long left with Voldemort. Was it so bad to indulge, to see what it would be like to give himself over completely?

Harry got up out of his seat and started making his way out of the kitchen and through the corridors towards the exit. It took him a while to locate Voldemort but by then his head was really starting to spin, and his breath was ragged from overexertion, but he needed that bit of pain. He needed some reason to stop even if his desire overrode it. Voldemort seemed to sense his slow approach, turning around. His brow tightened, and he shook his head.

"What are you doing? You're not well, Harry."

Everything turned dark for a moment but when his vision returned Voldemort was rushing towards him. He got to him just as he was about to fall and caught him by the hips, steadying him.

"What's wrong?"

Harry spoke,

"You shouldn't have asked me to do it if it hurt you that badly."

Voldemort's gaze softened as he held him still,

"No... You did not hurt me...I was just taken off guard by how wonderful my name sounded coming from your lips..."

Voldemort went silent for a moment and Harry waited for him to continue,

"I had always hated that name because it was so ordinary... I despised that... But it didn't seem ordinary when you said it. It felt special..."

Harry couldn't help but smile at that,

"So, I can say it then."

Voldemort nodded,

"You can."

That was enough to make him grab Voldemort's head and bring him down for a kiss. Not a gentle kiss, but one that was sure to aggravate Voldemort's almost healed lip. He grunted, and

Harry sucked harder until he pulled away. Voldemort stared wide-eyed at Harry; shock clear to see on his handsome face. It was only the second time Harry had shocked him, and it felt good,

"Harry?"

He breathed out,

"I want you. No lines."

Voldemort widened his eyes and stared so deeply into Harry's he swore he saw straight to the center of his soul. Not the boy who lived and Lord Voldemort, but Harry and Tom, and Harry wanted Tom so badly it hurt, especially when he knew it was days until he'd have to return to Hogwarts and to him it seemed like hell now... He was going to hell, but he'd enjoy himself first. Voldemort inquired softly,

"You want me?"

"Yes."

"Then you've got me."

Harry yanked him down by his shoulders, lifting himself on his tiptoes in an act of desperation to kiss Tom again. As soon as Tom started to lead the kiss, Harry pulled his mouth away, starting on his body. He unbuttoned his silk shirt with shaky fingers and stared at the smooth, pale skin.

He could only reach Tom's pecs. He licked over the tight stretch of muscles, following the trails in his skin, the dips of his collarbone. Harry sank his teeth in Tom's flesh, feeling the shiver and the involuntary jerking motion.

He continued to bite, not hard enough to break the skin, but enough to leave red dents. He could smell and taste Tom's distinct scent and couldn't get enough of it on Tom's skin. Tom's fingers found their way to his hair and he shivered at the blissful sensation, then fed his fingers through Tom's in return, and tugged hard.

Tom growled into his ear with lust and arousal dripping from every syllable,

"We cannot do this here."

Chapter 33

Tom was walking him backwards in the direction of the castle. Harry's cock throbbed each step they took, and his heart rate soared. They all but stumbled through the corridors and Tom managed to keep a hold of him until they reached the kitchen again and Tom was hauling him over to the table. He turned him around, then pressed between his shoulders until his chest was flat against the tabletop.

He yanked Harry's jeans and briefs down, exposing his ass. Harry tried to rear off the table, but Tom pinned him.

Harry nodded, knowing Tom wanted him to stay right where he was, bent over, no shame, no embarrassment, only unbelievably needy. He moved his head slightly so he could see Tom, his focused expression as he stared at him while stripping off his clothing. He got the lube from the side, lathered his cock, then spread Harry's cheeks.

"How do you want it?"

Tom's cheeks were red, his brown eyes still filled with unmistakable lust, and he stared at Harry with unmasked want. Harry managed to croak out,

"Rough... I want it rough."

It was sex after all, not love. He couldn't feel guilty about sex, at least not in comparison.

Tom's lashes fluttered, and a soft noise left his lips. Harry wasn't sure if it was a moan, or a curse, but Tom seemed pleased Harry desired it rough.

He pushed two wet fingers past Harry's rim with no apology. Harry cried out at the burn, curling his hands into fists on the table. Tom inquired,

"You sure?"

Harry nodded. He really was. He wanted the pain, the roughness, and Tom didn't disappoint. He took his fingers out, added more lube to them, then sank them inside again, stretching and loosening. Then he lined himself up, pressed his cockhead on Harry's opening until his rim stretched enough, then popped inside, and Harry let out a long moan.

Not only did his stretching skin burn, but Tom punched the breath out of his body with his thrusts. Harry clawed at the table, clinging on. The pain gave way to a dominating pleasure. Harry's body yielded, accepted the harsh treatment, willed it, until his prostate throbbed and his hard-on left smears on the table. The pain faded into insignificance, until Harry was a mewling mess, sobbing quietly, trying his best not to come.

Tom flattened Harry to the table with his chest. The scent of him, the breath on the back of Harry's neck, and the powerful thump of his heart were nothing short of intoxicating. The wet pants, the slapping flesh, and his nails scoring the table, Harry lost himself to the noises,

trying his best to arch his back, lift himself, but he knew his efforts were feeble. Still, him trying, excited Tom, and he panted louder, holding Harry's hips harder, pressing down with his chest firmer, until Harry was completely incapable of moving. He was on the edge of letting go. Tom whispered into his ear,

"Wait."

Harry frowned. He couldn't have been talking to him, only himself. Tom stopped, eased his cock out, but still stayed plastered to his back. Harry panted,

"What's wrong?"

"What makes you think something's wrong?"

"You stopped."

"Well, maybe something is wrong..."

Tom straightened, then maneuvered Harry on to his back. His head spun at the sudden movement and his vision blurred but it came back to focus when he looked at Tom. His eyes were dark with arousal, and his raven black messy hair and sweaty brow made him look feral. He spread Harry's legs, realigned himself, then sank inside. He closed his eyes and parted his lips as he pressed all the way in.

Harry preferred it the other way, not face to face, not romantic. He squirmed, doing his best to roll onto his front, but Tom shushed him, then reached for his throat. He pinned Harry to the table, pressure building, grip tightening, holding Harry's neck to keep him in place.

"Now this ... *this* is right..."

Harry should've been scared, feared what Tom was doing, but he shivered at the possessive hold, and his stomach fluttered. Tom restricted Harry's airflow, until black edged around his vision, closing in until he could only see Tom's face, then nothing at all.

He didn't know whether he'd closed his eyes, or whether they'd just given up seeing. Heat built in his skin, in his cheeks, behind his eyes, all through his body. He heard the wheeze of his body, the breathless gasp rushing in his ears, hearing it internally instead of externally.

There was a touch to his mouth, and he opened up instinctively to let Tom's tongue inside. He tasted even sweeter when he was clinging on to consciousness.

A heat so all-consuming and suffocating took over everything until his awareness started to fade. He couldn't recall his own name, let alone the man's pinning him down, and caressing his lips with poison. He needed air, but he wanted his kiss more.

His prostate tingled, his cock felt tight, overly tight, and the knife's edge he was on seemed to last forever, a build-up of euphoria he'd not experienced before. He started shaking, an involuntary tremble, and his mind spun, faster and faster, until he was dizzy with the pleasure of it all.

Only one thought surfaced from his cotton-stuffed mind: he was about to orgasm, couldn't warn or moan, could only do, and when the moment came, he slipped away, no longer able to think, only feel as his orgasm ripped through him.

Chapter 34

He was floating high, so high he could only see the black of space when he stared straight ahead. Every sensitive tingle rushed to his cock, and he gasped at the force of his orgasm. The rush of pleasure was so intense it stopped his heartbeat, the muscle squeezing extra hard the beat after to compensate.

He was vaguely aware of the splattering on his skin, the pleased grumbles of the man doing this to him, those intense brown eyes... then air, so cold and welcome down his throat, he arched up, hit by another wave of intense pleasure as his cock twitched out more release.

He panted, and his panting was joined by someone else's. A red-faced Tom, with a sweaty brow and damp hair. He was easing himself in and out of Harry's tense body, milking the last drops of his orgasm. Harry hadn't even known he'd come, but he could feel the trickle of it escaping each time Tom rocked all the way in then out again.

Pleasure subsided, and pain came back. The pain in his rim, his throat, but the worst of all was the headache. He felt hungover and began rubbing his temples, only for Tom to pull out completely and take over massaging his head. Tom was panting like he'd been the one denied air.

Harry panted breathlessly,

"That... that... I've got no words."

Tom shushed him,

"I got a bit carried away..."

Harry wondered out loud,

"Why did it feel so good?"

Tom inquired,

"What?"

Harry whispered,

"I don't understand why it felt so good... You were choking me, but it felt too good."

Tom stared, eyes bugging from his head. The third time Harry had shocked him, he thought, before laughing. Tom spoke,

"Harry... I could've killed you."

Despite his headache, and the seriousness of Tom's words, he kept on laughing. Tom stared down at him like he'd lost his mind, and he was probably right.

"But you didn't... You will never kill me...I know that now..."

Tom leaned down and stopped his crazed laugh by kissing him.

"No... Why would I kill you once when I can kill you like that every day?"

Before Harry could ask what he meant, Tom pressed their lips together. Harry let him control the kiss, allowed Tom to suck on his bottom lip and let it go, to lick against the seams of his mouth, making them tingly and sensitive. It was a different kind of pleasure, a gentle one, cautious, but somehow even more invasive. Harry didn't accept kisses like the one Tom was giving him. He added more heat, more spice until it inevitably turned to sex, but he didn't push back, or demand Tom changed the tempo. He closed his eyes and enjoyed being caressed.

His back ached being bent over the table, his leg throbbed at the weird position, but it didn't matter. Harry had no idea kisses could feel good both physically and mentally, until Tom had him paralyzed by one.

Tom kissed along Harry's jaw, then up to his ear before he whispered,

"That was insane..."

"A good kind of insane, I hope?"

"The best."

Tom finished his worshiping kiss along Harry's neck, soothing the tightness he'd put there until Harry relaxed completely, letting out a blissed sigh. His hands continued to rub Harry's scalp, easing the headache, while his gentle kisses brought feeling back to his throat. Harry finally murmured,

"What are we doing?"

Tom breathed into his neck,

"I have no idea."

He leaned back, then looked down at Harry. He was close enough for Harry to reach, and he stroked his hand through Tom's dark hair, then brushed his thumb against his lip,

"Do you ever..."

Harry trailed off, shaking his head. Tom inquired, flexing his eyebrows,

"Do I ever what?"

"Do—do you ever think about keeping me?"

Harry held his breath, shocked that he'd said the words, and nervous over Tom's reaction. After a moment of silence Tom replied,

"Yes."

A rush of happy endorphins went to Harry's head, dissolving his headache completely. His pulse quickened, and the breathlessness made him unable to speak.

"But I cannot."

"Why not?"

"I have manipulated you... all the things you're feeling aren't real. It's a coping mechanism, a psychological reaction to stress—"

"So?"

Tom chuckled,

"You might like me now, but you won't soon."

Harry scrunched his face up. He knew that he had only a couple of days before he received his letter from Hogwarts and then he'd have to leave but he didn't want to go,

"I don't want to go."

Tom closed his eyes,

"You will have to."

"But..."

"No buts. We have a few days left, and then it's over. I will be the monster again and you will be the boy who lived."

Harry closed his eyes in a long, disappointed blink. Tom leaned down, pecking Harry's lips.

"But for now, we're Harry and Voldemort... No lines between us."

Harry whispered,

"No lines..."

"Exactly, now... I want to carry on kissing you. Is that okay with you?"

"More than okay."

Tom smiled,

"Let's move this somewhere a little more comfortable then."

Tom half carried him to the bedroom and Harry didn't protest when he laid him down and pressed into the mattress. He didn't swerve Tom's kiss or blurt out some excuse. He kissed

back with the same need that he was being kissed with. A warm fluttery feeling grew in his gut, something that shouldn't have been there.

"Take me again..."

He said mid-kiss, half muffled by Tom's mouth.

"Right now?"

"Yes."

Harry rolled onto his front. His head still ached, and his hole still felt raw, but he needed it. He needed euphoria to white-out his mind.

Sex was simple; emotions were not. He finally pleaded,

"I need it right now..."

Chapter 35

A lustful fever took over them. Once they'd started having sex, Harry found it difficult to stop. He clung onto Tom when an orgasm stole him, panting into his neck, taking the scent of him deep inside, savouring it when he knew one way or another, he was going to lose it. He was distracting himself, not only from the impending loss, but from the odd emotion in his chest. Tom had won the game of twisting his mind, making him attached.

Harry was laying between Tom's legs as he slid his mouth over Tom's cock. It was soft on his tongue, firm in his mouth. He sucked and kissed, and Tom panted as he fisted his hair.

Each time Harry got his composure, thinking he was winning in the battle, Tom would pull on his hair, stealing his thoughts and bringing him closer to the edge. Harry panted and heaved, got his bearings, then lapped and sucked until Tom lost coordination, and his rumble groan vibrated from his throat.

It was a battle Harry never wanted to end, and he was pushed closer and closer to the tipping point. He moaned, and dribbled, and knew he was about to surrender, whining when he knew he'd lost, and Tom had conquered him.

He came hard, whimpering around the firm heat invading his mouth. He couldn't suck or lick while his mind was swamped in pleasure, Tom took over, and pressed his hips forward, he thrust his cock down his throat until his orgasm flooded his mouth.

When they finished panting, Tom rolled onto Harry until he was over him, chest to chest, beating heart, to beating heart. His breath tingled Harry's lips, and he lifted his head, encouraging what was about to happen, needing it. It started out as a filthy kiss, their tastes combining on their tongues, rough, demanding, but as it faded, Tom's swipes and sucks lingered. He took his time, and that fluttering feeling swamped him again.

For a man that couldn't love, Tom sure kissed like he knew what love was. Harry gave in to his leisurely caresses, hating them and loving them in equal measure. The kiss was a lie, and Tom had told him he'd never lied to him.

"Is your head hurting?"

The concern in Tom's voice made everything worse. It was a lie, Harry reminded himself. He didn't care if he was hurting...

"Harry?"

Harry breathed out,

"It's fine."

"Are you sure? You have not taken your potions for the past two days..."

Yes, it was hurting, but Harry needed the pain. It stopped him from breaking down completely. Harry murmured,

"I'm sure,"

Tom wrapped his perfectly toned body behind him, kissed the nape of his neck, then pressed his chin down firmly.

A constant weight that always seemed to lure Harry to sleep. He could feel Tom's strength, heat, smell him, feel his breath evening out after their intimacy. All of it felt far too nice and filled him with a sense of doom. He'd be without Tom soon, and that hurt far too much. Tom whispered near his ear,

"Relax, Harry, I've got you,"

Harry whispered back,

"But not for much longer."

Tom sighed softly before speaking,

"No, not for much longer."

"Because you need to conquer the world, more than you need to keep me."

Tom exhaled,

"Something like that. In an ideal world, I'd have both."

Harry didn't know why he woke. The dream started to fade before he could consciously recall it. He was lying on the mattress. Tom was behind him, heavy arm slung over Harry's side. Light was creeping around the edges of the curtains, and the only other light came from embers glittering in the fire.

He cautiously rolled, wincing as pain sparked to life inside his head, but making no sound. He stared at Tom, tense, waiting for him to stir and open his eyes, but he didn't.

Every line on his face stayed flat, relaxed. Harry was mesmerized by his long dark lashes, his lips that he knew from experience could kiss both soft and hard. Air whistled softly through his nose, in rhythm with the movement of his chest. As Harry looked at him, a fondness grew into something else in his chest. It was more terrifying and confusing than all his other emotions put together; even his guilt couldn't compare. It affected him physically, too. His insides felt fluttery, as if a million butterflies were flapping their wings. Although delicate and harmless individually, together they made a hurricane, in danger of shattering his bones and pushing them straight into his heart.

As he stared at Tom, he had a gutting realization: he couldn't see beyond the next few days. He couldn't picture the life he'd go back to, what would happen after he'd go back to

Hogwarts. And he realized that he didn't want to picture it. There was nothing, end of the road.

Tom admitted he was manipulative; Harry knew he was. He also knew the stress, the pain, the hopelessness had all made him reliant on the man that had saved him. It was a psychological condition, but right then, there was no psychology, no power play, or mind-games. Tom was asleep and couldn't bend or twist the situation in his favour.

Harry lusted for Tom, relied on him, liked his company, grew anxious without him, but he had to know if love was present, too. He had to try with Tom unaware, only a press of lips to see if those persistent butterflies all dropped dead on contact.

He edged forward, his heart picking up speed, his stomach flipping. The fluttering in his chest didn't die. Harry pressed his lips to Tom's, holding the position, not moving, just resting, and listening to what his body told him.

What he heard from his heart was devastating. It wasn't just sex, or reliance, or the messed-up situation. Harry had completely and utterly fallen for the monster, the one he was about to lose, the one that compromised his morality and conscience.

Chapter 36

Harry heard the distant sounds of pots and pans clanging somewhere... That was odd... Tom never made a noise when he was cooking. He did everything with so much finesse. He didn't even open his eyes though... Instead he tried feeling for Tom's warmth on the nape of his neck but there was nothing. That meant that Tom was already up... He was probably making breakfast... But then why was he making so much noise? The kitchens were at a great distance from their bedroom. The sound shouldn't reach him.

He turned over and buried his face in the pillow as the noise grew more raucous and it felt like it was painfully echoing inside his head, growing ever louder with every passing second. A groan escaped his lips as he raised his hands and covered his ears willing the noise to quieten... willing the excruciating pain inside his head to lessen.

In the meantime, he remembered what he'd realized last night... He remembered the utter devastation, that realization had brought him. Should he tell Tom? He wanted to... He wanted to tell Tom exactly what he'd felt when he had kissed his lips last night. He wanted to tell him what he felt for him... But the fear that Tom would shoot down his feelings and chalk them down to being present due to some psychological disorder was just too much.

He couldn't stop the whimper that escaped his lips as his thoughts evaporated and pain replaced them. He needed Tom. He needed him to make it better... There was no one else that could soothe his pain like Tom could and without thought he turned his head away from the pillow and screamed out his name over and over again until his throat felt raw.

He heard the door slam open and opened his eyes, expecting to see Tom... What he saw instead forced him to shut his eyes and scream some more.

This couldn't be happening... It wasn't happening... It was a nightmare... It was just a nightmare... He was still asleep. All he had to do was wake up. He could hear his heavy breathing and the sweat from his forehead was enough to fill an entire bottle. He just kept reminding himself that it was all a nightmare. It felt as if he might die from the pain in his brain as he desperately struggled to wake up, screaming for Tom to help him at the top of his lungs but Tom wasn't there... He didn't come...

Slowly... The pain started to ebb away again and it took him every ounce of courage he possessed to force his eyes open... comforting himself that the nightmare was finally over... He would find himself back in Tom's castle... in their bedroom... and any moment now Tom would walk up into the room holding his breakfast tray and apologize for leaving him all alone like that...

The sound of his hope shattering was deafening, and the shards flew everywhere and embedded themselves into his heart and his mind causing them to bleed and ache. His eyes quickly filled up with tears as he took in his surroundings.

He was back at Privet Drive... He was back where he'd been mistreated all those years and almost been murdered, and Tom had saved him... He was back...

His gaze stopped at the man, who called himself his uncle, standing in the doorway...No, he wasn't a man...He just looked like one...He was the real monster...He'd almost killed him and now he had the audacity to stand there and stare at him with that look in his mean eyes... That look that he'd seen so many time...The look that said that he was freak...

Another scream tore through his lips and he heard the door slam shut.

How could Tom do this to him?

After everything, how could Tom simply leave him here?

Tom just couldn't do this to him... He couldn't...

He couldn't even see past the blur of tears that had veiled his vision as he struggled to stop thinking about it.

Just thinking about Tom's betrayal caused him unbearable agony and his soul ached like hell. He curled up on himself and buried his face in his chest as a sob escaped his lips. Why was it hurting so much? He should have known this would happen. Tom had told him over and over again that this was a game. Maybe he'd finally grown bored of it.

The pain took over a portion of his brain, as if dealing with it was energy expenditure enough, without the effort of new thoughts. It was the sort of pain that burned, as if some invisible flame were held against his skin. He screamed out in agony and held himself tighter...

Why was it so difficult to handle himself? Where was all this pain coming from?

He had never experienced pain or betrayal this bad before. They lept at him all at once and ensnared him in their arms in an instant. Every memory of he'd shared with Tom...Every conversation they'd had... played like a haunting melody inside his head, repeating itself for what seemed like forever. He just felt so drained as he realized that he couldn't get Tom back no matter how badly he wanted him... And he did...Despite this betrayal, he still wanted him so bad because his life depended on him. He was gone though, and it felt like he'd stolen his heart and soul... Everything he'd shared with Tom had all vanished into thin air... turned to dust underneath his feet and now he was left with the memories...they were ash that surrounded him and covered him...

How was he supposed to stay alive?

Chapter 37

He didn't know how much time had passed until he reached a state where he'd run out of tears and was now simply lying on his side and staring blankly at the wall. He'd stopped thinking a while ago because his mind felt like it had been beaten black and blue and throbbed with pain occasionally.

A knock on the door followed by his Aunt's annoying voice forced him to blink out of his miserable state,

"Your friends are waiting for you downstairs. They said that they're here to pick you up."

Harry bit back a scream before struggling to even out his voice and speaking,

"Tell them, I'll be down in a few minutes."

He heard his Aunt's footsteps retreat before burying his face in the pillow and screaming at the top of his lungs.

Tom must have known. He must have read the letter. That's why he'd left him here.

He gripped his hair tight and pulled on them in despair as he struggled to figure out how he was going to do all this again. How was he going to fake normalcy again? How was he going to pretend that he hadn't lived with Tom...slept with him... kissed him... fallen in love with him?

It was impossible...

But he had to do this...If he didn't...They'd know something was wrong and then they'd drill him for information, and he was so afraid that he might crack under the pressure and tell them everything...The implications of what would happen if he told the truth were accelerating inside his head. He wanted it to stop so he could breathe but they wouldn't. His breaths came in gasps and he felt like he was going to black out. His heart was hammering inside his chest like it belonged to a rabbit running for its skin. He tried to make everything slow to something his brain and body could cope with but it wasn't working. He felt so sick... If this kept up, he would surely pass out...

NO!

That was not going to happen. He wasn't going to let that happen... He was not going to allow it to come to that...

He closed his eyes and drew in a deep calming breath as he repeated inside his head,

I can do this...I can do this...I can do this...

Getting up from the bed was the hardest thing he'd ever had to do and his head spun a bit as soon as he attempted to take a step, causing him to seek the support of the wall and wait for

the spinning to subside before making his way to the bathroom.

As he looked at himself in the mirror, he almost didn't recognize himself. His hair had grown over the summer and the tips brushed his shoulders...

The memory of Tom pulling on them as he kissed him senseless played on the forefront of his mind and made his lips tingle...

He shook his head to clear away the image as he splashed water over his face and tried to practice his smile. He'd smiled with Tom effortlessly. A half sob escaped his lips as he remembered all the jokes he'd told him when he'd been sulking and Tom had wanted to make him smile.

Suddenly, he found it easier to fake the expression as Tom's jokes played inside his head.

When he was satisfied with his appearance, he stepped out in the room and looked around. A letter was placed on his nightstand and Harry felt a sliver of hope that it might be from Tom. He hurried to pick it up and realized that it was a letter from Hogwarts, probably telling him about the books and supplies he would need this year. He opened it hurriedly and found that it contained three pieces of parchment: one the usual reminder that term started on the first of September; the other telling him which books he would need for the coming year. He was surprised to see that there were only two new ones. He folded the list and pushed it into the pocket of his jeans. Finally, he looked at the third parchment and he was shocked as he read what was written on it. It was congratulating him on being selected as Prefect...

He upended the envelope as the gold and crimson badge fell on the palm of his hand. A large 'P' was superimposed on the Gryffindor lion. He had seen a badge just like this on Percy's chest on his very first day at Hogwarts.

Once upon a time he would have been ecstatic at this but right now...right now he only felt hollow. Whatever hope he'd left, died in his chest as he quickly threw all his stuff into his trunk along with the badge in a haphazard manner and walked out of the room...

He felt anxious as he descended the stairs and it only worsened when he stepped into the living room and found Mr Weasley, Ron and the twins seated on the couch opposite a very tense looking Uncle Vernon, Aunt Petunia and Dudley. The atmosphere in the room was charged with uneasiness. Harry cleared his throat and watched the way Uncle Vernon jumped slightly... He was afraid of him...Now that was a first...But considering the fact that he'd tried to murder him and almost succeeded if it hadn't been for Tom...It didn't seem that odd for him to be scared. Maybe Tom had had a word with him.

Mr Weasley, Ron and the twins rose to their feet at the sight of him. Mr Weasley greeted him brightly,

"Hello, Harry...How have you been holding up?"

Harry stepped forward and shook his hand before hitching up a smile,

"I've been well..."

Mr Weasley smiled,

"I hope you've got your trunk ready?"

Harry nodded,

"It's upstairs."

Fred said at once,

"We'll get it."

He winked at him before he and George left the room. They knew where his bedroom was, having once rescued him from it in the dead of night plus they'd picked him up last year as well.

Mr Weasley, swung his arms slightly, while he tried to find words to break the very nasty silence in the room,

"I see you've fixed the fireplace..."

Uncle Vernon's face purpled, and Aunt Petunia started chewing her tongue. However, they seemed too scared to actually say anything.

Harry knew the Dursleys were remembering the last time The Weasley's had come to pick him up and demolished their perfect living room. He wished they'd done that again this year. The Dursleys deserved to pay for what they'd done to him. He swore he'd make them pay.

Ron walked up to him and patted him on the shoulder before inquiring,

"Your eyes don't look too good, Mate..."

Harry shook his head,

"I haven't been sleeping well."

Ron didn't seem satisfied, but he nodded nonetheless and then asked,

"Did you get the booklist?"

It was so difficult to keep his smile up as he spoke,

"Yeah...I got it..."

He didn't want to tell Ron about being made Prefect. At least not yet...

Fred and George came back into the room, carrying Harry's school trunk. Mr. Weasley finally spoke,

"Well, we should get going then."

He pushed up the sleeves of his robes and took out his wand. Harry saw the Dursleys draw back against the wall as one. Mr Weasley pointed his wand at the fireplace and spoke,

"Incendio!"

Flames rose at once in the fireplace, crackling merrily as though they had been burning for hours. Mr Weasley took a small drawstring bag from his pocket, untied it, took a pinch of the powder inside and threw it onto the flames, which turned emerald green and roared higher than ever. The twins were the first to go with his trunk followed by Ron...Mr Weasley was about to send him next when he spoke,

"You should go ahead...I have to say goodbye to my relatives."

Mr. Weasley patted him on the shoulder gently before stepping into the flames and speaking,

"The burrow."

When he was gone, Harry turned around to face the Dursleys and inquired,

"What did he say to you when he left me here?"

His uncle refused to meet his gaze as he spoke,

"Nothing... He just left you in your room and vanished."

Harry let out a disappointed sigh. That seemed exactly like what Tom would do. He fought back another wave of tears before speaking,

"Don't think that I've forgotten what you did to me...None of you are forgiven and I intend to make you pay for everything that happened."

And with that he turned around and walked into the flames. Throwing a fist full of floo powder, he spoke,

"The burrow!"

Chapter 38

Mrs. Weasley greeted him with all her usual warmth but Harry wondered if she'd still hug him if she knew who he'd been in bed with. He hadn't failed to notice the inquisitiveness in her eyes as she'd inquired about how he'd been. Harry knew what she wanted to know, and he spoke as politely as possible,

"I've put that incident in the past, Mrs. Weasley."

Mrs. Weasley's eyes filled with tears and he once again, found himself being hugged. He would have found it comforting once but now...now it was nothing when he compared it how good and safe he'd felt in Tom's arm.

He silently uttered a prayer of thanks when something akin to a small explosion went off somewhere upstairs and Mrs. Weasley pulled away from him before shouting,

"If I find you boys experimenting again, I will..."

Ron stepped forward and spoke loud enough so that Mrs. Weasley could hear him,

"I'm taking Harry up to my room."

Harry knew where Ron's room was, but he followed him nonetheless because he didn't want to be around Mrs. Weasley. He didn't want to be around Ron either, but he was the better option. Ron pushed open the door to his room and Harry walked in. Nothing had changed there. The posters of the Chudley Cannons still covered the walls. Harry took one of the beds and sat down on it as Ron went over to free Pigwidgeon from his cage. Once he'd flown out of the window. Ron sat down on the edge of the bed opposite him and spoke,

"Look, Mate...I know you're tired of people asking you this, but I need to ask you...Are you really okay?"

Harry folded his hands in his lap and stared down at them as he thought about what to say. He knew Ron wouldn't believe him if he told him he was okay...But he couldn't tell him the truth either so lying to him was the only option he'd had left so he spoke,

"I told you I haven't been sleeping well...It's just that I keep having nightmares about Cedric."

Ron leaned closer to him as his freckled face was shrouded by pity,

"It must be terrible for you... But I'm sure you'll be okay when we get back to Hogwarts."

Harry felt so bitter inside at being subjected to such pity. He didn't need it. And he was certain that things would only get worse once he was at Hogwarts. Nothing was ever going to be the same again. Tom had stolen him away from himself and now he didn't know who he was anymore...It felt like he was a stranger in his own skin and all these people that cared

about him...they didn't really care about him...they cared about the person whose skin he was inhabiting and he couldn't be that person ever again...He could never be that person again because he could barely remember him...All he could remember was Tom and all the things he'd done with him...That's all he could remember.

Ron's voice forced him out of his thoughts,

"Hey, Sirius said he was going to come by later."

Harry immediately stiffened at that...Sirius was still a fugitive in the eyes of the law,

"But why? What if he's spotted?"

Ron ran his hands through his hair before sighing,

"That's what everyone told him, but he's been adamant on seeing you..."

Harry buried his face in his hands as he drew in a deep breath. He couldn't stand the thought of being with Sirius...He remembered the nightmare he'd had about him and he had to repress a shiver. He'd told Tom everything about Sirius...Tom knew how important Sirius was to him...What if he ever decided to use that knowledge against him? Had he been stupid enough to jeopardize Sirius's life?

Ron got up and sat down beside him before resting his hand on his shoulder,

"You need to stop thinking about it, Mate."

Harry wished with all his heart that he could stop thinking. He wished Tom had obliterated him before returning him. He couldn't live with all these thoughts and memories...They would surely drive him insane.

He resisted the urge to clutch his hair as he felt on the verge of another panic attack...

"Dinner is ready, Boys!"

Mrs. Weasley's voice saved him just in time and Harry let out a silent exhale as he pulled his face out of his hands. Ron rose to his feet and spoke,

"We'd better go down before she comes up."

Harry nodded silently,

"Just go ahead...I'll join you in a minute."

He watched as Ron left the room and when he was gone, he buried his face in the pillow and screamed as he fisted the covers. It was going increasingly apparent that he wasn't capable of doing this. He wasn't a 'capable liar' as Tom as termed him...

The sound of the door closing forced him to still. The presence of someone in the room with him was unmistakeable and Harry felt his heart racing inside his chest. Whoever was in the

room with him had just seen him lose control...

Chapter 39

Adrenaline flooded his system and his heart pumped and beat like it was trying to escape. He thought his heart would explode and his eyes were wide with fear as he kept his face pressed into the pillow. He was terrified of moving because he knew the moment he would move, whoever was in the room would see the tears in his eyes.

For a moment, there was silence and, in that moment, Harry focused on the sounds that were coming from downstairs as his heartbeat slowed down to something more bearable and the adrenaline rush wore off. When he felt certain enough that his face or voice wouldn't betray what he was feeling, he pulled his head away from the pillow and straightened up. The twins were standing in front of the closed door with their arms crossed over their chests and wore matching expressions of concern.

He wiped away any remaining moisture from the corners of his eyes as he rose to his feet but his head spun and for a very brief moment, darkness veiled his vision. When his vision returned, he found himself being held up by the twins. They didn't say anything but their eyes... They conveyed everything they were feeling. Harry closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose before speaking,

"Thanks."

The twins released him, and Harry opened his eyes to test his footing by taking a few steps. Just then the door opened, and Ginny pushed her head in before smiling shyly at him,

"Harry... We're waiting for you downstairs."

He was about to speak when the twins beat him to it,

"We'll bring him down."

Ginny walked up reluctantly, and Harry was about to follow her when the twins blocked his path. Fred spoke up,

"We will talk about this later, Harry."

Harry forced his hands in the pockets of his jeans as he focused his gaze on his shoes,

"There's nothing to talk about."

Fred and George laughed humourlessly before George spoke,

"Yeah... We didn't find you in the middle of an emotional break down and you didn't black out afterwards..."

Harry looked up and met their gaze,

"It wasn't what it looked like."

The twins nodded but Harry could see that they weren't going to buy any of his lies. He breathed out,

"Can we go downstairs?"

The twins shook their heads together,

"Not before you promise to tell us what's really going on with you."

Harry groaned,

"There's nothing going on with me."

Fred clicked his tongue,

"Don't lie to us. It insults our intelligence."

Harry pulled his hands out of his pockets as he ran them through his hair and resisted the urge to stamp his feet in frustration,

"I'm not lying."

The twins stepped closer to him,

"Yes, you are. You've been lying since you woke up in the hospital wing after that incident."

Harry felt himself stiffen and that seemed to be all the confirmation that the twins had needed because Fred cupped his cheek,

"We had our suspicions, but your reaction just confirmed them... What really happened in the final task, Harry?"

Harry lowered his gaze as he felt his heartbeat quicken again... He could hear the blood thundering in his ears and his breaths growing shallower as the truth crept up from inside his chest and lodged itself in his throat... choking him... Mrs Weasley's voice saved him though,

"BOYS...DINNER IS GETTING COLD!"

Harry felt the truth retreat into the deepest, darkest corner of his chest and he made sure to slam the door shut on it as he fixed his face expressions and was about to walk away when George gripped his arm,

"We will continue this later, Harry."

Harry yanked his arm out of George's grip as he spoke,

"There's nothing to continue."

He rushed out the door and down the stairs into the dining room. The table was all set and Harry made sure to keep a smile plastered on his face as he took a seat beside Ron and

apologized to Mrs. Weasley for the delay. She'd prepared chicken-and-ham pie with boiled potatoes and salad, but Harry realized that he had no appetite. He had used to salivate over Mrs. Weasley's cooking but today it held no appeal for him. The twins joined the table and Mrs. Weasley took a minute to scold them before the meal started.

The food tasted like ash on his tongue and left him feeling nauseated. How could anything ever compare to Tom's wonderful cooking? He was fairly certain that nothing could even come close. Mrs. Weasley's voice pulled him out of his thoughts and he looked up at her,

"Your hair is getting silly, Dear. I could give you a trim later."

Harry was about to reply when Ginny spoke up,

"I like it..."

She lowered her gaze immediately and flushed cherry red. Harry chose to ignore that as he spoke,

"I want to grow it out, Mrs. Weasley...But thanks for the offer."

The twins winked together as they spoke,

"Are you looking to impress all the girls this year?"

Harry toyed around with the piece of his pie on his plate,

"If that's what you want to believe."

He looked up just in time to watch as the twins shared a conspiratory look and Harry silently shook his head before cutting out a piece and stuffing it into his mouth.

His sexuality wasn't something he'd given much thought to. Last year he'd been attracted to Cho like a moth to the flame but now when he pictured her inside his head, he found nothing alluring about her. But it just wasn't Cho... He felt like he could never be attracted to any woman ever again and he knew it had everything to do with the way Tom had so thoroughly claimed him...He'd taken his body...but more than that...he'd taken his mind and his heart and his soul. None of those things belonged to him anymore.

A knock on the door forced him off his train of thought and Mr. Weasley spoke,

"I'll get it."

Harry already knew who was at the door and he felt so unprepared to face him.

Chapter 40

A couple of minutes later, Mr. Weasley walked back into the room and Sirius followed right behind. He looked good. Sirius looked like he'd been holding up well. He didn't look as thin as the last time he'd seen him and his hair...his hair was well styled and lustrous under the light. His striking grey eyes shone when he looked at him and Harry couldn't help but feel a surge of affection for his Godfather.

He rose to his feet when Sirius approached him. Sirius grinned wordlessly before pulling him into his arms and Harry couldn't help but bury his face in his shoulder as he wrapped his arms around him,

"I missed you, Sirius."

Sirius held him tight,

"I know, Harry... I missed you too."

Harry stayed like that for a moment before pulling away and speaking,

"You shouldn't have taken the risk... What if you were caught? What would I have done then?"

Sirius cupped his cheek,

"It would have been worth it."

Harry pushed away his hand and frowned,

"No... It wouldn't have... I can't lose you, Sirius."

Sirius pulled him back into his arms,

"You won't lose me... I promise."

Harry closed his eyes as the nightmare he'd had about Sirius flashed in front of his eyes and he couldn't help the shudder that passed through his body.

Harry reopened his eyes and realized that everyone was looking at them. Sirius patted him on the shoulder gently before letting him go and spoke,

"Finish your meal."

Mrs. Weasley spoke up,

"Take a seat, Sirius."

Mr. Weasley conjured a chair and Sirius sat down next to him. When Sirius had his own plate laden with food, he asked,

"So, tell me all about your summer."

Harry wished he could tell Sirius everything that he'd been through, but he couldn't...No matter how much he wanted to, he couldn't tell Sirius anything, so he lied through his teeth,

"It was boring as usual."

Sirius snorted as he stuffed his mouth with pie and then spoke,

"Tell me anyway."

Harry was astounded by the ease with which the lies rolled off his tongue. Tom knew him better than he knew himself after all. When he was done lying to Sirius about his boring summer, he asked,

"How is Buckbeak?"

Sirius was too busy helping himself to thirds and Harry could tell that he hadn't been getting enough to eat. He wished he had Sirius's appetite... It would be better than this bitter hollowness that had taken a hold of him.

Dinner went by quickly and Harry found himself going for a walk outside in the fields with Sirius. When they were a considerable distance away, Sirius spoke up,

"Do you trust Dumbledore, Harry?"

Harry turned to face Sirius and looked into his eyes to assess why Sirius had asked him that question, but his eyes were unreadable and a question of his own slipped through his lips,

"Why are you asking that, Sirius?"

Sirius looked around them before resting his hands on his shoulders,

"I think he's going to give me up to the ministry."

Harry searched Sirius's face for any sign that he was joking but when he didn't find any, he inquired,

"What makes you think that, Sirius?"

Sirius squeezed his shoulders before speaking softly,

"I've been nearly caught twice already... And no one apart from Dumbledore knew where I was..."

Harry pulled away from Sirius as he took a minute to absorb this new information. Finally, he asked,

"Does he know you're here today?"

Sirius shook his head as he pushed his hands into the pocket of his coat,

"Why would he do that?"

Sirius sighed,

"I don't know..."

Another darker possibility occurred to him... What if it wasn't the ministry that was after Dumbledore? What if it had been Tom?

"You need to be careful, Sirius... You can't risk your safety like this again."

Sirius walked closer to him and spoke,

"I needed to see you and I needed to tell you this because I don't want you to trust Dumbledore blindly."

Harry looked around the dark fields and his mind conjured up all sorts of bad things that could happen to Sirius,

"I won't trust him... You need to go."

The sense of impending doom was silently choking him and he knew it was irrational... He knew there was no one in the fields but the voice inside his head kept screaming and he couldn't get it to shut up. Sirius hugged him again and Harry looked over his back imagining shapes flitting around... shadows dancing in the dark... just lurking out of sight, ready to grab a hold of Sirius and steal him away. Sirius rubbed his back,

"Harry, calm down..."

Harry hadn't even realized that he'd been hyperventilating until Sirius had spoken. He made an effort to calm his breathing, but it was futile because something was wrong... Everything inside him was screaming that something was wrong.

His suspicions were proved true when a distant shouting caught his attention... It was coming from the burrow and it didn't take a lot of imagination for him to understand what was going on,

"You need to go, Sirius... GO NOW!"

Sirius pulled away from him and Harry watched as he tried to apparate and failed. Sirius cursed,

"They've put up anti-apparition wards."

Harry glanced around the field before speaking,

"Run."

Sirius was about to run when a flash of red narrowly missed him. It was followed by more shouting and more couldn't believe he didn't have his wand. Sirius fired back a few spells but it was obvious that they were severely looked at him and Harry knew what he was going to do just by looking at his face.

Sirius raised his hands and shouted at the top of his lungs,

"I GIVE UP!"

Chapter 41

Harry was left staring into space in quiet disbelief after the ministry officials had dragged away Sirius and Mr. Weasley. If it hadn't been for the twins holding him back, he would have fought. He'd struggled against them...kicked and punched but they'd held onto him...They were still holding onto him, but all the fight had just left him. Their grip on his arms was the only thing keeping him upright now otherwise he would have crumbled down to his knees.

Mrs Weasley's hysterical sobs were playing in the background and Harry could only wish he could cry like her, but he didn't have any tears. His eyes were as dry as the desert. The twins were steering him somewhere, but he no longer cared. He was sat down on a bed and a glass of water was being held to his lips. He pushed it away but Fred spoke,

"Just drink."

He took a few sips and then pushed away the glass. He felt the twins settle down beside him and heard them speak,

"It'll be alright."

Harry shook his head as he stared blankly at the floor,

"No...It won't be..."

It wouldn't be alright...Nothing would be fine...

His heart began to beat out of his chest as his mind finally accepted that Sirius had really been arrested and what would happen now...The ministry would surely order the dementor's kiss on Sirius... His head was a carousel of fears spinning out of control, each one pushing my mind into blackness...

NO!

The realization forced him to his feet and he rushed out of the room towards the one he was sharing with Ron. He was glad to see that Ron wasn't there. After closing the door and locking it, he grabbed a piece of parchment, a quill and an ink-pot and got to work.

If anyone could save Sirius, it was Tom and he hoped and prayed that Tom would. If Tom didn't then Sirius was as good as dead.

He wrote down a short letter in which he begged him to save Sirius's life, attached it to Hedwig's leg and sent her on her way.

It was foolish of him to think that Tom would give a damn about him but what else could he do. Tom was his only hope. Somehow what Sirius had told him right before he'd gotten arrested kept playing at the forefront of his mind. Dumbledore had been trying to get Sirius arrested. But why would he do that? It didn't make any sense but deep down he knew that it

was the truth. The fact that Dumbledore had forced him to return to his abusive relatives year after year was the reason, he knew that Dumbledore wasn't the man he claimed to be.

He took a deep breath and tried to calm himself, but it didn't work. He couldn't rest until he knew that Sirius was safe.

He heard the lock click and wasn't the least bit surprised when the twins stepped into the room,

"Just leave me alone."

The twins shook their heads and spoke,

"Mum's gone to the ministry. She said that Dumbledore was going to meet her there...He won't let anything happen to Sirius."

Harry couldn't hold back the chuckle that escaped his lips,

"Do you really believe that?"

A look of understanding dawned on the twins faces and they spoke together,

"You don't believe in Dumbledore anymore."

Harry let out a derisive laugh,

"I don't know what I believe anymore... It's all so muddled up."

He was taken off guard when the twins stepped closer to him and wrapped him up in their arms as Fred whispered into his ear,

"We stopped trusting that old man a long time ago..."

He pulled away from them and stared at them in shock. George went to the door and locked it before casting something on it as Fred continued to speak,

"We don't think he's capable of saving Sirius or our dad... He probably doesn't want to..."

Harry couldn't help but ask,

"Sirius said that Dumbledore was trying to get him arrested but he didn't know why...Do you know why?"

A dark look stole over the twins' faces as they spoke,

"Yes, we do."

Harry rose to his feet and whispered,

"Tell me."

The twins exchanged a dark look before George spoke,

"His position as Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot was being threatened for aiding and abetting an escaped convict... He's just trying to save his position..."

Harry cursed,

"If you knew that then why didn't you stop Sirius from coming?"

Fred sighed,

"We tried getting a message to him, but he's been moving quiet a lot and it's been difficult to track him."

Harry closed his eyes and buried his face in his hands,

"What are we going to do now?"

The twins remained silent and Harry pulled his face away from his hands and looked up at them questioningly. They finally replied,

"For now, we have to wait till morning."

Harry collapsed back on the bed,

"I can't wait..."

Fred rested his hands on his shoulders,

"You have to... Once we know where Sirius is being kept, we can break him out."

Harry hoped it didn't have to come to that but waiting till the morning was inevitable in any case. He knew he wouldn't receive a reply from Tom till the morning, that was if he decided to reply at all. There was a chance that his letter might be ignored. Well, in that case, he had the twins.

There was no way, he was going to let Sirius die. He was going to save him whether anyone helped him or not.

Chapter 42

The sun took ages to come up...It took so long that for a moment Harry was sure that the night was never going to end, and he'd be trapped in the darkness forever. But it did end, and Harry was grateful for that. He was laying on the bed with his legs dangling off the edge, staring blankly at the ceiling when the tapping on the window forced him to his feet.

A rush of relief surged through his body when he realized that it was Hedwig. He opened the latch hurriedly and untied the letter from her leg with trembling fingers. Taking a deep breath, he ripped open the envelope and took a moment to just stare at the folded piece of parchment. Hoping against hope that the words written on it were in his favour.

His knees felt ready to give way, so he stumbled to the edge of the bed and dropped down on it as he unfolded the piece of parchment and started reading the letter,

Harry,

I cannot guarantee that your Godfather shall go free any time soon, but I can ensure that he gets a fair trial and is sent to Azkaban instead of being subjected to the Dementor's kiss. In due time, when I decide to free my death eaters from Azkaban, your Godfather shall be freed along with them. Rest assured, your Godfather shall not be harmed. All I require from you is your trust and cooperation.

There is something that I require you to do for me. When you go to your Godfather's trial, you must go down to the Department of Mysteries and retrieve something for me. Lucius shall meet you before the trial and he will inform you of the details. I hope that you will not disappoint me.

P.S. This letter shall burn within ten minutes of being opened. Don't burn your pretty fingers. That would be such a waste.

Just as soon as Harry was done reading the last part, a small spark lit up the corner of the letter and Harry dropped it to the floor and watched it burn. Somehow, he felt like Tom's words had suddenly silenced all his doubts and fears regarding Sirius.

But the fact that Tom hadn't bothered to give him an explanation for just leaving him back at the Dursley's so abruptly upset him. Tom should have said something... It felt like that gaping wound inside his chest opened up again and Harry drew in a deep breath as he struggled to bear the ache.

Tom didn't owe him anything... In fact, it was the other way around. He was the one that was indebted to him and he would have to retrieve whatever Tom wanted him to retrieve from the Department of Mysteries. But the thought of meeting Lucius twisted his guts and nauseated him. Well, he'd just have to stand it for Tom.

Rising to his feet, he walked out of the room and went downstairs. He found the twins, Ron and Ginny in the small kitchen and they all looked up when he stepped in. Harry couldn't

stand the accusatory glares that were cast his way by Ron and Ginny and walked back out towards the garden. It didn't take long for the twins to catch up with him and Harry heard them speak,

"How are you?"

Harry closed his eyes as he crossed his arms over his chest,

"I'm fine..."

It was Fred that spoke,

"We found out where they're keeping Sirius..."

Harry shook his head silently,

"There's no need for that anymore."

The twins spoke up together,

"What?"

Harry opened his eyes and sighed,

"Sirius is going to be fine now."

The twins came to stand in front of him and inquired suspiciously,

"How can you be so sure of that? Did Dumbledore send you a letter?"

Harry focused his gaze on his feet and spoke,

"No... Dumbledore didn't say anything."

The twins grabbed him by both his shoulders,

"Then how are you so confident?"

Harry focused on a weed growing an inch away from his shoe and spoke,

"I just know..."

He wished the twins would just let the matter go. He wasn't in any mood to talk about this but there was something he could distract them with,

"What's the Department of Mysteries?"

The twins looked at him like he'd grown an extra ear,

"How did you hear about that?"

Harry cursed the twins' inquisitiveness and spoke,

"Just read about it somewhere... Tell me what it is..."

The twins crossed their arms over their chests as George spoke,

"Not until you tell us where you heard about it."

Harry let out a frustrated sigh before throwing his hands up,

"You guys are hopeless; I'll find out about it from someone else."

He was about to walk away when the twins spoke together,

"Wait."

Harry stopped and turned around,

"Are you going to tell me then?"

The twins nodded,

"We will but before that, you need to promise us that you won't let yourself get hurt by whatever you've gotten yourself involved in..."

Harry raised an eyebrow,

"What makes you think I'm involved in something?"

The twins smiled sadly,

"You're a good liar but you're not a great liar... Sometimes it just shows in your eyes."

Harry grinned,

"Are you saying that I need to work on my acting skills?"

The twins smirked,

"Something like that...Anyways, the Department of Mysteries is a section of the Ministry of Magic that carries out confidential research. Wizards who worked in the Department of Mysteries are known as Unspeakables because of the confidential nature of their work."

Harry felt his curiosity growing out of proportions as he wondered what Tom wanted from a Department like that,

"So, what kind of research do they do?"

The twins shrugged,

"We don't know...It's supposed to be top secret."

Harry pushed his hands into his pockets as he thought about the task Tom had just assigned him. After what he'd just heard about the Department, he could tell that it wasn't going to be a piece of cake.

He was pulled out of his thoughts by a flustered looking Ginny rushing towards them. It was the twins that asked her,

"What is it, Ginny?"

Ginny turned her gaze towards him and spoke,

"He wants to meet you, Harry."

Chapter 43

Since Ginny hadn't bothered to mention who wanted to see him, Harry had walked into the small living room of the Burrow expecting to see Dumbledore...But when he'd seen who was waiting for him, Harry steps had been forced to a standstill in the doorway.

Lucius Malfoy stood there in the small space in all his pureblood glory and exuded an aura of disdain so strong that Harry felt momentarily suffocated by it. The disdain somehow intensified when Lucius Malfoy's grey eyes settled on him. Harry walked into the room despite not wanting to and closed the door behind him.

Lucius pointed his wand at the door and then the windows as he muttered something under his breath before turning his attention back to him,

"I believe you already know why I'm here."

Harry could only nod silently as he lowered his gaze and stared at Lucius's shiny silver tipped leather shoes,

"There's a man...an unspeakable...His name is Broderick Bode and he'll lead you where you need to go when you arrive at the Ministry for your Godfather's trial."

Harry nodded again but he felt Lucius step closer to him and heard him whisper,

"You're only useful to him if you keep your mouth shut and obey...Is that clear?"

Before he could fully absorb that and respond, Lucius thrust a black journal into his hand,

"I was supposed to deliver this to you."

Harry stared at the smooth surface of the journal and was about to speak when Lucius handed him a letter,

"Your Godfather's hearing is on the twenty fifth...Make sure you're there."

Harry expected Lucius to leave but he didn't so Harry was forced to look up at him. There was a thoughtful expression on his face as he spoke,

"Why have you kept your mouth shut, Potter? I expected you to announce his return as soon as he spared you."

Harry looked up and met Lucius's gaze,

"You said it yourself...He spared me and that's why I'm indebted to him now."

Lucius regarded him for a moment before turning around and walking out the door. Harry looked at the journal for a moment and couldn't help but think that it looked exactly like the one he'd destroyed in his second year. The only difference was that this one looked new.

He knew that the twins were probably outside the door, waiting to hear what Lucius had said to him. He thrust the journal underneath the cushions of the worn out couch and opened the door. Just as he'd expected, the twins rushed in immediately and inquired together,

"What did he want with you?"

Harry pushed the letter towards them as he spoke,

"Sirius has a hearing on the twenty fifth. I'm supposed to attend it."

Fred tore open the letter as he read it and then handed it over to George before speaking,

"He's getting a hearing. Now that is an unexpected turn of events."

Harry settled down on the couch and tried to act surprised but couldn't pull it off. The twins settled down on either side of him and Harry immediately felt trapped,

"You already knew though, didn't you? That's why you were so calm this morning."

He shook his head silently and Fred spoke,

"You're lying... Just like you've been lying about everything else."

Harry closed his eyes and sighed. He didn't have the strength to deal with this again. Taking a deep breath, he leaned back and rested his head against the back of the couch,

"You can tell us anything... We won't judge you..."

Harry struggled to find the words to speak but he was so sure that he'd regret saying anything. He couldn't tell anyone about Tom or what had happened between them. He didn't even know if he could trust the twins yet. For all he knew, they could be spying on him for Dumbledore,

"There is nothing to tell."

His fingers were already itching to touch the journal again mainly because he knew that Tom might have touched it some point. He was dying to know why Tom had sent it and whether or not it had something to do with the task Tom had assigned him.

There were so many questions buzzing inside his head that it made it difficult for him to breathe. Inhaling deeply, he struggled to find some semblance of calm and finally spoke,

"I need to be alone."

The twins eyed him with apprehension before getting up and leaving. As soon as they were gone, he felt like a huge burden had been lifted from his chest and he could breathe easier. He grabbed the journal from where he'd hidden it and ran his gaze over it. He missed Tom... missed his touch, missed his kisses, missed falling asleep in his arms but most of all he missed not having to make decisions and the ability to be himself.

He carefully tucked the journal in the waistband of his jeans and covered it up with his shirt before walking out of the room. He just wished he had enough strength to get through this.

Chapter 44

Harry lay on the bed with the journal placed on his chest as he stared vacantly at the ceiling. It was Sirius's hearing today and Harry hoped that what Tom had said would be true. Azkaban was better for Sirius than the dementor's kiss and Tom had assured him that he would free him from there as well.

But what if Tom had lied to him? What if Sirius was killed today? What would he do then?

He reached for the journal and on his chest and held it as he struggled to calm his doubts... Tom wouldn't lie to him... Tom had said that Sirius would get a hearing and he had gotten it. There was no reason for him to doubt Tom's words.

But he was still afraid because he couldn't afford to lose Sirius. Closing his eyes, he curled up on his side and clutched the journal to his. For a moment, he allowed himself the illusion of feeling Tom's warm, hard body pressed up against his back and his arms wrapped around him, holding him and making him feel like he was home...

He had no home...

The illusion vanished and Harry couldn't stop the sob that escaped his lips as he buried his face in the mattress and cried... Why couldn't just Tom let him live with him? Why had he made him feel all these things if he was going to ultimately discard him like a broken toy? He'd known he shouldn't have allowed himself to feel but he had and now he was all messed up.

It took him a while to calm himself but eventually, he managed and gathered the will to put himself back together. He took a shower and dressed up in one of his blue jeans and dark blue chequered button-up.

After that, he felt like his body was moving on autopilot until Harry stepped out of the fireplace and found himself at one end of a very long and splendid hall with a highly polished, dark wood floor. The peacock-blue ceiling was inlaid with gleaming golden symbols that were continually moving and changing like some enormous heavenly notice board. The walls on each side were paneled in shiny dark wood.

Halfway down the hall was a fountain. A group of golden statues, larger than life-size, stood in the middle of a circular pool. Tallest of them all was a noble-looking wizard with his wand pointing straight up in the air. Grouped around him were a beautiful witch, a centaur, a goblin, and a house-elf. The last three were all looking adoringly up at the witch and wizard. Glittering jets of water were flying from the ends of their wands, the point of the centaur's arrow, the tip of the goblin's hat, and each of the house-elf's ears so that the tinkling hiss of falling water was added to the pops and cracks of the Apparators and the clatter of footsteps as hundreds of witches and wizards, most of whom were wearing glum, early-morning looks, strode towards a set of golden gates at the far end of the hall.

He felt Lupin and the twins appear beside him and they began moving. They joined the throng, wending their way between the Ministry workers, some of whom were carrying tottering piles of parchment, others battered briefcases, still, others reading the Daily Prophet as they walked. Harry felt the gaze of several people following. He heard people whispering his name and gathering confirmation from their nearby fellows whether it was really Harry Potter or not.

Harry felt sick as they reached the security desk. A badly shaven wizard in peacock-blue robes looked up as they approached, put down his Daily Prophet. Lupin spoke up,

"We're here for the trial of Sirius Black and Arthur Weasley."

The wizard spoke in a bored voice,

"Come here."

Harry walked closer to him and the wizard held up a long golden rod, thin and flexible as a car aerial, and passed it up and down Harry's front and back,

"Wand."

The security wizard grunted at Harry, putting down the golden instrument and holding out his hand. Harry produced his wand. The wizard dropped it on to a strange brass instrument, which looked something like a set of scales with only one dish. It began to vibrate. A narrow strip of parchment came speeding out of a slit in the base. The wizard tore this off and read the writing on it,

"Eleven inches, phoenix-feather core, been in use for four years. That correct?"

Harry nodded nervously,

"Yes."

"I keep this,"

Said the wizard, impaling the slip of parchment on a small brass spike,

"You get this back,"

he added, thrusting the wand at Harry,

"Thank you."

The man repeated the process with Lupin and the twins and then Lupin grasped Harry by the shoulder as he steered him away from the desk and back into the stream of wizards and witches walking through the golden gates.

They made their way to the elevators and waited for it to arrive. With a great jangling and clattering a lift descended in front of them; the golden grille slid back, and they all moved inside it with the rest of the crowd. Harry found himself jammed against the back wall of the

lift. Several witches and wizards were looking at him curiously. He stared at his feet to avoid catching anyone's eye. He just wanted to shout at them. Why couldn't people just mind their own business?

The grilles slid shut with a crash and the lift ascended slowly, chains rattling all the while. Harry felt grateful as the witches and wizards exited at various levels. He couldn't help but tense up when Lucius Malfoy stepped into the elevator and spoke,

"Gentlemen, I'm sure you're all heading to Black and Weasley's trial... I hope you won't mind if I join you?"

Chapter 45

Somehow, the moment Lucius stepped into the elevator, the air in the atmosphere grew thick with tension and Harry felt himself tense up as well. Lucius came to stand right next to him and spoke,

"I hope you're aware that the hearing is taking place in courtroom ten."

He didn't know why that made everyone in the vicinity stiffen and the question just slipped from his lips,

"Where is courtroom ten?"

Lucius's lips curved into a smirk and just as he was about to speak, the elevator doors opened and a sallow-skinned wizard with a very mournful face got in,

"Morning, Mr. Malfoy."

He said in a sepulchral voice as the lift began to descend

Lucius turned his attention to the man and spoke,

"Morning, Bode."

And that is when it clicked in place.... Broderick Bode... This man was supposed to aid him in getting whatever Tom wanted from the Department of Mysteries. Harry noticed that Bode was surveying him unblinkingly and his unfaltering gaze did not make him feel any more comfortable.

"Department of Mysteries..."

Said the cool female voice, and left it at that. The lift doors rattled open, and they stepped out in a corridor that was quite different from those above. The walls were bare; there were no windows and no doors apart from a plain black one set at the very end of the corridor. Harry expected them to go through it, but instead, they walked to the left, where there was an opening leading to a flight of steps. Harry noticed that Bode was making his way to the door he'd expected to go through.

They reached the bottom of the steps and moved along yet another corridor, which bore a great resemblance to the one that led to Snape's dungeon at Hogwarts, with rough stone walls and torches in brackets. The doors they passed here were heavy wooden ones with iron bolts and keyholes,

"Courtroom ten."

They came to a halt outside a grimy dark door with an immense iron lock and stared at it. The others began to file in and Lucius spoke up,

"Mr. Potter... Since we have some time before the hearing starts... I would like to have a word with you."

The twins halted in the doorway and Harry spoke,

"Just go on...I'll be there soon."

The twins exchanged a doubtful glance before stepping in. Lucius leaned in closer to him spoke,

"Broderick is waiting for you at the entrance of the Department of Mysteries... You will do everything he says without question and return to me."

Harry was about to ask a question when Lucius narrowed his gaze at him so he simply nodded his head and ran the way he'd come. His heart was beating a violent tattoo against his Adam's apple and he swallowed hard as he found Bode standing in front of the door and staring at him vacantly. The door swung open and Bode walked in. Harry drew in a deep steadying breath as he marched in behind him. They were standing in a large, circular room. Everything in here was black including the floor and ceiling; identical, unmarked, handleless black doors were set at intervals all around the black walls, interspersed with branches of candles whose flames burned blue; their cool, shimmering light reflected in the shining marble floor made it look as though there was dark water underfoot.

The door closed behind them with an ominous click and became so dark that for a moment the only things they could see were the bunches of shivering blue flames on the walls and their ghostly reflections on the floor.

Bode walked purposefully towards the door and pushed it open effortlessly. Harry followed his lead like a lost puppy and found himself in a room that was filled with beautiful, dancing, diamond-sparkling light. As Harry's eyes became accustomed to the brilliant glare, he saw clocks gleaming from every surface, large and small, grandfather and carriage, hanging in spaces between the bookcases or standing on desks ranging the length of the room so that a busy, relentless ticking filled the place like thousands of minuscule, marching footsteps. The source of the dancing, diamond-bright light was a towering crystal bell jar that stood at the far end of the room.

Harry's heart was pumping frantically now as Bode led the way down the narrow space between the lines of desks, heading for the source of the light, the crystal bell jar quite as tall as he was that stood on a desk and appeared to be full of a billowing, glittering wind. As they drew nearer, pointing at the very heart of the bell jar. Drifting along in the sparkling current inside was a tiny, jewel-bright egg. As it rose in the jar, it cracked open and a hummingbird emerged, which was carried to the very top of the jar, but as it fell on the draught its feathers became bedraggled and damp again, and by the time it had been borne back to the bottom of the jar it had been enclosed once more in its egg.

His heart was now pumping so hard and fast he felt it must interfere with his normal functioning. Bode pushed open the door and walked through it silently. Harry followed quickly and found himself in a place, high as a church and full of nothing but towering shelves covered in small, dusty, glass orbs. They glimmered dully in the light issuing from

more candle-brackets set at intervals along the shelves. Like those in the circular room behind them, their flames were burning blue. The room was very cold. Bode was already moving again and Harry had to run to catch up with him.

Bode was standing in front of a shelf staring blankly at one of the orbs and Harry couldn't help but walk up to him and take a look. The sphere glowed with a dull inner light, though it was very dusty and appeared not to have been touched for many years. He had to crane his neck to read the yellowish label affixed to the shelf right beneath the dusty glass ball. In spidery writing was written a date of some sixteen years previously, and below that:

S.P.T. to A.P.W.B.D.

Dark Lord and (?)Harry Potter

Harry stared at it as he wondered what his name was doing down here. He reached forward and he closed his fingers around the dusty ball's surface. He had expected it to feel cold, but it did not. On the contrary, it felt as though it had been lying in the sun for hours, as though the glow of light within was warming it. Expecting, even hoping, that something dramatic was going to happen, Harry lifted the glass ball down from its shelf and stared at it. Nothing whatsoever happened.

Harry, gazed at the orb as he brushed it free of the clogging dust and looked at Bode who was now staring at the door, they'd just come through... At that moment, he knew that he'd retrieved whatever Tom had wanted and now he was supposed to leave.

Chapter 46

The victorious smirk that lit up Lucius's face as he handed the orb to him five minutes later was something else,

"I confess I had doubted your usefulness Potter, but it seems that The Dark Lord's trust in you is not misplaced. He shall be very pleased indeed today."

Before Harry could inquire about the significance of the orb, the door opened and the twins stepped out,

"The hearing is about to start, Harry."

He buried his burning curiosity for the time being and stepped into the courtroom with Lucius. Harry gasped; he could not help himself. The large dungeon he had entered was horribly familiar. He had not only seen it before, he had been here before. This was the place he had visited inside Dumbledore's Pensieve, the place where he had watched the Lestranges sentenced to life imprisonment in Azkaban. The walls were made of dark stone, dimly lit by torches. Empty benches rose on either side of him, but ahead, in the highest benches of all, were many shadowy figures. They had been talking in low voices, but as the heavy door swung closed behind Harry an ominous silence fell.

He saw Sirius and Mr. Weasley seated in the middle of the courtroom and couldn't help the nauseating anxiety that threatened to engulf him as Lucius pushed him down to take a seat on one of the benches. He looked up at the people seated at the bench above. There were about fifty of them, all, as far as he could see, wearing plum-colored robes with an elaborately worked silver 'W' on the left-hand side of the chest and all staring down their noses at him, some with very austere expressions, others' looks of frank curiosity.

In the very middle of the front row sat Dumbledore. A broad, square-jawed witch with very short grey hair sat on Fudge's left; she wore a monocle and looked forbidding. On Dumbledore's right was another witch, but she was sitting so far back on the bench that her face was in shadow.

Harry felt the bitter taste of betrayal fill his mouth at the sight of him. He wanted to scream out everything the twins had told him and it seemed Lucius had picked up on his impulse because he felt his vice-like grip on his wrist and heard him murmur,

"Do not ruin this, Potter."

Harry drew in a deep breath and struggled to calm himself as the hearing started. Every time Dumbledore talked, Harry felt venom pumping through his blood. Every time he came close to losing control over his tongue, the thought of Sirius being kissed by a Dementor forced him to halt.

When the decision was announced, Harry couldn't help but sag back in his seat as the emotional exhaustion finally took its toll on him. Lucius's departing whispered words were

barely audible but Harry still managed to hear them,

“Do not fret, Potter. Dumbledore will get what he rightfully deserves. The Dark Lord shall see to that very soon. In the meantime, play nice.”

When he was gone, he raised himself on his feet and walked to the center of the court where Mr. Weasley was being embraced by his children. He’d been acquitted of all charges and was free to go. Sirius was still chained to the seat and Harry could almost see the fear in his eyes as he looked at him,

“Sirius...”

Sirius closed his eyes and bowed his head,

“Harry... You should go before they come to take me.”

Harry felt his heart exploding with pain at the sight of utter despair on Sirius’s face. He knew why Sirius was afraid... He knew so well... He rested his hands on Sirius’s shoulders and spoke softly,

“You have to be strong for me, Sirius... You need to be strong for me because it will be okay.”

Sirius shook his head,

“Harry, this time I fear I won’t be able to escape.”

Harry covered Sirius’s bound hands with his,

“You won’t have to... This time you won’t have to escape, Sirius... Just trust me when I say that I will see you very soon.”

Sirius finally looked up at him and met his gaze,

“How are you so sure about that?”

Harry sighed,

“I can’t say right now but all I can tell you is that when an opportunity presents itself, don’t let your principles get in the way... There is no dark or light anymore, Sirius... There’s just no good or bad.”

Something like understanding shone in Sirius’s eyes and he was about to speak when he closed his mouth abruptly and his gaze zeroed in on a spot behind him. Harry turned around to find Dumbledore striding towards them with that somber expression that he had begun to resent and detest with all his heart,

“I wish it did not have to be this way... I have tried my very best not to allow any harm to come to you, but I know that you shall understand that I have taken this decision for the greater good.”

It took him everything he had in him to keep his face as neutral as possible when he spoke,

“I understand, Professor.”

Dumbledore patted him on the shoulder gently and Harry felt his blood boil at the touch. He couldn't stand it.... He couldn't stand Dumbledore's feigned goodness...Not when he'd finally seen what he was capable of.

His self-restraint was almost at its breaking point when the Aurors made their way to Sirius and spoke,

“Chief Warlock, may we have permission to move the prisoner to Azkaban?”

Dumbledore nodded silently and Harry felt his eyes burning up with tears. Sirius looked at him despairingly and Harry spoke,

“It will be fine, Sirius...It will be alright.”

Sirius just nodded and Harry took a step back as the chains vanished from around Sirius's wrists and the Aurors hauled him up from the chair and began leading him out. He knew Tom would make good on his word but that did nothing to lessen the pain of watching Sirius go.

He wasn't aware of his surroundings as his tears finally slipped free and the world around him blurred. Everything just seemed so hopeless and heavy and he felt so weak. The strength vanished from his legs and he collapsed on his knees as silent sobs racked his body.

How was he ever going to get through this?

Chapter 47

It had been a month since he'd been back in Hogwarts... back within the familiar walls that had once felt like home to him but now...now they just felt like a prison. Hogwarts was a prison that he desperately wanted to escape just so that he could with Tom again...

He needed him...

Some days the need was so overwhelming that he had to fight tooth and nail just to get himself out of bed and act like nothing was wrong...like he wasn't falling apart at the seams...like death didn't seem like a better alternative to this meaningless existence.

Tom should have just killed him.

He should have just taken his life like he'd taken the Magpie's life. It would have been better than this... Anything would have been better than this.

"Harry..."

He looked up from the book he'd been pretending to read and met Neville's gaze,

"Hey, Neville."

Neville twisted his hands and fidgeted so Harry knew he had something he wanted to say, he was just nervous about it,

"You can say anything you want."

Neville sighed as he took a seat opposite him,

"It's Professor Moody... Don't you think that today's lecture was a bit excessive?"

Harry leaned back in his chair... He'd been mildly surprised that Moody had managed to return to teach DADA again. That was definitely something considering that no one had managed to hold that seat for more than a year...something about the seat being jinxed or something.

Today's lecture had been exceptional though... Moody had been teaching them all about spells that could do some serious damage in a duel and Harry had found himself to be quite riveted when he'd practically demonstrated the spells on a bunch of rats.

He understood why Neville was bothered by it though and maybe he would have been bothered as well if he hadn't met Tom or fallen in love with him.

"I think it could be useful in a duel."

Neville looked at him like he'd lost his mind... Which was true,

“Those spells were borderline destructive, Harry... Besides it's not like You know who is ever coming back so we won't have to use them.”

Harry felt a jolt in his stomach as he struggled to keep his face neutral before replying,

“We should always be prepared for the worst... Just look at what happened to Cedric...”

His voice broke and he became silent but apparently, it was enough to put Neville's mind at ease as he got up and patted him on the shoulder,

“Thanks, mate... I guess I hadn't thought of it from that perspective.”

He picked the book back up and spoke,

“No problem.”

Once Neville was gone, he went back to staring at the pages of the book as his thoughts wandered off yet again... He was such an imposter... He could have told Neville that Voldemort was back. He could have told him that he was planning on taking over the magical world but he hadn't... He couldn't...

Shaking his head, he closed the book... He couldn't think anymore... Getting up to his feet, he brushed off the grass from his robes as he decided to head towards the dormitory. Ron and Hermione were probably waiting to ambush him there because that's what they always did these days. Even though he tried his damndest to act normal around them and talk to them and spend time with them as he'd once had... It just wasn't possible anymore because every time he tried... he felt like he was bloody well suffocating. He wasn't their Harry anymore... He was Tom's....

He was just passing the entrance hall when Professor Moody barked out,

“Potter... I would like to have a word with you in my office.”

Harry sighed silently... It was like Dumbledore had put Moody in charge of checking up on him after every couple of days... He hated those conversations... Absolutely loathed them...

Nonetheless, he followed Moody to his office and took a seat in the chair that he usually sat on as Moody closed the door and clunked his way to his seat,

“So, Potter... What did you think of today's lesson?”

Harry sat up straight but kept his gaze focused in his lap as he spoke,

“It was very interesting, Sir.”

Moody scoffed,

“It was supposed to be interesting, Potter. That is not the reply that I was looking for.”

Harry finally looked up and inquired as respectfully as possible,

“What response are you looking for then, Sir?”

Moody leaned closer to him,

“Would you use those spells if you were dueling The Dark Lord?”

Harry couldn’t help but inhale sharply as he struggled to come up with a reply.

No... A thousand times no because he knew that he would never duel Tom again... If it ever came to that he would just surrender himself to his will rather than use his wand.

Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and spoke softly,

“I can’t answer that unless I find myself in that situation.”

Moody barked out a laugh as he slammed his hand on the table,

“A very diplomatic reply, Potter... I was expecting you to express your desire to use those spells against him in a duel...Considering you’re The Boy who Lived.”

Harry lowered his gaze again,

“I think that I should no longer be referred to by that title.”

Moody rose to his feet and asked,

“And why is that?”

Harry shook his head,

“I just don’t like it.”

Moody's wooden leg clunked noisily as he came to stand behind him and then Harry felt his hands on his shoulders... There was something oddly comforting about his touch,

“Like it or not, Potter... You’re stuck with it.”

Harry felt his shoulders slump as he closed his eyes,

“Why am I here, Professor?”

Moody squeezed his shoulders gently,

“Because I need to know that you’re doing well.”

Something about the way Moody squeezed his shoulder made him want to cry and blurt out all his deepest darkest secrets but he couldn’t... He couldn’t do that...

“I’m fine, Professor.”

Moody’s hands vanished from his shoulders and Harry instantly wished for them to be back,

“Should you ever feel like you’re falling apart, you know where to find me, Potter.”

Harry rose to his feet feeling a little disoriented by the last statement. Why would Moody care about him that much? Why would his touch bring him so much comfort?

Before he could contemplate anymore, a knock on the door interrupted him,

“Thanks, Professor.”

Moody opened the door and Harry came face to face with Snape, who looking a little paler than usual. Snape watched him as he exited the office and spoke curtly,

“I hope I was not interrupting anything.”

Moody shook his head,

“No, you’re right on time, Severus.”

Snape disappeared into Moody’s office and Moody spoke,

“You can trust me, Potter... I want you to remember that.”

And with that Moody shut the door as Harry turned around and continued towards the dormitory.

Chapter 48

Christmas was just around the corner. Ron had invited him to come to the Burrow with him to celebrate the holidays, but he'd politely declined because he really couldn't stand being around people anymore. He was in desperate need for some solitude just so he could set his mask of normalcy down and be himself. He was actually looking forward to the time he would have to be by himself when Ron and Hermione would leave for the holidays this afternoon.

He had just picked up his cup of tea to take a sip when Hermione yelped. He saw that she was staring at the Daily Prophet so that sound that she'd just made was probably about some news. He was no longer interested in news. Whatever happened outside the world simply failed to concern him anymore. It was Ron that inquired,

"What?"

For answer, she spread the newspaper on the table in front of them and pointed at eleven black-and-white photographs that filled the whole of the front page, ten showing wizards' faces and the tenth, a witch's. Some of the people in the photographs were silently jeering; others were tapping their fingers on the frame of their pictures, looking insolent. Each picture was captioned with a name and the crime for which the person had been sent to Azkaban. There was only one picture that grabbed Harry's attention,

"Sirius."

Hermione nudged Harry and pointed at the headline over the pictures, which Harry, concentrating on Sirius, had not yet read,

MASS BREAKOUT FROM AZKABAN

Harry sat back and let the happiness soak right into his bones. He never wanted the feeling to end. He closed his eyes and savored the moment, but never released his grip on the seemingly inconsequential piece of paper and ink in his hands. For the first time in months, his body and mind relaxed. Sirius was free. Tom had kept his promise and freed him.

Opening his eyes, he began reading the article that accompanied the pictures,

The Ministry of Magic announced late last night that there has been a mass breakout from Azkaban. Speaking to reporters in his private office, Cornelius Fudge, Minister for Magic, confirmed that ten high-security prisoners escaped in the early hours of yesterday evening and that he has already informed the Muggle Prime Minister of the dangerous nature of these individuals.

'We find ourselves, most, unfortunately, in the same position we were two and a half years ago when the murderer Sirius Black escaped for the first time,' said Fudge last night. 'Nor do we think the two breakouts are unrelated. Black, as the first person ever to break out of Azkaban, would be ideally placed to help others follow in his footsteps. We think it likely that

these individuals, who include Black's cousin, Bellatrix Lestrange, have rallied around Black as their leader. We are, however, doing all we can to round up the criminals, and we beg the magical community to remain alert and cautious. On no account should any of these individuals be approached.'

Harry pushed the newspaper away as he took a sip of his tea. How ignorant could the Ministry possibly be? It didn't matter that they were blaming Sirius for helping others escape. But this breakout clearly implied that the Dementors had joined Tom's side.

He looked up and realized the fearful looks on Ron and Hermione's faces as Hermione whispered,

"Why would Sirius escape with all those death eaters? It doesn't make any sense... He could have escaped alone."

Harry leaned back in his seat,

"Why does it matter? At least he's free now."

Hermione scoffed,

"Harry, I don't think you realize how terrible these people are. Bellatrix Lestrange tortured Neville's parents to insanity. These people are You know Who's worst supporters. The fact that they're free is absolutely horrifying."

Maybe that information would have bothered him once upon a time but right now he couldn't bring himself to care about all the cruel things those people had done. The only thing he cared about was that Sirius was free and that was more than enough for him to feel some semblance of joy.

Did that make him a horrible person? Maybe... But he'd accepted that fact, the first time he'd given himself up to Tom.

Right now, he couldn't stand the discussion Ron and Hermione were having. It was apparent that they weren't sharing his joy over the breakout and he was afraid he'd say something incriminating if he stayed a moment more in their presence.

He finished the rest of his tea and rose to his feet,

"I'm going for a walk... I think I need some air."

He rose to his feet and glanced up at the staff table. Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall were deep in conversation, both looking extremely grave. Professor Sprout had the Prophet propped against a bottle of ketchup and was reading the front page with such concentration that she was not noticing the gentle drip of egg yolk falling into her lap from her stationary spoon.

He was about to leave when he noticed another smaller headline on the page that Hermione was currently reading. He spoke,

“Can I see that?”

Hermione handed him the newspaper wordlessly and Harry began reading

TRAGIC DEMISE OF MINISTRY OF MAGIC WORKER

St Mungo's Hospital promised a full inquiry last night after Ministry of Magic worker Broderick Bode, 49, was discovered dead in his bed, strangled by a pot plant. Healers called to the scene were unable to revive Mr. Bode, who had been injured in a workplace accident some weeks prior to his death. Healer Miriam Strout, who was in charge of Mr. Bode's ward at the time of the incident, has been suspended on full pay and was unavailable for comment yesterday, but a spokeswizard for the hospital said in a statement: 'St Mungo's deeply regrets the death of Mr. Bode, whose health was improving steadily prior to this tragic accident. As his speech and mobility improved, Healer Strout encouraged Mr. Bode to look after the plant himself, unaware that it was not an innocent Flitterbloom, but a cutting of Devil's Snare which, when touched by the convalescent Mr. Bode, throttled him instantly. 'St Mungo's is as yet unable to account for the presence of the plant on the ward and asks any witch or wizard with information to come forward.'

He handed the newspaper back to Hermione as he began walking out of the Great Hall with a great deal of questions buzzing through his head. Bode had helped him retrieve that artifact for Tom. He still had no idea what that artifact had been or how it had been useful to Tom but everything about the circumstances of Bode's death screamed that he'd been murdered, and Harry couldn't help but feel that it was due to that artifact.

He felt the cold wind slam him on his face as soon as he stepped out on the lawns. It was snowing but Harry didn't care as he trudged through the snow-covered grass and made his way towards the lake. He was almost there when a voice halted him in his tracks,

“Oi, Potter.”

Harry halted and turned around to find himself face to face with Draco Malfoy,

“What do you want, Malfoy?”

Draco pursed his lips like he was unsure about what he wanted to say. Finally, he spoke,

“My father sent me a letter this morning.”

Harry felt a jolt in his stomach as hope began blossoming inside his chest,

“What did it say?”

Draco was chewing on his lip nervously as he spoke,

“He told me to tell you to not spend the Christmas at the Weasley's or at Hogwarts.”

That didn't make much sense, but Harry had a feeling that Draco wasn't telling him the complete contents of the letter,

“I wasn’t really planning on going to the Weasley’s this year but did he say why I couldn’t spend Christmas at Hogwarts?”

Draco sighed before grumbling,

“He said that you should spend Christmas with us.”

Harry couldn’t help but raise an eyebrow at that,

“Us?”

Draco growled in frustration,

“Us...Meaning that you should spend Christmas at Malfoy Manor.”

Harry crossed his arms over his chest,

“Why?”

Draco threw his hands up in the air as he whined,

“Why do you ask so many questions, Potter? Isn’t it obvious?”

Harry couldn’t stop the butterflies that were fluttering in his stomach as he inquired,

“What’s obvious?”

Draco looked near enough to exploding,

“The Dark Lord ordered my father to write that letter. I don’t know why he wants you at Malfoy Manor, but he does so you’d better comply, or it won’t bode well for me or my family.”

The happiness he felt at that moment was infectious. It started as a tingle in his fingers and toes, much like the feeling he had when he was anxious, but instead of worrisome it was warm. He felt it pass through him like a warm ocean wave, washing away the stress of the past months and left him feeling so alive.

Tom wanted him to spend Christmas with him. There could be nothing better than that.

“Won’t it look suspicious though?”

Draco nodded in agreement,

“It will...That’s why you’ll be going to your relative’s house first. My father will pick you up from there.”

Harry felt like laughing with the joy that was currently bubbling up inside his chest. Today was the happiest he’d felt in a long time. The last time he’d felt this happy was when he’d been wrapped up in Tom’s arms. He hoped to be wrapped up in them again very soon.

Chapter 49

He had found his uncle waiting on the station, with the nastiest scowl on his face, as he'd emerged from the platform. He didn't look too pleased to be there... Well neither was he. This was the man that had nearly killed him. Harry dragged his trunk behind him as his uncle wordlessly led him to where the car was parked, and Harry hoped that he wouldn't have to spend too much time at Privet Drive.

The drive was completely silent and during it, Harry noticed that apart from the revulsion that his uncle held for him, there was an undertow of fear to his demeanor. Had Tom threatened him? He might have. It sometimes surprised him that Tom hadn't murdered the Dursleys after they'd tried to kill him, but Harry assumed that it was because Tom didn't want Dumbledore to get suspicious. Speaking of Dumbledore, he had been glad to find that Dumbledore had been extremely preoccupied with the break-in from Azkaban... especially since Fudge had been blaming him for sentencing Sirius to Azkaban instead of ordering the Dementor's kiss on him. So, in short, his abrupt departure from Hogwarts to spend the Christmas with his relatives hadn't sparked any curiosity except from Ron and Hermione who'd just looked at him like he'd lost his mind and then left it at that because by now they knew that arguing with him was futile and he would just do whatever he wanted to.

They reached Privet Drive in record time and Harry went straight up to his room without interacting with his aunt or his cousin. Slumping down on his bed, he pulled off his trainers and laid back as he stared at the ceiling and thought about what was going to happen next. He could feel the excitement bubbling up in his chest as thought about the prospect of seeing Tom again... Feeling Tom again... Simply being in his arms again...

Would Tom have missed him as much as he had? Maybe... Maybe not... But he'd asked Lucius to write that letter so he must have missed him a little...

At some point, he'd dozed off because the sound of someone knocking on his door startled him awake and he had to take a minute just to find his bearings and figure out where he was and how he'd gotten there. The knocking grew more insistent, and Harry sighed before murmuring,

"Come in... It isn't locked."

Harry had been expecting his uncle to step into his room, even though he found it a little strange that his uncle had actually bothered to knock but when Lucius walked into the room, Harry couldn't help but feel a little embarrassed by how messy his room was. Lucius was dressed in a dark grey finely tailored suit that looked like it had been stitched on him.

Lucius looked around his small room with a look of distaste and pity and spoke curtly,

"Come on, Potter. We don't have all day."

Harry slipped his feet into his trainers and was just tying the laces when Lucius spoke,

“The Dark Lord was very pleased when you successfully managed to acquire the prophecy for him... I confess I had doubted his wisdom when he’d chosen to spare you that night but I was wrong. He truly is the greatest wizard to have ever lived.”

Harry straightened up and rose to his feet,

“Prophecy?”

For months, he’d been curious about the item he’d acquired for Tom from the Department of Mysteries but since he’d had no real lead as to what that item was, he had been unable to research it. Now that Lucius had mentioned that it was a prophecy, Harry could feel his curiosity tenfold. He doubted he’d get any answers from Lucius but maybe Tom would tell him all about it. After all, that orb had had his name on it too.

Just as he’d predicted, Lucius ignored his question and spoke curtly,

“You won’t be needing anything so shall we get going?”

Harry nodded silently and followed Lucius out of the room and down the stairs. The Dursleys were nowhere to be seen and the house was so eerily quiet. Lucius turned to face him when they were standing in the middle of the hallway and spoke,

“Have you ever apparated before, Potter?”

Harry shook his head,

“No...Never.”

Lucius’s lips curved up into a smirk,

“This will be a new experience for you then.”

If it made Lucius smirk like that then it was bound to be unpleasant,

“You will need to hold on to my arm very tightly, Potter.”

Harry gripped Lucius’s proffered forearm,

“Well, here we go.”

Harry felt Lucius’s arm twist away from him and redoubled his grip: the next thing he knew, everything went black; he was being pressed very hard from all directions; he could not breathe, there were iron bands tightening around his chest; his eyeballs were being forced back into his head; his eardrums were being pushed deeper into his skull, and then... He gulped great lungfuls of cold night air and opened his streaming eyes. He felt as though he had just been forced through a very tight rubber tube. It was a few seconds before he realized that Privet Drive had vanished, and they were now standing in a narrow moonlit lane. The lane was bordered on the left by wild, low-growing brambles, on the right by a high, neatly manicured hedge.

Harry immediately let go of Lucius's arm and began following him as he walked ahead. They turned right, into a wide driveway that led off the lane. The high hedge curved with them, running off into the distance beyond the pair of impressive wrought-iron gates barring their way. Lucius raised his left arms in a kind of salute and passed straight through as though the dark metal were smoke.

Harry knew he was expected to do the same, so he mimicked Lucius's gesture and passed straight through the gate. The yew hedges muffled the sound of their footsteps. There was a rustle somewhere to their right, but the source of the noise proved to be nothing more than a pure white peacock, strutting majestically along the top of the hedge. Harry simply stared at it in awe until Lucius cleared his throat and wordlessly urged him to keep walking.

A handsome manor house grew out of the darkness at the end of the straight drive, lights glinting in the diamond-paned downstairs windows. Somewhere in the dark garden beyond the hedge, a fountain was playing. Gravel crackled beneath their feet as they walked towards the front door, which swung inwards at their approach, though nobody had visibly opened it. The hallway was large, dimly lit, and sumptuously decorated, with a magnificent carpet covering most of the stone floor. The eyes of the pale-faced portraits on the walls followed them as they strode past. Lucius halted at a heavy wooden door leading into the next room and Harry stopped with him. Lucius paused for a heartbeat and then turned the bronze handle.

Chapter 50

As soon as the door opened, Harry was greeted by the sounds of agonized screaming followed by a burst of mad cackling laughter. As Harry stepped into the opulent living room, the source of the screaming became apparent. It seemed to be a muggle, bound and chained, on the tiled floor, right in the middle of the room as a dark, beautiful woman with inky black curls stood over him with her wand pointed directly at him. Lucius cleared his throat and spoke up,

“Did I not inform you that we would be having company, Bellatrix?”

That seemed to have caught Bellatrix’s attention because Harry found her heavily hooded gaze fully focused on him. Her painted red lips curved up into a hellish grin as she cooed,

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t itty bitty baby Potter.”

She began steadily making her way towards him and Harry was unable to break eye contact with her. He felt the tip of her wand press into his cheek as she whispered,

“I ought to torture you to death.”

Lucius glared at her as he hissed vehemently,

“You will do no such thing. The Dark Lord’s instructions are very clear on the subject. He is not to be harmed. If he finds a hair on his head out of place, it will mean sure death for the person that caused it to be.”

Bellatrix bared her teeth at him and spoke,

“He will give you to me, Potter. You will be mine to torture.”

Lucius snatched her wand out of her hand and spoke,

“He will do no such thing. Potter has proven his usefulness to the Dark Lord and in doing so, he has chosen his side...Our side... He stands among our ranks now.”

Bellatrix cackled raucously,

“Among our ranks? Is he truly worthy enough of that?”

Bellatrix grabbed his wrist and Harry couldn’t help but hiss out in pain as her sharp, pointed nails pierced his skin,

“I see no Dark Mark on his skin. If he stands among our ranks then why hasn’t the Dark Lord branded him?”

Lucius growled,

“It is not your place to question the Dark Lord’s intent...Release his wrist, Bella. You shall bring his wrath down upon all of us.”

Lucius pulled her hand away from his wrist and thrust her wand into her hand,

“Go and torture that muggle. That ought to keep you occupied.”

She glared at him for a second before walking back towards her prey. Lucius took his wrist and examined the nail marks that were oozing blood,

“Narcissa will heal you. You will not speak of this to the Dark Lord.”

Harry could only nod silently as Lucius let go of his wrist and went in search for his wife. The muggle was screaming again...begging for his life...begging for Bellatrix to stop...

It didn’t bother him...Not the least bit... In fact, he found himself to be quite fascinated by the spells Bellatrix was casting. He’d certainly never heard of them or read about them. He was certain that he’d never be taught them at Hogwarts.

Bellatrix seemed to have picked up on his morbid fascination because the screaming stopped and when Harry looked up at her, she was grinning wildly,

“Maybe, he did see something in you after all...Come here, Potter.”

Harry walked towards her and she spoke softly,

“If I didn’t know better, I’d assume that you were mute.”

Harry cleared his throat before speaking,

“I can talk. I just...”

Bellatrix cut him off abruptly,

“You just don’t feel comfortable talking to death eaters?”

Harry shook his head,

“It’s not that.”

Bellatrix chuckled darkly,

“You don’t feel comfortable talking to me because you think I’m insane?”

Harry sighed as he looked down at the muggle, who was curled up in a fetal position and shaking like a leaf, before inquiring curiously,

“How can you tell if you’ve gone insane?”

Bellatrix stepped closer to him,

“Care to clarify your question?”

Harry looked up and met her gaze. He found it slightly odd that she resembled Sirius. Maybe he was missing Sirius a little too much,

“What’s the standard for measuring insanity? What would I have to do to be sure that I’ve really truly lost my mind?”

Bellatrix made a thoughtful sound before touching his cheek,

“You must have lost your mind if you’re standing over a muggle and you don’t feel any empathy...”

Harry pursed his lips,

“I don’t think that’s it... If that was the case, then all the death eaters are insane...I know they’re not insane... You’re not insane...”

Bellatrix laughed as she kicked the muggle with her high heeled boot,

“You’re amusing, Potter...I’ll have to give you that... This is not what I expected you to be...”

Harry tucked his hands in the pockets of his jeans as he asked,

“What am I?”

He knew the answer... He wanted to hear someone else say it. He wanted someone else to affirm his view of himself,

“You’re one of us, Potter... You’re loyal to the Dark Lord and his cause... You hate muggles just as much as any of us... You are, by all rights, a death eater.”

A death eater...He was a death eater... He was loyal to Tom. He’d do anything for him. He’d probably give his life if Tom asked that of him. But that wasn’t all...He wasn’t just loyal to Tom...

He loved him...He loved him so much...

Maybe, he had lost his mind.

Before, he could contemplate the matter any further, Bellatrix had taken his wrist in her hand and was waving her wand over the wounds. He watched as the wounds sealed themselves and the skin merged back together. It was as if the wounds had never existed.

He was about to thank her even though she’d be the one to cause them when he heard the door open, and he turned around to find Sirius rushing towards him. When Sirius was inches away from him, he reached forward, stealing his breath and the heat from his skin. Before he could draw in the air his body needed, he melted into Sirius's form. He could feel his firm torso and the heart that beat within. Sirius wrapped his arms around him, drawing him in closer. He

could feel his body shake and tremble as he cried his heart out. Cried for all the pain he'd been through. Sirius pulled his head back and wiped away the tears with a finger, the pure kindness in his eyes brought more relief than his heart could hold.

Sirius was eating him with his eyes, running his hand through his hair, as if he couldn't quite believe that he was real...that he wasn't a dream. Sirius's mouth painted a soft smile and he spoke,

"You're here...you're really here..."

Harry could only nod and Sirius had him wrapped up in his arms again. He buried his face in his shoulder and shut his eyes trying to revel in the warmth that surrounded him,

"I missed you, Sirius... I missed you so much."

Sirius only held him closer,

"Harry, you will never have to miss me again."

Chapter 51

He knew the question would come sooner or later but that didn't make him feel prepared to answer it.

"How did all of this happen, Harry?"

He was curled up next to Sirius on the couch, right in front of the fireplace. Sirius was stroking his hair, much like Tom used to but it just quite didn't feel the same.

He contemplated how much of the truth he ought to tell Sirius. How much would Sirius be able to digest without hating him?

According to his perception... Not much...

But he couldn't sit silently either. He had to give Sirius something, so he gave him another question in response,

"All of what?"

Sirius's fingers stopped carding through his hair, but Harry made no move to remove his head from his lap,

"You know very well what I'm talking about.... This.... Us spending Christmas with death eaters... They're the enemy, Harry..."

Harry couldn't help it. He sat up straight and faced Sirius,

"They got you out of Azkaban... You would have been stuck there for the rest of your life... Did you really want that to happen?"

Sirius ran his hand over his face, but his restlessness was obvious from his demeanor,

"No...But..."

Harry grabbed Sirius's hands in his as he cut him off,

"They're not the enemy, Sirius... Don't you see that? Don't you see what Dumbledore did to you? Are you really that blind?"

Sirius sighed in frustration,

"None of this makes any sense, Harry. All my life I've hated these people..."

Sirius paused for a second and Harry saw the pain in his eyes as he probably recalled memories,

“These people... They’re connected to me by blood, and I left them behind at the age of sixteen...”

Harry couldn’t quite get a hold of his astonishment as he inquired,

“Which ones?”

Sirius’s gaze moved to where Narcissa and Bellatrix were sitting and chatting animatedly. Harry followed it and couldn’t hold back the gasp that escaped his lips,

“That’s why she resembles you.”

Sirius smiled ruefully,

“They’re my cousins.”

Harry pursed his lips as he pondered whether he should ask the questions that were burning on the tip of his tongue or not,

“Go on... Ask me...”

Harry drew in a deep breath before asking,

“Why did you leave?”

Sirius smiled bitterly and ran his fingers through his long, unkempt hair,

“Because I hated the whole lot of them: my parents, with their pure-blood mania, convinced that to be a Black made you practically royal... my idiot brother was soft enough to believe them... He was younger than me...”

Harry couldn’t help but ask,

“Was?”

Sirius nodded,

“He died years ago... Stupid idiot that he was, he joined the Death Eaters.”

“You’re kidding me?”

Sirius shook his head silently,

“I’m afraid not.”

Harry asked hesitantly,

“Were your parents death eaters too?”

“No, no, but believe me, they thought Voldemort had the right idea, they were all for the purification of the wizarding race, getting rid of Muggle-borns and having pure-bloods in

charge. They weren't alone, either there were quite a few people before Voldemort showed his true colors, who thought he had the right idea about things ... they got cold feet when they saw what he was prepared to do to get power, though. But I bet my parents thought Regulus was a right little hero for joining up at first."

"How did your brother die? Was he killed by an Auror?"

Sirius traced a pattern on the couch's expensive brocade surface,

"Oh, no, he was murdered by Voldemort. Or on Voldemort's orders, more likely; I doubt Regulus was ever important enough to be killed by Voldemort in person. From what I found out after he died, he got in so far, then panicked about what he was being asked to do and tried to back out. Well, you don't just hand in your resignation to Voldemort. It's a lifetime of service or death."

Harry felt unease swirling in his stomach as Sirius's words played over and over in his mind. Being reminded of how cruel Tom could really be like being doused by icy cold water. But Tom had never pretended to be anything other than what he really was when he'd been around him. He'd reminded him of his cruelty constantly. He'd reminded him of the fact that he was a murderer every single day. He knew what Tom was when he'd gotten himself into this. He had known it so well.

"So, you see why it's so difficult for me to back among them."

Harry cupped Sirius's face as he read the agony in his eyes,

"I did what I had to do to get you out of Azkaban... But that doesn't mean that you have to stay here. If it doesn't feel right to you then I'll ask him to let you leave. You're not bound to these people and you're certainly not obligated to do anything for them."

Sirius held his gaze and inquired softly,

"Him? You mean Voldemort?"

Harry nodded silently,

"So, he really is back then, and you really have been hiding his return."

Harry pulled his hands away from Sirius's face as he turned around to stare at the fireplace,

"He is back, and he is more powerful than ever."

Sirius made an impatient sound,

"Harry... He tried to kill you when you were a baby... He killed your parents... What are you even doing here? Help me understand this..."

Harry laughed bitterly,

"There is nothing to understand, Sirius..."

Sirius rose to his feet and spoke angrily,

“Yes, there is. How can you be loyal to the person who murdered your parents in cold blood?”

Harry rose to his feet as well. Sirius’s question had been heard by everyone and the room that been alive with the sound of chatter just a second ago was now eerily quiet.

He was about to respond when he felt a shiver run down his spine and goosebumps erupt all over his skin. He knew that feeling. He knew that only one person could cause it. And then, as if to confirm his intuition, he spoke,

“I think we all want to hear the answer to that, Harry.”

Chapter 52

He was afraid... so very afraid of turning around and facing Tom. He was afraid that it would break him. He knew that there was too much below deck not to shatter his carefully created mask when it would all come out. Breaking was hard but recovery was almost impossible and that was something he just couldn't afford.

He needed to act smart and keep his feelings under wraps. He knew Tom expected that from him and that's why he'd play along. but his traitorous heart absolutely refused to calm down. He didn't have the fortitude to face Tom after everything that had happened. He was certain that one look at him would be enough to make him crumble.

No... He was not that weak... He couldn't be that weak...

Taking a silent breath, he turned around and came face to face with Tom, who looked as immaculate as ever. His dark hair had somehow grown longer and matched perfectly with the dark black robes that he wore. His eyes, however, were crimson rather than brown and they shone with something, Harry couldn't quite place.

But he'd been right... He'd been so right because as soon as he set his eyes on Tom because everything and everyone just became irrelevant. The only person he could think about, the only person that he could see was Tom...It was like the world around him turned black and white and Tom was the only thing he could see in color.

Tom's face was impassive, but his eyes were saying something that Harry was incapable of reading. His heart jackhammered in his chest, threatening to burst out as he made his way around the couch and towards where Tom stood.

He didn't trust his voice. He knew it would betray him. So, he did what he could do.

His knees gave way on their own and he came crashing down in front of Tom. He bowed his head until his lips were level with Tom's foot clad in a leather steel-tipped boot and then slowly, reverently, he pressed a kiss to the polished leather. He knew it was the only part of Tom, he could kiss right now.

He kept his lips there for as long as he could before pulling them away but even then, he made no move to straighten up. His heart was beating so loud, he wondered if Tom could hear it. He wondered if Tom knew how much pain he'd been through...how much he'd suffered...

"Harry..."

He felt his world turn upside down at the sound of his name coming from Tom's lips. How long had he yearned to hear this? He'd lost all hope that he would ever hear Tom call him by his name again. And even though, right now, Tom's voice was devoid of all emotions, it was enough for him.

He raised his head but kept his gaze lowered. He bit back a sigh of relief as he felt Tom's fingers card through his hair. No words could describe the joy that was brought on by such a simple touch. There was no substitute for the buoyant light that filled up his dark insides and made him feel like he was truly alive again.

He knew Tom was waiting for him to speak so he summoned all his strength and spoke,

"My Lord, please forgive my Godfather for his imprudence. He...He does not understand the favor you have bestowed upon him by freeing him from Azkaban..."

Sirius cut him off in a loud voice,

"I did not ask him for this."

Harry felt his insides squirm with unease at the disrespect in Sirius's voice. Tom had freed him from Azkaban, the least he could do was show a little respect. Before he could continue, Tom spoke,

"It seems your Godfather does not appreciate his freedom."

Harry shook his head violently at that,

"No...My Lord...That is not the case...He simply does not belong here and that is why I request that you allow him to leave."

Tom tsked,

"As much as I am pleased with your loyalty, Harry, I simply cannot allow that. Your Godfather must learn to belong here otherwise he will find himself at the mercy of my ire."

Harry closed his eyes as he felt Tom tug gently on his hair,

"Your Godson has gone to great lengths to free you, Black. I suggest you learn to show some gratitude..."

Tom paused and Harry silently prayed that he wouldn't ask him to answer that question again because he didn't know the answer...Maybe he did know the answer but he couldn't speak it out loud.

"As for you, Harry... You have proven your loyalty to me and therefore, I wish to make an announcement today."

Harry already knew what the announcement was. Tom's fingers moved away from his hair and he felt his hands on his shoulders,

"On your feet, Harry."

Harry rose up to his feet but made sure to keep his gaze lowered as Tom spoke,

“I have decided to allow Harry into my inner circle... I believe he has earned his spot there. If anyone in this vicinity has any objections regarding my decision, let them be known now.”

No one spoke because Harry knew as well as everyone else that whoever voiced their objections would probably be tortured into oblivion. And he doubted that anyone wanted that. Tom spoke,

“Excellent... Now that you have accepted Harry into your ranks, I expect that none of you will hold any animosity against him. He is to be treated as an equal and he will command the same respect from my outer level death eaters as any of you.”

Tom paused and Harry felt a surge of electricity shoot through his entire system as Tom took his wrist and spoke,

“Some of you may be wondering that he has not even been marked. I have decided not to mark him at the moment because it would affect my plans regarding him. He will be marked when those plans have been realized.”

Tom squeezed his wrist gently and Harry felt him draw closer to him...so close that he could feel his breath against his cheek,

“You belong to me, Harry... You should never forget that.”

Chapter 53

He stared at the variety of food laden on the table and while, the sight and aroma of it would have been enough to arouse anyone's appetite, it did nothing for him. Tom was seated at the head of the table, immersed deeply in a conversation with Lucius. Harry was trying so hard not to look at him but every few seconds, he felt his gaze just wander towards where Tom was seated, and he felt helpless to prevent it.

After an eventless dinner, Tom simply departed without a word and Harry felt himself missing him already. He stared at the large Christmas tree in the Malfoy's living room and wondered if Tom even cared about him anymore. Somehow Tom's words kept playing on repeat inside his head,

"You belong to me, Harry... You should never forget that."

Maybe it didn't mean, what he thought it meant. Maybe it was just Tom telling him that he was just a death eater now...

NO!

It just couldn't mean that. The heat and possessiveness in Tom's voice when he'd said those words was unmistakable. Tom still wanted him...

He buried his face in his hands as he stifled a groan. At this rate, he was certainly going to lose his mind. If only he could get some time alone with Tom... get the opportunity to talk to him alone and get the answers to all the questions swirling around his brain.

He felt the couch dip as someone sat beside him. He pulled his face out of his hands and looked up to meet Bella's gaze laser-focused on him,

"What's bothering you, Sugar?"

Harry stared blankly at her for a moment, trying to process the nickname that she'd just used. She laughed softly and cooed,

"I can find another name for you if you don't like that."

Harry shook his head to get rid of the momentary blankness and spoke,

"No... It's fine... It's completely fine... you just caught me off guard."

Bella's painted red lips pulled back into a grin as she spoke,

"Good... So now tell me what's bothering you."

Harry sighed as he stared down at his hands,

"It's nothing."

Bella's tipped his head back up with a long pointed fingernail,

"Are you bothered by being one of us?"

Harry held her gaze,

"No. That's not what's bothering me."

Bella looked away from him and Harry followed her gaze towards where Sirius sat in a corner of the room with a dark expression on his face,

"Is this because of him?"

Harry closed his eyes. He knew Bella wouldn't leave him alone until he gave her a satisfactory answer. And the truth was that he really was worried about Sirius. He knew Sirius would never accept the death eaters. He would never support their actions. He could never be one of them and Harry was worried that despite everything that he had with Tom, it wouldn't save Sirius from the man's rage.

He wouldn't be able to protect Sirius from Tom.

"Yes."

Bella patted him on the back,

"Don't worry about him, Sugar. He'll have to fall in line if he truly loves you as your Godfather."

Harry shook his head,

"I know him. He won't... He's too stubborn. He's still too blinded by Dumbledore and his messed-up morals to see how right the Dark Lord is. He just won't let go of the past...And I'm afraid that I won't be able to protect him from The Dark Lord's wrath."

Bella wrapped an around his shoulder and pressed a kiss to his cheek that left him momentarily breathless,

"I'll handle him for you, Sugar. Don't worry your pretty little head."

He turned to face Bella,

"How?"

Bella winked coyly,

"Just leave it to me."

He grabbed Bella's hands,

"You won't hurt him, right?"

Bella pursed her lips,

“No, I won’t. You have my word on that.”

Bella got up and left as swiftly as she’d appeared, and Harry was once again left staring at the brightly lit tree. He hoped Bella would be able to make Sirius behave just good enough to be safe from Tom.

He grabbed a cookie from the plate that was set in front of him on the coffee table and began munching on it as he contemplated what Tom’s plan for him were. They would involve Hogwarts. He was certain of that. Tom wanted to take over the world and Harry knew he would do anything in his power to help him with that. He just wished he’d do it soon so that he wouldn’t have to pretend to be something he wasn’t anymore.

He was sick and tired of acting. He was just exhausted of trying to appear normal to everyone at Hogwarts. So many times, he’d contemplated death as a means of permanent escape, but he’d quashed that thought every single time because he wanted to be with Tom again... That hope just kept him hanging from a thread.

A house-elf came to stand in front of him and spoke,

“Master has instructed Figgy to show Master Potter to his room.”

Harry looked at the house-elf wrapped up in a dirty towel and spoke,

“You’re Figgy?”

Figgy nodded before bowing her head. Harry ran his fingers through his hair. He really needed to get some sleep. He rose to his feet and followed Figgy out of the living room, up several flights of stairs and through a labyrinth of corridors until they were standing outside a large oak door. Figgy vanished into thin air and Harry was just about to push open the door when he felt a hand wrap around his wrist and before he knew it, he was feeling the sensation of side-along apparition again.

Chapter 54

He kept his eyes closed as he waited for the nausea and dizziness to abate and his brain processed the familiarity of the grip around his wrist.

It felt too good to be true.

What if he was wrong? What if he opened his eyes and all his hopes came crashing down?

The fingers around his wrist vanished and the loss of them was the thing that forced his eyes open.

He stood there in front of him but this time, he was certain that this was his Tom... Not Lord Voldemort... Not the feared Dark Lord...

This was the Tom that had saved his life and nursed him back to health. This was the Tom that he'd fallen in love with.

Tom's lips curved up into a gentle inviting smile and that was all the invitation he needed. Harry's eyes watered rapidly, and he rushed forward to throw himself at him. Literally. He flung his arms around Tom's neck and screwed his eyes shut. He couldn't get close enough fast enough. Not even with his arms and legs wrapped around him was he anywhere as near as he wanted to be.

Tom steadied himself and let out a soft chuckle, quickly tightening his arms around his middle. He gave him a tight hug, and Harry almost broke. In the best ways. He just held onto him as if his life depended on it. He never wanted to let him out of his arms, out of his sight. Harry sniffled and buried his face in the warm, delicious-smelling curve of his neck. Harry croaked,

"This has been torture. I can't...not again...Please don't send me away again...Please, Tom..."

Tom stroked his back and kissed his shoulder,

"I know how hard this must have been for you."

Harry couldn't hold back the tears. Being with Tom made him realize what he had been missing and he felt like he wouldn't be able to breathe again if he let him go again. Tom gently whispered in his ear,

"Shhh, I've got you."

Tom kissed his temple and walked them to a chair,

"You've grown nearly weightless."

Harry was about to speak when Tom cut him off,

"It'll be a long time before I let you go."

He shuffled around a bit and loosened his legs, and then they dropped into a chair,

"There we go."

Tom hugged Harry impossibly harder and breathed him in and Harry couldn't help but speak,

"I missed you so much, Tom."

A whimper slipped out of his lips and he just couldn't hold himself together. Tom hummed and brushed back his hair.

Harry groaned as that gesture stirred a maelstrom of emotions in his chest,

"I don't want this to end. I don't ever want you to let me go, Tom."

He was in Tom's lap with his arms wrapped around his neck. Tom wiped away the leftover tears,

"I don't particularly enjoy it when you cry."

Tom's brown eyes were so full of sincerity that Harry was certain that he wouldn't cry for the rest of his life just to please Tom. Harry felt his lips tingling with need, he turned his head and fit their lips together. Tom sucked in a breath, pulled off Harry's glasses, and cradling Harry's face with both hands, licked Harry's bottom lip before pushing his tongue inside and kissing him deeply. Harry made a small noise...a gasp needy enough to be embarrassing if embarrassment didn't seem so far away, somewhere on the other side of the thrumming of his blood and the firmness of Tom's body against his. He needed him. Needed to feel him. Craved it. Eventually, they had to part to get some air in their starved lungs. When Tom had brought his breathing relatively under control, he inquired softly,

"What do you need?"

Harry snuggled his head into Tom's chest with a contented sigh. He didn't need anything anymore. Tom was here and that was all he needed,

"Nothing...Just you."

Tom brushed his fingers through his hair,

"You have not been taking care of yourself."

Harry considered lying but being dishonest to Tom seemed like an unforgivable sin,

"I just couldn't do it..."

Tom kissed the top of his head and Harry was just content to sit like this for the rest of his life. He loved Tom...loved his gentle touches, his soft kisses, his compassionate words. Loved how special Tom made him feel. Tom brushed his lips against the corner of his mouth,

“Get comfortable, Harry. I’m going to get you something to eat.”

Harry didn't want anything to eat, he wanted Tom. Tom seemed to have listened to his thoughts because he slipped his glasses back on and chuckled,

"I saw the way you were playing with your food at dinner. You hardly took a bite. You need to eat, Harry. Everything else comes later."

Everything else... Harry rose to his feet slowly. He didn't enjoy parting with Tom's warmth. Tom had brought him back to his castle. He had no doubt, he'd done that so that they could have some privacy. He looked around the room and he recalled every single moment; he'd spent there with Tom. He took a shower and changed into the clothes Tom had laid out for him as quickly as possible. When he emerged from the bathroom, Tom was still seated on the chair but now he had his long legs stretched in front of him and crossed at the ankles. Tom rose to his feet at the sight of him and signaled him to sit down on the couch. Harry did. Tom sat down beside him and wrapped his arms around him. Harry instantly melted into the embrace. Harry finally murmured,

"I thought you'd changed your mind."

Tom held his shoulders and made him face him,

"Changed my mind about what?"

Harry closed his eyes and murmured,

"Me."

Tom cupped his face,

"You need to understand that I have a reputation to maintain."

Harry sighed softly,

“I understand... You want to take over the world and you need to be Lord Voldemort to do that.”

Tom kissed Harry's cheek,

“That does not mean that you are not mine, Harry. What I did today was to ensure that I could keep you close... It will have its burden on you, but I know that you are more than capable of bearing it.”

Harry could only nod because he couldn't reply to that. He knew Tom would never give up his ambitions so he would have to be the one to compromise. Tom tipped his head back to meet his gaze,

“Will you bear that burden for me?”

Harry held Tom's gaze and nodded,

“I’ll do whatever you need me to do.”

Tom patted him on the cheek as he conjured a tray laden with all manners of things that smelled exquisite and made his stomach grumble. Tom seemed pleased with that response because he picked up the knife and fork and spoke,

“Let me feed you.”

He was all for that. After a delicious dinner, they moved to the bed. Harry sat back on the bed and Tom hovered over him. He noticed that Tom had a bowl of chocolate-coated strawberries. He picked one and dangled it over Harry's lips. Harry craned his neck up and managed to touch it with his tongue. Tom smiled devilishly and raised it higher. Harry was about to get up when Tom tsked. Harry's neck strained but he loved the challenge in Tom's eyes. He attempted to reach it again but failed. Finally, Tom took pity on him and lowered it. Harry instantly bit it clean off the stem and chewed on it, savoring the sweetness. Tom's fingers were covered with chocolate and Harry licked his lips suggestively. Tom seemed to understand what Harry was asking silently and Harry saw the way his pupils dilate with lust. Harry was sure his eyes weren't any better. He was probably blushing too but he couldn't feel it.

Tom extended his fingers and Harry sealed his lips around a finger and closed his eyes. One finger after the other was licked and sucked until Harry was licking at the slick palm. Harry drew his tongue from Tom's wrist up to the tip of his middle finger, and Harry's embarrassed flush began to fade, and he opened his eyes.

Tom pulled away his hand. The next thing he knew, they were kissing furiously, all tongue and teeth, hands in each other's hair, and it felt so good and so addictive. Harry moaned into Tom's mouth and sucked on his tongue, pulling him closer, tighter, until he was on his back and Tom was on top of him, his heavy body pinning him down. Gasping, Tom hooked his leg around Harry's body and ground their erections together. Harry groaned against his mouth and kissed him harder.

Harry whimpered when they had to stop kissing to draw some much-needed air into their lungs. Tom looked at him with nothing but adoration in his brown eyes and Harry felt himself flush. Slowly, Tom pulled him into his arms and began rubbing soothing circles on his back. The silence was so comforting, so peaceful. Harry had never quite experienced bliss like he was experiencing it now. Tom dropped a kiss to the top of Harry's head before he started playing with the hair at the back of his neck. He softly murmured,

"I missed this, Harry."

Harry had his eyes closed and could only murmur back,

"I missed this too... Just don't make me go back again, please."

Chapter 55

Harry woke up disoriented, his face pressed into a wonderfully warm pillow. A shiver ran through him as he registered kisses along his spine. Harry could only mumble groggily,

"Sorry, I didn't mean to fall asleep."

Harry felt Tom hook a couple of fingers inside the waistband of his pants and heard him murmur in his ear,

"It's good that you got some rest but your body is still tense."

His skin burned pleasantly as Tom's hand moved over his back. Harry's eyelids fluttered shut again,

"Sit up, Harry. Let me undress you."

Harry was too comfortable to move and he groaned his protest in the pillow. Tom chuckled softly and lifted his t-shirt up,

"You know I will not stand for that kind of insubordination from you as my death eater... Arms up."

Harry did as told and Tom pulled his T-shirt off. Tom's fingers returned to the waistband of his pants while his other hand cupped his hips,

"Lift up."

Awareness shook him, and he obeyed quickly so Tom could pull down his pants. Was this it? Finally? After months? Even as sleep continued to grasp at Harry, desire slithered into his bones and made him needy. Harry groaned when Tom's hands glided over his shoulders and he started working the muscles there.

"Tom..."

Pleasure and pain lanced through Harry as Tom found every single knot. Tom pressed a kiss in his hair,

"Relax, Harry."

So, so easy to do. Harry closed his eyes and tried not to groan or squirm too much as Tom warmed his back and worked each muscle group in turn. While it was utterly sensual to have Tom touching him, it also felt good in a way that wasn't sexual.

He'd been tense. Parts of his back, both upper and lower, had enough knots in them to keep Tom busy for a while. The past few months really had done a number on him. Heat and movement and strong fingers combined with Tom's breath against his skin made Harry shiver. Harry felt the fingers leave him along with Tom's body heat. He heard a cabinet

opening and then the rustle of clothes. Harry smiled into the pillow. It seemed Tom had undressed too. The mattress dipped and the scent of something sweet reached Harry. It only took him a second to realize that it was oil. Was Tom going to give him an actual massage? Harry buried his face in the pillow feeling more cherished than he had ever felt. Gently Tom pulled him away from the pillow and had him lay face-first on a towel and arranged his limbs and neck so he was comfortable. Tom pressed a kiss to his temple,

"Comfortable?"

Harry nodded his head,

"Yes."

The word came out languid, akin to his jelly limbs and deep breaths,

A chuckle and Tom slid his hands to Harry's hips,

"You've never had a massage before?"

No, he hadn't and his moan was all kinds of confused. So, so good to have Tom's fingers work out the tension in those muscles. He was so turned on by Tom rubbing and pulling his slick hands over his hips. His body melted as his cock hardened. Tom kissed the small of Harry's back,

"You are absolutely gorgeous. I could just eat you up."

Harry could only whimper and rock against the bed. For the first time in months, he felt relaxed and happy. He felt completely unburdened. Harry lost himself in the sensations. The entire time, Tom didn't stray near his hole. He seemingly touched every part of his hips but his crack...then worked lower, to his legs.

"Let's work on your feet. Let's see if I can get those muscles to loosen up."

The foot massage nearly had him drooling into the pillow. Tingles all the way in his skull when Tom pressed in on a particularly stubborn knot.

"Feels so good up to my head."

Tom worked his way up Harry's leg, this time lightly touching his calves. It felt better.

"It's all connected. I'm going to work a little deeper. Yelp if it hurts."

There was laughter in Tom's words and Harry smiled into the pillow. He gasped when Tom pressed harder.

After the legs, Harry was close to passing out...until Tom ran those warm hands over his hips again, then up his back. This time, the touch was anything but therapeutic. Harry shifted and bit his lip.

"This is good, too."

It came out as a whisper. Tom pinched his hips,

"Turn over."

Harry did, and there was Tom, bending over him, bare-chested, bare-legged, his shaft hard under the thin fabric of his underwear. A flush ran up his neck and his grin was bright and endearingly wicked.

Tom traced a finger down the center of Harry's chest. He poured more oil on his hands and leaned over, palms gliding across Harry's shoulders. He worked down one, fingers making Harry gasp as he hit every sore muscle group. Tom repeated the same with the other. More oil and his palms slid over Harry's torso. Fingers pressed into his pecs and skimmed over nipples, sending conflicting signals again. He groaned. and met Tom's gaze. The heat in them made Harry flush.

Tom's slick hands slipped to Harry's stomach, and he gave up all hope of trying to remain still. He rocked his hips.

"Want something?"

Tom's voice was rough and deep. He worked closer and closer to Harry's cock.

"Touch me, Tom. Please"

He was dying under those hands. Hot blood pounded in his head. All he wanted was Tom's hand around his shaft. Tom laughed and his fingers danced over his stomach and up his side.

"I am touching you."

Harry gasped and moaned and caught Tom's hands,

"I need you, Tom."

Tom straightened and reached for the bottle of oil.

"I want to hear you say it, Harry."

There was a gleam in Tom's eye and Harry blushed furiously. He shivered and arched his back.

"I want your hand around my cock."

He took a breath.

"I want you naked and on top of me. I want..."

His breath caught. He wanted Tom inside him. Not just his fingers, either. Tom's smile was brilliant and his eyes were overflowing with joy,

"Let's start with that lovely cock of yours, and see what happens from there?"

Harry exhaled and bent his legs so Tom could kneel between them. Finally, Tom's warm hand wrapped around Harry's shaft and he stroked. Tight. Firm. Silky smooth from the oil. Harry rolled his head against the pillow and moaned. He lifted his hips and thrust into Tom's fist.

"I like this massage."

A laugh.

"I fully intend to give you a happy ending."

He pressed his thumb against the head of Harry's shaft and slid it over the slit. Harry could only groan and work his hips faster. The closer he got to bliss, the more Tom loosened his hand.

"Not yet."

Tom let go of Harry's shaft and climbed over him until his lips were inches away from his. Tom devoured his mouth, his tongue opening Harry's lips, stroking, tasting every inch. Harry melted into the mattress, his blood thick in his veins and his head and body on fire for Tom. Their lips touched, and brushes of arms and legs...so close...so far. When Tom relented, Harry had to catch his breath. When he did, he stared up at Tom,

"Touch me...Tom...Please..."

A small smile.

"Where?"

Nerves tingled and pinpricks danced up the back of Harry's skull.

"My hips...my hole..."

A barely audible chuckle,

"Why?"

Harry knew Tom understood, but he wanted to hear the words. Intimate desires and unspoken needs spoken out loud. He whispered,

"I want you to have sex with me."

Tom smirked,

"Are you absolutely sure, Harry? Will your conscience allow it to happen again?"

He stroked Tom's strong arms because in that moment, he didn't give a damn about his conscience.

"I want you so bad, Tom. I can't even describe it."

Tom stole a kiss and whispered softly,

"I need to wash the oil off my hands. That should give you a minute to decide what you really want with a clear head."

Harry didn't need a minute; he'd already decided but he watched as Tom climbed off the bed and vanished into the bathroom. Harry nestled his head into the pillow and couldn't stop himself from smiling. He felt like he had the world on the palm of his hand. At that moment he had everything he had ever wanted. He had Tom. He finally had Tom back. Tom returned to the bed and raised an eyebrow,

"What do you want, Harry."

Harry breathed out,

"You."

Tom pulled off his underwear and fetched a different bottle from the nightstand.

"On your side then."

He shifted and did as Tom ordered, his heart ramming against his ribs. He shivered and burned and his exhale was one long shudder. Tom kissed the nape of his neck. Every nerve in Harry's body blazed at Tom's touch. He continued his kissing, down Harry's neck where he grazed his teeth along his skin

"Relax."

Harry's eyes fell closed, and he reveled in every touch. Tom's hands were warm and kneading his flesh, and he could feel his cock pressing against his leg. Tom was kissing his way back up his neck when Harry wanted him way down. Tom traced a finger over his opening, causing him to meet his too-gentle touch.

"You are all mine."

Harry's cock got harder and harder, and his belly tingled. He let out a whine.

"I need you, Tom... Please... I've waited so long."

Tom sucked on the nape of Harry's neck. Harry groaned and felt the pleasure spreading like wildfire,

"No more waiting for you, my prince."

Harry heard the unmistakable sound of a bottle opening. Cool liquid ran down his crack and he gasped when Tom circled his hole. Sparks flew up his back. He let his head drop. He pressed a finger in and Harry couldn't help the whimper,

"Does it hurt?"

Tom continued to move his finger, gently at first, then harder until Harry had the towel under him...and maybe the comforter under that clenched in his hands. He couldn't answer, only

moan in rhythm to Tom's thrusts. Far too soon, Tom pulled his finger out and teased him with two wet fingers, circling him, then pushing inside. Harry exhaled noisily and white-knuckled the sheets. He fingered him and Harry was dimly aware that he was begging...pleading...

"I have to prepare you. It's been too long."

Tom sank his teeth into his shoulder and Harry hissed at the sting.

"I won't go easy on you...I can't..."

Harry sucked in a breath and forced himself to accept three fingers. Tom's breath was warm against his neck, eliciting another shudder,

"It might hurt a bit."

Harry murmured out,

"That's okay. I want to hurt for you."

Tom kissed the side of Harry's neck before he grunted as he slipped his thick erection between his legs, rubbing it against his opening,

"I just want to take you until you scream. Until you don't know if it's too much pleasure or too much pain."

Harry gulped. Tom pressed his lips against the small of his back.

"Relax and push. Don't tense up. It'll hurt."

Tom withdrew his fingers. Harry made a noise of complaint. Nothing could've prepared him for how fast Tom was going to replace his fingers with his cock. The wet, blunt head pressed against his opening, and then he gripped his hip and thrust inside in one sharp push.

Harry's mouth popped open, though no sound came out. The pain was blinding and robbed him of air. And at that moment, he had only one name. Tom became everything, and he needed all of him. He'd shocked him, shocked his system. Harry felt him throbbing deep inside of him.

"I warned you."

He let out a harsh, shallow breath and bit his shoulder,

"Oh... Harry."

Eventually, Harry let out a choked sob and just barely managed to utter a broken,

"M...More."

Harry had no word for this sweet agony. The pain kept him in a death grip, clearing his head, wiping away any coherent thought, and chained him to the moment.

"Ow..."

It hurt to move, it hurt to breathe. Instead, he focused on Tom taking complete ownership of him. His rough hands were everywhere, his mouth was sucking and biting on Harry's skin—uncontrolled and unsteady—and his every action pushed at his mind. He started moving inside him in long strokes. His energy was intoxicating and consuming, and it made him doubt there was any being on this planet he couldn't seduce. Tom paused and Harry panted. Gently, Tom whispered in his ear,

"You will take it for me, won't you?"

Harry murmured, out of breath,

"An..anything. Just don't make me go away, Tom. Promise me you won't."

Tom slipped out slowly, then pushed in once more. When Tom slid a hand along the backside of his thigh, Harry exhaled a high-pitched whine. He felt like his brain had short-circuited. He was ticklish and supersensitive, and his skin wouldn't quit breaking out in goosebumps. The euphoria was beginning to flood him. His cock strained uncomfortably, but before he could do anything about it, Tom reached for it and whispered between thrusts,

"Look how hard you are."

His touch wasn't enough. He wasn't stroking or rubbing him, he was just ghosting his fingers alongside it, tracing the ridges, and it was driving Harry to tears if he didn't give him more. Tom cupped his balls gently and fondled them as if he was getting to know them. Harry whimpered. He bucked into him, back and forth, rolling his hips,

"Please, Tom!"

Tom thrust harder and Harry moaned,

"Patience."

He drove in hard and deep and set a faster pace. Then...as soon as Harry was shaking and pleading, he slowed down and chuckled darkly when Harry accused him of enjoying his misery.

"Or maybe I love hearing you beg for me."

Harry moaned.

"Or maybe both...Oh...yes, right there, please don't stop, please, please."

Harry begged shamelessly,

"I want you so much."

Tom shuddered and held him tighter to him, and his movements picked up more speed. Harry could feel how tense he was. It was so hot.

"You feel incredible."

Harry flushed all over, and then he gave him exactly what he'd begged for. He fisted his cock and swiped his thumb over the slit, then stroked him firmly and expertly. Harry's breathing hitched, and he went rigid.

"Please, please, please,"

Harry heard myself chant breathlessly.

"So good, Tom, so good, ohhh..."

Harry gasped as Tom hit a different angle, and he almost came right there.

"I think that's it."

Tom kept hitting that spot, and his upper body inched away a bit,

"Tom, I'm..."

Harry mumbled like a drunk. The orgasm was coming at him from every direction, and he couldn't turn away from it.

"I'm, I'm..."

"I've got you. You can come."

Harry was already gone. He came and let the tremors shake him up. His ears rang, and Tom thrust into him brutally through his climax. Through the rushing sound, Harry heard Tom's gritty curses and how he was going to come inside him, how much he wanted him...

Harry was a whimpering, squirming, sweaty, and thoroughly used by the time Tom slammed in once more and came inside him. His hand was still rubbing his cock, coating him in his come, causing Harry to squirm more. He'd stopped breathing. Tom continued to rock lazily.

Harry couldn't have asked for anything better than the silence that followed. Tom didn't let go of him; if anything, he hugged him to his chest impossibly hard. The soreness was already making itself known, but it only made Harry smile sleepily. It was perfect. Harry hoped Tom would stay inside him all night. And maybe wake him up and have sex with him some more.

Chapter 56

When he stepped into the room, Harry stretched his limbs out and blinked at him through mostly lidded eyes.

"Is it morning?"

The sunlight streaming in through the French doors should have given that away. Harry looked perfect, his raven black locks were all messed up and his cheeks had a healthy glow to them. His naked body was only partially covered by the silk sheets and it was a gorgeous sight.

"For some definition... it is still early, though. Sleep if you need to."

Harry pressed his face into the pillow and groaned.

"I didn't dream it up, did I? You're real, right? Last night was real, right?"

Harry sounded half asleep and Tom chuckled and crawled back into his side of the bed.

"It was all real."

Once he was in arm's reach, Harry grabbed him and snuggled against his chest.

"Want you inside me."

Harry's limbs were loose and pliant with sleep. A dance of electricity cascaded over Tom's skin and he pushed a lock of hair out of Harry's eyes.

"You're half asleep."

Though, there was something to be said for having sex with a needy, sleepy partner.

"Am not."

And if to prove the point, he licked Tom's nipple.

Lightning spread to his brains and cock. Tom arched against Harry,

"Harry."

Harry pressed a series of kisses down the center of Tom's chest.

"Please, Tom."

Harry pleaded so prettily. It was so difficult to resist him. Tom pulled him up, took his mouth in a rough kiss, and rolled him onto his back. When Harry moaned and squirmed beneath him, he relented.

"I guess you *are* awake."

He ground against Harry. Sleep still clung to Harry, but his cheeks were flushed and he was hard against Tom,

"Told you."

So, he had. Tom stole another kiss before reaching over to the nightstand. Didn't take long to grab the lube, nor to press against Harry's entrance. When Tom slid into him, Harry relaxed, rolled his head back and moaned out,

"Oh...Tom..."

Hot, tight, and yet so pliant. He hadn't expected Harry to love sex so much. Then again, it was the one time Harry could let go of everything that had happened to him. Those beautiful emerald green eyes, so warm and needy, Harry urged Tom on with whispers and murmurs and groans from kiss-swollen lips. It seemed Harry was addicted to him...Just like he wanted him to be. Tom pushed deep and withdrew slowly, before rocking in again. Didn't take too many strokes before they found a rhythm that left them both gasping and breathless.

He could do this every day.... Claim Harry. Watch his flushed cheeks and neck grow redder, feel Harry's nails bite into his back. Listen to his gasps and moans. Breathe in his scent,

"Like this?"

Harry pulled him down until they were lip to lip,

"Love this."

He paused, and there was moisture rimming Harry's eyes. Tom kissed him as he continued to move inside Harry slow and soft until Harry's kisses turned into bites. He quickened the rhythm until he plowed into Harry hard and fast and they both grappled with each other.

Harry shook under his thrusts, his grip on Tom's arms almost painful.

"More."

He said the word through gritted teeth.

"Don't want to think...want only you."

Take Harry out of his mind? That was a challenge he would accept. He pulled out,

"On your hands and knees."

Harry groaned, but complied.

"Trust me."

He pressed his hand just below Harry's neck.

"Shoulders on the mattress."

A whimper this time. Tom stroked himself. Such a lovely sight...Harry squirming, hips in the air. With his free hand, he traced fingers over Harry's arched back. He added a bit more lube before thrusting inside Harry. Harry panted and melted against the bed,

"Tom..."

He gripped Harry's hips and picked up speed,

"Do you like this?"

Harry moaned the words.

"Yeah...Oh...Tom...So good."

For him too. He had an inkling about what got Harry off but he had to check first. Tom gathered Harry's wrists together, pulled them to the small of his back, and held them there. A hitch in Harry's breathing and another whimper. He slowed his strokes, letting Harry flex and shudder under him.

"Is this okay?"

An exhale and a whisper.

"Yeah. It's...yeah."

Tom didn't miss the little hint of wonder there. He pushed in deep.

"Good. Right now, you have one job."

He leaned down as close to Harry's head as he could manage,

"Forget everything, relax and breathe."

Another groan, but he saw Harry smile. Tom straightened then drove furiously into Harry, over and over until they were both groaning and moaning. Harry begged for more and more and more.

Harry was hot and tight and *perfect*. Those moans of "please" and "yes" and "Tom" were music playing along Tom's every nerve. Each stroke rocked them both and Tom's blood burned with need. He closed his eyes and focused on the way Harry clenched around him, the timbre of breath and the pitch of his cries. Wrists shifting as Harry clenched and unclenched his hands in Tom's grip.

He was so close to heaven, but he pushed back against the crashing tide. Before he could reach his free hand under to touch Harry's cock... Harry shuddered and tensed all around him.

"Oh...Tom..."

All the warning he had before Harry was yelling and coming and tighter than he'd ever been before. No hope of holding off his own orgasm. Tom rammed into Harry, riding the wave of pleasure until he was blinded by light behind his eyes. He pumped his hips, buried himself in Harry, and spilled every last bit of himself. They both collapsed onto the mattress.

Somewhere along the line, he'd let go of Harry's wrists. Good. He couldn't think through the spinning of his head to do much more than press kisses to Harry's back. After ages, or a few minutes, Harry sighed happily,

"This is definitely real."

Tom managed a chuckle...and pulled out of Harry,

"It's as real as it gets, my prince. You're mine in every sense of the word."

"I've never..."

Harry stopped and huffed a laugh.

"I've never felt this good before or happy before."

Tom pressed a kiss to Harry's neck,

"Maybe that's because you were too busy fighting me before."

Harry laughed and rotated to face Tom, all limbs, flushed skin, and smile,

"You're amazing, Tom."

He propped himself up and leaned over to kiss Harry,

"Harry, you can have all the happiness in the world when I have taken over it."

Harry's smile fell away and he sank against the pillow

"Be with me and just let me be with you."

Tom stole another kiss,

"As if I will ever let you go... You just need to be a little patient."

He'd hold fast to Harry. He never intended to let him go. After all, Harry had a vital part to play in the grand scheme of things.

"I'll be right back."

He rolled out of bed. By the time he came back, Harry's eyes were closed and his limbs loose. He chuckled and pulled the covers up. Harry stirred and cracked a lid,

"Sorry. I'm..."

It was easy enough to plant a kiss that shut Harry up,

"It's not even eight yet. Sleep in, Love. You'll need it."

"Mmm..."

And that was all Harry managed before sleep caught him. Tom found a pair of grey trousers, donned them, and left Harry to sleep off the sex and exhaustion.

Harry's conscience while subdued, was still killing him. Tom tasted it in Harry's desperate need for oblivion and felt it in the thinness of his body. It was going to be fine. Harry was going to be fine. He was already starting to do so well. A fresh wave of excitement rolled over him as he thought about his plans. Yes...it was all coming together so nicely.

Chapter 57

Harry woke up a few hours later feeling unusually refreshed. He was happy...way too happy. But he was terrified as well. What if this didn't last? Nothing that gave him happiness ever lasted...what if this met the same fate? He rolled over and buried his face in the pillow. Last night was as real as things got. They'd had sex again. Harry couldn't help but smile into the pillow. A warm hand on his back made him hum with delight,

"Are you properly awake now?"

Harry nodded and Tom pressed a kiss to the nape of his neck,

"Shower first and then breakfast."

Harry turned over and faced Tom. Tom's lips were curled into a soft smile,

"Just one kiss first?"

Tom bent down and kissed Harry's lips tenderly. Pulling away he spoke,

"Better?"

Harry smiled and spoke,

"More than just better."

Tom straightened up,

"Go and get showered, Harry"

Harry sat up straight. He quickly became aware of his nakedness and pulled the sheet up to his chest unconsciously. Tom chuckled softly and handed him a dressing gown. Harry pulled it on quickly and realized he was blushing. Tom smoothed a hand over his cheek,

"You should know that there is no need for you to be shy around me."

Harry rose to his feet slowly,

"I know...just can't help it..."

Tom rubbed his back and then steered him towards the bathroom,

"I never want to let you out of my sight...The thoughts that I have about you would probably scare you."

Harry looked up, his emerald eyes glimmering with mischief,

"Scare me, Tom."

Tom growled and nipped Harry's upper lip,

"You're terrible for my self-control."

He pushed him into the bathroom.

A few minutes later, Harry emerged from the bathroom wrapped up in a bathrobe. Tom had changed at some point because now he was dressed up in a pair of pants and a casual black button-up. He was a sight to behold and Harry never wanted to look away. Tom signaled towards the bed. Harry realized that Tom had picked out an outfit for him. It was a pair of black dress robes that seemed a little too expensive,

"The Malfoys shall be holding a Christmas ball today. You should wear those."

Harry picked up the robes and felt the luxurious materials between his fingers,

"Will you be there?"

Tom nodded but Harry knew that they wouldn't be able to interact at the ball...Appearances to maintain and all that...

He dressed up in the robes and looked at himself in the mirror. The robes were tailor-made for his body because of the way they fit. They clung to his slender frame till his waist and from there, they flowed freely down to his ankles. An elaborately designed silver clasp was the only thing that fastened them together.

Tom grinned brightly as he stepped out of the bathroom to reveal the outfit before he made his way towards him,

"Maybe you shouldn't wear these to the ball after all."

Harry frowned,

"Why not? Don't I look good?"

Tom laughed softly and caressed his cheek,

"You look a little too good. Only I should be allowed to see you like this, my prince."

Harry laughed softly,

"How about you lock me up somewhere so only you can see me?"

Harry arched his neck and Tom kissed it,

"Don't tempt me, Harry."

Harry looked into Tom's brown eyes but there wasn't any humor there. He knew Tom was perfectly capable of it and maybe the thought of being locked away would have bothered him

before, but now, it no longer affected him. In fact, he craved it. He wanted Tom to lock him away. Tom brushed his hair away from his forehead and Harry whispered,

“I’d do anything to be yours, Tom.”

Tom pulled him into a hug,

“You are already mine, my prince.”

Harry melted into the embrace. They remained like that for a while and then Tom pulled him to the bed and sat him down,

“Breakfast. You need to eat, Harry.”

Tom conjured a tray laden with all manners of breakfast items and Harry felt his appetite increase. It felt good to want to eat again. He’d started to think that his appetite was dead forever.

Tom poured a generous amount of syrup on his pancakes and inquired softly,

“Why haven’t you been eating, Harry?”

Harry looked down at the tray as he decided on what he wanted to eat when Tom tsked before cutting a bite out of the pancakes and bringing the fork to his lips. Harry opened his mouth instinctively before accepting the sugary sweet goodness.

“I meant at Hogwarts, Harry... You’ve grown so thin.”

Harry twisted his hands in his lap nervously and Tom spoke again,

“You need to understand that you are mine, which means that you are obligated to take care of yourself whenever I am unable to do so.”

Harry accepted another bite of the pancakes and chewed on it thoughtfully as he contemplated what to say,

“I didn’t feel like I was yours, Tom. When I woke up in my bedroom that day, I thought that you’d had enough of me. I’d thought that I would never see you again. It was more painful than anything I’ve ever felt. It was the worst form of torture and I had to bear that every single day.”

Tom set the plate down and pulled him into an embrace,

“What about now? Do you still doubt my ownership over you?”

Harry shook his head before replying,

“I don’t doubt it...I belong to you...I’ve learnt that I belong right here, by your side because this is the only place where I’m at peace.”

Tom smoothed his fingers through his hair,

“Yes, you do, my prince.”

Chapter 58

The ballroom was lit up and shining like a medieval vision of heaven. A small collection of death eaters, all of them masked, the men aloof and interchangeable in sleek black dress robes, the women aloof and marginally less interchangeable in their glamorous gowns, were chatting up with each other and laughing.

Harry felt slightly dizzy. Too much light glinting on too many surfaces. He felt horribly out of place in that gleaming white gallery, among the beautifully dressed people. A caterer with the tray of champagne paused beside him and Harry picked up a flute just to have something to do with his hands.

A few death eaters greeted him as he made his way through the crowd. He politely greeted them back. Not knowing what to do, how to behave, or what to say. This was too much. He found a quiet corner and leaning against the pillar, he took a sip from his flute.

Where was Sirius? He understood that this was difficult for him. These were the very people he'd left his family for and now he was back amongst them, but Sirius needed to accept that these were the people that had saved him. If they hadn't helped him escape, he'd still be locked up in Azkaban. Bella had said that she would help convince Sirius to behave himself. He really didn't want Tom to torture him. He knew he wouldn't be able to stand it.

Tom wasn't here yet, which was extremely disappointing for him. He knew he'd seen him just this morning but somehow, it felt like months had passed since he'd heard his voice or felt his touch.

This was not going to work if he kept acting like a love-drunk teen. Tom expected a lot from him and he wouldn't disappoint him.

Harry noticed a masked woman dressed up in an elegant black dressing gown saunter towards him and he was pretty sure, he knew who she was,

"Sugar, you look absolutely ravishing."

She pulled the mask away from her face and leaned in to press a kiss to his cheek,

"You look good too."

Bella scoffed as she pulled away,

"That's the blandest compliment I've received all evening. What's the matter, Harry?"

Harry ran his gaze around the crowd and Bella gripped his chin gently,

"You don't feel comfortable here?"

Harry ran his fingers through his hair before speaking,

“I don’t know how to act or behave here.”

Bella smirked,

“That’s what’s bothering you?”

Harry nodded and Bella laughed before conjuring a mask and adjusting it on his face,

“There you go...Now you can be yourself.”

Harry watched as she put her own mask back in place and took his hand before leading him through the crowd. He felt more involved as he watched Bella interact with all the other death eaters. It made him feel less of an outsider.

There was another thing that he noticed. Most of the death eaters held a certain level of fear for Bella. She seemed to hold quite the reputation for being insanely violent but that wasn’t the impression he got, whenever he was around her.

He was drinking his second flute of champagne when Lucius inquired,

“I hope Bellatrix is helping you settle in.”

Harry nodded and Bella patted him on the shoulder,

“I’m taking good care of him, don’t you worry your pretty little head, Lucius.”

Harry couldn’t help but inquire,

“Where’s Sirius? I haven’t seen him around.”

Bella sighed,

“He’s being stubborn. It’s better that he’s not here tonight.”

Just as Harry was about to inquire where he was, Harry felt him before he saw him. And a hushed silence fell all around him as Tom appeared in the middle of the ballroom, dressed in plain black robes that seemed ordinary at first but when he moved, Harry felt utterly mesmerized by the iridescent show of colors as the light bounced off them. His heart twisted itself into a knot so tight and tender he could hardly breathe. It took him all his effort to hold on to the flute.

The death eaters gathered around him in a neat circle and Harry watched as Tom ran his gaze over each and every one of them until his gaze collided with his and Harry could practically feel the way Tom saw all the way down to his very soul. Harry was glad for the mask that covered his face because he couldn’t help but blush at the intensity of Tom’s gaze. At that moment, he knew that no one else could ever make him feel, the way Tom made him feel. The connection he felt to Tom had only grown stronger last night and now, when they looked into each other’s eyes, Harry could feel like there was a bridge between their souls.

It was Lucius’s voice that made Tom look away from him,

“My Lord, grant us the permission to formally commence the ball?”

Tom’s wand appeared in his hand and he raised it to the sky before a shower of green and silver sparks fell on top of all of them,

“Permission granted.”

Harry watched as Tom gracefully moved to the front of the ballroom where a large throne had already been placed for him.

Music filled the air without effort, like the waves filling holes in the beach sand, the sound rushing in and around every person in the room. Some reacted to the rhythm while others continued to chatter,

“We should dance.”

Ignoring his protests, Bella grabbed his hand and began dragging him towards the center of the ballroom where quite a few death eaters were already gathered in couples and dancing and swaying to the beat of the music. Harry couldn’t help but remember the time, he’d danced with Tom in the kitchen. The way Tom had maneuvered his body so expertly even though he hadn’t known the first thing about dancing.

He could almost feel his face burrowed in the crook of his neck and smell his wonderful distinct scent. His fantasy vanished into thin air when Bella wrapped an arm around his waist and took his other hand in hers,

“I really don’t know how to dance.”

Bella laughed softly,

“Me neither. That’s why this is so fun.”

Before Harry could say another word, he felt Bella twirl him around and Harry felt that he had no choice but to go along with it.

All through the dance, he felt Tom’s gaze burning into him and he couldn’t dare to look in his direction. Several times he tried to feign exhaustion but Bella was having none of his excuses and it felt like hours before the music stopped and Bella let go of him.

Moving towards one of the secluded corners of the ballroom, he chanced a glance towards where Tom was supposed to be seated and realized that the throne was empty.

That puzzled him but before he could comprehend where Tom had gone, he collided into someone hard enough to knock his mask off.

Chapter 59

Moving towards one of the secluded corners of the ballroom, he chanced a glance towards where Tom was supposed to be seated and realized that the throne was empty.

That puzzled him but before he could comprehend where Tom had gone, he collided into someone hard enough to knock his mask off.

“I’m s...”

He broke off in midsentence when he realized who he’d collided with. He felt Tom’s hands on his shoulders, steadying him after the collision and the touch along with the proximity unsettled him. But he regained his composure soon enough and spoke,

“I’m so sorry, My Lord.”

He was about to take a step back when Tom’s hold tightened on his shoulders,

“You should be more aware of your surroundings, Harry.”

The music had stopped, and an eerie silence surrounded them as the Death Eaters watched the proceeding with bated breaths. Harry could feel himself panicking because he didn’t know what to do. He couldn’t look up into Tom’s eyes to read his intentions because that would come off as defiance and Tom wouldn’t let him step back either,

“I’ll be more careful in the future, My Lord.”

Tom made a thoughtful sound,

“Maybe you will, but perhaps I should punish you just to be certain that you will never forget.”

Harry bowed his head,

“I’m yours to do with as you please, My Lord.”

Tom released his shoulders and conjured the mask back over his face,

“A dance might suffice.”

Harry was glad that the mask was back over his face because he didn’t know how to hide his sentiments,

“A dance, My Lord?”

Tom extended his hand,

“A dance.”

Harry could feel his palms sweating as he nervously raised his hand and took Tom's. This was different from when they were alone. Surely, Tom didn't want his death eaters to know about the relationship they shared. But then why was Tom doing this? It seemed reckless. It would surely raise a lot of questions. Had his dance with Bella incited him to do this? Tom wasn't the type of man that would get jealous...Or was he?

The music started playing again and Tom pulled him in closer as the Death Eaters cleared the dance floor for them,

"There is no need to be nervous, Harry."

This was definitely a punishment. He shook his head slightly as Tom began to lead him through the dance steps,

"I'm not nervous, My Lord."

Tom spun him on the spot and Harry could do nothing but follow his lead. Tom leaned in closer and breathed against his ear,

"I knew it was a horrible idea to let you wear those robes. They have been nothing but terrible for my self-restraint this evening."

Harry's lips tingled with the urge to kiss Tom's possessiveness away, but he couldn't...not now...not in front of all these people. Tom maneuvered his body to take a double reverse spin and Harry was left in awe of his dance skills. Well, it shouldn't surprise him. Tom was absolutely perfect in every way possible.

The song was beginning to wind down and Tom gently whispered against his ear,

"I know what you crave, Harry. Those lips of yours are just begging to be taken."

Tom paused and Harry felt his hand on his waist descend lower to his hip before he continued in a hushed murmur,

"No one should touch you other than me... Is that understood?"

Harry nodded his head silently because he didn't trust his voice. The possessiveness in Tom's voice lit a fire inside him that was scorching him alive with desire from the inside out. He didn't trust his body either so when the music faded away, Harry took a cautious step away from Tom,

"You certainly know how to dance, Harry."

Harry lowered his gaze in diffidence,

"I was merely following your lead, My Lord."

Tom laughed jubilantly. It wasn't his real laugh. It wasn't the one that caused butterflies to flutter in his stomach every time he heard it. It was his Dark Lord laugh,

“The two things that I expect from all my Death Eaters are loyalty and obedience. You have proven that you possess both of those qualities and I find it admirable for someone as young as you.”

Harry could feel himself blushing at how openly Tom was praising. He just hoped he didn't garner any jealousy from Tom's followers,

“I will never disappoint you, My Lord.”

Tom spoke,

“I am certain that you will not. Come and sit with me. I wish to have a word with you.”

Tom began making his way back towards his throne and Harry followed suit. Once Tom had settled down on his throne, he snapped his fingers and the music started playing again. The Death Eaters took that as permission to reclaim the dance floor and the dancing began anew.

Harry was standing in front of Tom and staring at Tom's lap longingly. Tom conjured a chair for him and cast a privacy barrier all around them,

“Oh, my prince. That is where you truly belong and that is where I wish to have you, but we do have appearances to keep.”

Harry sat down in the chair and looked around,

“They can see us, but they can't hear us, right?”

Tom nodded imperceptibly and Harry sighed,

“You know I didn't want to dance with Bella. She was just trying to make me feel included.”

Tom conjured two glasses of champagne and handed him one,

“You will be included, My Prince. Once my plans are set in motion, you will play a pivotal role in my victory and when I have conquered the magical world, I will claim you as mine publicly.”

Harry took a sip of the sweet bubbly liquid, but it felt bitter on his tongue. He knew that would take a long time and until then he would have to play the part of the boy who lived. The thought of pretending to be someone he no longer was, just absolutely wrecked him with terror. He wasn't sure he could keep up that façade any longer. What if he broke?

“I know what you are feeling, Harry. I know how difficult it must be for you, but I also know that you will not break. You will endure this for me.”

Harry could only nod silently as he wiped the moisture from his eyes. What else could he possibly do other than endure? That was what he'd always done... But before Tom, he had always imagined that he'd kill or be killed by Voldemort or his followers, and now... Now he had something beautiful to look forward to and maybe it would be enough to keep him going.

“I just want this to be over, Tom. I want peace. I want quiet. I just want to be someplace; I can be alone with you. Is that too much to ask for?”

He downed the rest of his champagne in one as Tom breathed,

“It is not, and you will have that and so much more when this is over.”

When this is over... Harry hoped and prayed that it was over quickly. He hoped and prayed that Tom got his victory and that quenched his thirst for absolute power because only then would he get what he wanted. The fulfillment of his desires was now directly tied in with Tom's. If Tom failed... Everything would fall apart. Therefore, he had to ensure that whatever role, Tom wanted him to play, he would play it to perfection. He needed to ensure Tom's victory because only then would he get his.

Chapter 60

Harry closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath as he mustered the strength to go through this again. His eyes brimmed with tears as he recalled how hard it had been to let go of Tom before he'd had to leave for King's Cross. It had felt like he would never get the chance to see him again and just the thought of that left him in excruciating pain. But this time, Tom had held him and comforted him that he would see him again very soon. Tom had said that it was important for him to return to Hogwarts in order for Tom's plans to advance. The sooner Tom took over Hogwarts, the sooner they'd be reunited.

"You didn't tell us about your Christmas, Harry?"

Harry let out an internal sigh. He didn't have the fortitude to deal with Ron and Hermione at the moment, but he had to blend in. He had to act normal. He had to act like he hadn't left his heart in Tom's hands. Harry faked a grin as he spoke,

"The Dursleys gifted me Dudley's old socks, so it wasn't a complete waste."

Ron patted him on the shoulder consolingly,

"Mum was seriously mad at me when she heard you were spending the Christmas at the Dursley's. She didn't let me rest through the entire holidays."

Harry pretended to laugh, and Hermione spoke,

"You're starting to seem better, Harry. Maybe, it was a good decision for you to spend the holidays with your relatives."

Harry turned his attention to her and spoke,

"Yeah, I'm starting to feel better. After Cedric's death, I just felt so disconnected from everything. I barely felt alive but now, I'm starting to feel normal again."

Hermione smiled as she took his hand in hers,

"I'm glad to hear that, Harry. I was concerned that you would not be able to perform well on your OWLs."

Harry forced himself to smile but he knew there weren't going to be any OWLs this year if Tom had his way and he was certain that Tom would have his way. Still, he'd use that excuse whenever he needed some solitude because he was fairly certain that he couldn't pretend to be someone he wasn't all the time.

The train ride drained him more than he'd thought possible. Keeping up appearances was exhausting work, but he had to do it for Tom's sake. All through the carriage ride and dinner, he acted as lively as he possibly could. Only when he was in the safety of his four-poster bed, with the curtains tightly drawn, did he give himself the opportunity to break down? He'd

slept with Tom in his bed, every night for the past week and now laying alone, he felt so cold. Wrapping his arms around himself, he burrowed his head in the covers and allowed the thoughts of Tom holding him, touching him, kissing him, and making love to him, lull him into sleep.

He wasn't sure what he'd been dreaming about before but he felt the shift as the dream changed. His body felt smooth, powerful, and flexible. He was gliding between shining metal bars, across dark, cold stone ... he was flat against the floor, sliding along on his belly ... it was dark, yet he could see objects around him shimmering in strange, vibrant colors... he was turning his head ... at first glance the corridor was empty ... but no ... a man was sitting on the floor ahead, his chin drooping on to his chest, his outline gleaming in the dark ... Harry put out his tongue ... he tasted the man's scent on the air ... he was alive but drowsy ... sitting guard in front of a door ... Harry longed to bite the man ... but he must master the impulse ... he had more important work to do ...

But the man was stirring and soon enough he jumped to his feet; and Harry saw his vibrant, blurred outline towering above him, saw a wand withdrawn from a belt ... he had no choice ... he reared high from the floor and struck once, twice, three times, plunging his fangs deeply into the man's flesh, feeling his ribs splinter beneath his jaws, feeling the warm gush of blood ... The man was yelling in pain ... then he fell silent ... he slumped backwards against the wall ... blood was splattering onto the floor ... His forehead hurt terribly ... it was aching fit to burst ...

“Harry! HARRY!”

He opened his eyes. Every inch of his body was covered in icy sweat; his bed covers were twisted all around him like a straitjacket; he felt as though a white-hot poker were being applied to his forehead. “Harry!”

Ron was standing over him looking extremely frightened. There were more figures at the foot of Harry's bed. He clutched his head in his hands; the pain was blinding him ... he rolled right over and vomited over the edge of the mattress,

“He's really ill,”

said a scared voice,

“Should we call someone?”

More shouting,

“Harry! Harry!”

Taking great gulps of air, Harry pushed himself up in bed, willing himself not to throw up again, the pain half-blinding him. He needed to understand what was happening. The pain in his forehead was subsiding slightly, though he was still sweating and shivering feverishly. He retched again and Ron leaped backward out of the way.

“Harry, you're not well.”

“I’m fine!”

Harry choked, wiping his mouth on his pajamas and shaking uncontrollably. There were too many questions racing through his mind... There were just too many thoughts and his mind felt ready enough to explode with the pain. Whether one minute passed or ten, Harry did not know; he simply sat there shaking, feeling the pain recede very slowly from his scar.

The pain in his scar could only mean that this had something to do with Tom. The last time he’d had dreams such as this had been last year but after that, the dreams had stopped. So, why were they starting again now?

Another thing that he’d noticed was that this was different than any of the other dreams he’d experienced. All the other time’s he’d experienced them from Tom’s point of view. He couldn’t understand how he’d experienced this from the point of view of the snake. It was almost like he’d been the snake.

And that man... That man was probably bleeding out and dying somewhere but he didn’t who or where he was. He didn’t know how to help him. He wasn’t even sure he wanted to help him.

He buried his face in his hands and Ron inquired timidly,

“Are you okay, Mate?”

Harry nodded silently. He just wanted to be left alone so that he could focus on his thoughts and attempt to disentangle them.

Chapter 61

Harry found himself extremely nettled in the days that followed the nightmare he'd had. He couldn't make sense of what had happened or how it had happened. He recalled the times; he'd had nightmares last year but they'd been nothing like this one. In all the previous nightmares he'd had, he'd seen what Tom had been doing. This time, he'd been inside the snake. It was almost as if he'd been the snake.

"Harry... You're not eating."

Harry snapped out of his thoughts and looked down at his plate dispassionately. He had no real appetite for food, and he hadn't been getting much sleep either. He was certain that it was starting to show. Taking a deep breath, he picked up his fork and began turning the mashed potatoes over on his plate. Hermione sighed,

"You know you can talk to me about what you saw, right?"

Harry dropped the fork with a clatter and spoke,

"There's nothing to talk about."

Hermione, being the relentless interrogator as she was continued,

"It's quite obvious that you are disturbed by it. You haven't been eating... Ron told me that you barely sleep."

Harry resisted the urge to snap at her and exercised every inch of his willpower to stay calm and reply in an even tone,

"I'm fine. Just don't worry about me, Hermione."

Hermione looked like she wanted to say something but Ron's hand on her shoulder was probably what stopped her. Harry took that as his cue to leave and pushed away his plate before getting up and walking out of the Great Hall. He was just making his way to the library when Draco's voice forced him to halt,

"Potter..."

Harry turned around and eyed a very nervous-looking Draco Malfoy standing in the middle of the corridor. Draco pointed towards a door and spoke,

"Can we talk?"

Harry nodded and Draco walked towards the door and pushed it open to reveal a vacant classroom. Harry stepped in and watched as Draco closed the door and turned to face him. Harry crossed his arms over his chest and demanded,

"Well... What do you want to talk about?"

Draco's gaze moved away from him, and Harry noticed that he was staring at someone that was probably standing right behind him. Harry turned around and came face to face with Snape.

Harry wondered what this was about. Because the last time he'd talked to Draco, he'd invited him over for Christmas on Tom's order. Maybe this had something to do with Tom as well. He knew Snape had been a death eater. He'd seen his mark with his own eyes last year. But Snape hadn't been present at Tom's resurrection. Could it be possible that Snape had re-joined Tom's ranks?

Snape's mouth was pursed into a tight line, and he had a severe expression on his face. When it became apparent that Snape wasn't going to say anything, Harry spoke,

"Would any of you mind telling me what this is about?"

Snape's expression soured further, and he spoke through clenched teeth,

"Why would the Dark Lord allow an imprudent brat like you into his inner circle, Potter?"

Harry couldn't stop the grin that lit up his face,

"That's probably because I proved my loyalty to him."

Snape made a thoughtful sound as he stepped closer to him,

"Yes... That is the part that intrigues me, Potter. How can you be loyal to the man who murdered your parents?"

Harry had heard that question enough times already and he was so sick of it. It frustrated him that he couldn't tell the world that he'd fallen in love with Tom,

"That is none of your concern."

Snape was about to speak when Draco spoke up,

"Professor Snape, we should tell Potter why he's here. It's not safe for us to prolong this."

Snape nodded curtly and produced an envelope from inside his robes,

"This is for you."

Harry turned the envelope over in his hand and inquired,

"Is this from him?"

Snape simply nodded so Harry pushed the envelope in his pocket and asked,

"Have you really re-joined him then?"

Snape turned away from him,

“That is none of your concern, Potter.”

Harry walked around him so that he was standing right in front of him,

“It clearly is. I need to know if I can trust you.”

Snape sighed before gritting out,

“Yes, you can trust me.”

Harry turned his attention to Draco,

“Is there something else?”

Draco nodded,

“There’s a room in the castle. It’s called the Room of Requirement. You’ll need it when you’ll be following the instructions in that letter. I think The Dark Lord might have written down the instructions on how to find it for you.”

Harry was already itching to read the letter and since it didn’t seem like there was anything left to be said, he walked out of the classroom and straight to the common room. He was certain that there would be no one to bother him in the dormitory at this time of day so that was the perfect place to read the letter.

Once he was safely seated on his bed, he pulled the envelope out and opened it with the utmost care before retrieving the parchment inside it. He could smell Tom’s scent on the parchment. In his mind, he could almost see him as he’d written this letter. Taking a deep breath, he started reading

Harry,

I have been informed that you have not been taking care of yourself despite my clear instructions on the matter and that has disappointed me immensely. Your disregard for your personal well-being has led me to believe that you are incapable of looking after yourself. Since Severus has re-joined my ranks, I have given him the responsibility to look after you. I expect you to visit him at the schedule he delegates. That being said, I have a task for you. There is a very special room in the castle, which can only be discovered by someone who is in need. It is located on the seventh floor, opposite a tapestry showing Barnabas the Barmy trying to teach trolls to dance the ballet. To make the Room appear, a person must walk past the section of blank wall three times concentrating hard on what is needed. There is a vanishing cabinet in that room that provides a doorway between Hogwarts and Knockturn Alley, but as it turns out, it is broken. I need you to repair it. Draco and Severus will assist you in that task. I know you will not disappoint me further. If you feel the need to contact me, write to me in the journal. I always wonder why you haven’t written to me in that journal when I provided you with it specifically for this purpose. All further communication between us will take place through that journal. I do hope you have not misplaced it I look forward to hearing from you.

Which journal was Tom talking about? It took him a minute to remember but when he did, it struck him like lightning. He jumped off the bed and began frantically rummaging through his trunk. He clearly recalled that he'd put it here somewhere. He found the journal at the very bottom of the trunk, nestled in his invisibility cloak and Marauder's map.

He took it out and stared at it for a while as he damned Lucius for not telling him what the journal was for. He'd had the means to contact Tom all this time and he hadn't used it once. He placed the journal on the bed and pulled out the marauder's map.

It was obvious that Tom wanted a way to infiltrate the castle and so far, he'd come up with a broken vanishing cabinet. Maybe he could give him something a lot better than that.

Chapter 62

Harry was leaning back against the headboard with his eyes closed as his lips curved into a smile. He caressed the spine of the journal lovingly as he replayed all the conversations he'd had with Tom over the past couple of weeks. He was so close to finally being with him because the plans to infiltrate and take over Hogwarts were coming together so nicely.

He'd sent the Marauder's Map to Tom along with the instructions on how to operate it and Tom had been using it to shape his plans. Harry suspected that it would take a week more for the plans to be finalized and then all of this would be over. He wouldn't have to pretend to be someone he wasn't anymore. It would all be so simple.

Ever since he'd reconnected with Tom through the journal, he'd been much happier and a lot more cheerful. Even acting normal around everyone didn't feel like that much of a chore anymore. The reason behind that was probably his upcoming reunion with Tom and he absolutely couldn't wait for it.

He wanted to feel Tom's arms around him again. He wanted to feel his lips against his skin. He wanted to look into his eyes and tell him everything he felt for him.

He was pulled off his train of thought by a light blue glow emanating from the journal. His smile widened as he opened it and found a single line written in a thin serpentine font on the first page,

"Still awake, my Prince?"

Harry picked up the quill and jotted down quickly,

"I was waiting for you."

For a moment, there was no reply and then another stream of text appeared underneath his,

"Yes, I must admit I got a bit delayed by Bellatrix."

Harry felt a slight twinge of jealousy at that which he knew was definitely misplaced because Bellatrix had nothing but an angel towards him, but he couldn't help it. It bothered him that all those people were close to Tom. They could see him, talk to him, kiss his feet, and touch him while he was trapped here in this castle. He ached to have those privileges.

"I know what you feel, Harry."

Harry blinked at the sentence as he hated himself for feeling something so petty,

"I don't mean to... It just happens."

He'd told Tom all about the nightmare he'd had, and Tom had told him all about what had truly happened. He had possessed Nagini to infiltrate the ministry and carry out the attack. The man he'd called had been guarding the Department of Mysteries at the Ministry of Magic

and Tom had wanted to acquire something from there...A weapon of sorts, he'd stated. But after Harry had informed him about what he'd seen, Tom had become more mindful of his emotions and feelings, and he'd said that he would investigate the matter further when they were together again.

"I adore the fact that you are so possessive about me, My prince."

Harry felt his grin return as he wrote down,

"Aren't you possessive about me too?"

There was a pause and then,

"You have no idea."

Harry was in a mood to be playful,

"Well, what if I wanted an idea?"

He could almost hear Tom chuckle in his mind,

"I will certainly kill anyone in the most painful way imaginable if they ever think of touching you. You are mine in every possible way and no one else can have you now."

Harry tapped the quill against his lips as his stomach filled with the butterflies and his heart fluttered in his chest,

"I know, Tom. I am yours."

Tom's reply came a second later,

"Your joy is contagious right now."

Harry felt his curiosity pique,

"Can you really feel it?"

Tom wrote down,

"I can feel it when you feel something intensely. I believe the same is true for you... You feel it when I feel something intensely. It is a connection that I had felt but was not aware of until you described your nightmare to me. I wish to explore it further as soon as I have you in my arms."

Harry chewed on his lower lip as he wrote,

"Is that the first thing you're going to do when you have me in your arms?"

Tom's reply was instantaneous,

“Of course not. The research will have to wait because I intend to ravage you as soon as I see you again.”

It was moments like these when Harry truly wished with all his heart that he could leave everything and just go to Tom. He knew Tom felt that urge too because he could feel it.

“We will be reunited soon, My Prince. I am making the final arrangements for taking over the Ministry and Hogwarts. You will receive the good news soon.”

While Harry was happy that Tom was finally going to take over the ministry, he was afraid as well for Tom’s safety. There were skilled Aurors at the ministry that would probably be willing to sacrifice themselves to protect it. On top of that, the ministry was filled with wizards and witches that would certainly put up a fight. He knew Tom was stronger than he’d ever been. The power he’d amassed after his resurrection was incomprehensible but what if something went wrong? What if things didn’t go according to plan? What if Tom got hurt or worse...?

“Harry.... Stop thinking.”

Harry realized that his eyes had filled up with tears and he wiped them away quickly as he began to write,

“What if...”

Tom’s reply came before he could finish writing,

“My victory is certain, My Prince. Nothing will get in my way this time. If you play your part well then everything will go according to plan.”

Harry sighed silently as he ran his hand over his face. He knew a lot was riding on his role in the plans and the slightest mistake would cost them everything.

“I won’t make a mistake.”

Tom’s reply was brief,

“I know that you won’t... Just get your rest. You need to sleep.”

Harry knew that this conversation was over, so he wrote down,

“Good night.”

Before he proceeded to close the journal and placed it under his pillow as he laid down to sleep. Soon, he’d be sleeping next to Tom and then everything in his life would be good again.

Chapter 63

Harry's feet hit solid ground and his knees buckled as he collapsed on the carpeted floor. A shout escaped his lips as he took in his surroundings and realized exactly what had taken place.

He was in Dumbledore's office. The portraits that hung all around the walls were empty. Not a single headmaster or headmistress remained to see him; all, it seemed, had flitted away, charging through the paintings that lined the castle, so that they could have a clear view of what was going on.

The war was going on outside.... The war that he was supposed to be a part of.... The war that he had meticulously planned right alongside Tom and now here he was.... At the very last minute, swept away by Dumbledore.... What would Tom think? Would he think that he had betrayed him?

His heart leaped out of his throat at the thought of that. No, Tom couldn't think that.

He checked his pockets for his wand, but it seemed that Dumbledore had taken it away.

The bangs reverberated around the castle shaking it to the very core and Harry pushed himself to his feet and rushed to the window to get a view of the battle but the only thing he could see was fire and smoke.

He cursed loudly and stomped his foot on the floor. The thought of being trapped here as Tom fought right outside was unbearable to him. He wouldn't allow it to happen.

He walked around the office, breathing quickly, trying not to think. But he had to think ... there was no escape... He needed to get out of here as fast as he possibly could.

A loud bang forced him to move to the door and seize the doorknob.

It would not turn. He was shut in.

Harry could not stand this. He banged his fists against the door and shouted at the top of his lungs. Hoping that someone.... Anyone would hear him. But he knew that no one could.

He needed to calm down... He needed to think this through. He knew why Dumbledore had locked him up in here... Dumbledore thought that he was protecting him... He thought that Tom was here to kill him when that was no longer the case. He was the one that had helped Tom infiltrate the castle. He was the one responsible for all the mayhem going on. His own lack of concern for the well-being of the students bothered him...just for a moment...But nothing mattered to him more than being with Tom again.

He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath as he calmed himself. There had to be another way out of this office. He moved towards the fireplace and realized that the grill was locked. He knelt in front of it and pulled on it, but it wouldn't budge.

Damn it! Why was nothing going the way he wanted it to go today?

He let out a frustrated shout before getting back on his feet. How was he going to get out of here? The way things were looking, the only person that could let him out was Dumbledore...Or maybe Tom, if he succeeded in taking over the castle...

Tom had to succeed.... There was no other acceptable way that this could end.

He slumped down in one of the chairs as he buried his face in his hands. Could Tom sense his distress? Maybe... Maybe not... Right now, Tom was in the middle of the battle and Harry hoped that he was winning. It didn't matter right now whether Tom could feel his distress or hear his thoughts right now.

The only thing that mattered was that he won.

His restlessness forced him back on his feet and he made his way to the Pensieve. The stone Pensieve lay in the cabinet where it had always been. He opened the glass cabinet that contained the vials of memories and stared at them. Maybe, he could kill some time this way.

He picked up one of them and pulled out the crystal stopper before tipping the silvery contents of the bottle into the Pensieve, where they swirled and shimmered, neither liquid nor gas.

Taking a deep breath, he plunged face-first into the silvery liquid as he fell through darkness. Seconds later his feet hit the firm ground, he opened his eyes and found that he was standing in a bustling, old-fashioned London Street.

His gaze found a tall figure crossing the road in front of a horse-drawn milk cart and he realized that this was Dumbledore's memory.

This younger Albus Dumbledore's long hair and beard were auburn. Having reached their side of the street, he strode off along the pavement, drawing many curious glances due to the flamboyantly cut suit of plum velvet that he was wearing.

Harry followed the younger Dumbledore as they passed through a set of iron gates into a bare courtyard that fronted a rather grim, square building surrounded by high railings. He mounted the few steps leading to the front door and knocked once. After a moment or two, the door was opened by a scruffy girl wearing an apron,

"Good afternoon. I have an appointment with a Mrs. Cole, who, I believe, is the matron here?"

Why did that name sound familiar?

"Oh,"

Said the bewildered-looking girl, taking in Dumbledore's eccentric appearance,

"Um ... just a moment ... MRS COLE!"

She bellowed over her shoulder. Harry heard a distant voice shouting something in response. The girl turned back to Dumbledore.

“Come in, she’s on ’er way.”

Dumbledore stepped into a hallway tiled in black and white; the whole place was shabby but spotlessly clean. Harry and the older Dumbledore followed. Before the front door had closed behind them, a skinny, harassed-looking woman came scurrying towards them. She had a sharp-featured face that appeared more anxious than unkind, and she was talking over her shoulder to another aproned helper as she walked towards Dumbledore,

“... and take the iodine upstairs to Martha, Billy Stubbs has been picking his scabs and Eric Whalley’s oozing all over his sheets – chickenpox on top of everything else...”

She said to nobody in particular, and then her eyes fell upon Dumbledore, and she stopped dead in her tracks, looking as astonished as if a giraffe had just crossed her threshold,

“Good afternoon”

Said Dumbledore, holding out his hand. Mrs. Cole simply gaped,

“My name is Albus Dumbledore. I sent you a letter requesting an appointment and you very kindly invited me here today.”

Mrs. Cole blinked. Apparently deciding that Dumbledore was not a hallucination, she said feebly,

“Oh, yes. Well... well, then... you’d better come into my room. Yes.”

She led Dumbledore into a small room that seemed part sitting room, part office. It was as shabby as the hallway and the furniture was old and mismatched. She invited Dumbledore to sit on a rickety chair and seated herself behind a cluttered desk, eyeing him nervously. Dumbledore spoke cheerfully,

“I am here, as I told you in my letter, to discuss Tom Riddle and arrangements for his future.”

And instantly, Harry knew what this memory was about. This was the first time; Dumbledore had met Tom. He knew where he’d Mrs. Cole’s name. Harry looked away from Dumbledore chatting with the woman and focused his attention on the surroundings.

This was the orphanage; Tom had been brought up in... For a moment, he could hear Tom’s voice as he’d told him about this place. He had admitted that he’d hurt children here. But he had also admitted that he’d found the Magpie here. The magpie whose eggs he’d crushed... The magpie that had broken its wing and then Tom had taken care of... The magpie whose neck Tom had finally snapped...

He saw that Dumbledore and Mrs. Cole were getting up and leaving the office, so he followed suit while his heart raced inside his chest. He was about to see the young Tom...

Well, technically, he'd seen him before in a picture but seeing him like this would be different.

Mrs. Cole led them up a flight of steps, calling out instructions and admonitions to helpers and children as she passed. The orphans, Harry saw, were all wearing the same kind of greyish tunic. It was a grim place to grow up and Harry couldn't help but see why Tom had grown up to be the way he was. Mrs. Cole spoke as they turned off the second landing and stopped outside the first door in a long corridor,

"Here we are."

She knocked twice and entered,

"Tom? You've got a visitor. This is Mr. Dumberton... sorry, Dunderbore. He's come to tell you... well, I'll let him do it."

The eccentrically dressed Dumbledore walked into the room and Harry held his breath as he walked in beside him. It was a small bare room with nothing in it except an old wardrobe, a wooden chair, and an iron bedstead. A boy was sitting on top of the grey blankets, his legs stretched out in front of him, holding a book.

A boy Harry recognized from the picture...

It was his Tom.

Tom was handsome, dark-haired, and pale but something about seeing him in motion instead of in a picture, made him realize the depth of darkness in his eyes. This was not the happy Tom from the picture. Harry was forced to believe that this meeting had happened after Tom had killed the magpie.

Before he could watch anymore, a hand had closed tightly around his upper arm and before he could see who it was, Harry felt himself rising into the air; the room evaporated around him; he was floating upwards through icy blackness, the hand still tight upon his upper arm. Then, with a swooping feeling as though he had turned head-over-heels in mid-air, his feet hit the carpeted floor of Dumbledore's office and he was standing again beside the Pensieve.

Before he could turn to see who was holding him, he felt a wand being pressed to the back of his head and then he heard Dumbledore's voice,

"I had hoped that it would not come to this but alas..."

Harry wanted to ask what was going on but the cold dread creeping down his spine told him exactly what Dumbledore was going to do to him... But it didn't make sense.... Why would Dumbledore want to kill him now? And if he wanted to kill him then why would he lock him up here in the first place? Did Dumbledore know about his involvement with Tom?

There were so many questions swirling inside his head, but he couldn't bring himself to voice any one of them. The only word that escaped his lips was,

"Why?"

Dumbledore was silent for a moment before a spoke,

“Because it is for the greater good. You were a faithful student, and it saddens me to do this, but your death will ensure Lord Voldemort’s defeat. I can assure you, my boy, that your sacrifice will not go in vain. Lord Voldemort will be defeated, and you will forever be immortalized as the reason for his downfall.”

Before Harry could reply, Dumbledore spoke,

“I assure you that this will be quick and painless.”

Harry felt the wand being pulled away and before he knew it a flash of green light illuminated everything and then threw it into darkness.

Chapter 64

The sound of a loud thump forced his eyes open, and he spun around instantly to find Dumbledore laying on the floor... Eyes wide open...mouth agape...Presumably dead...

His brain stuttered for a moment as he took in the sight in front of him. Every part of him went on pause as his thoughts struggled to catch up with what had taken place.

A familiar clearing of a throat turned his attention away from Dumbledore's body and towards the origin of the sound. Snape stood there, looking every bit as unconcerned and as indifferent as he'd always been, with his wand raised.

And that was when all the pieces fell together and fit perfectly. It was so easy to imagine what had taken place.

Snape stepped closer to him and grabbed him by the arm before dragging him to a chair and pushing him down in it roughly,

"I need you to listen to me very closely, Potter."

Harry's frozen stream of thoughts was slowly beginning to melt and before he knew it, his mind was flooded by them again. Why would Dumbledore want him dead? It didn't make any sense. None of it was making any sense.

Dumbledore's last words kept echoing inside his head on repeat and he couldn't understand their meaning or their context.

Snape rested his hands on his shoulders,

"Listen to me, Potter. The Dark Lord has very specific orders for you."

Harry blinked before focusing his attention on Snape,

"Does he know where I am?"

Snape pursed his lips,

"He foresaw this..."

Harry leaned back in his seat... Unsure of what to make of that... Had Tom really known that Dumbledore would attempt to kill him? Was Tom aware of the reason behind it? He felt so hopelessly tangled right now but Snape had said that Tom had orders for him. His questions would have to wait.

"What did he say?"

Snape conjured a glass of water,

“Drink first.”

Harry took the glass cynically and downed it in one. Why was Snape being so nice all of a sudden?

“The Dark Lord has ordered you to keep your cover.”

Harry felt his jaw drop open as he processed that statement. This was not part of the plan. He was supposed to stop pretending today. Tom had said that all of this would finally be over.

Harry felt tears well up in his eyes, but he fought them back. There had to be a reason behind why Tom had issued that order,

“What should I do then?”

Snape sighed,

“I’m supposed to bring you to him as a prisoner.”

Harry closed his eyes and leaned back in his seat as he ran his hands over his face,

“And I’m supposed to do what? Act like the boy who lived?”

Snape nodded and Harry buried his face in his hands as despair clenched his heart. He couldn’t act anymore... He couldn’t lie anymore...

“The Dark Lord will be very disappointed if you...”

Harry rose to his feet abruptly and cut Snape off,

“I will not disappoint him.”

He needed to stop thinking... Right now, he just had to focus on not disappointing Tom. He could get the answers to his questions later. Taking a deep breath, he looked down at himself,

“I need to look like I at least put up a fight...”

Snape nodded curtly as he took out his wand and went to work on making him look like a prisoner of war. Harry stood still as he stared at Dumbledore’s eyes lifelessly staring back at him. He wished he could expose how morally corrupt Dumbledore really had been. How heartless, merciless, and cruel the man had truly been. He felt a savage satisfaction when he imagined the look on the faces of all those people that had worshipped the old man.

Harry was brought out of his thoughts as he felt Snape prod his cheek with his wand. He felt a trickle of something warm run down his cheek and he raised his hand to wipe it away only to find that his fingers were painted red,

“It is not your blood, nor is it real.”

Harry wiped his fingers clean on his now dirty-looking jeans as Snape went about making him look more injured and beaten down.

A couple of minutes later, when Snape held up the mirror to his face, Harry could hardly recognize himself. Now he just needed to make sure that he didn't slip up in his acting. Everything had to be impeccable.

He ran his fingers through his now matted hair, messing them up a bit more as he inquired,

"Does he expect me to surrender or resist?"

Snape took his wrists and magically secured them behind his back,

"He said that you would know what to do."

Harry let out a silent groan... He obviously didn't know what to do. What if he made a mistake?

Snape nudged him slightly,

"I think we should start moving."

Harry nodded as he began walking. They exited the office and Harry noticed how eerily silent the entire castle was. There was no clamor... no noise... Was the battle over?

Almost as if Snape had read his thoughts, he spoke,

"Yes... The Dark Lord has claimed victory over the castle, and he has rallied his forces and the prisoners in the Great Hall. He must be expecting us."

Dumbledore's actions were beginning to seem more and more like the actions of a desperate man. What could Dumbledore have accomplished by killing him?

He was just lost in these thoughts when Snape spoke in his ear,

"I shall have to display a certain level of roughness."

Harry sighed,

"Knock yourself out."

Snape grabbed him abruptly from the collar of his shirt and began dragging him towards The Great Hall. Harry fought his hold on him with all his might because he needed his struggle to look real... Snape should have just knocked him out... That would have been easier.

He faltered in his acting though when Snape shoved him roughly through the doors of The Great Hall and he took in the sight around him.

Chapter 65

Harry schooled his surprised expression into one of defiance as he took in the state of The Great Hall. One half of the hall was occupied by Tom's Death Eaters and other allies of his army. The other half of the hall was crowded with the occupants of the castle, that had been subdued without a doubt because they exuded the air of defeat.

Snape dragged him through the passageway that had been left clear in the middle of the hall and Harry fought to get free as best as he could with his bound wrists. Harry's gaze caught sight of Tom who stood at the very front of the hall, surrounded by his inner circle.

Their gaze met for a fraction of a second and Harry hoped he could convey everything he felt at that moment to him as quickly as possible,

“HARRY!”

Harry pulled his gaze away from Tom's and looked for who had shouted out his name. From the voice, he was willing to bet it was Hermione. Soon enough, the hall was reverberating with the shouts of his name which was soon followed by tortured screams as the death eaters dealt with the rebelling prisoners.

Snape didn't stop though, and Harry was glad for it because he couldn't deal with any more melodrama. Snape pushed him up the stairs and then he was unceremoniously shoved down which caused him to land directly in front of Tom's feet,

“Harry Potter...The Boy Who Lived”

The silence that fell in the hall as soon as Tom started speaking was deafening. He could hear his own heart beating a steady rhythm inside his chest. Being this close to Tom was beginning to soothe all his doubts and uncertainties. He wished he could just get up and burrow his face in Tom's chest just so he could breathe in his wonderful scent, but he had to pretend to be The Boy who Lived right now so cuddling would have to wait.

He managed to push himself up to his knees and looked up at Tom, just so he could get a hint of what he was supposed to do but while Tom's face was impassive, Harry could see his eyes glinting with that familiar spark of mischief and while he rather liked it when Tom was mischievous, right now, in the present circumstances, he knew it meant that he would up his ante and outdo himself.

Tom leaned down and gripped his chin as he continued to speak,

“These people believe that you can save them. Do you believe that you can save your friends from me, Potter?”

He was absolutely hating this but he had a role to play so he set his jaw in defiance but kept his mouth shut. Tom chuckled,

“My death eaters are looking forward to claiming your friends as spoils of war and using them as they please... I wonder if you would allow that to happen...”

Harry couldn't understand where Tom was going with this or what he was supposed to reply and Tom seemed to understand that because he spoke,

“You cannot stop that from happening, however, if you surrender to me, I can give you assurance that none of them will die.”

Harry held Tom's gaze and inquired,

“Will you kill me?”

Tom placed the tip of his wand to his forehead,

“Why would I kill you once, when I can kill you every day?”

Something warm fluttered in his stomach as he recalled the last time Tom had said that. The first time Tom had claimed him. He could still feel that heady sense of euphoria that he'd felt in that moment. He was willing to be killed by Tom like that every day. He knew now what he was supposed to say and he knew why Tom had arranged this show.

“I will do anything to protect their lives.”

Tom grinned and Harry felt the binds around his wrists disappear,

“Prove it, Potter.”

Harry eyed Tom's feet and Tom nodded imperceptibly. He felt no reluctance in kissing Tom's feet but right now he had to show that he was reluctant. The death eaters all started chanting together,

“DO IT, POTTER!”

Harry bowed his head and brushed his lips against Tom's feet, and as much as he didn't want to, he pulled them away as fast as he could before straightening up.

The death eaters jeered and catcalled but grew silent as Tom raised his wand,

“I had thought that it would take an enormous amount of pain to bring you to this point. But perhaps I underestimated your loyalty to these people. You did not even put up a fight for yourself.”

Harry allowed his head to fall in defeat as the death eaters continued to celebrate his supposed surrender.

Someone gripped him from behind and he was raised to his feet. Tom spoke just low enough so that only he and the person holding him could listen to him,

“Take him upstairs. I shall join you in a moment.”

Harry was glad for that because he literally could not act anymore. He was mentally and emotionally drained and all he really wanted to do was to nestle himself into Tom's arm and never leave them ever again.

Harry felt a slight nudge and he began moving. The screams and shouts in the hall grew louder but Harry didn't pay them any heed as he was shoved out of the hall. As soon as they were on the seventh floor, he felt the person behind him let go and he turned out to find himself face to face with a masked death eater.

Before he could ask who it was, the person removed the mask and Harry found himself face to face with Sirius.

Before he could draw in the air his body needed he melted into Sirius's form. He could feel his firm torso and the heart that beat within. Sirius wrapped his arms around him, drawing him in closer, and rubbed his back.

He'd needed to see Sirius. He'd needed him so badly and the fact that Tom had known that he would need him just made him fall for him a little bit more. Sirius gently carded his fingers through his hair, soothing him, and then spoke,

"I missed you so much."

Harry nodded,

"I missed you too."

There was a pause and then Sirius spoke,

"Do you think what happened here was right?"

Harry knew where Sirius was going with this and he refused to follow him there. He pulled away from him,

"There is no right or wrong anymore, Sirius... You need to accept that."

Sirius fingered the silky material of his death eater robes and spoke,

"Do you have any idea what the death eaters will do to your friends..."

Harry cut him off,

"They are no longer my friends and I know for a fact that The Dark Lord will allow them to live because he said it and he is a man of his word unlike Dumbledore, who was a hypocrite and murderer."

Sirius was about to speak when Harry gritted out,

"He tried to kill me..."

Sirius's jaw dropped and he stared at him in silence for a moment before inquiring,

“Dumbledore tried to kill you?”

He nodded. Sirius stepped closer to him and held his shoulders,

“Why?”

Before he could respond. Bella’s cackling laughter filled the hall and Harry couldn’t help but smile as he turned away from Sirius to find her approaching him followed by a small group of inner circle death eaters.

Her painted red lips were stretched into a wide smile as she pulled him into a tight embrace almost immediately,

“You were so perfect.”

The death eaters circled him and Harry felt them patting his back and commending him. Harry didn’t know when Bellatrix released him or when the death eaters stepped away from him and bowed because everything and everyone had just become irrelevant. The only person he could think about, the only person that he could see was Tom...It was like the world around him turned black and white and Tom was the only thing he could see in color.

Chapter 66

When Tom was standing a foot away from him, Harry realized that he still had no intentions of making their relationship known to his death eaters and even though Harry heard the tiny crack of his heart breaking a little, he did not allow his emotions to show up on his face and he dropped to his knees next to Bella,

“My Lord... I apologize for...”

Tom placed his hands on his shoulders and there was something so soothing about being touched by him again. He felt all his doubts and uncertainties melting away as he reveled in Tom’s touch and the sound of his voice as he cut off his apology,

“You need not apologize for your absence from the battle, Harry...After all, you are the reason why our conquest went so immaculately.”

Harry kept his head bowed as Tom urged him to rise to his feet. He obeyed silently but made sure to keep his gaze lowered. He bit back a gasp as Tom’s hand came up to cup his cheek and he heard him whisper in his ear,

“I heard that crack, My Prince. I saw your tears and I felt your pain... Just bear this a little longer.”

Harry felt Tom’s words penetrate deep into his heart and he could almost picture them fixing all the broken pieces and bringing them together again,

“Yes, My Lord.”

Tom patted his cheek,

“Atta boy, Harry.”

He took a step away from him and Harry took the opportunity to finally raise his gaze. Tom was walking towards the stairs that led up to Dumbledore’s office...The office he’d been trapped in and almost killed in a couple of minutes ago.

Bellatrix and the rest of the inner circle were following him but Sirius stood stock still. Harry walked towards him and grabbed his hand,

“Sirius, you need to let go of whatever notion of goodness you’re holding onto because it's worthless. The only thing that matters is your well-being and my well-being. If you keep acting like this then I won’t be able to keep you safe anymore, Sirius... And it will break me if you get hurt, Sirius... You’re the only family I’ve got and I can’t stand to lose you.”

Sirius placed his hand right where Tom’s had been mere moments ago and spoke,

“It scares me, Harry... Your utter devotion to him scares me... He’s turned you into someone you’re not and sometimes...”

Sirius sighed and Harry knew what Sirius was going to say before he said it,

“Sometimes I can’t find my Godson in you.”

Harry clenched his jaw as he took several steps away from Sirius,

“Then you should leave, Sirius... If I’m not your Godson anymore then you have no reason to stick around here...”

Sirius chuckled darkly,

“I’m not allowed to leave.”

Harry vehemently wiped the tears streaming from his eyes as he gritted out,

“Just go... I will talk to him.”

Sirius looked like he wanted to hug him but Harry wrapped his arms around himself and cried out,

“LEAVE, SIRIUS.”

He felt his knees give out as he collapsed on the cold stone floor. And when he heard the last of Sirius’s footsteps he cried. He cried as if his brain was being shredded from the inside. Emotional pain flowed out of his every pore. From his mouth came an extremely raw cry that was the quintessence of pain. He was shaking violently as he curled up on the floor. From his eyes came a thicker flow of tears and he couldn’t control the sounds that left his throat. All of the emotions he’d been bottling up all night just unleashed themselves all at once and they left him a broken mess.

He was dimly aware of Tom pulling him into his lap and holding him, whispering comforts and asking him what was wrong. But that couldn’t be right... Maybe he was hallucinating because Tom was busy celebrating his conquest, Tom wouldn’t hold him like that in public...

“Harry!”

He opened his eyes and found Tom’s concerned filled eyes laser-focused on him,

“What happened?”

He looked around the corridor and realized that there was no one there except them. Tom wiped the tears from his cheeks and Harry simply buried his face in Tom’s chest as he let out another painful howl. He felt Tom’s hand on the back of his head and heard him speak in a low, dangerous tone,

“What did Black do?”

Harry gripped the soft, silky material of Tom’s robes as he spoke in a ravaged voice,

“I told him to leave.”

Tom's lips brushed his temple,

"He cannot leave."

Harry closed his eyes and nestled his head deeper into Tom's chest,

"It was hurting him to stay here... He wasn't fitting in..."

Tom cut him off sharply,

"You care for him and he did not care enough for you to accept the gift that I bestowed upon him. If it were not for you, he would have been rotting in Azkaban... Maybe you should have left him there... Maybe I should put him back there so that he can better appreciate you."

Harry shook his head,

"Just let him go, Tom. Please don't hurt him."

Tom pressed a kiss to his head and wiped away the rest of his tears,

"I will not hurt him."

Harry opened his eyes and looked up into Tom's,

"Promise?"

Tom nodded begrudgingly and spoke,

"Promise... But you are not allowed to cry like that again."

Harry couldn't help the laughter that bubbled out from his lips,

"You really are too soft for someone who calls himself The Dark Lord."

Tom pulled him into an embrace and brushed his lips against his,

"This is only for you."

Chapter 67

Harry stood with Bella and all the inner circle death eaters as they watched Tom remodel Dumbledore's office. Dumbledore's corpse had been vanished and Tom had stated that he would be making Dumbledore's funeral very public.

The portraits of the previous headmasters had been vanished and all of Dumbledore's little trinkets were removed. Tom made sure to change everything to his liking, even Dumbledore's chair was replaced by a throne that looked like it had been carved out of pure diamond. The back of the chair was shaped like a curved serpent and the arms were encrusted with all manner of precious gems and jewels.

Harry's mind kept wandering back to the scene in the hallway. The way Tom had held him and comforted him... It filled him up inside with the brightest and bubbliest of joy and that was a feeling that he was willing to pay any price to attain it permanently.

Tom was about to vanish the Pensieve when he recalled the memory he'd been watching before Dumbledore had pulled him out of it. Now that he thought about it, he wondered why Dumbledore had placed it in the Pensieve in the first place. What could Dumbledore possibly attain by watching that memory? Even if he didn't know maybe Tom would, so it was important that he interrupt now,

"My Lord..."

Tom fixed him with a questioning gaze and Harry took a hesitant step forward,

"The memory in there might be of some significance to you."

Tom stared down in the memory and Harry saw something like understanding dawn in his eyes. He wordlessly vanished the Pensieve and turned to address everyone,

"Our victory today has proven to the Ministry of Magic that we are a force to be reckoned with. I have no doubt in my mind that at this very moment, the Ministry is gathering whatever strength it possesses in order to retaliate against us and reclaim Hogwarts...."

Tom paused and then raised his wand,

"That will not happen today or any other day. We will strike before they get an opportunity to do so. My Death Eaters, we will take over the Ministry today."

Harry felt unease settle in his gut at Tom's announcement. Because as far as he knew, there had been no immediate plan to take over the ministry, but it seemed that Tom had foreseen the ministry's reaction and had already made arrangements to counter it. The death eaters were cheering and Harry could feel their devotion flooding the room. They would support Tom to any extent, Harry was certain of that and he knew that their unwavering devotion was also the reason that they were allowed in Tom's inner circle. With them by his side, Tom

would surely be ruling over Magical Britain...He could possibly be ruling over the entire magical world...

“You may all have your pick of the prisoners but no one is allowed to kill them. Go and celebrate your victory now for another battle awaits us very soon.”

The death eaters jeered and Harry watched as they all began to file out of the office. He was about to follow them when Tom spoke,

“You will stay, Harry.”

Harry watched as the door closed leaving him and Tom as the only inhabitants of the office and then he turned around to face Tom, who had stepped closer to him.

Harry closed the distance between them and Tom cupped his face so very gently,

“You watched that memory?”

Harry nodded as he held Tom’s inquisitive gaze,

“I recognized the names from when you told me about the Magpie and then I saw you...the childhood version of you and that’s when Dumbledore pulled me out of it.”

Tom pressed a chaste kiss to his forehead,

“He tried to kill you?”

Harry closed his eyes so that he could simply revel in the purity of the kiss and the feeling of Tom’s touch,

“Yes...”

Tom’s hands vanished from his face and at the same time, he felt an arm being wrapped around his waist. He allowed himself to be pulled in closer and rested his head on Tom’s shoulder as Tom’s other hand began to stroke his hair,

“No one is allowed to hurt you anymore, My Prince... No one will ever hurt you.”

Tom gently led him to the throne and sat down in it before settling him in his lap and maintaining their position. Harry wrapped his arms around Tom’s neck as Tom tipped his head back. He parted his lip in an open invitation and Tom claimed them almost immediately. Everything fell away at that moment. Harry couldn't think at all. Nothing mattered to him except for the fact that he was once again in Tom’s arms, being held by him, while his lips crashed against Harry's like a tidal wave hitting the shore.

When they finally pulled apart and opened their eyes. It felt like they had been kissing for an eternity, but Harry could read it in Tom’s eyes that an eternity of kissing was not enough and he agreed with that wholeheartedly.

Tom brushed his hair away from his scar and traced his finger over it,

“I don’t think you realize how many secrets you hold.”

Harry closed his eyes and sighed,

“I’m so tired of keeping secrets.”

Tom’s lips gently brushed against his scar,

“Just rest then... All of this will be over very soon.”

Harry shook his head as he burrowed his face in Tom’s chest and fisted his robes,

“I’m not so sure about that... You want so much... I’m afraid of what will happen if for some reason you can’t get it.”

Tom’s fingers stopped stroking his hair and Harry felt his warm breath on his cheek as he whispered,

“I am meant to attain everything, I have set out to achieve, and with you at my side, I know that nothing and no one is capable of stopping me.”

Harry turned his head and pressed his lips to Tom’s,

“I know that... I just wish I could have you without having to worry about other people finding out.”

Tom chuckled softly against his lips,

“Such a small wish, My Prince, but what you don’t realize is that you already have me... It does not matter whether other people know about what we have...”

Harry opened his eyes and held Tom’s gaze,

“What exactly do we have, Tom?”

Tom pulled his lips away and raised an eyebrow so Harry sat up a bit straighter in Tom’s lap and cupped his cheek,

“What word would you use to describe what ever is happening between us?”

Tom’s eyes flashed with understanding and he covered his hand with his,

“I cannot give you the answer you expect, Harry. Because I don’t feel emotions the way you do.”

Harry pressed his forehead to Tom’s and inquired in a voice that dripped with the desperation he truly felt,

“Then tell me you feel something for me, Tom... Just tell me that please.”

Tom frowned and Harry shook his head because he wasn't brave enough to hear Tom's answer. He'd already suffered one loss tonight... He didn't have the fortitude to bear another,

“Don't say anything.”

He pressed a kiss to Tom's cheek and rose to his feet before exiting the office as swiftly as he could. At that moment, he knew that Tom had broken him in ways he'd never imagined possible.

Chapter 68

He wandered through the halls, struggling not to think about his conversation with Tom but no matter how hard he tried, his thoughts seemed to drift back to him. Tom had told him who he was...He had told him everything about himself and his inability to feel emotions. Despite all that, he'd fallen in love with the man. It was his fault... Not Tom's...

He'd broken his own heart...

Well, it served him right to be this miserable. The sound of music and laughter forced him out of his brooding and he realized that he was close to the great hall. The prisoners were in there, he wasn't supposed to be seen here.

He had just turned around when Bella cooed,

"Come on, Harry... Join us... The prisoners are all locked up in the dungeons."

Harry sighed before turning back to face Bella,

"Really?"

Bella nodded before stepping close and grabbing his hand,

"Come on."

She began leading him into the great hall where the death eaters were celebrating like no tomorrow. She lead him to the front of the hall where the teacher's table had once been and Harry spotted Lucius, Severus, Rabastan, and a handful of others from the inner circle. They were drinking something and Harry wondered if it was magical wine. Sure enough, Bella conjured a bottle and with a wave of her wand sent full glasses to all the occupants of the hall. Silence fell as Bella held hers aloft,

"To the Dark Lord."

The death eaters all repeated the cheer before downing their drinks. Harry did the same. The drink seared Harry's throat and he welcomed it. He needed the distraction. The music started playing again and Bella refilled his glass,

"So, tell me, what happened with Black?"

Harry shook his head as he took a sip from his glass,

"It was nothing."

Bella rested a finger underneath his chin and raised his head so that she could look into his eyes,

"He left, didn't he?"

Harry blinked before nodding. She patted him on the shoulder as she refilled his glass,

“He’ll be back.”

Harry could only nod his head in agreement. After a couple of minutes of meaningless banter, Bella was whisked away by her husband and Harry silently thanked Merlin because he’d been tethering on the edge of his fortitude. He didn’t have the strength to deal with any more questions or any more feelings. He just wanted to numb everything out and clear his head and his heart of all the pain and misery.

For once, he just wanted to exist.

He wasn’t really sure which glass of whiskey he had in his hand because quite honestly, he’d stopped counting after three. He wasn’t even sure if the contents of his glass were even Firewhiskey anymore. The one thing he knew for certain though was that he’d definitely had more than he’d intended and it was starting to work.

He felt nothing but a faint sense of melancholy now and his mind was devoid of all thoughts. An arm wrapped around his waist and he turned his head to look at who was standing beside him. He recognized him as Rabastan. He was young, relatively handsome and Harry knew he was definitely tipsy because he felt a faint sense of attraction towards him. Rabastan took the glass from his hand and swapped it with one that was filled with a pale greenish liquid,

“Try this.”

Harry swirled the contents before downing them and that’s when Rabastan inquired,

“Dance with me.”

Harry didn’t reply...couldn’t reply because, at that moment, he’d lost all his inhibition. If Rabastan wanted to dance with him then who was he to deny him that.

In no time, he found himself amidst a crowd of dancing death eaters. And then they were dancing, touching in a way he had never touched anyone except Tom before, swaying to the music chest to chest. This felt intimate, perhaps a little too intimate.

Harry felt his eyelids droop as Rabastan’s arm wrapped around his waist and maneuvered him around the dance floor. It was easier with his eyes closed because then he could pretend that he was dancing with Tom. He could pretend that the arms around his waist belonged to the one person who had wrecked his heart. He could pretend that Tom cared enough about him to own him in public.

His head felt fuzzy as the music changed but he didn’t dare open his eyes because he was so afraid of the illusion breaking. That was when he felt the soft, warm brush of lips against the side of his neck and his eyes flew wide open, the fog invading his head dissipated instantly and he made a move to pull away.

Rabastan held onto him though and spoke,

“Relax...It was just a kiss.”

Harry wanted to shove him away but his head spun and he wound up holding onto Rabastan for support,

“I think you had a little too much to drink... Let’s get you to bed.”

Harry didn’t like the tone of Rabastan’s voice or the way he was touching him invasively. And that’s when he remembered the drink, Rabastan had offered him earlier.

He felt panic well up in his heart as he tried to shout out for help but it felt like his tongue was made of lead. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t get a sound out so he screamed in his mind.

He screamed Tom’s name... Over and Over again... Hoping that he would hear him.

Rabastan was carrying him through the crowd of death eaters towards the exit and Harry felt powerless to stop him. He couldn’t move, he couldn’t shout, he couldn’t do anything except for counting on Tom to hear his thoughts.

He’d almost lost hope when he heard the music stop and Tom’s cold voice reverberate through the hall,

“RABASTAN!”

Rabastan halted and Harry made another attempt to shove him away, this time he succeeded but his knees gave way he was about to crumple to the floor when a pair of strong arms held him.

“Narcissa... Run a diagnostic on him.”

Harry could hear the cold, unadulterated rage in Tom’s icy tone and he knew that he’d messed up by coming here. His head was resting against Tom’s shoulder and as far as public displays of affection went, he was guessing that Tom had never held anyone like he was holding him now. Narcissa’s voice seemed to quiver with fear as she responded,

“My Lord, he’s been drugged.”

Harry felt the arms holding him up tighten around him as Tom snapped his fingers and Rabastan’s screams filled the hall,

“What did you drug him with, Rabastan?”

Tom seemed to have lost his patience because he shouted,

“Bellatrix... I expect you to torment the answer out of him and Narcissa I expect you to get the antidote ready as soon as she’s finished with him. You have fifteen minutes.”

Harry felt the familiar feeling of apparition but it was over as soon as it started and judging by the carpet underneath his shoes, they were back in Dumbledore’s... No.... Tom’s office.

Tom pulled him up into his arms like he weighed nothing and carried him somewhere... To the chair most probably because soon he felt that he was back in Tom's lap, nestled against his chest... The exact place he'd walked away from a couple of hours ago.

Tom swept the hair away from his face and Harry struggled to open his eyes, just so he could take in Tom's face and find out if he was angry. Tom must have heard his thoughts because he whispered,

"I'm most certainly angry."

Harry felt the need to justify himself suffocating him but he couldn't speak, couldn't do anything. Tom's wonderfully soft lips enveloped him and he murmured,

"I am not angry with you, my Prince... I am angry with myself... I contemplated what you said and I concluded that I do feel something for you... I have yet to understand what it is but I know that I cannot allow you to part with me."

He felt his mind quiet down as Tom kissed him senseless and once again he permitted his heart to be deluded by Tom's soft words and the warmth and safety of his embrace.

Chapter 69

He woke up the following morning to the sensation of warm lips pressed against his temple. But even though he was awake, he couldn't will himself to open his eyes because they still felt too heavy. Tom murmured softly,

"You're awake finally... I was so worried."

He swallowed but his mouth and throat were as dry as the desert and his attempts to raise his eyelids were all unsuccessful,

"Just rest, My Prince. You have had quite a rough night."

Harry could feel Tom's arms wrapped around him and he nestled his head in his chest as he tried to speak,

"T...Tom...I..."

Tom pressed a finger to his lips,

"You need to recover. Then we will talk."

He nodded weakly as he focused on going back to sleep. He was curious to know where he was because the bed felt unfamiliar and his surroundings felt unfamiliar. He couldn't be in Tom's castle. Was he still at Hogwarts?

Tom sighed softly and Harry felt his warm breath tickle his cheek,

"We are still at Hogwarts but I believe that the Ministry is rallying its Aurors to attack us. There are preparations that need to be made to ensure that we strike first."

Harry curled up tighter against Tom's body as he spoke in a hoarse voice that he barely recognized,

"Are you sure you'll win?"

Tom moved his fingers through his hair and pressed a kiss to his forehead,

"Yes, My Prince. I am certain."

He knew he needed more sleep but it was difficult for him to quieten his mind. There were thoughts blazing through his head like a wildfire... Too many in number and too scattered to control...

"HARRY!"

Tom's voice was sharp enough to bring everything to a halt,

“You need to rest... No more thinking until you’re back on your feet.”

Harry sighed,

“I’m trying... It’s just...I’m anxious about what you just told me...”

His voice was still scratchy and hoarse so Tom helped him sit up and held a glass of blissfully cool water to his lips and he drank from it as a thirsty man drank from an oasis in the desert. Tom vanished the glass and Harry leaned back against the cushy headboard as he rubbed the leftover moisture from his lips,

“What makes you anxious?”

Harry took in the regal-looking bedroom which was decorated sumptuously with black and gold wallpaper and had tall windows which were currently enshrouded by thick dark brocade curtains. An ornate huge fireplace, surrounded by soft cushy couches took up one side of the room.

He pulled his gaze away from the lavish interiors when Tom pressed his lips to his temple and smoothed his fingers through his hair,

“This is the headmaster’s bedroom... Well, it is ours now.”

The only word Harry could truly focus on was “ours” ... It seemed to echo inside his heart and his mind and warmed him up from the inside out. He had assumed that Tom would make him stay in a separate room. But what he’d just said implied that,

“Of course, you shall be staying here with me. And after what happened last night, I have decided that you are forbidden from drinking and socializing with my death eaters in my absence.”

Harry closed his eyes as he smoothed his fingers over the soft silky material of Tom’s robes,

“What role am I supposed to play...”

Tom lowered his lips over his and murmured,

“No... You will not be leaving this room. You have done enough. I do not plan on putting you in harm’s way ever again.”

Harry cupped Tom’s chin as they kissed languidly. In that moment all Harry wanted was for the kiss to last forever. He never wanted to part with Tom. He never wanted to be away from him. Because in this moment he was as close to heaven as he possibly could be. The need for oxygen was the only reason why Tom pulled away and even then, he stayed close enough so that their breaths were shared and Harry could still feel the warmth emanating from his lips,

“I won’t be able to bear being alone here while you go to war.”

Tom patted him on the cheek as he smiled,

“Would it not make you happy when I return to you victorious?”

Harry pursed his lips and nodded but he knew Tom could read the concern in his eyes,

“Nothing shall happen to me... No one is capable of harming me, My Prince. And now that I have you back in my arms where you truly belong, I am invincible.”

Tom pulled him closer to his chest and began stroking his hair in a soft rhythmic pattern,

“I need you to sleep now. I have arranged for Dumbledore’s funeral to take place today.”

Harry closed his eyes as he reveled in the warmth of Tom’s touch,

“Can I be a part of it?”

Tom scoffed,

“You’re in no state to be out of bed, Harry.”

Harry sighed in disappointment,

“Fine.”

It was better this way. Because he couldn’t possibly bear to attend the funeral of the man who’d deceived him ever since he’d met him and tried to kill him. Besides, he would have to pretend to be Tom’s prisoner all through it, and right now he wasn’t feeling like doing any more acting.

“My death eaters shall be having their pick of prisoners today... Is there someone you would like to have as yours?”

Harry couldn’t comprehend how that would work. What would he possibly do with a slave? Besides, he couldn’t imagine the disgust in their eyes when they would realize who he was now... But it would be nice to have someone who would see things from his perspective... someone who’d understand why he’d done the things that he’d done... Someone he could talk to as a friend. He’d hoped with all his heart that Sirius would be that person for him but well it hadn’t panned out the way he’d wanted... But maybe he knew someone that could be that for him,

“I have someone in mind.”

Tom’s voice was dripping with curiosity as he inquired,

“Now who would that be?”

Chapter 70

He couldn't stop himself from grinning when he entered Tom's office and found two very familiar red heads kneeling on the floor with their backs to him. It turned out the bedroom he'd been staying in was situated right behind the headmaster's office and was only accessible through it. There was no other way in or out...well none that he was aware of. Tom was seated in his serpent throne and acknowledged his presence by tilting his head ever so slightly towards him,

"Harry... Come claim your reward."

Harry saw the way that the twins' shoulders stiffened at the mention of his name but they made no move to turn around and look at him. Harry was slightly puzzled about how he was supposed to behave around Tom with the twins' around but Tom eased his confusion by extending his hand. Harry took it and Tom pressed a soft kiss to it,

"How are you feeling now, My Prince?"

Harry felt his cheeks redden slightly by the open display of affection. Maybe because Tom had never treated him so affectionately in front of anyone before.

"Much better."

Tom nodded as he pulled his lips away but no move to release his hand,

"You may turn around now."

The twins turned around and Harry felt his blush intensify as they both regarded the way Tom was holding his hand,

"It was Harry that claimed you as his reward and your fates rest in his hands now. But consider yourself fortunate that he has chosen you because it ensured that you were not picked by one of my death eaters who might not have been so kind to you."

Tom pulled him closer and Harry went until he found himself comfortably seated in his lap. Tom wrapped an around him and Harry felt his breath tickle his cheek as he spoke to the twins,

"Harry is very special to me but for understood reasons, I cannot make my bond known to him yet. Therefore, both of you will make an unbreakable vow with me to keep secret whatever you may witness or hear in our presence."

Tom paused and signaled the twins to speak. The twins murmured together,

"We understand."

Harry could practically hear Tom smirk as he continued talking,

“From now on, you are also forbidden from meeting your former friends and order members. You will stay with Harry until he or I dismiss you. And while you are in his presence if any harm befalls him by your hand or someone else’s, I shall not hesitate to kill you.”

“We shall not disappoint you, Master.”

Tom chuckled softly,

“Both of you will be marked tonight at dinner. Till then you are dismissed.”

Tom pointed his wand towards a bookshelf and Harry watched as it slid to the side and revealed a dark staircase leading downwards,

“You shall find your living quarters at the end of those stairs.”

The twins bowed their heads in submission before getting up and vanishing down the stairs. The bookshelf slid back in place and Harry cupped Tom’s cheek,

“You’re going to use them as my bodyguards.”

Tom took his hand in his and pressed a kiss to the inside of his wrist,

“Your safety is the only thing that matters to me, My Prince... And after last night, it became quite apparent to me that I could not trust my death eaters with your wellbeing.”

Harry sighed before leaning his head against Tom’s chest,

“I know nothing can hurt me as long as you’re with me.”

Tom kissed his temple,

“Yes, My Prince...Not even death can steal you from me.”

There was a knock on the door and Harry pressed a quick kiss to Tom’s lips before getting out of his lap. He was about to head back to the quarters when Tom grabbed his wrist,

“Stay...”

Harry looked towards the door and then at Tom before nodding his head in agreement. Tom released his wrist and Harry stood by his throne as Tom spoke,

“Enter.”

The door opened and Bella sauntered in with a half-naked unconscious man hovering behind her. She bowed down and dropped the man with a loud thud on the carpet,

“My Lord.”

Tom rose to his feet and walked towards where the man lay before pointing his wand towards his chest and reviving him.

The man came to with a loud gasp followed by pained cries and pleas for mercy. It was only then that Harry realized that the man was Rabastan,

“Harry, come here.”

Harry immediately made his way to Tom’s side. Tom placed his wand in his hand and spoke,

“I want you to return the favor, Harry. I want you to torture Rabastan.”

Harry stared at the wand for a moment, feeling a little squeamish inside as he mulled over how he was supposed to torture Rabastan. He hadn’t tortured anyone before.

His hand shook but he clenched his fingers around the wand as tight as possible to stop the trembling. He wasn’t weak. He should be able to do this. But somehow, he couldn’t bring himself to say the spell that was just sitting on the tip of his tongue.

Tom came to stand behind him and Harry felt his hand wrap around his wrist as he whispered in his ear,

“You can do this. You just need to focus.”

Harry closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath as he struggled to focus. Rabastan had intended to hurt him last night and he would have succeeded if Tom hadn’t saved him. For a moment, he could feel the helplessness he’d felt in the moment he’d been paralyzed.

Rabastan needed to pay for that. He needed to suffer. The spell that had been stuck in his throat seemed to flow freely from his lips as he focused on the hate and soon enough the office was filled with the excruciating screams of the man writhing at his feet, begging for mercy...He felt that heady rush of power surge through him and it made him feel so intoxicated.

Tom’s fingers tightened around his wrist and Harry heard the pride in his voice as he whispered,

“You are perfect.”

Chapter 71

Harry was leaning against the far wall of the great hall, draped in standard death robes, head hooded, face masked. He watched as Tom discussed his plans for the ministry with his death eaters. It irked him that Tom thought that he was incapable of protecting himself in a fight. He was not weak.

He'd tried to convince Tom to take him along but it seemed Tom was hell-bent on keeping him here where he was safe. It should flatter him but it didn't. He wanted to be with Tom when he went to war. He wanted to play an active role in helping him win it.

He closed his eyes and drew in a deep breath as Tom conjured a large map of the ministry and put it on display to demonstrate the infiltration points. He'd insisted on being here for the briefing but now he was sorely regretting that. He was better off not knowing any of this because honestly there was no point to it if he wasn't participating in it.

The briefing ended and the death eaters were ordered to rally back here in one hour. The ministry was going to be taken over tonight and just the thought of that made Harry feel an uneasy sensation of apprehension in the pit of his stomach. He was worried about Tom. Because he knew that the Aurors at the ministry wouldn't be sitting idle, surely, they would be coming up with a strategy of their own. What if Tom was outnumbered...What if...

No!

He had to believe that Tom wouldn't fail. He had to believe that right now Tom was the strongest wizard alive.

"Harry."

Harry paused his train of thought and looked up at Bella who was standing in front of him, already geared up for the fight ahead,

"I know you're sore about not being able to come with us but it's for your own good. Right now, the ministry thinks that you're a hero for giving up your life to save your friends and the Dark Lord believes that it should stay that way."

Harry sighed,

"I'm wearing a mask now... No one would be able to tell that it's me."

Bella chuckled,

"Oh Sugar, wearing a mask is not enough..."

"Bellatrix is absolutely right."

Harry bowed his head to keep up appearances as Bella turned around to face Tom,

“My Lord.”

Tom dismissed her with a wave of his hand,

“Prepare the others for the fight ahead. You know the part that you must play.”

Bella nodded before walking away and barking orders at a group of death eaters. Tom turned to him and spoke softly,

“Let’s go somewhere private.”

Harry nodded as Tom led him out of the great hall and down towards the dungeons. As soon as they were alone in a potion lab, Tom pulled away the mask from his face, pushed him against the cold stone wall, and peppered his jaw and neck with hard, rough kisses,

“What will it take for you to understand that you are invaluable to me?”

Harry felt his mind go blank as lust and wanton desire filled him to the brim and all he could do was whine while his hands roamed over Tom’s chest and arms, greedy...wanting to feel his skin... wanting to feel closer to him...

“Tom... I need you...”

Tom looked at him through heavy-lidded eyes, his thumb stroking his earlobe, making him shiver violently. His dark gaze didn’t look away from him even for a moment, so intense it felt like a physical touch.

“I’m going to strip you, bend you over that desk, and claim you.”

Harry wet his lips, his cock twitching and his whole being relishing the idea of giving Tom complete control over himself.

His lips curling, Tom pulled him away from the wall and discarded his robes in one swift motion while he got to work on unfastening his shirt. He didn’t even glance at his own hands, still holding Harry’s gaze.

Harry shivered under the gaze feeling his arousal peaking and he couldn’t do anything but to lick his dry lips once again. Tom pulled his shirt off and then his hands immediately traveled down his sides towards the waistband of his jeans. He unbuttoned them with swift precision and tugged them down so slowly Harry was positive Tom was doing it on purpose, his hands stroking his tingling skin ever so slightly.

By the time Tom took his pants off, Harry was a wreck. A panting, flushed wreck of want. When Tom actually got to his knees to take the shoes off him, long fingers stroking his ankles and making his toes curl, Harry felt embarrassingly close to begging. At this rate, he thought he might come from one touch to his cock, which would be a whole new level of mortifying.

Tom’s eyes lifted to meet his gaze as his hands finally slid up Harry’s bare legs to stroke his quivering thighs,

“You are about to lose your mind.”

Before the implications of what Tom had just said could sink in, Tom swallowed his cock. Harry’s eyes rolled to the back of his head, a long, stuttered moan leaving his lips.

Tom sucked cock as aggressively and confidently as everything he did, his strong hands gripping Harry’s thighs so hard they were probably leaving finger-shaped bruises, but Harry didn’t care. All he cared about was that perfect, warm, wet mouth around his aching cock, and he was about to come into Tom’s mouth

Except Tom pulled back, letting Harry’s cock slip out of his mouth, and said,

“Not yet.”

His whole body burning with need and desperation, feeling like he wasn’t even in control of his own voice anymore. He couldn’t look away from Tom’s lips, which were shiny from his leaking cock.

“Turn around,”

Tom instructed, his eyes roaming all over Harry’s naked body. Harry’s cock was so hard it hurt, and his body felt like one raw nerve, ready to unravel at a single touch. So, he turned and bent over the desk, arching his back instinctively, and felt a rush of vindictive pleasure when he heard Tom’s breathing hitch.

When nothing happened, he looked over his shoulder at Tom and found him staring at his ass with a fixed, intense expression.

And then Tom spread his cheeks and licked his hole.

Harry flinched,

“Tom...Stop...”

Chuckling hoarsely, Tom spread his cheeks wider and pushed his tongue inside.

A high-pitched whine left Harry’s throat, his body jerking as if electrocuted. Another deep lick had him grabbing the edge of the desk for support or he would have collapsed.

He almost sobbed when Tom pulled his tongue out.

Harry panted, staring dazedly at the desk’s polished surface and trying to ignore how unsatisfied and horribly empty he felt. There was the sound of clothes rustling before Harry felt Tom’s hands on his hips again.

“Tom...”

Harry’s words turned into a gasp as Tom’s thick, hard, cock pressed against his stretched, tingling hole. It was gratifying to know that Tom was aroused enough to leak so profusely. Harry knew he was a mess. He probably looked like a whore, bent over the desk and eager

for Tom's cock. But, he didn't care all he wanted was relief so badly he didn't give a damn about how he looked. He was so empty and so damn hard.

"Tom... Please... Can't take it anymore..."

He gritted out finally, unable to stand the wait anymore.

When Tom tightened his grip on his hips and pushed inside, Harry didn't make any sound. He was unable to, his mouth opening and closing as he tried not to come. The feeling of fullness was incredibly gratifying,

"You are irresistible."

Tom said, his grip bruising on Harry's hips as he started pounding into him, his breathing harsh and unsteady against Harry's ear,

"More,"

He gasped, reaching back and digging his fingers into Tom's ass, urging him on.

Tom let out a desperate grunt, and then his mouth was at Harry's neck and he was biting it like a savage. Harry wanted to beg for more. He couldn't; he could only let out small whimpers as Tom pounded him into the desk.

It was fast, dirty, and desperate. His whole world narrowed down to the hot, unsteady breaths against his nape, the hard body behind him, and the thick, perfect cock moving inside him, claiming him so good. He had no idea how long it lasted. The pleasure pulsed through him in waves, intense and unrelenting, taking him higher and higher, even though it felt like he was teetering at the edge all the time. Just a bit more...there...

Tom's hand wrapped around his cock and started stroking him hard and fast, in time with his thrusts.

"Come for me"

he said into Harry's ear, his voice so husky it was a growl.

Harry's body obeyed immediately and he came, crashing with a shock of ecstasy. He coated the desk with his come, whimpering weakly. In an instant, every muscle in his body seemed to shift from being tightly wound to loose and trembling. Harry collapsed onto his elbows, blood pounding in his head, and his heart trying to climb out of his throat. He was only distantly aware of Tom's cock softening inside him and Tom's come dribbling down his thighs. He hadn't even noticed Tom coming, but they must have come together. He didn't know. He couldn't think. His eyelids slipped shut and he might have blacked out for a short while.

The next thing Harry was fully aware of, he lay boneless on the desk, still shaking with the aftershocks of his orgasm, his stomach and thighs sticky. He was pinned beneath Tom's body as they both tried to steady their breaths.

Harry blinked his eyes open and stared dumbly at the desk. His brain still didn't seem to be working properly. He felt more than heard a sigh against his neck before Tom pulled out of him. Harry shivered at the sensation, his body too sensitive. The cool dungeon air hit the beads of sweat on his back and made him tremble.

Tom helped him up and wrapped a blanket around him before placing a kiss on his temple,

“That should keep you worn out until I return.”

Harry nuzzled his head into Tom's chest, incapable of forming words as Tom apparated them back to their quarters and placed him on the bed,

“You need to sleep. And by the time you wake up, I will be sleeping right next to you.”

Harry felt tears well up in his eyes, he knew he was overly sentimental but he couldn't help himself. He cupped Tom's face and kissed his lips before whispering,

“Just be careful, Tom.”

Tom smiled as he wiped away the tears,

“I will.”

Chapter 72

Harry stood at the castle's entranceway, dressed in black robes, face hidden behind his mask, as he anticipated Tom's return. It had been hours... It wasn't supposed to go on this long. Tom should have been back now. Waiting behind him were the death eaters that had been told to stay back and protect the castle, lest the ministry try to take over it again but nothing of the sort had happened yet.

His anxiety was peaking though with every passing minute and for a moment he felt like he would drown in it but then it would pass and he would reassure himself that Tom was okay, he was merely taking this long because he was cementing his victory and reinforcing his newfound hold over the ministry.

"My Lord, may I suggest something?"

Harry flinched internally at the title. He wasn't used to being addressed like that. He turned his attention to one of the twins and spoke,

"You may."

Fred spoke up,

"Maybe we should send someone to the ministry to check."

Harry sighed as he turned his face towards the stormy sky...It was going to rain soon,

"No... If the ministry attacks, we'll need everyone here."

After that, there was no more conversation. But the silence only served to make him feel more afraid but he knew that this fear was his challenge and his demon to slay. The only way out was to order his brain to function, to demand solutions instead of this crazy-making circling anxiety. So, even though it felt as if his bones had no more strength and his muscles are all out of power, he still had the option to remain still, to be quiet enough to choose how to fight and he chose that option.

Right now, he was in charge and he needed to ensure that he didn't fail Tom.

A crack resounded through the silent entrance way and Harry felt his heart jump to his throat as he waited for the person to approach. He hoped it was Tom. He hoped with all his heart that it was Tom. But it wasn't...

Bella's broken and bloodied form staggered towards them and Harry rushed forward to catch her before she collapsed,

"Bella!"

Bella was lighter than he'd anticipated but still, the twins helped him support her and they led her inside the castle towards the great hall. Somehow Bella's condition was a prelude to

something horrible and that meant that he had to ensure the castle's safety,

"Seal the castle. I want anti-apparition wards put up right this instant. Lock all the fireplaces and secure all secret entryways."

A group of death eaters rushed away as one of the twins conjured a stretcher and laid Bella down on it. Bella was a right mess. Her clothes showed signs of burning, and there were bruises and lacerations everywhere, however, the cause for concern was a gash that extended from her hip to her chest and was bleeding profusely. Her complexion had already gone ghostly pale and Harry was sure that she'd already lost a lot of blood,

"WHERE THE HELL IS NARCISSA? SOMEONE INFORM HER THAT HER SISTER IS INJURED!"

Harry cradled Bella's blood-stained face,

"You're going to be alright. Narcissa is going to heal you... You'll be fine, Bella."

Bella coughed and signaled him to come closer so Harry bent down and that was when she whispered into his ear,

"It's... It's Ov...Over..."

Harry didn't want to think too much about what she'd just said but he couldn't stop himself. The panic that had been building up inside his chest inflated like a balloon and began to suffocate him,

"What's over, Bella?"

Bella grabbed his hand and murmured,

"They have him."

Before he could ask anything else, Narcissa had arrived and she demanded that the space be cleared. But he was already moving out of the hall and towards the lawns. He could hear the twins rushing behind him but he didn't care...Nothing mattered right now...

The rain poured over him as he ran through the castle grounds...He didn't know where he was going... He just ran...If he ran hard enough he could run from the truth.... He could run away from reality... But how far would he be able to run before it would eventually catch up to him... How far could he possibly go?

His knees gave away and he collapsed and the first thing he did was rip off the mask from his face. It was still day but to him, everything was as dark as the blackest night. It occurred to him that it must be a nightmare, perhaps he ought just to play along. Or maybe if he refused to the world would right itself.

"Tell me it's a nightmare...Just wake me up... WAKE ME UP!"

He felt the twins kneel beside him and soon enough he was wrapped in their arms,

“Harry... Please get a hold of yourself.”

Harry pushed them away as he rose back to his feet and approached the nearest tree before punching it until his knuckles were bloody. And then he began to cry, not because it hurt, but because there was a chance that all this was real and he would have to deal with it.

Grasping on to that fact, helped him though. He wiped away his tears as he looked down at his bloody knuckles. There wasn't much time and he wasn't going to waste it crying and tormenting himself. He had to get Tom back before it was too late.

He turned around to face the twins and spoke up,

“We're going to the ministry.”

The twins stared at him in puzzlement,

“Are we taking the death eaters with us?”

Harry shook his head as he flexed his fingers and winced,

“No...Just us.”

Chapter 73

Something sharp pricked his arm and as soon as he tried to move it, a soft groan escaped his dry lips. A distant voice spoke,

“You’ve been through enough, Mr. Potter. You should rest.”

His head felt like it was stuffed with cotton...Everything was too murky and it took him everything to piece together his thoughts as he recalled how he’d gotten here.

He’d asked the twins to torture him and despite their strong protests he’d managed to convince them to do it because him being rescued by them was their best bet to get into the ministry and apparently it had worked like a charm.

“Where...Where am I?”

His voice sounded weak. A little too weak, which was a good thing because it made their story more believable,

“You’re safe now, Mr. Potter. Your friends managed to rescue you.”

He felt a wave of nausea as he wondered how long he’d been out. He hoped it hadn’t been too long. He hoped he wasn’t too late...

He forced his eyes open and closed them as the lights over his head felt extraordinarily bright and made a sharp pain lance right through the middle of his head,

“Just rest, Mr. Potter.”

Harry felt panic welling up inside his chest and he needed someone to answer the questions storming through his mind. He heard footsteps retreating from his bedside and then he heard the voice he’d been dying to hear,

“They’re keeping him in the department of mysteries.”

Harry let out a sigh of relief as he felt a pair of warm hands take his. It was George that continued,

“You’ve been unconscious for a day... They wanted to move you to St. Mungo’s but we convinced them that you were safer here in the ministry.”

Harry squeezed the hands holding his and inquired softly,

“What’s the security like?”

“It’s pretty tight.”

“And what are they planning to do with him?”

“They’re waiting for the international confederation of wizards before they announce their decision.”

“Is he okay? They haven’t tortured him, have they?”

“We’re not sure... The security is impenetrable. Only the Minister and a select few Aurors are allowed to see him.”

Harry thought long and hard about that as he came up with a strategy to get closer to Tom. It seemed the only way to do that was by meeting the Minister,

“What will they do with him when the confederation arrives?”

The twins didn’t respond to that so Harry knew what the answer was. They were going to kill Tom and he needed to get to him before that happened.

“I need to meet the Minister.”

“That is not going to be easy. He’s pretty preoccupied.”

“Percy is working as his junior assistant, right? Get him to arrange a meeting... I sacrificed myself for all those students, I deserve a meeting with the minister of magic.”

“We’ll do our best.”

He heard the twins leave and Harry turned on his side and buried his face in the pillow. He needed to ensure Tom’s safety at any cost. How was he going to live without him?

Harry heard the door to his room open and immediately all his senses were on high alert. The twins couldn’t be back this early. A single pair of footsteps approached his bed and then he felt a very familiar touch on his cheek,

“Harry...”

Sirius’s voice was choked with emotions and Harry couldn’t help himself as he breathed out,

“Sirius.”

The mattress dipped as he felt Sirius sit down next to him and he felt his fingers thread through his hair,

“I know you’re not here because you were rescued.”

Harry opened his eyes and stared up at Sirius’s tear-filled ones,

“Why haven’t you told everyone that?”

Sirius averted his gaze and Harry reached up to grab his chin and turned his face towards him,

“Are you afraid they’ll kill me like they’re planning to kill him?”

Sirius pulled his hand away from his hair and Harry grabbed his wrist,

“Answer me, Sirius.”

Sirius rose to his feet and began to pace around furiously. His frustration was evident from the way he stomped his feet on the floor. After a minute he returned to the bed and settled down right beside him,

“Just tell me why?”

Harry raised an eyebrow,

“Why?”

Sirius growled,

“Why are you so loyal to the man who murdered your parents? Why are you so hell-bent on saving him from a fate he so rightfully deserves?”

Harry sighed as he looked away from Sirius and up at the plastered ceiling. He could see how tormented Sirius actually was. He was his Godfather after all. He loved him. It made sense that he would want to know the reason why Harry was doing what he was doing. But Harry wondered how he'd take it. Would he be as supportive as the twins or would he be disgusted? Well... It wasn't like he had anything to lose by telling him. Best case scenario, he would help him in his plan... Worst case, he'd tell everyone in the ministry what he was up to... In that case, he was happy to die by Tom's side. It would be far better than living without him,

Sirius pleaded,

“Harry, please tell me...”

“I love him.”

Saying that out loud made it seem all the more real and Harry prepared himself for the next question that would most surely come. But for the moment, Harry simply stared at the expression of utter disbelief on Sirius's face as he no doubt struggled to contemplate how that had come to pass.

Well, sometimes he had trouble contemplating how that had come to pass. How had he fallen for the man he'd once hated with all his being? Somehow, every time he thought of Tom, he remembered his carefree laughter, the taste of his cooking, those crossword puzzles on the kitchen table, and then being claimed ruthlessly by him on the very same table. Somewhere in those little happy moments, he'd stopped seeing the monster and started seeing the man that Tom was. But how could he ever explain that to Sirius... It was impossible to put all that into words.

Sirius cupped his cheek,

“Does he love you back?”

To be honest, he didn't have an answer to that.

Chapter 74

Harry leaned back in his seat in the stands of the dimly lit, gloomy courtroom where Tom's sentencing was supposed to take place. The stands were nearly filled and the courtroom was buzzing with excited conversations regarding what would be taking place here in a couple of minutes.

Harry wished he could share their excitement but right now all he felt was nervous. The twins had managed to arrange his meeting with the minister by coercing Percy and it was in that meeting that he had sought permission to be present at this sentencing. Fudge had granted him permission without any hesitance... So here he was.

He looked around the crowd, his gaze searching for Sirius and the twins but apparently, they had not completed their designated tasks yet. If everything went according to plan then this would all be over in less than fifteen minutes but if it didn't...

No...

He would not think about failure... He could not afford to fail today.

He breathed out a sigh of relief when he saw Sirius navigate through the crowd and make his way towards him. It was only when he had settled down in the vacant seat next to him that Harry inquired nervously,

"Is it done?"

Sirius ran a hand through his hair as he nodded,

"It's done."

Harry looked up at Sirius's face and saw nothing but puzzlement in his eyes... The same puzzlement that had been present there ever since he'd told him that he loved Tom,

"I don't expect you to understand what I have with him... It's too complicated... Sometimes, even I don't understand it but Sirius, I can't live without him anymore and I'm really glad that you agreed to help me in this."

Without thinking, he hugged Sirius tight and for a moment, Sirius sat there unmoving. Just when Harry was beginning to think that Sirius wouldn't reciprocate, he felt his arms wrap around him and hug him back,

"I'm sorry about what I said to you at Hogwarts... I shouldn't have left you like that..."

Harry pulled away from Sirius and saw the tears glimmering in his eyes,

"It's okay... You did what you had to... I just..."

He wasn't able to finish the sentence because everyone in the courtroom rose to their feet as Fudge walked in, leading a group of regally dressed wizards that Harry presumed were the representatives of the International Confederation of Wizards.

They all took their seats on the highest benches and a heavy silence permeated the courtroom. Fudge spoke,

"Bring in the prisoner."

Harry's hands balled into fists at how derisively Fudge had called Tom prisoner. Sirius pried his fingers open,

"Just relax."

Harry watched awestruck and heartbroken as Tom was escorted into the room, his wrists and ankles were shackled by bonds that glowed blue. There was a collar around his neck that was made of the same light. He looked weak and pale...almost like he hadn't been fed for the duration of his captivity. The shirt he was wearing was ripped in several places and Harry had no doubt that they'd tortured him...

He was seated in the chair and the golden chains snaked up and restrained him almost immediately.

"Where are the twins?"

Sirius murmured softly in reply,

"They are on standby."

Fudge began reading out the charges but Harry couldn't hear anything anymore. The sole center of his attention was Tom at the moment and if it were up to him he would kill each and every person that had mistreated him,

"Give them the signal."

Sirius took his hand,

"Are you sure?"

Harry nodded without looking at Sirius. Somehow, he just couldn't tear his gaze away from Tom.

Something clattered to the floor with a loud clatter but the sound was disregarded over Fudge's monotonous droning.

Harry counted down the seconds under his breath and just as he reached one...The doors of the courtroom burst open and an army of death eaters surged in. Shouts and cries echoed through the courtroom and everything was in chaos. Harry looked around at the mayhem around him and spotted the twins running towards him. They handed him a death eater mask and a pair of black robes that he put on in a hurry. As soon as he was dressed, they took off

and began jumping over the benches towards the center of the hall where Tom was restrained. A group of Aurors had formed a protective circle around Tom.

Harry signaled to the now masked twins and they flanked him from both sides as Sirius rushed forward and began dueling with the Aurors. Flashes of color shot across the courtroom like a deadly display of fireworks and Harry navigated his way through the courtroom with the twins whilst avoiding as much of the fight as possible.

A flash of color caught his attention and he turned his head to see the representatives from the confederation that Fudge was leading, trying to escape through the door but Harry had ensured that there was no way out from the courtroom so obviously their attempts were futile.

Sirius and the death eaters were still trying to break the protective circle of Aurors so Harry figured that a plan B was in order.

He removed the mask from his face and ran towards where Fudge was trying to blow the door open,

“Minister...”

Fudge turned to look at him, his face red and sweaty from overexertion,

“Mr. Potter, what are you...”

Harry pulled his wand out and pointed it to Fudge’s throat,

“If you know what’s good for you, call the Aurors down.”

Fudge stared at him awestruck, his gaze puzzled and filled with confusion,

“I don’t understand.”

Harry pressed the wand into Fudge’s throat,

“You don’t need to understand anything, Minister. Just do as I’m telling you to and you’ll live.”

The twins came forward and snatched the wand from Fudge’s hand. Harry looked at the representatives and spoke,

“I’d give them your wands if I were you.”

The twins made quick work of collecting everyone’s wands and restraining their hands. Harry grabbed Fudge’s arm,

“Let’s go... You have an announcement to make.”

Fudge turned his face towards the courtroom and then shouted,

“I ORDER MY AURORS TO STAND DOWN!”

And just like that, the chaos in the courtroom subsided.

Chapter 75

Harry didn't know what he was supposed to do now. Tom was free and back on his feet. The Minister had ceded over the control of the ministry to Tom so all in all his plan had gone better than he'd originally imagined. But now, as he stood amongst the crowd of death eaters that celebrated their new victory, he felt so purposeless and out of place.

Well a part of him, a love-sick, foolish part, had thought that maybe Tom would call him up to the middle of the courtroom and kiss him in front of everyone to announce their relationship but obviously, that had not happened. Tom had barely even acknowledged him and maybe that was the part that bothered him the most.

He just wished Tom would at least look at him, just once... But nothing of the sort happened and Harry felt his already broken heart fall apart inside his chest.

Maybe he ought to just leave. He wasn't needed here after all.

He pushed through the cheering crowd towards the door that led out of the courtroom. On his way out, he heard the twins,

"Wait up, Harry."

Harry groaned softly. Why couldn't he just get a moment alone anymore?

The twins caught up to him in the corridor and inquired,

"Where are you going?"

Harry chose to ignore them as he stepped into the elevator and pressed the button for the lobby. The twins seemed to have taken his silence as a cue to not ask any more questions and Harry was completely fine with that. He was even okay with their silent presence because it meant that he wouldn't make any rash or reckless decisions.

They reached the lobby and Harry made his way straight to the fireplaces. George spoke,

"They're locked, Harry."

Harry sighed,

"Unlock them then."

The twins crossed their arms,

"Tell us where you're going."

Harry ran his fingers through his hair as he struggled to abate his frustration. The truth was, he didn't know where he was going to go. He didn't actually have a home. The only time he felt like he was home was when he was in Tom's arms. But it was so apparent that Tom felt

nothing of the sort... In fact, Tom felt nothing and he would probably never feel anything ever because of the way he was. And if he kept denying that, it would only destroy him...

Well, he was already destroyed... He had nowhere to go.... He had nothing to do... There were no more dreams... No more aspirations... No more plans for the future... Everything about his being was just so pointless...

It was hopeless to even think Tom would ever accept him publicly because the truth was that Tom's hunger for power was insatiable and Harry was certain that he'd never be satisfied even if he had the entire world at his feet. There would always be something more important in his life than being with him. He would never be a priority for Tom.

Maybe he should just kill himself and end this. Tom wouldn't miss him... He doubted anyone would.

The thing that he found funny was that he wasn't even upset. He just felt... nothing... Maybe that's how Tom was able to make just cruel decisions so effortlessly. He blinked and realized that he'd gotten lost in his thoughts for far too long,

"Hogwarts... I'm tired... I want to go back to Hogwarts and get some rest."

The twins seemed to believe him because they unlocked the fireplace for him.

The twins followed him to Hogwarts though. In fact, they followed him until he reached the quarters he shared with Tom. Only then did they leave him alone.

Alone... Finally...

Harry looked around the elegantly decorated room, his gaze came to a halt on the king-sized bed, covered with emerald silk sheets that gleamed beautifully under the dim light from the chandelier that hung overhead.

It would be such a waste if they got soiled with his blood.

Harry closed his eyes and sank down to his knees on the plush carpet. He knew he was probably being weak right now but there was a part of him that was opposing the idea of what he wanted to do.

That part told him how hurt Tom would be when he would find him here lifeless...

He wondered how Tom would react when he would learn of his death... Would he even react at all?

Harry opened his eyes and scoffed at himself.

Tom would feel nothing... Just like he felt nothing now.

He rose to his feet and stepped into the opulent bathroom. With a gentle flick of his wand, he conjured a straight razor and held it up so that the light from the wall scones reflected off of it blindingly. He couldn't remember when he'd decided to go with the blade...

Out of all the ways he could end his life, the razorblade was probably the most painful one but as he stared at the maliciously gleaming blade, he knew that he'd made the right choice.

Overwhelmed with social interaction, interviews, and the omnipresent stares of his death eaters, he hovered on the verge of murdering someone. He'd been informed by the twins that Harry had retreated to the castle. He missed him, and every minute spent away from the boy added a drop into the pool of his darkness. A bitter taste of premonition filled his mouth and unsettled his nerves. He scanned his surroundings, trying to locate the cause of his alertness, but nothing unusual caught his eye.

There was something wrong. He could just feel it in his very being.

Without saying a word, he flooded himself to the castle. The bedroom was empty but a single stripe of light leaked from under the bathroom door.

On impulse, he shouldered the door open.

The faucet ran full force. Red water flowed over the edge of the tub and flooded the floor. Thick steam thickened the air with a surreal feeling of doom.

This can't be happening.

He thought, watching the bloody hand hang from the bathtub lip, red droplets tearing from fingertips and crashing against puddles of water.

He shook his head and pressed his hands to his face, checking his reality. No, this can't be happening...

Chapter 76

His knees hit the marble tiles, red water rippling around his black robes. Harry lay still, face bloodless. Even beneath the bloody water, his fingers looked pale as they wound around a straight razor.

“No...”

He wanted to scream, rage, and crush things. He grasped the blade and, pouring all his impotence and frustration in a movement, threw it away. Metal clanged against stone.

His fingers shook as he fumbled over the pallid neck, searching for signs of life. Weak and fluttering, the pulse pushed against his finger pad, giving hope.

He plunged his arms into the water and lifted the boy. Water cascaded from the motionless body, flooding the floor when he carried Harry to the bed. With great care, he lowered his possession to the bedspread and checked his body.

A net of shallow cuts covered the wrists and forearms. Dark red blood steadily welled from the cuts, suggesting the veins were slashed. The inner sides of the lower eyelids were pale, and even Harry’s lips had lost their color.

Casting his soaked robes aside, he made quick work of healing the cuts and stopping the bleeding but it was so apparent that the boy had lost enough blood already. His heart drummed in his chest as he summoned the twins through the dark mark.

He would certainly punish them later but right now he needed them to fetch some blood-replenishing potions from the dungeons.

While he waited for them, he ensured the Horcrux inside Harry was still intact. It was, but that did not bring him any sense of relief. He just needed the boy to live. The horcrux’s safety was secondary.

The sunrise slashed the darkness with a single bleeding stripe. Harry slept, heavily sedated. For some time, he sat by his side surrounded by the bloody mess of his clothes and spilled water, with a single question exhausting his heart and mind.

Why?

Harry had seemed fine at the ministry. He’d planned his rescue and surprisingly managed to pull it off. What on earth had happened?

At some point, he decided to clean the mess. He vanished the bloody clothes and the bedsheet. He vanished every single drop of blood out of the bedroom and the bathroom so nothing would remind him of last night.

When the brisk wind washed out the last traces of blood from the air, he rested his back against the wall and then slipped to the floor. His legs stretched out, palms resting on the marble floor.

A soft moan forced his attention toward the bed. The slight body lay on the bed, blank emerald eyes staring at the ceiling. He expected to detect pain or for his darkness to resonate, but not a single emotion radiated from the boy as if he was dead.

He circled the bed and sat by Harry's side.

"You shouldn't have stopped me."

Listless, indifferent words came out quiet and calm.

"Why?"

"Because no one would ever miss me...I'm not needed."

Harry said as if it was self-evident. His unblinking eyes brimmed, and two shimmering trails painted his temples,

"Who told you this?"

His voice came out a soft hiss,

"No one..."

Harry tried to avert his face, but he grasped his chin and instilled eye contact,

"Tell me who told you that you were not needed."

Harry shook his head and wrenched his chin out of his grip,

"Isn't that the truth, Tom?"

"It's not the truth."

He exhaled words, and Harry settled his glossy emerald eyes on him. Shining with tears, they looked like gems. *So pretty...*

"What is the truth then, Tom?"

A speck of hope glimmered in those hopeless eyes and he wondered whether he should extinguish it or ignite it,

"I need you."

Three words... Three simple words but they seemed to mean the world to the boy because the sorrow evaporated from his very being like it had never been there. He leaned down and pressed his forehead to Harry's as Harry whispered,

“I’m sorry... I am so sorry.”

He shushed him as he slotted his lips against his deliciously soft ones and then breathed,

“I should feel offended that you chose death over me, My Prince.”

He felt Harry’s arm wrap around him. It was so apparent that he wanted to justify his actions but justifications did not matter. If the boy had attempted it once, there was a possibility that he would try it again and that was not a risk he was willing to take,

“You need to understand that every action has a consequence and I cannot protect you from the consequences of your actions if you keep acting so irrationally.”

Harry seemed to have understood the subtext because he could feel his panic,

“It’s not their fault... It is no one’s fault. I did this by myself...No one knew I was going to...”

He abruptly quieted him by pressing his lips to his and kissing him hard and rough. The boy melted underneath him and he wrapped an arm around his waist as he got in the bed beside him and pulled him closer,

“You will not attempt anything like this ever again, My Prince.”

Harry’s eyes were closed but he indicated his agreement with a slight nod.

“Good, you belong to me and I will never let you go.”

Harry nestled his head against his chest and he carded his fingers through his messy locks. He knew how much comfort the boy derived from that little gesture and it was instantly apparent that it was working because he felt the exact moment the boy fell asleep against his chest.

Last night had been a close call. He felt a terrible twinge of pain in his chest when he imagined how wrong things could have gone if he had arrived a moment later than he had. He could have lost the boy forever and along with him his Horcrux. But it also somehow unnerved him when he realized that the thought of losing his horcrux did not bother him as much as it was supposed to. The thought of losing the boy...Now that was what caused a gaping wound in his heart to open up and it felt like the pain would swallow him whole.

It wasn’t right.

The boy was merely a possession...Nothing more... He could never be anything more...

He scoffed at himself. It was as clear as day that he had inadvertently gotten attached. There was no use in denying that. But that also meant that he would need to be more protective of the boy. Nothing like this could ever happen again.

Chapter 77

Harry awoke to the sounds of the birds chirping somewhere in the distance and the soft rustling of the curtains as the cool morning breeze flowed into the room. But the thing that brought him the most joy was the man that was sleeping next to him and had his arms wrapped tight around him. It almost felt as if he was scared to let go.

He could feel the warmth from Tom's body seeping into his skin and it was the most beautiful feeling in the whole entire world. Waking up next to Tom was like moving from one dream to a better kind. His lips curved into a smile as he reveled in Tom's possessive hold. But when last night's events flashed in front of his eyes, he bit his lower lip as guilt pooled in his chest,

How could he have been so stupid and thoughtless?

Last night was the third time Tom had stopped him from dying. The first time was when he'd spared his life in the graveyard, the second was when his uncle had cracked his skull in and then left him on the road to die, and now this...

He couldn't understand what had come over him last night... Had it really been last night? Maybe he'd been asleep for longer than he thought...

"Harry... Stop thinking... You're going to give us both a headache."

Harry sighed as he raised his wrists to look at the smooth skin. It was almost like he'd never sliced through them in the first place,

"Tom..."

Tom turned him around so that they were laying face to face,

"I do not want to discuss this again."

Harry nodded silently,

"You shall be accompanying me to the Ministry today where you shall not be leaving my sights."

Tom read the puzzlement in his eyes and pushed away a stray lock of hair from his forehead,

"You'll be in disguise. I'll cast a glamour over you."

Harry closed his eyes as he pressed his forehead to Tom's. He didn't want to feel disappointed but he couldn't help it. Tom cupped his cheek gently,

"I can't let the world know about you yet, My Prince."

"Everyone saw me that day, Tom... They all saw me when I had my wand pointed at Fudge."

“I’ve already justified that... It wasn’t you who was in that courtroom. It was one of my death eaters who had taken Polyjuice Potion to infiltrate the ministry.”

Harry opened his eyes and met Tom’s gaze,

“What could possibly go wrong now, Tom? You have the ministry. You have members of the International Confederation of Wizards, which means you have the entire magical world on its knees.”

Tom’s lips curved into a smile as he stroked small circles on his cheek with his thumb,

“What do you think will happen as soon as I announce our relationship?”

Relationship... That one word sparked so much joy in his heart... Tom had finally given whatever was happening between them a name. Which meant that they were making progress... Tom snapped his fingers and Harry realized that he’d zoned out,

“I don’t know, Tom.”

Tom pressed his lips to the corner of his mouth,

“They will target you. They will try to hurt you to make me heed their demands... And I will, My Prince. I would do anything they would ask if it meant your safety and well-being... You have become my Achilles heel and if I expose you... All of this power that I have amassed... All of it could be gone in seconds.”

Harry wrapped his arms around Tom as he kissed him desperately,

“I don’t want that, Tom... I want you to have everything that you want... I can’t be your weakness.”

Tom kissed him hard and rough and the world fell away. Tom was practically devouring his mouth, yet it was comforting in ways that words would never be. His hand rested below his ear, his thumb caressing his cheek as their breaths mingled. He ran his fingers down his spine, pulling him closer until there was no space left between them and he could feel the beating of his heart against his chest. When Tom finally pulled away, Harry was left shaking, breathless and undone. He felt intoxicated. How could something so violent, leave him feeling so wonderful? Tom’s soothing voice whispered in his ear,

“I knew you would not disappoint me, My Prince... I knew you would understand.”

But before Harry could catch his breath or respond, his lips were claimed again ruthlessly into another kiss. His arms wrapped around Tom, holding onto him for dear life and Tom held him back. He was perfect. This was perfect. Harry was incapable of forming any coherent thoughts as Tom pulled away from him and pressed a kiss to the corner of his mouth,

“If I stay in this bed for a second longer, we will not be able to get any work done today.”

Harry groaned in disappointment as he panted against Tom’s neck,

“You’re not allowed to leave me like this after turning me on.”

Tom chuckled devilishly,

“I could finish you off now... But I think it’ll be so much sweeter to have you on the edge all day.”

Before Harry could grab him. Tom pushed away the covers and jumped off the bed,

“I expect you to be ready in fifteen minutes.”

Just as Harry was about to reach down to finish himself off, Tom tsked loudly,

“You are not allowed to touch yourself all day...”

Harry whined as he punched the mattress in frustration. Tom laughed playfully,

“I promise, Harry. The reward for your patience will be worth it.”

He knew that Tom meant that and that was probably the only thing that gave him the fortitude to get himself off the bed and haul himself into the bathroom to freshen up and get ready for whatever Tom expected him to do today.

Chapter 78

Harry quickly freshened up and dressed in the clothes Tom had laid out for him... a simple black suit that fit him perfectly. He glanced at his reflection in the mirror, adjusting his tie with a touch of nervousness. Today was going to be a crucial day, filled with hidden dangers and unforeseen challenges.

As he walked out of the bathroom, Tom was waiting for him, looking immaculate in his tailored dark robes. Harry couldn't help but feel a surge of pride and admiration as he gazed at him. Tom's presence exuded power and confidence, a force that seemed capable of bending the world to his will.

Tom held out his hand, and Harry took it willingly, their fingers intertwining. It was a gesture that offered both reassurance and a silent promise. Together, they walked out of the room, leaving behind the sanctuary of their shared intimacy.

The corridors of the castle were dimly lit, casting eerie shadows on the walls. They made their way to the fireplace in the main hall. Tom cast a glamour over Harry, rendering him unrecognizable. It was a necessary precaution. Tom couldn't risk anyone discovering the truth and using it against them.

"We'll be using the Floo Network to reach the Ministry,"

Tom explained, his voice low yet commanding.

"Remember, Harry, you must not reveal your identity to anyone. Our relationship is not to be revealed to the world just yet."

Harry nodded, his heart heavy with a mix of guilt and understanding. He knew Tom was doing everything to protect him, to keep him safe from the prying eyes of those who would seek to exploit their connection. But it was a double-edged sword, one that filled him with conflicting emotions.

Stepping into the fireplace, Harry took a deep breath, and Tom threw a handful of Floo powder into the flames, uttering the destination clearly. They were whisked away in a whirlwind of green flames and smoky trails, emerging moments later in the Ministry's fireplace network.

They arrived in a secluded corner, away from prying eyes. Harry, followed Tom closely as they made their way through the bustling corridors. The Ministry was abuzz with activity, wizards and witches, death eaters going about their duties, bowing to Tom, and clearing a path for him as he walked through them.

Tom led Harry towards a secluded office, one that he had claimed for himself within the vast labyrinth of the Ministry. Inside, the room was dimly lit, lined with bookshelves filled with ancient tomes and scrolls. It felt like a sanctuary within the heart of bureaucracy.

As Harry looked at Tom, his eyes filled with a mix of gratitude and uncertainty, he whispered softly.

"Thank you, Tom, for everything."

Tom's expression softened, and he placed a hand on Harry's cheek, his touch gentle yet possessive,

"You are my most precious secret, Harry. I will do whatever it takes to keep you safe."

Harry leaned into the touch, savoring the warmth and comfort it provided,

"I understand why you want to keep our relationship hidden,"

he murmured,

"But it's hard, Tom. It's just so hard."

Tom's eyes held a mixture of regret and determination,

"I promise you, My Prince, one day we will reveal our relationship to the world. But for now, we must be cautious. There are forces that would use our bond against us."

Harry nodded a mixture of sadness and acceptance settling within him. He knew that Tom's words were true, that whatever was between them was a fragile secret in a world consumed by fear and power struggles. It was a reality he had to navigate, no matter how much it pained him.

As the day unfolded, Tom had several meetings scheduled. The first one was with his most loyal Death Eaters and key Ministry officials. While Harry had no interest in being present in the meeting, Tom made sure that he was seated at the table and a part of the meeting. During the meeting, Tom made it clear that his word was law and any disobedience or betrayal would be met with severe consequences.

After the meeting ended, Tom dismissed the ministry officials but ordered the death eaters to stay for another meeting. In this meeting, he created an inner circle of trusted advisors and administrators within the Ministry. These individuals, handpicked for their unwavering loyalty and competence, were to serve as the backbone of his regime, ensuring the smooth functioning of the Ministry under his command.

Bellatrix was assigned the Department of Magical Law Enforcement. Snape was given the Department of Mysteries. Lucius Malfoy was delegated the Department of International Magical Cooperation. Department of Magical Education was given to Antonin Dolohov.

While Harry had never doubted Tom's administrative prowess, he was left completely in awe by how efficiently Tom was handling the decision-making process and reorganizing the ministry to meet his vision. As the meeting was coming to an end, Bellatrix spoke,

"My Lord, I have a question?"

Tom signaled her to ask as he went through the papers that were placed in front of him,

“Shouldn’t Harry Potter be assigned a department? He is a part of the inner circle and he has proven his loyalty and usefulness.”

Tom looked up from the papers and chuckled softly. The death eaters all visibly tensed as he pointed toward him,

“Do you know who he is?”

Bellatrix looked directly at him with puzzlement. Of course, she couldn’t recognize him because of the glamour Tom had placed on him. No one could...

“No, My Lord.”

Tom smirked,

“Yet you did not question why he was present in this meeting where only my most loyal death eaters were allowed to be?”

Bellatrix bowed her head,

“My Lord, I believed that he must be someone important if you have allowed him to be here. I cannot question your judgment.”

Tom rose to his feet and Harry felt a twinge of excitement in his belly as he came to stand right behind his chair and placed his hands on his shoulder. Harry felt that sensation of chilliness on his face again and closed his eyes. He knew Tom had just removed the glamour,

“Now do you recognize him, Bella?”

Harry opened his eyes to find that Bellatrix was fighting hard to hold back her grin,

“Yes, My Lord.”

Tom squeezed his shoulders and Harry felt a sense of relief course through his body. At least there was someone who was going to know who he was,

“I do have a job for Harry. He will be appointed as my senior undersecretary. But I do not want his allegiance to me to be public knowledge just yet. That is why no one other than the people present in this room can know who he truly is. He shall work here but you shall only refer to him by Adrian Ashcroft. As far as public knowledge is concerned, Harry Potter is under my captivity. Is this understood?”

Adrian Ashcroft... Harry liked that name but he hoped that Tom wouldn’t be addressing him by that. He liked hearing his name on Tom’s lips,

The death eaters around the table muttered in unison,

“Yes, My Lord.”

Tom dismissed everyone from the room and Harry felt his warm breath against the nape of his neck,

“Does this make you feel better, Harry?”

Harry nodded as Tom pressed a kiss to the back of his neck,

“My purpose was never to isolate you, My Prince.”

Harry sighed,

“I know, Tom.”

Chapter 79

The day at the Ministry of Magic had been a long and arduous one for Harry. Pretending to be Adrian Ashcroft, his alternate identity, had begun to take its toll. The weight of the charade had settled heavily on his shoulders, chipping away at his spirit. Deep within, Harry yearned for a moment of respite, a chance to shed the mask and embrace his true self.

As the afternoon sun bathed Harry's office in a warm glow, Tom entered, his usual air of authority temporarily subdued. Sensing Harry's weariness, he approached with a gentleness that bespoke his deep understanding of the burdens they both carried.

"Harry,"

Tom began, his voice tinged with concern,

"I can see the exhaustion in your eyes. The weight of this charade we maintain is taking its toll on you."

Harry sighed; his fatigue evident as he slumped in his chair,

"Tom, I'm trying but I can't deny it anymore. I'm tired. Tired of pretending, tired of hiding who I really am... tired of being someone I'm not."

Tom's gaze softened, and he reached out to grasp Harry's hand, offering comfort and support,

"My Prince, I understand your weariness. The sacrifices we make are immense, and the world demands so much of us. But know that you are not alone in this struggle."

Harry looked into Tom's eyes; his heart heavy with a mix of emotions. He knew that Tom's connection to him was different, driven by a need for companionship and control rather than the deep wells of love that Harry felt. But he also recognized that Tom's presence in his life, in whatever form it took, brought him a sense of purpose and belonging.

With a resigned yet determined expression, Harry continued,

"Tom, I need a break. A chance to step away from this facade, even if only for a little while. I want us to go on a vacation, a place where we can be ourselves, where we can breathe freely without the weight of expectations."

Tom studied Harry's face, his expression a blend of understanding and admiration. Harry knew that Tom could never fully comprehend the depths of his love, but he knew that Tom was drawn to it, and somehow along the way they had become co-dependent on each other.

"You're right, Harry,"

Tom replied, his voice laced with a mix of empathy and detachment,

"We both deserve a respite from the burdens we carry. A moment to reconnect with our true selves, away from the prying eyes and judgments of the world."

A flicker of hope mixed with a tinge of sadness flickered in Harry's eyes as he grasped Tom's hand tightly. At that moment, he realized that their connection, though different in its nature, was still profound in its own way.

With a resolute smile, Harry leaned closer, his voice trembling with a blend of vulnerability and longing,

"Let's go, Tom. Let's embark on a journey where we can be unapologetically ourselves, where our connection can flourish without constraint."

Tom nodded, his eyes searching Harry's face, trying to decipher the emotions that danced across it. Though he couldn't fully grasp the depths of love, he recognized the significance of this request, the vulnerability that Harry had shown. And he couldn't deny the magnetic pull he felt towards him, the source of both fascination and stability in his life.

As Harry yearned for a respite from the charade of their lives, little did he realize the profound impact his request had on Tom's tormented soul. The very notion of Harry seeking a break, a temporary escape from the confines of their shared existence, struck a dissonant chord within Tom's heart. It awakened a dark obsession that simmered beneath the surface, a possessiveness that thrived on the idea of keeping Harry all to himself, hidden away from the prying eyes of the world.

While Harry's plea for a vacation was born out of weariness and a longing for authenticity, for Tom, it stirred a deeper desire... an insatiable hunger to possess Harry entirely, to ensnare him within the web of their connection and never let go. The vacation became an opportunity, not only to grant Harry respite but also to revel in the overwhelming power he held over him.

In the secrecy of his thoughts, Tom found solace in the realization that on this vacation, Harry would be at his mercy, completely reliant on him for every ounce of happiness and security. It was an intoxicating prospect, fuelling the twisted depths of his obsession with an intensity that defied comprehension.

As plans were made and the anticipation grew, Tom's mind teetered on the edge of euphoria and darkness. The vacation would not only offer them a brief escape from their roles but would also serve as a vessel through which he could control Harry's every experience, every moment of joy and vulnerability. The mere thought sent shivers down Tom's spine, a dark pleasure pulsating through his veins, as he reveled in the knowledge that during their time away, Harry would be entirely under his spell, captive to his every whim.

And so, as the day of their departure drew near, Tom's obsession transformed into a sinister blend of possessiveness and adoration. In the depths of his twisted love, he relished the notion of Harry being his captive, their vacation becoming a twisted dance of control and intimacy. As they embarked on this journey, Tom would revel in the power he held over Harry, manipulating their shared moments of bliss and molding them to fit his own desires.

In this paradoxical concoction of love and obsession, the vacation became a manifestation of Tom's deepest desires. It would be a stage upon which he could indulge in the illusion of a perfect relationship, a twisted fantasy where he was both protector and captor, intertwining their fates in a dark tapestry of passion and possession.

Chapter 80

Harry woke up early that morning, his mind filled with a mix of anticipation and trepidation. The sun's golden rays spilled through the curtains, casting a warm glow across the room. As he lay there, thoughts of the upcoming vacation and the complex emotions it stirred within him consumed his mind.

Part of him was thrilled at the prospect of a much-needed break, a chance to escape the confines of the Ministry and the burdensome charade he maintained. The allure of being able to shed the mask and embrace his true self for a while was tantalizing, like a breath of fresh air after being suffocated for far too long. He yearned for the freedom to simply be Harry, without the weight of expectations and the constant pretense.

Yet, beneath the surface of excitement, a lingering unease nagged at him. He couldn't shake off the unsettling feeling that something was amiss, that perhaps his request for a vacation had awakened a darker side of Tom. The intensity with which Tom had embraced the idea, the way his eyes gleamed with a mix of possessiveness and adoration, sent a chill down Harry's spine. He couldn't ignore the undercurrents of control and obsession that seemed to taint their impending journey.

Pushing those disquieting thoughts aside, Harry rose from his bed and began to prepare for the day ahead. He dressed up in a pair of jeans and a T-shirt. The destination for their journey was still a surprise and since Tom had been missing from the bed, that meant that he was either getting some work done or he was putting the plan for their vacation in motion.

He was just about to walk out of the bedroom when he felt Tom's arms wrap around him from behind in a tight embrace. A smile curved Harry's lips as he leaned into Tom's solid form,

"Tom, where were you?"

Tom pressed a kiss to his nape,

"Just taking care of some things and getting these."

Harry turned around to find that Tom was holding what seemed to be two passports. Harry stared at him in puzzlement,

"Why would we need those?"

"We're going to Italy."

When Tom just stared at him, Harry's eyes bugged wide,

"We're really going to Italy."

Tom nodded and Harry decided to just go with the flow,

“But I haven’t packed anything.”

Tom shook his head as he rested his hands on Harry’s shoulders,

“Where we’re going, you won’t need anything.”

Before Harry could ask any more questions, Tom grabbed his arm tight and Harry felt the uncomfortable sensation of the side along apparition. Harry found himself staring at a plane and his jaw all but hit the tarmac,

“Are we traveling by that?”

Tom didn’t give him a verbal reply but his smirk said everything. Another thing dawned on him and Harry gasped,

“That’s your plane?”

Tom chuckled,

“It is. Why? Is it not big enough for you, My Prince?”

Harry struggled to come up with a response as Tom led him on the plane.

He couldn’t believe Tom could own something so muggle... Well, he supposed Tom was rich enough to own anything in the magical o muggle world but he’d never really thought about it in that respect. The way this holiday was turning out, Harry was fairly certain that Tom was hell-bent on giving him a very muggle vacation. Once they were strapped into their seats, Tom took his hand in his and spoke softly,

“The muggle world reminds me of the simplicity I often long for. It’s a chance to be ordinary, to blend in and experience life without the weight of magic. And I want to give you that experience. So, while there will be no magic involved in this vacation whatsoever... I will still make the experience as magical as I possibly can.”

The sincerity in Tom’s words brought moisture to his eyes and he rubbed it away with his free hand,

“Every minute I spend with you is magical, Tom.”

Tom pressed a kiss to his knuckles just as they felt the plane take off.

Someone was nudging Harry in his dream. It was an insistent touch, but Harry was too focused on the letter he was writing to give any attention to whoever was trying to distract him.

Almost done...just need to find the right words for the last paragraph

“Harry.”

Not now, I’m trying to...

“Wake up, my prince, we’re here.”

Here? Where?

Harry’s eyes opened and found that he wasn’t in his office at the ministry, he was in, but a plane. He blinked, trying to get his bearings.

“Care to see Italy, or did you want to stay here?”

Italy? They were already there?

He sat up quickly and looked out the window, and sure enough, they were no longer flying through the clouds but had landed among tree-lined hills. Damn, he’d slept through almost all of the flight and probably could pass back out now.

He bounded out of his seat and followed Tom off the plane, but as he walked down the steps, he realized they wouldn’t be going far. Not with Tom walking straight toward the black Aston Martin that was parked a few feet away. Of course Tom would know how to drive a car.

It was a beautiful convertible, and with Tom in the driver’s seat, it was practically a fantasy come to life. Harry hopped into the passenger seat and buckled himself in before Tom started up the car, and the purr of the engine drowned out everything.

“So... Where exactly are we?”

Harry looked at his surroundings as Tom drove toward the exit of what seemed to be another private airport. But there was no visible signage, no “Welcome to Wherever Airport” sign, just the runway and a road leading out.

Was this place even legal? Or was it completely off the grid for people like Tom? Was this where all the bad muggle guys like drug traffickers and gun runners entered and exited undetected? Harry had no idea, but when he glanced over to his driver, he realized that somewhere along the line he’d stopped lumping Tom in with those kinds of men and women.

“We’re in Milan right now,”

Tom said as he made his way out of the empty airfield and onto a quiet street.

“Milan?”

“That’s right, but we aren’t staying here.”

Tom wove his way out of the densely wooded area, and as he brought the car to a stop at a main road, the sound of horns beeping and blaring made Harry grip the dashboard for dear life.

“What the hell?”

he said as one driver after another laid their hand on the horn as they whizzed by,

“Why are they all honking at us? We aren’t even moving.”

“Because that’s their way. They’re making sure you see them and stay put.”

He reached across the car and tugged at Harry’s seatbelt.

“Very good... you’re going to want to be buckled up for this trip.”

Harry frowned,

“Um, why? I thought we were just going to drive to wherever we’re staying.”

“We are.”

Tom chuckled, and the sound was slightly diabolical.

“But the Italians are rather aggressive when it comes to getting from one place to another.”

“Aggressive?”

“Yes. As in, any small gap you see is an invitation.”

“An invitation to what?”

“To get ahead.”

Tom flashed a wolfish smile, then pushed in the clutch and shifted into first gear,

“And you know very well that I love to get ahead. So, hang on, my prince.”

Like a bullet out of a gun, Tom shot out of the quiet road and onto the main drag so fast the tires squealed and kicked up the gravel underneath them. He maneuvered the vehicle into a small opening between two cars that was so tight it made Harry’s entire body clench. As horns blared all around, Tom laughed like some maniacal lunatic and punched the accelerator.

Harry gripped the side of the door with one hand and his seatbelt with the other then sent up a quick prayer that this wouldn’t be how or where he died and realized that once again Tom held Harry’s life in his hands.

Tom weaved in and out of the bustling traffic, honking away as he cursed in Italian at cars flying by. When hands came out of windows to flip them off, a wide smile crossed Tom’s face.

Of course, something like this appealed to him. He loved the adrenaline. Harry, however, did not share the same sentiment.

He wasn’t sure how long the drive of death went on for, but when Tom came around a wide bend in the road and the view opened up to a spectacular lake, all thoughts of vehicular death vanished from Harry’s mind.

Chapter 81

He wasn't sure how long the drive of death went on for, but when Tom came around a wide bend in the road and the view opened up to a spectacular lake, all thoughts of vehicular death vanished from Harry's mind.

He straightened and took in the sweeping mountains on either side of the pristine body of water, the sailboats, shops, and markets running along the coast.

"Welcome to Lake Como,"

Tom said.

Harry's jaw dropped as he took in the most beautiful sights he'd ever seen in his life. It looked like he'd been dropped into a painting, the colors too rich and vibrant to be real. Even the air smelled too fresh, with a hint of something sweet and floral on the breeze.

"Wow,"

he said, shaking his head.

"This is incredible."

"Yes. It is."

Tom drove through the winding streets, staying closer to the water rather than going up into the hills. Harry's eyes grew wide at the size of the homes along the lake. There was no way they were staying in one of these places, were they? Each house was more luxurious than the last.

When Tom finally pulled into a driveway, Harry practically passed out from shock.

"We're here,"

Tom said, cutting the engine, but he didn't make a move to get out of the car. Instead, he stared up at the palatial estate,

"What is this place?"

"Via Besana Moltrasio."

"Is it yours?"

Tom nodded, still not taking his eyes off the house. Harry couldn't blame him... it was beautiful. Rounded windows decorated the two-story, cream-colored exterior accented with stone and ornate carvings he couldn't quite make out. From where they parked, he could see a sliver of the backyard, and he realized that the house was directly on the water. He was itching to get out and explore, but Tom hadn't moved.

“Is everything okay?”

Harry asked.

Tom blinked, snapping out of whatever trance he’d been in.

“Yes,”

he said as he hopped out of the car and then made his way to the front door, leaving Harry to follow him. Clearly, everything wasn’t okay, but he’d ask questions later.

As he stepped inside the villa, he sucked in a breath at the view staring him in the face. Through the window, he could see a large terrace covered in lush foliage, beautiful flowers in bloom, and an inviting pool, and beyond that, the sparkling waters of Lake Como. It was the most stunning place he’d ever seen in his life.

“Oh, I’m so sorry, Mr. Riddle. You’re here earlier than we expected.”

A woman’s voice knocked Harry out of his reverie. Two ladies were pulling white sheets off the furniture, but they stopped when they saw Tom and Harry.

“Apologies. When I’m here, I’m afraid I have a bit of a heavy foot.”

Tom gave the women a charming smile, and Harry stifled a chuckle.

“We’ll have everything down here cleared and cleaned for you soon, but the bedrooms have already been made, as well as the kitchen. If you’d like, we can stock it for you, or...”

“There’s no need to do that, but thank you.”

The woman nodded, and as they went back to uncovering what looked like a formal room, Tom ushered Harry toward the stairs.

“The rooms are upstairs to your right.”

“What? I don’t get a tour of the place first?”

Harry asked.

“No. It’s not ready yet.”

Oh.”

Harry looked back at the white sheets lying in a heap on the floor. He didn’t know people actually did that. He’d only ever seen covered furniture in old movies.

“So should I just take any of them?”

“Any room is fine.”

The change in Tom's demeanor was like night and day. He'd gone from fun and carefree out on the road to introspective and closed off in here.

Harry started up the stairs, trying to make sense of what he might've done to cause such a shift in Tom's mood. But when he reached the top of the landing and turned to look back down, he saw Tom had moved toward the windows overlooking the lake and had his hands clasped behind his back.

He was still and silent as he stared out at the sun sparkling off the water of the lake, but he seemed despondent.

Harry frowned, more determined than ever to get to the bottom of that mystery. Maybe it was something to do with the place? The house? Memories from here? He wasn't sure, but as a yawn hit him and his eyes began to feel heavy, he realized it was a mystery that would have to wait another day. The bed was calling his name.

Harry stretched along the king-sized bed, practically melting into the soft mattress, and opened his eyes. He could smell Tom's distinct scent on the sheets but he didn't know when Tom had joined him or how long he'd been asleep, but it felt like it could've been days. He'd needed it, though. Being Adrian Ashcroft had been more exhausting than he'd thought and that had made him relax more than he thought possible.

He rubbed his eyes and sat up, wondering what time it was. There wasn't a clock in the room, but the sun was out, which meant he should probably get up and see what Tom was up to.

Harry threw off the covers and got to his feet, stretching his sore body out a little more, and caught the gorgeous view out his window. Shimmering dark blue water contrasted with the vibrant green hills, and suddenly, any lingering fatigue in his body left. He was in Italy. No way was he staying up in this room when there was so much to explore.

He turned around to throw on the clothes he'd left in a heap beside the bed and noticed the fully stocked open closet. Wait, was that for him? Or were they Tom's clothes? But even if these belonged to Tom, Harry could use a fresh pair of clothes.

Harry changed into a pair of jeans and a loose linen shirt, feeling more human already, and then stepped out into the hallway. Unlike in the penthouse, the doors were all open, and Harry wandered down the hall and peered into each one. They were all empty, the luxurious beds untouched. Each one was formal in design, with decorative coffered ceilings, gold sconces on the walls, and sheer curtains framing the windows. No personal touches or photos to indicate whom the rooms belonged to.

If Harry owned a place like this, he'd be there all the time.

He wandered downstairs, nothing but silence meeting his ears.

"Tom?"

No answer, and from the look of it, the women he'd seen when he arrived were no longer there either. All the furniture was now uncovered, and it looked like everything had been freshly cleaned. The wooden fixtures were polished to a shine. As he moved through the house, he noticed how well lived in it looked despite the expensive décor. It actually felt like a family had lived here, or maybe that was just the way it was designed to feel.

"Tom? You down here?"

he called out, but Tom didn't answer.

Maybe he was outside. That gave Harry enough time to do a little snooping around, checking out each of the rooms without anyone looking over his shoulder.

A light breeze ruffled Harry's shirt, and he turned to see where it had come from. A pair of double doors were open to the backyard. Harry moved toward them and realized why Tom wouldn't want to stay cooped up inside. Though the house itself wasn't small, the yard was vast and appeared to have several levels that stretched out along the coast. The level he stood on was a large deck of intricate stone designs, statues, and separate lounge and seating areas along the expanse, and to his right, a grassy area with a covered pavilion. It was an unreal view, and the fact that it was only one of the levels blew his mind.

He peered down to the second level, where a pool and several lounge chairs were practically inviting him to come take a swim. Damn. It was tempting. He looked around, and when he still couldn't see Tom, he decided, what the hell. Harry jogged down the steps and made his way toward the shallow end of the large pool, where he kicked out of his flip-flops, rolled up his jeans, and walked down onto the first step.

Ahh, heaven... The cool water lapping against his ankles as he stared out at the most breathtaking view, he'd ever seen in his life was an experience he wasn't sure he could top.

As he stood there drinking in the view, a breeze swirled up around him, bringing with it sweet fragrances from the flowers and foliage surrounding the patio, and off in the distance he swore he caught the faint sound of splashing.

Curious, Harry got out of the pool, headed to the ivy-covered rail that overlooked a third level, and saw a charming seated area in amongst perfectly manicured hedges and water fountains. There were several statues surrounding the perimeter of the level, and off to one side was a gate.

Unable to resist further exploration, Harry hurried down the stairs that led to the third level. This place was incredible, the outdoor space as much a draw as the house itself. But it was the sound of the water that held and caught his attention.

He made his way through the gardens and toward the railing, and when he peered over the edge, Harry sucked in a breath. The drop-off between himself and the lake was vast, with the water splashing up against the brick wall supporting the gardens and home above it. But when he glanced off to the right and spotted a dock, he realized where the gate led.

With a smile on his face, he rushed over to it and pushed his way through. As he headed down the winding wooden path to the dock below, he had the fleeting thought that he hoped he wasn't trespassing.

This did belong to Tom, right? He hadn't seen a sign anywhere saying stop or private property. But maybe it was gated off for a reason.

All those questions seemed to vanish, however, as his feet hit the wet slats of the dock and he was faced with another magnificent view. It was almost as though he were standing on the lake itself with the way the water rippled under the dock. The sun sparkled off the lake like diamonds, and as he began to walk further out across the water, he heard the splashing sound again... much louder this time.

Harry tried to zero in on where the sound was coming from, but with the reflection from the sun, it was difficult. He brought a hand up to shield his eyes as he walked closer to the end of the dock. Scanning the pristine waters, he spotted a swimmer several feet away.

Harry watched as the swimmer powered through the water, strokes smooth and precise, propelling him toward a buoy, where he flipped under the water and started to make his way back.

Harry stood there mesmerized by the display of athleticism, his own swimming style nowhere near as fluid or smooth, but when the man got closer, his heart began to hammer.

That was Tom.

Harry wasn't sure why he was so surprised. Of course, Tom was a good swimmer... he had a house on a lake, for God's sake. But as he drew closer, and Harry continued to watch, good felt like too simple of a word for what he was witnessing. Tom moved through the water like he was made to be in it.

When Tom finally reached the dock, he stopped and glanced up,

"Finally, you're awake, My Prince. I thought you'd sleep through the entire vacation."

Harry was sure there was something he could say in his defense, but that would require remembering how to speak, something he was finding extremely difficult as he stood there staring down at one of the most sinfully sexy men he'd seen in his life.

Tom Riddle was a lot of things: arrogant, brutal, and cold-hearted at times. But no one could say the man wasn't drop-dead gorgeous. With his dark hair slicked back from the water and droplets clinging to his lashes, he looked mouth-watering, so much so Harry couldn't remember how to think.

When Harry just stood there, Tom raised a brow and hauled himself out of the water in one glorious move. Harry's jaw almost hit the wooden slats under his feet. If Harry thought Tom was sexy in the water, that was nothing compared to him standing out of it dripping wet, dressed in a pair of the tightest black swim shorts Harry had seen in his life. Harry's eyes

practically fell out of his head as he followed the water droplets trailing down all the delicious grooves of Tom's body.

"Did you forget how to speak sometime between yesterday and now?"

"Um..."

Harry dragged his eyes up to see Tom raking a hand through his hair.

"See something you like?"

The arrogant comment was enough to pull Harry out of his stupor and throw him into a playful mood. He pretended to look around him.

"Yeah, the lake is gorgeous."

Tom took a step toward him, and Harry immediately took one back,

"So that's what has you all tongue-tied?"

"I'm not tongue-tied."

"Mmm."

As Tom continued toward him, Harry kept retreating until the backs of his ankles hit the stairs onto the dock and he stumbled.

Tom reached out and took hold of his elbow,

"You're lying."

Harry's pulse began to race as he turned his head,

"No, I'm not."

Tom let go of his arm to bring Harry in flush to his body, and Harry brought his hands up to Tom's wet chest.

"And I suppose the lake is making you hard too?"

Harry shrugged, determined to play it cool,

"Yes. It's a beautiful lake. It made you hard too."

Tom's lips twitched, then he let go and reached for a towel that Harry had completely missed on his way down here.

As he wrapped the towel around his waist, Tom looked up at the garden and house above,

"I have to go out and pick up some food. Are you in the mood to do a little exploring? Or do you want to sit here and...enjoy the lake a little longer on your own?"

Harry scoffed,

“I’d love to go into town for a bit.”

“Good. Then let’s get upstairs. I need to get dressed.”

It was on the tip of Harry’s tongue to ask why when Tom looked so good in what he was already wearing. But not wanting to give Tom any more leverage this morning, he kept quiet and instead filed the image of Tom wet and naked climbing out of Lake Como into the far corners of his mind, to maybe take out one day later and enjoy on his own.

Chapter 82

“Try this.”

Tom stabbed one of the balls of fresh mozzarella with a toothpick and handed it to Harry.

“Um.”

Harry bit down on his lower lip and looked around the crowded marketplace.

“Are we allowed to?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes.”

“Harry.”

Tom narrowed his eyes.

“Just eat the cheese.”

Harry only narrowed his eyes right back, showing the defiance that had been steadily making itself known.

“C’è qualche problema?”

One of the women behind the booth appeared out of nowhere, a frown marring her brow.

“Non Le piace la nostra mozzarella?”

Harry looked to Tom for translation.

“She wants to know why you don’t like her mozzarella,”

Tom said.

Harry’s mouth fell open,

“She said that?”

“She did.”

“No, it’s not that I don’t like it, I just didn’t think we could...”

He shook his head and then slid the cheese off the toothpick and into his mouth. As he chewed, his eyes practically rolled into the back of his head,

“Oh my God. That’s amazing.”

“Che cosa ha detto?”

the woman asked Tom.

“Ha detto che è meglio di un orgasmo.”

Tom winked at the woman, who didn't even flush at his crude remark. She clapped her hands together and gestured toward the other samples she had on the table.

After his first taste, Harry was only too happy to try it all, and with each moan of satisfaction, Tom found himself a little turned on. He also couldn't help watching Harry's mouth, the way his full lips wrapped sensually around each bite.

“This one,”

Harry said, pointing to one of the samples.

“We have to get some of this to take with us.”

“Why not get them all?”

“Is that an option?”

“Everything's an option, My Prince. You should know that by now.”

“Wow. That might be the most arrogant thing you've ever said.”

Tom snorted and pulled out his wallet,

“I doubt that. Prendiamo uno di tutto quanto, per favore.”

Sheer delight crossed the woman's face as she bagged up their items, and Tom handed the sack to Harry.

“I think I could live off this stuff,”

Harry said,

“Why doesn't it taste as good back home?”

“Because it's fresh here.”

Tom led him over to another booth, this one showcasing a variety of fish. Harry leaned in close to whisper,

“We don't have to sample these too, do we?”

“I don't. You do.”

“What?”

Tom grinned, surprised to be enjoying himself. He'd never enjoyed shopping in these local markets as much as he did today.

"Buon pomeriggio,"

Tom said to the man standing behind the booth,

"Prendiamone quattro dell' persico, per favore."

The man nodded, and as he began to get their fish together, Harry said,

"I really miss your cooking, Tom"

Tom couldn't help but smile,

"And that's why we're here gathering ingredients."

"Signore?"

The man behind the counter held up the paper bundle, and Tom took it from him and handed it off to Harry,

"Grazie,"

the man said after Tom paid.

"So, what's next?"

Harry asked, all but bouncing on his toes.

"Hmm."

Tom glanced around the market and his eyes fell on a familiar stand,

"Do you have a sweet tooth?"

"Of course, doesn't everyone?"

"Not always."

Tom began to walk down the aisles of fresh fish toward the vegetables, and Harry jogged to keep up.

"What about you? Do you like sweets? I know you like ice cream."

Tom headed past several stands of fresh vegetables and stopped in front of a fruit stand, where a lady with a scarf wrapped around her hair smiled at him.

"Buon giorno,"

Tom said with a smile.

“Buon giorno. Would you like to try some plums?”

“Yes, please, these are my favorites.”

“You must have one, then. One for you and one for your friend.”

Tom picked up one of the small black plums and inspected its dark skin. Then he turned to Harry, who was frowning.

“What’s that?”

“A prune plum.”

Harry screwed his nose up and shook his head, and the lady behind the counter gasped.

“Congratulations, you’ve now offended one of the elders here in Lake Como.”

Harry’s mouth began to flap as though he was trying to think of the words to apologize, but realizing he didn’t speak her language, he reached for one of the plums and brought it to his mouth.

Before he took a bite, though, he glanced at Tom and asked,

“Does it uh, have the same side effects of a prune?”

“Meaning?”

“Are you being purposely obtuse?”

“Do you really think I’d be eating one if that was the case?”

“Well, it’s important to ask.”

“Again with all the questions. Trust, Harry. Try having some.”

Tom nodded to the fruit,

“Just eat the plum.”

Harry took a bite of the sweet fruit and when the juices hit his tongue, he nodded and took another.

“Wow, okay, this is really good.”

Tom looked to the little lady behind the stand still glaring daggers at Harry.

“Prendiamone una dozzina. Ignorarlo, è Americano. Non sa niente del cibo.”

“Ah, adesso è chiaro.”

As she bagged up the fruit and handed it over, Harry said,

“What was that about me being an American?”

“I just told her you were visiting.”

“You’re such a bad liar.”

Tom shrugged, and they continued through the aisles of fresh veggies and fruit, stopping every so often to sample and purchase another bag of produce. The crowds were bustling, the markets full, as everyone went about their morning routine so they could go home and start cooking for the rest of the day.

Everything was a day-to-day choice, and there was something so refreshing about that, something liberating about not being tied to a choice you made a week ago.

Well, wasn’t that an accurate metaphor for his life? Here Tom was in Italy with Harry because of a string of choices he’d made. Choices he’d initially because his own well-being was tied to the little piece of soul that lived inside Harry.

“Qui! Qui! Vieni qui.”

“Wait, what?”

Harry’s voice snapped Tom out of his thoughts and back to the present.

“I don’t understand... Let me go, please.”

Tom turned to where Harry had been walking beside him a second ago to see a big, burly man with his hand wrapped around Harry’s elbow, tugging him off down one of the aisles.

Tom’s senses immediately went on high alert as Harry dropped one of the bags he held and several plums rolled away. Tom sprinted up the opposite aisle, his brain already mapping out his plan of attack. When he got within reach of the bastard manhandling Harry, he went for the knife in the holster at the waist of his pants. He pulled it free and within seconds had his arm around the man’s neck and the blade at his jugular.

The man froze as Tom’s forearm tightened.

“Let him go, and you’ll live to see the sunset tonight.”

Harry was immediately released. The man’s hands went up in the air.

“I’m sorry. My English no good.”

Tom trailed his eyes down Harry, checking for any injury, as he held his knife in place,

“Why did you grab him?”

“I...I want him to see my cart. My fruit. He is American. I have the best. He should taste.”

As the words penetrated the haze of possessive fury that had just overtaken Tom, his brain started to re-engage.

“Tom,”

Harry said, rubbing at his arm.

“I’m fine. Really. I think he just wanted us to come see his shop.”

The man gestured with a shaky hand to the cart of vegetables beside them,

“I’ll give to you for free.”

Tom slowly began to relax as the words all started to make sense. He removed the knife from the man’s throat and released him, and the guy ran behind his cart. The fear in his eyes made Tom’s stomach twist, and he saw that the commotion had caused the entire market to freeze. He walked over to Harry and looked at his arm, checking that he was really okay. Once he was satisfied, Tom holstered his knife, walked over to the man’s cart, and held his hands up.

“I don’t want trouble,”

the man said.

“I know,”

Tom said. This poor man had just been trying to get Harry’s attention, and instead had stepped into a world he knew nothing about,

“I apologize,”

he said, reverting to Italian,

“Please, let me make it up to you. How much for the whole stand?”

“The whole stand?”

“Yes. Have it delivered to Via Besana Moltrasio.”

“Uh...”

The man looked at the produce on display, then back to Tom, and rattled off a number.

Tom nodded and handed over a wad of cash that had the man’s eyes growing wide as saucers, then he turned to Harry,

“Let’s go.”

As they exited the market, Harry leaned in and said,

“I don’t understand. What did you end up buying from him? You didn’t take anything.”

Tom's jaw twitched as he tried to push aside the terror, he'd inflicted on the small market just now.

"I took everything from him this morning. So that's what I bought."

Harry stopped in his tracks and took Tom's arm,

"Everything?"

"Yes."

Tom gave a clipped nod, wanting to get home now more than ever,

"Now let's go. We have a meal to cook."

Chapter 83

Harry watched in admiration as Tom moved through the kitchen like a well-trained chef. He'd missed watching Tom cook. He'd missed tasting his cooking as well.

Harry cut into one of the tomato slices on his plate that had been topped with fresh basil and mozzarella and swirled it in the olive oil drizzled on his plate. It was heaven on his tongue. All he ever wanted was to eat Tom's insalata caprese in Italy for the rest of his life but that wouldn't happen. He knew that. Tom would never give up his desire to take over the world.

"I really missed this, Tom."

Harry said, forcing himself to set his fork down so he'd still have an appetite for whatever Tom was making.

Tom grabbed the bottle of red wine he'd opened earlier and topped off Harry's glass before refilling his own. He leaned against the counter and took a long drink, and Harry couldn't help the way his eyes dropped to the tanned skin of Tom's throat as he swallowed. In his mind, the memory of Tom taking him on the table played and made heat coil in his stomach.

"I missed this too, My Prince."

Harry hopped off the stool, walking to the stove.

"Okay, so I know we're having fish, right? The ones we got from the market?"

Tom smirked,

"Nothing gets by you, does it?"

Harry glanced over his shoulder to see Tom watching him over the rim of his glass. His eyes slowly trailed up over his jean-clad legs to his face. When their eyes met, Harry turned to face him and crossed his arms.

"What I mean is, are you frying it? Is that what the pan is for?"

"You and all your questions."

Tom pushed away from the counter and walked over,

"I gave you the Caprese so that you could keep your mouth shut."

Harry couldn't help his grin.

"Well, looks like you failed. So, unless you have another plan to shut me up..."

When Tom's eyes dropped to his mouth Harry's words got stuck somewhere in the back of his throat.

“Such as?”

Harry glanced at the wine in Tom’s hand and wished he’d had several more glasses already. Then maybe he would’ve called the bluff and offered up a few suggestions. As it was, he chickened out and stepped aside, turning back to the oven.

“I was just curious if you plan to fry the fish.”

“I do, but that pan isn’t for the fish.”

“It isn’t?”

“Nope. That comes at the very end. This is for the risotto.”

Harry’s eyes widened,

“You know how to make risotto?”

“Don’t look so shocked. You’ll hurt my fucking feelings.”

“I’m just... Isn’t risotto really hard to make? Or at least make right?”

Tom shrugged and placed his glass on the counter,

“Wouldn’t know. I’m relatively good at whatever I do. Risotto con filetti di pesce persico is a staple here in Lake Como. Perch is the most common fish.”

“You’re right. You are just naturally good at whatever you do even if it's something muggle.”

Tom turned away and opened one of the overhead cupboards.

Harry headed back around the counter as he thought about what happened at the marketplace earlier. Was Tom’s reaction extreme? Yes. But given their unusual circumstances, the guy who’d grabbed Harry should thank his lucky stars Tom hadn’t decided to use his special skills in a more fatal way.

Was the reaction extreme? Yes. But given their unusual circumstances, the guy who’d grabbed Harry should thank his lucky stars Tom hadn’t decided to use his special skills in a more fatal way.

Harry shuddered at the thought before taking a long sip of his wine. Even that tasted better here, though he supposed it could be argued that enjoying food and drinks was more pleasurable without pretending 24/7 that he was someone else.

But it was all so deceptive. Because Harry wasn’t free. It was easy, in a place as beautiful as this, to forget why they were there or what they’d eventually be going back to. The future was unknown, and while a part of Harry was still worried about what would happen, another part of him knew that as long as Tom was around, he would be safe. Or would he?

“Amazing,”

Tom said as he stirred the pot of risotto.

“Ten minutes of quiet. That’s a record for you.”

Harry made the motion of zipping his lips and took another drink.

“Please tell me what brought this on so I know how to do it again. I thought only my cock down your throat shut you up.”

Harry coughed out a laugh, grabbing a napkin so he didn’t spew red wine everywhere. When he finished wiping his mouth, he said,

“You say the most inappropriate things all the time.”

Tom looked up, a wicked smile curving his lips,

“I can make you beg as well, Harry.”

Harry wasn’t sure if it was the memory of Tom making him do just that or the wine that had the heat creeping into his cheeks.

“Kind of hard to forget.”

“That’s a compliment, right?”

When Harry nodded, Tom lifted his glass.

“Then thank you.”

Harry shook his head but couldn’t stop his chuckle.

Tom went back to stirring the risotto, then pulled out a second pan and placed it on the burner to the left. He added in some olive oil and turned it to a medium heat, then he opened the fridge and pulled out the fish he’d prepared earlier.

He patted the perch dry and then began to flour it, and once he had all four of the fillets ready to go, he washed his hands and moved back to the stove. It was like watching a professional chef, and Harry had a feeling he could blindfold the guy and he’d still be able to make this meal.

Tom placed the fillets into the pan, and as they sizzled, he pulled out two dinner plates. A couple of minutes later the fish were flipped and the risotto was off the stove.

The aromas wafting through the house were divine. Tom plated the fish on the risotto like it was something from a Michelin-Starred restaurant.

“What are you doing sitting there? Grab the wine; we’re going outside.”

“Outside?”

“The pavilion. You remember where that is?”

Harry nodded and scooted down off his seat, grabbing up the wine and their glasses.

“Do you need any help?”

“I need you to stop talking and go outside so we can eat and move on to more important things.”

Harry headed to the open doors,

“What important things?”

When Tom merely arched a brow, Harry grinned and said,

“Ohhh.... Those important things...”

before he headed outside to the pavilion.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!