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**Psychopath**

by [shez_writer](http://archiveofourown.org/users/shez_writer)

**Summary**

Modern stepsibling AU. ‘Tom Riddle’ is a believable character, designed with the customary tensions of a young man navigating the modern world.
Chapter 1

It’s Friday night. His match is in fifteen minutes but he’s stalling in the locker rooms, listening to his sister’s—sorry, *stepsister*, semantics are important—horrendously cheery voicemail for the third time:

*If you’re hearing this I’m probably in the lab where I don’t get reception—or in the bathroom ... so just leave a message, and I’ll get right back to you when I can!*

Fingers curl at his sides.

“It’s me. Hope you’re alright… I know you’re busy but I was hoping we could talk. Call me when you get this, ok? Miss you.”

*Miss you*—it sounds ludicrous leaving his mouth. It should’ve been a joke. All it needs is a *sweetheart* at the end for eye-rolling incredulity. He should’ve just said *answer your goddamn phone*. But it’s too late to take it back, so he hangs up and focuses on wrapping gauze around his quivering fingers. The air stinks of booze and a musky egg odor while the single fluorescent light overhead wavers, an opaque sun beating against his sleepless eyes. The sounds are just as cliché: buzzing gnats, a painstakingly slow faucet drip, copulating pants from the streaming porno on his miniature TV. He stands and raises his arms over his head to pull on the muscles of his abdomen. Pops a few punches in the air.

He’s out of pills. Ran out just this morning and there’s a *tick-tick-tick* beneath his skin, a frenetic energy—hunger’s not the right word for it, neither is lust. It’s an alive thing that bulges from his thoughts like an uncomfortable mass of flesh *either tumor or erection he isn’t sure* It makes words ram into the cage of his jaw, makes him feel ineloquent. Eloquence is a gentleman’s tranquilizer, Father used to say Pacification can be made criminally easy with pretty words—People are more likely to follow an eloquent man than a savage though every man must know how to be both.

‘Tom Riddle’ is a believable character, designed with the customary tensions of a young man navigating the modern world. He enjoys football, video games, and some third conventional male thing. He is twenty-five years old. He has a girlfriend named Bella who is a decent lay. He is a semi-professional boxer neither poor nor good enough to be distinguished. Being excellent at something is risky. Father said that people preferred their idols—barring Jesus—flawed and undivine. Distinctly Human. Since conception Tom has strived to incorporate these words into his personality with little success. Books, movies, pornos: He has found there is no comfort in the media that he consumes voraciously, because there is no narrative which suits him, from which he can steal.

For most of his life, Tom has been religiously careful about his substance intake. During his brief stint at Yale, he went through a stream of reckless doctors who provided him with all sorts of unusual-sounding candies: Zyprexa, Seroquel, Risperdal, Fluoxetine. Ruined his sleep, killed his libido, made the days without their centers. Following his expulsion for reasons that are still unclear to him, and are far too clear to his sister, he was given more and more until he stopped taking them altogether. All except for one.
Flash forward and eyes stare down between the bright yellow lines, avoiding the obscenities, the triggers. Big-tittied blondes with painted faces, holding gaudy posters plastered with his name. Flanked by guards, he is secured safely through the crowd, hoodie pulled over his face to prevent the lights blinking from all directions from dizzying him.

“What took so long?” Coach says. Tom climbs into the ring, slinking onto his stool. “Pre-match jitters? You don’t get those anymore.”

“Headache,” he lies.

A look crosses Coach’s face as he moves to kneel. He plants two hands on Tom’s knees, leaning in real close, about to drop a platitude, one of those ‘you’ve got nothing to be nervous about, kid’. He pauses. “Check out your next paycheck.” Instead, he nods toward the bald, tattooed fighter climbing into the ring from the opposite side. “Now say Thank you, Coach.”

Mordred “Dread” Patti. Not the most skilled boxer but great for drawing a crowd. Unlike Tom who the network has branded a fragile white boy, Dread looks the part of a scummy fighter: fissured mouth, beady eyes, a face dusted over with a cragged beard. Outside this, he’s a set of limbs attached to a body made of flesh and steroids. He is Goliath. People cheer for him, bet on him. Bet against him. They yearn to see him fall.

“Thanks Coach.”

“You’re welcome. Now stop kissing my ass.” Coach shoves his shoulder in a way that Tom has learned through keen observation means camaraderie. “Watch for his uppercuts. He’s got a new plate installed in his knuckles. It’ll hurt like a bitch.”

Speaking of. “Seen Hermione around tonight?”

“Nah. Knew you’d ask though. Sent my boys looking for her earlier.”

“You—” Coach shoves the mouthpiece into his mouth before he can finish hissing. He spits it out, sputtering angrily, and watches Coach act too busy drawing heavy gloves onto his taped hands to pay his temper any attention. This isn’t the first time he’s treated Tom like a petulant child.

“Don’t sweat it—probably forgot you were fighting tonight. Sisters, you know?”

“Hermione doesn’t forget things.”

“What?”

“Forget it.” Standing, yanking the towel off his neck, Tom hurls it at the stool in muted fury.

“Good talk.” Coach nods, eyes glazed. “Now get out there—” a shove “and keep it smart with that left jab, alright? It’ll set off all your other moves.”

Staggering forward two steps, Tom turns and sends one last glower. Coach flips a finger —another endearment— before ducking out of the ring and out of sight.

Tom’s hands are twitching inside his gloves—it's a mistake for him to be here tonight. He knew this before he left his apartment. He is out of pills.

Dread swaggers over, so that they’re standing face to face: His eyes are bright, face wide in a manic
grin. Tom cannot manage a single facial expression in retaliation. Dread is one of the stupid few who innately believes in this brawling performance, whereas Tom has always understood that they are playing roles. His body, in its delicate, much smaller form, serves as a spectacle—food and circus for the masses.

Without his pills, the match feels like a psychedelic dream. His blood is pulsing. His head is throbbing. White flashes like strobe lights as imaginary wires shoot from the ends of the ring, rising to startling length all around him and Dread, curling together to trap them a cage-like construction. The ceiling dissolves, inky black bleeding into the steely portrait of grey. His muscles cramp with exhaustion but he doesn’t care. He feels so high even if his face is arranged to not give away any inkling of excitement— he cannot show that he enjoys this as much as he does.

The match is over and Tom is still bouncing around like he needs to piss. He stares down at the beaten man, at the beads of sweat rolling off Mordred’s skin, bloodied face, the vague expression of – what, dread? – in the swollen eyes. There’s something poetic about instilling dread in Dread. It scratches an itch. The violent flash of a second passes and he is ruminating over what it’d be like to go the whole way. All it would take is one screwdriver punch into the chest, really, really hard, straight into Dread’s heart. He would be dead in five, ten seconds max. This is not the first time Tom has thought about killing someone.

The voice of the announcer snaps him from this macabre fantasy. He finds Coach standing in the ring, lifting his arm in the air, making the crowd cheer harder. It’s white noise. It means nothing, much like everything else. He blinks and stares blankly, breathing hard, staring at himself in the golden reflective gleam of his trophy, his body glistening with sweat under the bright lights. He cannot remember what happened or feel happy that he won, all he can do is admonish that his sister didn’t come to see his match.

It’s a pity, because he would’ve loved to rub his victory in her face.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Becoming "Tom Riddle" has been a lifelong project.

An unfinished project.

Ivy League school dropout, to a novice sportsman, to yet another directionless cockroach urban-dweller. A young man you'll likely miss if you blink.

Tom never thought he'd be a boxer, much less enjoy it. There was a time in life where all he wanted to do was be like Father, who'd been a very famous scientist. His sister is also a scientist. Specifically, she is a medical researcher. And Tom...

Well, he might just be her favorite experiment.

The night is dark, opaque, uncaring. City lights bustle like the flickering of gnats, and Tom's sitting in a nondescript bar, celebrating his victory with Coach and the boxer boys, listening to incoherent snippets of conversations between heavy bouts of drinking.

"Nice match, gorgeous."

His eyes dart up. It's a woman. Of course it is. There's a very specific type of woman that approaches Tom late night in a bar. And that type stands leaning against the stool, her body arched with a deliberate languidness, her hair a glistening black and her lips painted red. She wears a shimmery skin-tight dress that leaves little to the imagination.

Tom sits quietly, staring into his glass, proferring nothing. He only vaguely remembers her from elsewhere...

"It's Pansy," she said, already exasperated with him. "We've met, what? At least dozens of times now."

Silence.

"At the cafe you visit every morning, luv. I'm the one who brings you eggs and asks if you want cream in your coffee."

"Right." Busy fishing a stray cigarette from his pockets; he lights it, and glances at the other end of the bar. His lack of pills makes him all the more agitated and he wants her to stop talking—wants her to fucking shut up. He morphs his expression into one of somber apology. "Sorry; didn't recognize you."

She lends a gracious smile. "You've had a long night, haven't you?"
"It's been alright."

"Just alright? Well then, anything I can do to help make it better?"

Her hand grazes his arm. Her smile grows wide, lips ruby-red and inviting. He can picture them around his—

Tom swallows.

Suddenly he's not feeling well.

The bar stool screeches as he stands, abruptly. "I have to go."

"Go? Go where?"

"I have to go return some cassettes."

Tom has no clue why he says this. It must be something he heard in a movie once.

He leaves the bar as if he's fleeing a fire, when really he's only fleeing himself. His mind spirals a thousand miles a second. The bitch. He reasons the bitch is irrelevant. She does not matter. She is a side-character in his eventual downfall. Would anyone really care if he killed her? Strapped her to a board and sawed off her limbs, the way he's seen happen in illegal live streams that he's found way to hack on the dark web? He could just as easily slip poison into a proffered fruity margarita—if he was feeling kind or merciful. Or cautious. What was fulfilling about that? If she wasn't screaming for help, would Tom even enjoy it? Would his neighbors call the cops when they heard the noise? Would they break down the door and shoot him? Is that what Tom has wanted all along, his due penance? Some proof of justice. A diety.

Justice doesn't exist, Father used to say justice is a man-made concept meant to instill law in a lawless world—but it is a failed attempt. If justice did exist, Father said God too would exist and Tom would be dead. Yet Tom lives while Father is long dead which means God must be dead...and so Tom is left to his own devices. Why is Father dead? The pills?

He knows, in this small, violent, filthy, shameful, extremely high-functioning space of his mind that he's hidden from society, that it wouldn't take much to convince 'Pansy' or whatever the fuck her name he can't remember now he's already blotted her back to his apartment and do to her what she clearly wants him to do. And much more.

He is a handsome, athletic, young white man. While he cannot truly comprehend who he is, he takes cue from the wealth of media he has consumed—the archetypes and stereotypes and one-dimensional delusions of society. He has seen enough badly-written movies to know that his character is 'troubled' or 'brooding'. The byronic hero, the damaged love interest to some naive young bitch.

He can do anything he wants, to any woman at all.

He can escape punishment all too easily.

Which is the problem.
Footsteps slosh over slick, muddied pavement, entering the giant building complex. Mania feels heavy in his gut. His legs became rubber, bending pliantly under his weight as he takes flight up a never-ending stairway to his apartment.

The lock click echoes through the small flat.

He locks it once, twice, *thrice*.

He scurries down the dimly lit hallway. His bedroom is breathlessly cold; the streetlight shining pale from the open window, casting long, shifting shadows. He sets down at the edge of his bed, shoulders tight and shaking. Yanks his phone from trouser pocket and rings a familiar number.

His sister.

"Pick up," he says, waiting out the rings. "I don't feel well right now. I've run out of pills. I, um, met a woman that I wanted to—" Breaking off, he swallows a tight breath. "I wanted to bring her back. I wanted to tie her up and take a knife and – do sick, horrible things. I—"

"Hello? Tom?" comes her urgent tone. "Oh god—where are you right now?"

"Back at my apartment." He draws a breath. "Alone. I need more pills. I'm out."

"Christ, Tom," Her voice is shaky, on the edge of a sob. "You're going to kill yourself."

His eyes close flinchingly.

"Try to get some sleep. I'll call you in the morning." His sister's voice has gone soft, loving—it's a liar's voice.

He shakes his head, infuriated, again and again.

"Can I come over? I don't think I should be alone right now."

A long, cautious pause.

"Is Krum there?" he asks.

Krum. A blandly successful rugby player with bad teeth, old money, and what Tom, in his mind, has reasoned is a nonexistent libido. He is her sister's newly-wed.

"No, he's at the —listen, I just don't know if you coming over is a good idea. Victor will, well, I don't think he'd like you seeing me. Not this late at night."

Her words, the implication made by the *not this late at night*, suffocates. He squeezes his eyes.

"I see." His voice goes cold, numb.

"Tom—"

"No, forget it, never talk to me again," he snaps. "Go to hell." And hangs up.

It takes thirty seconds for the phone to ring again. He squeezes his fists once, twice, against his
thighs. Exhales sharply. Then answers.

"What?" he barks.

"Just let me finish," comes her whine.

She's pleading. It's that voice he's always hated. He hates when adults whine. He rather they scream or cry. His sister is a grown woman, three years older, but it takes so little to reduce her to a child. Tom knows he's inside her head, but he can't bring himself to care. If this is what it takes to get a response from her...

He can hear her suppress a sob. For a second it makes him flinch. He is torn between comforting her, how brotherly protocol might dictate, or relishing in this small victory. Secretly, he loves that he can make her cry so easily. Every time Tom has ended up in the hospital, from Father's punishments or fights he picked at school or at university, Hermione has shown up, with an ugly, blotchy, tear-stained face and a mountain of tupperware, determined to feed him back to health.

"I know you're on edge. I know you need someone but tonight...tonight's just not a good night for me, Tom.

He sits upright. "Why?" he says, and grows frustrated at her subsequent pause. "Tell me already, goddammit, I'm your brother!"

The crackle of a held breath. He can hear her seething. "You're a brat, you know that?... We can't be family only when it's convenient for you," she throws in his face. It's brutal when she does this. He's never liked this version of Hermione, the one that goes shrill and says honest things and refuses to give him first priority in her life. Even though he knows, from all the shitty TV sitcoms and teen novels, that sisters are supposed to be like this.

The line vibrates from their mutual breathing. She's quiet. He's quiet too, listening to her ragged, static-y sounds. He knows she's feeling apologetic; she'll cave if he softens just a little.

"Where are you right now?" he says, dropping his voice a decibel, so that he sounds low, husky. "I'm tired. I want to come over."

"Tom, no! I— I'm heading down to the lab again." He can hear her impatient feet shuffling across the tiled floors of her hospital. "I've got my hands on the perfect heart. It's so beautiful... plump veins ... I have to focus... No distractions... Not tonight. I'm close, so, so close."

His sister is a surgeon.

And if she's Dr. Frankenstein, then what does that make Tom?
Hermione Riddle has great skill at medicine

But while she is gifted, she is well aware her brother—stepbrother, though it doesn't matter, family has nothing to do with blood, it's a state of mind—her little brother is smarter than her. When they were teens this made her jealous. Since then she's tried to make peace with it. It's not Tom's fault he's criminally intelligent. Of course, her little brother doesn't understand how dangerous this makes him and that, on the eve of his 18th birthday, when the final bell tolled in their parent's apartment, and lightning flashed outside the curtains—Hermione saw everything

The bloodied body of his father. Three puncture wounds, she counted. Two through the skull and one through the abdomen. She was the one who held Tom's panicked face between her soft hands, and took the blade from his hands, and kissed his brow and dragged him to the city, far, far, away, before he could realize what he'd done.

The elder sister has always fulfilled her role. She's taken care of Tom. She's the one who came up with the special pills. Take these. Blend in. Act normal. Don't let them suspect. She's taught herself all the necessary biochemistry and pharmacology, to cope with the precarious nature of her sibling.

But is Hermione really coping? On the exterior she looks fine. She has a career in something she is very passionate about. She is married to a rich and benign—Tom might call him bland—man. Which means she will never want for money. She blames her ditzy, poverty-ridden, wayward mother for instilling the need for financial security in her. Just like she blames his now-dead father, for never getting younger Tom the proper help. And she blames both parents for putting her and Tom together, and obliging her to love Tom. Hermione is a creature of solitary habits, too introverted for a sibling, much less a husband. She wants to live in her laboratory, in the world of her little science experiments. Often she has just wished she was alone.

But life has burdened her with another human to take care of—there's no way out.

It's nothing to do with blood.

Family is a state of mind.

Chapter End Notes

The cassette line is from American Psycho, a movie Tom has likely seen.

Let me know what you think! Thoughts, character analyses, predictions, etc...
Chapter 3

Every morning Tom walks to the same café, sits at the exact same table, and orders the exact same thing. He prefers all things to be done with the same systemic ease and efficiency. Repetition, habits are important for normalcy—maintaining the illusion of it.

"Hello handsome," he hears a cool female voice, like he does every morning. "What can I get you?"

Handsome. Gorgeous. Bastard. Sick Fuck. The spectrum of nicknames thrown his way. Offering little in way of an upward glance, Tom gives his usual order—egg whites and coffee—while scrolling the day's news on his phone. He is, of course, reading for violent crimes, obituaries, articles that provide gratuitous imagery. He is hungry, always for the wrong thing. Browsing the news is something he can do in public thankfully.

Tom is versed in the law to know what he can or cannot be caught doing. Unlike those late-night webcams he hacks to watch—broadcasting heinous crimes that lead to obituaries, reading the news is fine. As long as Tom himself is not responsible for a murder he's found no reason he can't enjoy the work of others with similar...proclivities, even if that should require him to use a private VPN.

Tom is well-versed in technology too. During his time at Yale he befriended those with similar thoughts who showed him how to evade detection. This has allowed dark queries into the ugliest, vilest corners of the internet. Tom knows he is not unique in the world. Those like him exist, but only in the fringes. They're not fictional characters. They do not plot world domination. Their evil is smaller, more contained. They come in all colors, shapes, and ethnicities. Some are 'handsome' too - a mask that provides an easier route to seduction, abduction, and etc. Others are less good-looking and must work harder. They are real but unlike him they are ineloquent. They act freely. They have no means to sedation. No pills.

They are barbaric like Father had been.

**Whatever happened to Father?**

Finally, proffering an upward glance, Tom notes one key difference about the cafe this morning.

The flirtatious waitress. This one is not the one that hit on him last night. Pansy whatshername. This one is different. New.

Disinterested, he turns back down to his phone.

A fist is slamming into Tom's face before he's even finished climbing into the ring.

He tastes blood pooling in his mouth.
Turning his head he grins, baring teeth at his assailant.

"Bit slow this morning, Tommy," the fellow boxer—Malfoy—pants, his feet bouncing, his eyes narrowed in determination.

All too eager for this fight, Tom dodges the next fist and comes up with his own; for a brief instant, Malfoy's cerulean blue eyes widen as Tom manages to throw his head forward and slam it into Malfoy's.

They stumble apart for a brief second to catch their breaths.

"Against the rules, fucker," Malfoy growls, spitting a wallop of blood.

"No rules," Tom says. Lunges in fierce with his right hook. "Fight to the death. Makes it more fun."

"The fuck is wrong with you," Malfoy pants, incredulous, narrowly dodging the blow to his face.

Boxing isn't meant to be a brawl or a street fight. There are rules to reduce chance of serious injury to fellow boxers, but today Tom can't seem to remember them.

Stars burst in his vision at the next hit but he shakes them off, shakes his muscles loose, and blindingly throws a sloppy punch.

Malfoy steps back, evading the blow. "That it?" he crows. Tom growls and throws himself at the boxer, changing direction at the last minute, throwing his body weight behind the fist that edges closer to his face; it hits Malfoy's jaw with such force blood pools out of his mouth. Pain, likely enormous pain, erupts from the point of impact.

Malfoy's howl is glorious to his ears.

Tom draws his fist back again and it ploughs into the stomach next; it's like hitting a train head on. He imagines Malfoy's guts smashed together, blood vessels bursting. He can picture the fellow boxer's death so beautifully, so vividly, so viscerally—it's practically pornographic. He continues battering the boxer until he falls to the floor, and his face is fully bloodied, and his eyes are drawn wide in terror, his chest rising and sinking with each shallow breath he draws in, as though praying it will not be his last—

Then comes Malfoy's divine intervention.

"Stop—stop—break it up!"

Tom has his left arm—fierce left hook—forcibly gripped. He's yanked off the injured boxer, sent stumbling across the ring where he grips onto the ropes and leans against them, catching his breath.

Coach stands there, Malfoy's lolling head at his shoulder, holding the injured boxer's semi-conscious form up.

"Go take a rest, Tom," he says, emphatically.

"I'm fine."

"I said go."

Tom feels reprimanded. Like an overgrown child. Throwing his towel over his shoulder, he stalks to the locker rooms and slumps onto a bench, sweat slicking down the trained muscles of his arms
and his abdominals. His eyes sting with hot moisture. He sits there, squeezing his fists against his thighs, seething from behind the cage of his teeth.

Minutes later Coach finds him and sidles next to him, in his casually charming way, so that they're shoulder to shoulder. A gesture of male camaraderie that Tom's not in the mood to indulge. The older man begins the unwanted conversation with—

"That move to the spine—You could've paralyzed him. You know better."

"Do I?"

Tom watches those grey brows raise.

"Son," Coach starts, concerned.

What he should say next is 'get psychiatric help'

Or 'I'm calling the cops you sick freak'

Coach won't though. He lets it go. Always has and always will. He has the power to pull the trigger on all this—all of Tom—and he won't. Society is easily controlled by aesthetics and Tom is white and good-looking. Which means he's great at bringing in a crowd, no matter how many times he slips and breaks others and breaks himself in the process too. Coach—a Puerto Rican immigrant—has dollar signs in his eyes. Who is exploiting who? Is complacency as bad as the crime itself? Will Coach be implicated in his eventual downfall?

Coach takes a rag to Tom's sweaty brow. "You disappeared last night, buddy. How come?"

"I was tired." Tom puts no effort into this lie.

Coach doesn't need it. All too ready to provide Tom with an alibi, he probes, "Went home with someone?" Coach is all smiles now, trying to be friendly. "Getting it in are ya? 'Bout time. Saw that pretty red number flirting with you. Waitress at the Sunbird's café, isn't she?"

Tom offers neither denial nor confirmation. There is no need to let anyone know he spent half the night screaming at his unruly sister on the phone, then the second half siphoning though internet streams of humans dismembering other humans, hours and hours of sinful searching, all to find the one video that hits his sweet spot just right. He rather Coach believe what he wants to believe.

"Next match in a week," Coach continues, sliding a wad of cash into his shorts pocket. "Think you'll make it kid?"

Tom removes the wad, flicks his fingers across the edges, noting its sparseness.

"How much?"

"Week's worth of rent, I bet."

Tom's mouth upturns slightly. "My rent isn't much apparently."

"Not with that shit hole you call an apartment, it's not." Coach grins, as if relieved to see a shade of humor, of warmth, in him. Most people are. "But you'll be here won't you?"

"Only if it's interesting."

"Yeah, well I'll try to find someone that doesn't bore you," Coach says, giving him a friendly
shoulder shove off the bench. "Now get the fuck out of my arena."

His sister's sitting hunched at her desk when he enters the room.

It's poor form but perfectly in-character that she's still in her pajamas—knickers and long tee and abominably ugly pink slippers. Tom knows she hasn't brushed her teeth yet. In one of those moods where she can't spare anything a second because there's an idea pressing far too insistently inside her brain.

"You should have knocked," she drones, bleary eyes glued to her notes. "...I could have been naked."

They haven't seen each other in ages, and the nonchalance of this comment gets under Tom's skin. She manages to rile him before they've even had a proper conversation.

"Does Krum ever knock?"

"He's my husband," she yawns, still without looking up. "He's allowed to see me naked."

"So am I," he murmurs, walking over and pressing up behind her. He leans, dangling his head over her shoulder, surveying her work—surgical schematics—plans and theories and research and documentation—knowledge that will end up in textbooks someday. His sister, the savant. The virgin.

She leans against his body, as if by instinct. He presses a hard-edged kiss to her temple, chuckling softly, and feels her stiffen.

"No," she says, this time firmly, turning to glare at him. "You're not allowed. You're my brother. You knock."

"We can't be family only when it's convenient for you."

It's a game of ball. He's thrown it – her words – back, to maim and hurt. It has the desired effect. He watches pain and disappointment wash down her tired, delicate features.

"Nothing about being your family has ever been convenient for me," she whispers.

A low blow. You've made my life hell, is what she's really aching to say. Then take a gun and blast my brains out, he wants to throw back. But that is more than a sibling conversation, so it's not a conversation they'll ever have. At least, not with words. To have it would mean the end.

Tom wanders her room, yanking open her messy drawers one by one. Until, at last, he finds the blue pills he's so desperately sought for half a week. He pockets the orange medicine bottle and heads for the door.

"Leaving so soon?" her voice calls, scornful.

Hand on knob, he halts. Turns and meets her eyes with a bloodshot glare.
"Then beg me to stay," he orders.

Her face softens, the hostility melting. "I'm begging." She gently pats the edge of her bed.

Placated, he strides over, sinks into the designated spot and watches her chair swivel toward him. Facing him now, her fingers crawl under his shirt as she searches his torso for bruises.

"So what happened last night?"

"Usual," he murmurs, already annoyed by her clinical nature. He hates being inspected like one of her patients. "Don't look at me like that—I didn't kill the dumb bitch, if that's who you're so concerned about."

"Don't call women—" She stops, her hand taut at his chest. His sister, the feminist. Protector of all dumb bitches in the world.

Her fingers continue their slow, arduous trace of his skin, taking note of his discomfort. He squirms and flinches in all the right places, and she observes how his muscles are remarkably stiff.

"You've bruised your clavicle…"

"I feel fine."

"Well you shouldn't feel fine," she huffs, and swivels away, "It should heal fine on its own, but I'll write you a prescription for some ointment…"

His mouth twitches. "Just what I need. More drugs in my head."

"It's for the discomfort," she says, matter-of-fact, scribbling a doctor's note. "Shouldn't affect your head at all."

"I can find hallucinogens on my own, don't worry."

The pen halts, her shoulders tensing. The chair swivels back at him and then she's glaring, from behind her puffy, sleep-worn eyes.

"Don't give me more reason to worry for you," she accuses.

He smiles. "How else do I keep your attention."

"Try not being a fuck up for a change," she says, more out of instinct than anything. Her fingers slip back inside his shirt, continuing her inspection, feeling out his ribcage. "You've lost weight since last I saw you."

"I'm on a cut. Trying to get my cheekbones to pop."

"They pop enough," she drones, tired. "You're almost underweight, Tom. How much more handsome have you got to be?"

"How much do I have to pay for unsolicited groping and criticism," he says, sharply. "Because I'm certain I can't afford your prices."

Her brow creases but she's far too used to his insolence to be genuinely bothered.

"You should be grateful you've got a family member in the medical field."
"I wonder how Krum manages your astronomical ego," he hisses back. "Probably got to fuck you with his eyes closed...if he fucks you at all."

More than a simple jab at her sex life, Tom knows this will get under her skin. His sister is smart, accomplished...but she is homely and awkward and not attractive in the slightest. She lives in her little projects, finds fulfillment in the dead bodies she harvests organs from and run experiments on in the hospital's morgue. She is fascinated by dead men. She has no interest in living ones.

Before Krum there was one boyfriend by the name of Ron, a fellow medical student, a meek boy who is the highlight of her sexual life—sloppy kisses and groping in the back of a van. Tom is certain she's never properly consummated with Krum either. It's a pity, he thinks, that his sister will only ever know mediocre sex. That said, it's her own damn fault.

"He might be gay, you know," he offers the cruel remark, just as she's folding a bandage around his wrist bone.

Her sister pauses and stares at him, as if he's just grown a second head.

"Krum," he continues. "Probably why he's never around. Always with his boys. S'why he won't touch you either." With a cursory glance over her chest, he adds, "Not that there's anything to touch."

Hermione maintains a wounded, withering stare.

"How do you know..." Her face takes on all the stages of grief at once, denial about her marriage, anger, depression, and finally.... It all clicking together. She is quiet, contemplative, before offering a resolute: "I wouldn't care if he was."

"Really?" Tom asks, brows raised.

He watches her draw a calm, steadying breath.

"I don't need anyone to touch me," she says, wrapping the gauze around his skin tightly, once, twice. "I don't want—I'm self-sufficient. Fine on my own. I've always been."

With the emphasis placed on 'anyone', and the steel-clad fingers she's gripping his wounded wrist with, Tom is certain he knows what she means. She's dropped vague hints their entire life. He's not a fool. But she'll never say it. "Doesn't sound fine. Sounds like daddy issues, Hermione."

"Don't psycho-analyze, you're not the one who went to medical school," she says, angrily. "As a matter of fact, a psychiatrist is what you need."

He raises his shoulders in a shrug.

"Or a guillotine," he says.

Her face falls.

Suicide jokes are in poor taste today, evidently. Though, his sister's got no sense of humor for homicide ones either. She really doesn't appreciate his humor at all.

She looks shattered at his 'guillotine' remark.

"We need to figure this out, Tom," she whispers, fearfully. "You being like this...Pills can't be a permanent solution."
"I can turn myself in. Have them castrate me. Before I rape and murder a bitch."

"Stop it."

"You'd visit me in prison, wouldn't you? Slide me tupperware through the bars."

Her face crumples. She slumps forward, as if utterly defeated, tears streaming freely down her cheeks.

"You're horrible," she croaks, and then with a sudden lunge forward, her arms are wrapped around his shoulders in a tight embrace. He can hear her crying softly against him. "I'll hate you if you put me through that."

Tom shifts in his spot, uncomfortable. 'Utter revulsion' and 'go to fucking hell' and 'weeping sordidly into his shirt' go hand in hand when it comes to his sister. He tactfully peels her off, holding her at rigid distance with the full of length of his arms.

Maneuvering a new subject, he nods over at the notes and diagrams set atop her desk.

"What're those?"

Hermione draws a deep, gut-wrenching breath. She sniffles, wiping her eyes with her fingers.

"I've...I've been working on a new project," she says between childish sobs.

He leans in, arms on his knees, and with a patient smile, says, "Tell me about it."

His sister hesitates, adjusting to this shift of conversation. She exists in a strange internal world, much like Tom himself. It takes her a moment to realize that not everyone functions at the same pace or is familiar with the same details she is.

"I'm working on a theory. I want to see if an artificial heart transplant is workable." Awkwardly, she paws at her desk, grabbing a paper. She holds it up. "First you have to remove the old one. You'd make an incision...cut this artery here and this one here. It's only a theory..." she says weakly, wiping her eyes again. "Maybe after some animal trials..."

Wrenching the paper from her fingers, Tom grips onto her wrists, and watches her lower half squirm. He forcibly brings her hands to his chest.

"Show me where you'd slice into me."

The request makes her flinch.

"Hypothetically," he says.

She traces her steady—surgical—fingers over the fabric of his shirt as if they were a scalpel. This touch is not clinical but delicate, caressing almost, as if grasping for something not there.

"There," she whispers, finishing the imaginary incision. She meets his eyes with a shy, watery smile. "What d'you think?"

"Clever."

He returns the smile. His is brighter, more attractive, obviously, and symmetrical—but his does not reach his eyes. She must know it cannot. She must know it's not real. And perhaps this knowing is what pains her.
Tom feels the strangest pang of annoyance. His sister has provided a real smile. Rare thing. And while he cannot comprehend it—is incapable—he feels he must give something of equal value in turn.

It strikes him.

"When I die, I want you to carve out my heart and keep it in a jar," he offers. "Deal?"

The good moment is gone. Her eyes widen in revulsion.

"What the hell is wrong with you?"

He dodges the hand that abruptly comes to smack his forehead.

"Joke." Though it's not a joke, not really, more a looming eventuality, but there's no need to spoil their ending. So he presses a kiss to the edge of her mouth and says, "Now I'll be off."

Hermione slumps back in her chair, fingers lingering at the skin where he has imprinted the rare offering.

She blinks excessively.

"Where..." she begins, a little breathless, a little pink. She clears her throat. "Where are you going now Tom?"

"Church."

"Confession?"

He shrugs a shoulder, nonchalant. "Might as well try."


Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.

He sits in the small box room. There is no priest on the other side. Tom hates priests, for the same reason Tom has always hated his Father. He prefers these moments to be fatherless. This is a pragmatic summit, a meeting of negotiations.

"I've been thinking..." Tom starts, pensive, gathering his thoughts. "I've no clue if you're real. I don't know why I care either. If you are, I'm upset at you for making me this way..."

Tom trails off and screws his face in concentration. Trying to cry. Trying to summon the motivation from the deep recesses within him to feign remorse. He read in a book somewhere that God really appreciates this particular emotion.

But of course, Tom can't find 'remorse'.

Doesn't even know how to fake it.
Which is a pity.

He settles on being blunt.

"I know you were probably expecting me to kill a dumb bitch by now," he says, conversationally. "Well I haven't. I'm on my pills again. So I really don't think I have to go to hell. Second, I'm trying to be nice to my sister again. She makes my pills after all. No I'm not going to rape her. I think I can manage that much. Third, I've come to church— Doesn't all this make me a good person?"

The question hangs in the cold, damning air.

Tom rolls his eyes.

"More silent treatment then," he sighs. "You're just like my actual dad, you know. Anyway, see you. Same time, next week."

He finds his sister waiting on a bench outside, hands folded in her lap, looking awkward among the churchgoers. She did not feel comfortable entering the holy building. Church is an unusual place for adults that never came as children. Their parents did not teach them about God—they only taught them about demons. Church is a habit Tom has adopted only recently. He's no clue if it means anything at all. All he knows is habits are important for sedation.

"All forgiven?" Hermione asks, busy wiping her eyes after what has likely been another round of crying.

"God's still deliberating. Said he'd get back to me."

His sister gives a tearful laugh, lightening a bit as she stands up, and he wryly wraps an arm around her shoulder as they walk down the street, stride in stride.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

I've raised the rating of the fic to E with this chapter and added tags for violence, blood, and gore. Don't read if those things bother you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Oh Tom."

The wanton pant comes desperate, aching, beneath him, long, feminine legs wrapped around his torso tightly like boa constrictors.

Her knuckles clasp at his hair, gripping tightly. He gives a roll of the hips, causing a yelp, watching her head loll back, eyes straining closed. He reads the barest of emotions on her face, in the thrumming of her pulse where his fingers squeeze her wrist.

"Don't stop. Please."

As her whining continues, Tom wishes he could. He's been at this for several minutes and boredom—aggravation—is throbbing dully through his skull. Sex is a degrading practice as is, but the bad dialogue always runs a jolt of cold through him, bringing him to the verge of losing his erection.

Lowering his head between her breasts, he concentrates on breathing through his enunciated thrusts.

"Harder. Harder."

Her large, fleshy breasts slap against his face, determined to suffocate. Tom knows there are more ridiculous ways to die than by the stupidly, comically loud porno noises of Bella, but he might take anything at this point. She is that horribly grating to his ears.

"Fuck me, Tom"—he winces, her fingers pulling painfully at his hair— "Fuck me!"

He can scarcely breathe.

That does it.

He slaps a firm hand over her mouth.

"Shut up," he says, sharp and cutting, bringing his thrusts to a swift halt. "I want quiet—I can't finish if you keep talking."

"Then fuck me harder." She bites at his palm, wriggling her hips insistently. "Be meaner. Make me hurt."

It's from the position of superiority—and total dominance—that Tom glares down at his girlfriend cruelly. He's a sculpture, perfectly tousled, frozen in this cold moment. The lamplight casts a shadow in all the right spaces on his face. It illuminates the slim V of his torso—the result of long hours spent in mindless, laborious physical conditioning. Society is more forgiving of a beautiful
man than an ugly one, and Tom maintains immaculate deception. He knows well that he is every woman's fantasy.

'Tom Riddle' is a fantasy.

The muscles of his arms clench and relax as he finally lets her go. His abdominals tense as he pulls out of her.

"We're done," he says, with a tone of finality.

"No—!" she squeals out.

Exasperated again, he tightens his hand over her mouth. It takes every ounce of self-control not to slide that hand down, grip her slim throat, and asphyxiate. Watch the light flit those pretty mascara-and-tear-stained eyes. Or would he want to make her suffering last? Surely he would want to punish Bella. She is filthy, her behavior deprived and wanton. She is stupid, to expect him to indulge this stupid torture fantasy of hers, when he could easily make it a reality. Tom must exercise incredible, incredible self-control not to harm his girlfriend. She is lucky he's on his pills.

He shifts off. Swinging his legs over the bed frame, he yanks open one of his messy drawers, pulls out a stray cigarette, lights it, and sits at the edge of his bed, facing away from her, seething from behind his teeth.

When he finally turns, Bella's staring at him in stunned disbelief.

"You're too loud," he offers the criticism, blunt and nonchalant. "It ruins my immersion. I want you to stop."

He watches her kohl-black eyes fill with tears.

"I thought you liked loud," she whispers, looking fragile and small, bunching the blanket over her bare legs. "The girls in those videos you watch are always screaming."

Sure they are—but Bella has never actually seen the content of these private videos Tom indulges in. They aren't screaming from anything fun.

"I don't want porn. I want real."

She gives a bark of laughter. "You want—real?" She sounds incredulous, or maybe she sounds bitter, as if he has said a horribly naive thing. "No you don't. You're not equipped to handle real."

"Why not," he snaps.

"Real will never live up to your fantasies, sweetheart."

When the cold flush of anger hits, it stings. Though, he knows, Bella is right. Tom understands female anatomy—If I do this, then that happens. If I touch her there, she'll respond by doing that—but on the whole, this experience is lost on him. He has no appreciation for it. Outside the torture fantasies, outside the pornos. All his reality is informed by the media he consumes. The actions of others, never his own.

Bella doesn't know much about him—yet even she can sort this out. It's unnerving, that she is not an idiot, but that she still hasn't left him, when she has had enough time to sense these fundamental gaps in him.
Which means there must be gaps in her too.

Bella lives in a fantasy world, where she genuinely believes that Tom will someday father her children. A criminal delusion that makes Tom's girlfriend just as dangerous as Tom. She's gone as far as forgetting to take birth control, which has led to Tom forcing plan B down her throat many times.

Bringing an unwanted child into the world is one of its gravest tragedies—and most unforgivable sins. It is one of the few things that can run a trill of horror up his spine—why risk conceiving another 'Tom Riddle'? What hope is there for the child when there is none for the father.

"Who the hell made you all this food."

His girlfriend is drunk now. She is upset at him, and she is drunk, and he can hear her bleated hiccuping laugh as she wanders his apartment, digging through his things—digging through his fridge. It's in effort to avoid her that Tom lounges on his balcony, smoking out the last remnants of his cigarette, watching the sun dip below the horizon. By the time he returns, she's removed all the carefully-organized tupperware that lines his top shelf.

"My sister."

After their last encounter, Hermione came over and stacked his entire fridge with home-cooked meals; forever worried her brother wasn't eating enough. She is right. Tom is not anorexic, obviously, but he is obsessive enough about his physique for it to be considered a disorder. He keeps measurements of his waist, hips, chest, thighs, all his body parts. He tracks every meal, every calorie that he consumes—not a morsel passes his lips without planning.

True perfection is unattainable but the appearance of it depends upon covertly hiding one's weakness. And Tom is nothing if not appearances. In fact, that may be all that he is. He spends the next two minutes doing one hundred and fifty push-ups, then he writes this number in a neat little row in his journal, along with the calories of what he's consumed so far that day—only egg whites and coffee—and then he slinks into a high-chair across the counter from his girlfriend, watching her eagerly sift through the meals Hermione has prepared.

"What are you staring at."

Tom leans over the counter to fold a stray hair behind her ear. With a smile, he says, "My handiwork."

The tear-and-mascara stained face of Bella doesn't smile back.

She stabs a fork into a tub of hot noodles, ignoring him.

"Bella," he insists.

"What."
"C'm'here."

She swallows a mouthful of carbs, the space between her brows prickling—anxiety.

"I'm going to kiss you, c'm'here," he repeats, swiping a tissue from a box and dabbing at her cheeks until he gets all her tears.

Her shoulders tense. She remains behind the counter, shoving more noodles into her mouth. She is right to distrust him.

Tom can be persuasive, and silver-tongued, and just when she thinks he will kiss her he might turn on her in a snap-second of wrath. Bella has learned that Tom can have a conversation with her in which she doesn't realize she isn't even talking. Tom doesn't just perform as himself. He plays everyone else on the stage, as well.

"Say that you love me," he orders.

"I love you," she echoes obediently.

But of course, the outcome desired is not the outcome achieved. Tom swallows, staring hard at the ground. His gaze scatters, mind engulfed in flames. *Nothing. Nothing at all.*

He watches her twist a hand down her skin-tight blouse, to yank her bra back in place. It's as if she's trying to project some semblance of decency now.

Her eyes dwell on the tupperware she has splayed on the counter. "Your sister's an amazing cook," she says, with genuine affection, stirring the noodles in their fat-laden sauce. "Never knew you were so goddamned lucky."

Not a muscle on Tom's face shifts.

"Wish my sister cared half as much about me," she continues pathetically. "Hell, I'd even take a quarter… Cissy won't even return my calls."

"Step-sister."

"What was that?"

Making no effort to repeat himself, to further clarify this strange point he seems to think—for whatever reason—needs clarification, Tom stalks to his closet. He reappears as he's drawing his arms through the sleeves of a starched white shirt. "You can leave," he decrees, halting in front of the wall mirror to do his buttons with an almost brutal efficiency, his mouth a thin line. "I'll call you when I want to see you again."

Tom is too busy staring at his own face in the mirror now to glance over at Bella. There is a lifeless, flinty quality to how he regards himself, an eerie blankness. His eyes are cold and dark but their pull is like gravity, and he blinks until he can make them brighten, light up in some artificial emotion. So preoccupied with himself, he cannot see the crushing disappointment set on Bella’s—she must know he won't indulge her prying.

"Can I take your sister's food with me at least?" he hears her plead. "Since you won't eat it anyway."

“Sure.”
It's late night by the time Tom finally gets rid of his girlfriend and has the privacy to go online.

Late nights have never been good for him.

He closes his windows and his blinds, and for the third or possibly fourth time ensures all the latches on his door are done. Then he sits down at his desk, turns on his laptop, plugs in his noise-cancelling headphones, and fires up a private browser called TOR. A blank screen pops up, demanding an access password, followed by several layers of file encryption that he must get through to make certain he has achieved an adequate level of security and anonymity.

He is hungry tonight, for the wrong thing.

After a long string of pauses, his screen flickers a little bit and, out of nowhere, his browser opens by itself. This time, a little chat box opens…

*Hello*

This has never happened before.

Tom stares at the screen for a couple seconds, unsure of what’s going on.

*I want to talk to you*

Tom has heard about AI programs that have all programmed responses to simulate conversation with people and if that's the case, then he's not impressed. This may be one nasty virus.

*You need to leave this network now. This is your last warning.*

Hm. Maybe an automated security program designed to keep hackers out? Tom has to admit, he's impressed with it. He's never seen anything like this before.

*I'm telling you one last time. Leave now.*

Unsure what compels him, Tom responds to the program.

*Or what?*

The next response runs a jolt of cold through him. The program begins listing information about him. His name, address, telephone number, credit card information. A hacker—his heart sinks in his chest. He can't move. He just sits there, fingers gripping the edge of his desk, paralyzed with tension. But what comes next is even worse.

*Don't look so confused.*

His webcam light is on.

*You really shouldn't stare, [V0ld3m0rT], you might see something you regret.*
Suddenly, gruesome images flash on his screen. Images of disemboweled humans, human sacrifice, detached limbs, cannibals eating people, video clips of mass suicides and firing lines. The muscles in Tom's arms tense as he stares blankly, through his dark-rimmed, insomniatic eyes, while the flashing images are seared into his brain. He musters the control he has left and hits the power button on his computer and slams the screen shut.

He inhales. Exhales, a bit too harshly. Trying to compose himself.

"That's probably enough internet for today," he tries.

It doesn't work. The joke's in poor taste. Lands badly even with himself.

It takes twenty-minutes of madman pacing back and forth in his apartment until he's curious and agitated—enough to try again. It's an intimidation tactic, of that he's already certain. But why? 'Tom Riddle' moves through the world as if he were a shadow. A No-One, with no great fortune or assets. Why would someone—a stranger on the internet—choose to target him? There's no reason anyone should want anything to do with him. It's foolish, knowing what Tom is capable of.

Unless.

Hm, an interesting thought.

Unless this hacker is capable of more.

Morbid curiosity leaves Tom with no choice but to pursue further investigation. He grabs a prepackaged salad and a can of Coke—diet, of course, he's on a cut—from his fridge and turns his computer back on. He waits.

The screen flickers.

Without him doing anything, command prompt opens. But it's blank. No prompt or anything. Just that little black box with the white cursor flashing at him.

His webcam light turns on again.

Command prompt begins to type.

*What's the matter, [V0ld3m0rT]? Bad dream?*

*You're very handsome.*

*The others that come on here don't normally look like you.*

*Did you come looking for sex?*

Forking a bite of salad into his mouth, Tom chews thoughtfully. If not blackmail, could this be coercion? Tom is not shy about sex, nor is he a stranger to being propositioned by men and women alike. Normally he would just ignore such a seedy question. He tears a piece of colored tape from his stationary and smooths it over his webcam. Still curious, playing along, he types:

*Why, are you offering sex?*

*No*
I am not attracted to men.

But I am interested in you.

Fascinated, one might say.

You see... I believe that I can provide... a different sort of satisfaction... to people like you.

People like me?

Let me rephrase.

People like us.

Taking a gulp of his soda, Tom stares at the screen. Slowly coming to terms with the fact that he is speaking to another 'him'.

Curiosity at an unprecedented high, he types:

Why threaten me.

I wanted to see what you'd do.

If you'd run away or if you'd come back...

You came back.

I don't appreciate paltry intimidation tactics.

What's your name?

Friends call me Grindelwald.

I think you and I can be friends.

I want to send you something [V0ld3m0rT]...

A link to a passion project of mine...

Interested?

Will this link get me arrested?

What a stupid question.

Does it matter, if it satisfies you?

Seconds later, the link pops up. It's a random jumble of letters with a dot-onion domain. Tom has no idea what's in it, where it leads. It's a risk, trusting a stranger on the internet, but Tom has taken similar risks before and not been arrested. He clicks it.

His screen goes blank.

Adjusting back in his chair, he gives a sharp exhale, drumming his fingers at the end of his table as he watches the screen change to show letters. He's witnessed these sort of steams numerous times, is all too familiar with bright red screens flashing big bold black letters.
This is a red room.

The letters to this particular room say "Deathly Hallows"

Underneath, is a list of IP addresses. Beside each one are the words "permitted" or "banned." Tom assumes some people abused their privilege on this site or possibly tried to hack it. 'Grindelwald' is tracking the people that watch him.

There's a chatbox at the very bottom. It's filling with the usernames of other spectators, the cockroaches, bottom feeders— gutter rats of society—

More 'hims'.

Less intelligent, less attractive 'hims'.

Then the live stream begins. Tom takes a deep breath.

A video camera moves through a dark, likely abandoned, hospital room.

A women who is obviously sedated is lying in what looks like a dentist chair. She is in a blue hospital gown. Her wrists and ankles are strapped down. Two people, dressed in doctor scrubs and masks, stand at her sides, injecting her in the arm with needles.

Messages start popping up on the chat box. One user types 'I want to see an amputation of the arm please!' Another says 'Drill her head open and pull her skin down over her face.' Another user wants a complete organ dissection. Another wants to witness murder-then-rape. The one after: rape-then-murder. More users type in foreign languages that Tom can't understand. He doesn't care.

His focus is centralized on the whimpering woman, strapped to the chair. Young, maybe twenty years old. A college student then. Likely abducted piss drunk at a party. It's beautiful, the muted terror in her wide, bloodshot eyes. She has no idea where she is. He's enraptured by her labored breathing—They have her heavily drugged. Ketamine? Or perhaps Rohypnol? It may even be a hypnotic.

Tom has seen live streams before, but the victims have never felt this real or palpable. Most of the time they are puppets or computer programs. It's difficult to run an operation this high-quality and illegal without detection—which makes this 'Grindelwald' an unusually sophisticated criminal. Intriguing. Tom has also never typed a request, has never interacted with the 'hims' on the other end. Such an act could put him in direct danger. So he sits watching in mute fascination.

He leans in, staring intently, as the owner of the livestream finally enters the camera.

This must be 'Grindelwald'. In the flesh, he is as much a cipher. Stocky, medium-build man, face obscured by the hoodie he's wearing. He doesn't speak— which makes it impossible to discern anything else about him. No age, skin color, or nationality.

A complete cipher, then.

'Grindelwald' carries an array of toys that he, with gloved hands, splays out on the table in front of the woman. It is with theatrical slowness that he does so, one by one, building viewer—Tom's—suspense. Hammers. Surgical tools. Cranium drills. Bone saws. Rib knives. All types of cutting and dissecting instruments.

Tom feels a familiar, dreaded pang of excitement. He draws a shivery inhale. As if to will himself
to calm down. He feels far too high, far too alive. He knows what happens next. He—

No.

His shaking, jittery fingers dig through his desk drawer, scrounging for his pill bottle. When he finds it, he twists off the lid, and swallows the pill dry. The choking glide down his throat is painful.

Good.

This pain is good.

It's well-deserved.

He squeezes his eyes and waits. For the even keel of sedation. For the familiar wash of numbness to drag his mind back into complacency.

When he opens his eyes, he does not look at the screen, though he knows what is happening. He hears a whrrrrrrrrrr—noise of an industrial drill tearing into flesh, the loud, guttural screams of the woman—

Tom clicks his headset off.

He won't look at the screen.

He won't.

Really, he won't.

Somehow, his attention falls onto a photo that is laying under the pill bottle in his drawer. He brushes the bottle aside with his thumb.

It's of his sister.

Not lewd, like the material he keeps of other women, with their legs splayed open and phallic parts stuffed in their mouths. In fact he's not even sure why he has this. Hermione's frizzy curls fall over her shoulders, and she's wearing a green turtleneck sweater underneath her white doctor's coat. She's smiling; it's awkward and small and not the most attractive smile. But it's real.

For one bleak, helpless moment Tom finds himself staring at this picture. As if willing his sister to look away from him.

There is a tick-tick-tick inside—an inevitability to the nervous bleeding in his brain. It's always the idle habits you acquire over time which you regret the most, Father said that Christ was not crucified—that he too was worn away by a minute ticking of little wheels.

What to do?

A carefully cautious glance is cast upwards, at the woman on the muted screen. By now, smooth skin is torn muscle and flesh, as raw as any carcass at the butchers. Blood flows, thick and sluggish, from a slash across her gut, spilling out a nest of glistening red snakes. The toys are tainted of her essence. Her body blends into a blur of red-black-red, long limbs and youth and crushing innocence—and perhaps that is what causes the unbearable tension to swell within Tom's chest, a dense knot pressing tight against his wind pipe.

Grindelwald's victim is going to die because God is dead and there is no justice in the world and
Tom will go to hell and sit here and watch whether or not God exists and it doesn't matter it doesn't matter because Tom exists even if justice doesn't Father said and Tom—

And Tom what?

Tom exists, that is absolute.

Tom sees. He notices that there is still a flicker in the young woman's eyes, a faint light.

She's not dead. Yet.

'Do you want the artery to be clamped off or do you want her to bleed out' pops on the screen. A message from Grindelwald.

The chat box blows up with responses.

One spectator types 'No' and another says 'Let her bleed out man, she's not gonna want to wake up after all of this.' The other 'hims' are very casual about sending this woman to her impending death.

And Tom?

He's thinking at lowered efficiency. The pill has set in and the photo of Hermione burns in his skull. He closes his eyes and though he does not want to, he can still see her awkward little smile. Heavily sedated, and properly ruthlessly bold, he bares his teeth. His quivering fingers tap his first message into the chat box full of other 'hims'. A command, that will put him at enormous risk.

A direct challenge to this 'Grindelwald' whoever the fuck he may be.

He types the word:

**STOP**

Chapter End Notes

Tom-Hermione interaction next chapter!

Some things of note:

Red rooms, like the one Tom visits here, are an internet myth. They are basically streams where people can watch live murders. It's possible they existed at some point? Or still do? Somewhere in the buried trenches of the internet. I don't know, I haven't researched much into it. But to me they just felt like the sort of thing real world psychopaths would try to seek out. I apologize if it just sounds like made up nonsense.

I added tags for blood/gore/violence but I also feel compelled to say that this fic will NOT feature any graphic rape. It may be implied or talked about in dialogue but it won't be given gratuitous, tasteless detail.

Lastly, I'm fairly new to the Tomione fandom, and after reading popular stuff here on AOO, I'm fully expecting no one to stick with this fic lol. If you do end up enjoying it,
I hope you'll chime in from time to time to let me know what you think!
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Some say surgeons are no different from gods. They have extraordinary authority over lives. The power to save them.

And the opposite.

"Forceps," Dr. Hermione Riddle intones to the standing nurse through the fabric of her surgical mask. She's in scrubs, at the operating table, surrounded by a crowd of hospital staff watching her conduct open heart surgery. Problem of the day: Valve stenosis.

Classical music, a hollow, background melody, echoes though the large, dimmed chamber. Low casual chatter rings, fellow staff making their ritual exchange of inquiries into each other's weekends, but Hermione is deep inside her head, where she pictures, with gorgeous clear-cut precision, the slick red pathway she must slice to heal this heart.

"How was your weekend Hermione?" Her anesthesiologist Amos Diggory makes banal conversation while he's checking the monitor.

"Scissors," she says, eyes trained on the open bloodied ribcage, half listening. "It was nice. Viktor and I went to brunch with family."

"Family? I didn't know you kept in touch with your family." Diggory maintains his reputation as a nosy old man.

"Viktor's family," she clarifies. "I don't really have anyone on my side — just Tom."

"The model?" So Diggory's seen the posters.

She resists an eye-roll. "He's actually a boxer." Not that that's any more respectable. "They advertise him on posters because it broadens their demographic. It brings in women. "Tom's their most profitable boxer." He doesn't give a damn that they're basically prostituting him. "His matches always get sold out." Boxing's a stupid sport and I wish he'd quit.

"Aha, I see." Diggory's too old and benign to pick up on any of the subtext. "How's Tom the boxer doing then?"

Though all too accustomed to standing long hours, Hermione fidgets her weight between her feet. Inquiries about her brother are a mental segue-way down a rabbit hole of unease.

"He's managing." She shoots a strained, muted, smile from behind her mask. "Still... figuring life stuff out. Has a girlfriend now." She makes a point to bring up Tom has a girlfriend every chance she gets. He's met a girl called Bella. He takes her on frequent dates, and they're a very happy couple together. It's important to help her brother maintain a steady, solid alibi in case—

Well, in case.

She makes an opening in the appendage of the left atrium and inserts a finger to palpate and explore the damaged mitral valve.
"Figuring things out is what your twenties are for, aren't they," Diggory reminisces, providing unasked-for commentary. "Trying new things. Finding love. Figuring out who you are."

Hermione scoffs. Evidently her brother is stuck in a coming-of-age novel.

"How much younger is he again?"

"Three years." Hermione presses her finger at the valve, causing blood to leak backward into the atrium, the leaflets bulging back. "We were eight and eleven when our parents married. Now we're twenty-five and twenty-eight. So he's not that much younger."

"A little brother is always a little brother," Diggory says, with a fond smile. "It's more a mental difference than a physical one really."

"Very mental," Hermione agrees, meaning something entirely different.

"Your brother went to school with you?"

"He dropped out."

"Why's that?"

Hermione stares at her red-soaked gloves. Of course, when one is the elder sister, work isn't the only time one is covered with blood. Not that her sibling remembers, or will ever be grateful. "School wasn't right for Tom," she lies.

More like: Tom wasn't right for Yale. Too clever and unorthodox and unsafe, really.

Why boxing? He could've been anyone or anything in the world, could've had any career, could've been a mathematician or a lawyer or a computer-scientist—and in a non-complimentary way, he even had the facets to eventually become a politician if he so chose...but these things, her brother has never felt a draw to—

"Tom likes trouble." Hermione staples along cut flesh, clamps the organ shut. Feels its glorious pulsing twitch beneath her fingers. "He gets a thrill out of picking fights...he was expelled."

"Oh?"

"Behavior issues," she admits, with an awkward twitch of the shoulders. "Runs in the parentage. His side, anyway. Tom's dad had issues too. Was a—" monster "—drug addict. Used to beat —" me "—my mother."

When she looks up, the older colleague's staring at her in alarmed concern. "I know many psychiatrists I could refer, Hermione," he says, quietly. "There's no shame in seeking out help. You only have to ask..."

Hermione shakes her head. Smiling sadly.

"I'll be okay," she sighs, done being pried at. And returns to the live, throbbing organ on the table. "Life's got to get better eventually."
White. Loud. The word stares back at Tom.

The chat box has gone still.

A woman is slowly dying on the screen, her upper body curled inward on the shackled chair, like a butchered animal, in a waste of blood. Her ribcage has lost ediface. Her head droops forward and over her chest a great of mat of blood has spread like a bib. Tom can hear her ragged panting, the fear that these may be her last breaths.

He's been staring at her so long that he can't bear to look anymore.

The hooded figure stands at her side.

'Grindelwald'. When he finally speaks, the voice is heavy, every syllable laden with a thick, eastern European accent. He speaks with weight, with gravity, and with arrogance—he isn't used to being questioned.

"And why would I stop?"

He quickly types:

**Eloquent men don't kill.**

"Eloquent men don't..." Grindelwald echoes, squinting as he reads the words off the screen. "And what do 'eloquent' men do—jerk off behind their keyboards? Turn your mic on, asshole. And your camera."

His fingers freeze, a chill crawling down his stomach. He leans back in his computer chair, eerily still. In calculation. Understanding the risk posed with revealing himself.

He retaliates:

**Take your hood off.**

The outline of Grindelwald's body morphs, acute angles falling obtuse. As if he is amused. Intrigued. Tom knows he'd be the same in his shoes. All games are played in pairs, and one bold move requires another.

It's with a theatrical slowness that Grindelwald raises his hands and pulls his hood back to reveal a carefully-styled blond head of hair—

A man. Disappointingly ordinary-looking.

He looks like a politician, which likely isn't far off the truth. People like Grindelwald hold office and run charities as shields for the activities they truly enjoy—they take perverse pleasure in obtaining positions of public trust. Charming, socially intelligent, enough to know they don't need to play by the same rules as the rest of society. They have no remorse, no regrets... no restraints.

The most unsettling part of Grindelwald is his stare—though not intentionally piercing, his face somehow lacks the mobility normal people have. His eyes, wide with mania, stare directly into the camera, as if he is looking directly at Tom.
"Your turn, stranger," he says, nonchalant.

Already Tom wants to slit his throat, for no reason other than Tom is always itching to kill someone at any given moment. But he cannot get ahead of himself. He must let things play out, with a young man’s naivety if necessary. He must let Grindelwald present him with a motive—a ruse.

Pushing away the ever-poignant fantasies of murder invading his brain, Tom calmly removes the tape from his webcam and clicks his mic on.

"Hello..." he clears his throat, speaking into his headset. Talking to someone on the internet for the first time is awkward, so he adds, "Nice perm."

There's a rumbling, a strange assortment of voices—there are other people in the background of 'Grindelwald'. It's possible he has an entire team, an entire secret organization devoted to this illegal fetish. Tom reasons his net worth must be monumental. The other 'hims' have fallen still behind their keyboards; they are listening in— discerning, deciphering this odd interaction.

Through the camera, Grindelwald is grinning broadly back at Tom. "You're very young, handsome stranger," he murmurs, sounding charmed. "What college campus are you speaking from? I'll find you by tomorrow. With a sharp, shiny present."

More paltry intimidation.

Tactically astute, Tom diverts the subject. "You lied to me," he says into the mic.

"What was that?"

"You said you weren't attracted to men," he reminds, blunt and dry. "But—with that perm, I'm certain you're gay."

Grindelwald's lip curls in offense. He stares at Tom, eyes growing sharp, the artificial nonchalance he managed a few seconds ago gone. "Making fun of my hair, are you?"

Tom slumps back in his computer chair, crossing his arms. He shrugs his shoulders. "I'm sharing my thoughts."

The strange angles of Grindelwald's face are turned ghoulis by the harsh light of the lamps; for a moment Tom thinks he must see what Hermione sees when she looks at him—a monster, an alien. A freak.

His voice is quiet, throaty. "Then I'm going to kill her."

Tom sits back up, alert.

He watches Grindelwald's long fingers drum along the table splayed with his toys; they curl around the hammer. One hard blow, that's all it would take to kill her.

Though the woman manages to lift her gaze to witness the weapon, she does not speak; no need to tell her not to fight, to make a sound. She sits there, as if stifling a scream; one threatening to unhinge her very jaw if a sound is to leave her lips. This is how she is to remain, silent. Taken. Silent. Die. Silent.

This is meant to be Tom's moment. He must to negotiate with this other 'him' and save this woman and—
And what?

Redeem himself? Make up for every bad thought he has ever had? Fix the wiring in his brain? That wouldn’t happen—but perhaps the wiring provides him an advantage here. Tom can understand the entity staring at him through the camera better than anyone else.

Now, to negotiate.

First thing, sex is off the table. Tom doesn't barter with his body. And he can't play on Grindelwald's feelings; there are none to be played upon. Which leaves money.

"I'll pay you," Tom interjects, reaching for his wallet and credit card. "Let her live and I'll make the transaction right now. Send me your paypal." A second later, he adds, "Joke. I know paypal isn't secure."

Grindelwald is looking like he doesn't appreciate the joke. However, he slowly edges the hammer away from the woman’s cranium.

"You don't have enough money to make a deal with someone like me... I've checked," he informs, tone light, brisk again, having discarded his previous anger; appearing to fluctuate between two irrational moods. "I know everything about you...Tom Riddle."

Quiet falls.

"How much," Tom repeats, intently, ignoring the deliberate reveal of his name to every single person on the stream. "I'll have it by the end of the week."

Grindelwald is now looking amused by his persistence. Clearly, this doesn't normally happen...

"You want to turn my little show into a ransom?" He stares directly into the webcam. “Well, well… Are the rest of you listening? It appears our new friend here wants to play white savior for this woman. One, it's either a perverted kink of his or two, he's trying to assuage a guilty conscience. Either way, it’s a tremendous buzzkill." Grindelwald sends him a reproachful look through the webcam. "She's not going to fuck you for saving her, Tommy."

Fucking is the last thing on Tom's mind right now. It's not as if he has a shortage of willing participants in his life, so it's not about the woman in question at all—she could be anyone. She could even be a man. He doesn't care.

Tom's trying to make a point.

It’s okay if he doesn’t know what this 'point' is yet. Because he knows he's doing the correct thing in the situation—he's seen a movie like this before with the exact same plot.

Tom Riddle’s going to save this dumb bitch. That’s what they do in the movies.

He hears a ping! Then more: Ping, ping, ping! Because this is an interactive livestream, the other 'hims' are filling the chat box with messages. They write 'this could be interesting' and 'find Tom and blow his brains out!' and 'kill him next' and 'tear his dick off and shove it up his ass'. Tom finds them so ineloquent and disappointing. They lack all originality to come up with a truly interesting design to murder.

"You know what—scrap it," Grindelwald interjects, reverting back to his old tone of airy deceptiveness. "Ransoms are inherently boring. I'm not interested in indulging one. I have a shiny new idea—ready?"
Tom watches him grip a gun from the table and ceremoniously raise it, point it at the woman's temple.

"No money, no stupid ransom." His tone is eerily pleasant, making the ferocity of his expression even more unnerving. "Here's what I'm going to do. I'm going to shoot this bitch—and then I'm going to come find you, gorgeous Tom…and I'm going to tear your throat off," he ends in a harsh snarl.

The words creep over Tom's skin like wet cement. His room is colder than ever.

He draws his hoodie over his head, pulling it around his neck, and stares at his computer screen.

Grindelwald's grinning as if he's just said something incredibly witty. It's a mad maniacal grin, but also a deeply affectionate grin—the grin of someone who’s really happy because they think they’ve just made a new friend. "How does that plan sound?" he continues, pleasantly, as though he and Tom are making dinner plans.

Tom clears his throat.

"Well," he begins, politely. "I think it depends… on when you're coming over?"

"Oh don't worry, we can parse out the details later."

A gunshot goes off.

So of course Grindelwald kills the woman.

No surprise to anyone at all.

The plot twist, however, it's that Tom's knowingly invited needless danger into his life. Grindelwald has all his personal information: address, medical history, credit card information….his cell phone number. What's more, he has a vendetta.

The next morning Tom’s at his gym, short-clad and hair slicked back and shoulders glistening in sweat, releasing his fury on a punching bag—thud-thud-thud—so much force in every harsh blow. His fists wallop at the bag as if he means to smash it into the very cement. He pretends it's the soft, pliable body of his brand-new friend who he doesn't just want dead; but wants obliterated, with nothing left to salvage.

Why?

Well, why not.

Normal life doesn't present the proper avenues for violence. At long-last, Tom Riddle has found the something he has ached for his entire life—justifiable reason to kill someone. He has a nemesis. He's thrilled as he is fearful as he is stunned. He’s been fantasizing about murder in exquisite graphic detail all day. He won't let this glorious chance slip.
"Tom!"

A fellow boxer calls his name. Fischer, his brown muscles slick under the lights, swaggers into the lockers. He's got a sweatband and a tattoo of a Chinese dragon scorched over his chest. "Heard you beat the shit outta Malfoy the other day. That's *savage*— wish I'd seen it."

Tom bears no memory of this match. Injuring Malfoy is so low on his list of priorities it's inconsequential. "I might have," is all he says, between swift, practiced punches.

Fischer slinks onto the bench across from him. "Oh you *did*. Malfoy hasn't been walking straight since he's come in. Hasn't been able to look anyone dead in the eye out of shame neither ... He's waddling like you tore the dick from between his legs. It's hilarious."

"Okay."

Tom is bored with locker room banter already. His mind is wandering to fantasies of murder again. Athletes, though excellent fodder, aren't interesting enough to keep his attention for too long. Luckily there's someone far more interesting paying him attention, and Tom would be lying if he wasn't feeling a thrill by the challenge he has been given. He feels like he's in a crime movie where he's playing the hero.

Playing.

As for the villain, could it be that Tom Riddle has finally met his match? Or at the very least—someone with the same hobbies. His message box is brimming full with texts from 'Gellert'—Tom has been receiving them from the murderer all through the night and well into the morning.

*Awake, [V0ld3m0rT]?

*Can I call you Tom now."

*What about Tommy?"

*I don't care."

*Or do you prefer handsome stranger?"

*Not that."

*Too gay?"

*What are you wearing right now?"

*If I showed up at your doorstep today, how would you kill me?"

*I'd shoot you through the head.*

*How unoriginal.*

*Today is too soon. I have work. I won't have time to come up with anything creative.*

*You should learn to kill within time constraints, Tom. It's a valuable skill. In real life, an adversary won't announce when they're coming over.*

*A polite one would.*
I would give a heads up.

How chivalrous.

Wanna know how I'd kill you, Tom?

Go on.

And make it interesting.

Gellert certainly makes it interesting.

It's late at night and his sister is in the basement of the hospital—the morgue—so lost in defiling yet another dead body that she doesn't even hear him enter.

He leans against the frame, his arms folded across his chest. "Forgot to knock," he says, with an insincere note of apology. His voice is slow, almost lazy. Deliberate. "Or ask if you were naked." He makes a point to let his eyes trail lingeringly down her long white coat. "Everything... looks clothed to me."

He watches with great satisfaction as her eyes roll up to the heavens, wishing for patience or mercy or perhaps a conveniently timed lightning bolt.

"You're not allowed in," she intones, and then with a look his way, her eyes narrowing on the cigarette between his lips, she adds, "And you're definitely not allowed to do that here."

Tom glances down at the cadaver on the operating table, releasing a cloud of smoke from the edge of his lips.

"He's already dead," he says, with the barest of shrugs. "He's not bothered."

"It's the principle of it, Tom. This is a hospital. With sick people."

Two in the morning, and his head is throbbing from the sting of antiseptic in the air. What's more, Hermione has begun lecturing—trying to start a fight over principles.

Disinterested in allowing it to become a banal hour-long argument, Tom puts the cigarette out, and stands beside her, watching her nimble fingers carve a small triangle of flesh into the deceased.

"So what's wrong now?" she says, only bothering to engage him with half-hearted interest. "Break your tooth? Snap your dick? Out of pills already?"

"I just came to return your tupperware."

She shoots him the filthiest look imaginable.

"Joke," he says, flicking a mote of dust from her white coat.
"I know it's a joke," she says, seething. "You have never in your life returned my tupperware—"

She stops, collects herself, fixing her stare back on her cadaver. "Go home, Tom. It's night and you look—"

"Handsome?" he says, smiling with teeth.

Tom knows he's flirting. He's done it before, with little thought. It's reckless and cruel, to play this game; to risk the permanent for the fleeting. But there's safety in his sister's unwillingness to reciprocate. She may be a bitch, but she is a rigid one, not a naive one.

"I was going to say you look exhausted," she responds, dryly, her gaze flickering over his face in that familiar mix of irritation and concern. "Christ—what did you stay up with so late last night?"

"Video games."

She snorts.

"I did," he presses.

A video was involved. And a game is certainly being played.

"You don't play video games," she says, tracing her scalpel in deliberate design, down the center of the chest, through the breast bone. "The same way you don't watch football. Or like having to maintain a girlfriend. These are all things you say you do because you think you're supposed to."

His sister's observational prowess is outstanding. Incisive. Vulgar. It makes the muscles in his jaw tighten, aggravated.

He replies in a slow, deliberate voice, "You think I'm pretending?"

Hermione looks at him, and she frowns in that pitying, adult way he hates so much.

"I think you've spent your whole life pretending...I'm not sure you know any better."

Tom feels as if his skin's peeling off. Stinging, strangely cold, as if he's standing there not only without his clothes, but also without the beauty of his carefully-constructed external appearance.

"And who do you want me to be," he prompts, annoyed.

She frowns, quietly, sewing one section of an artery around a tiny opening just below the blockage that likely killed the patient — in effort to preserve the heart. "It shouldn't matter what I want," she sighs. "I'm not you. I don't have to live in your head."

"Pretend—Hermione—for a minute, that I might actually be interested in hearing what you think."

His sister sets down her instrument.

Tom watches her yank off one surgical glove.

Next, slowly, a small, bare hand rises through the air, coming to rest against his sharp, bruised cheek in odd affection. Warmth permeates Hermione's palm; She normally doesn't touch him like this.

"I love my brother," she whispers, smiling at him. "I love him so much, and I just want him to get better. That's it. I promise."
Tom looks at the slate grey floor, the dove ceiling, anywhere but at her face. The air is stagnant like he has just gone in some pit. He feels as if he's had his marrow hollowed out.

"Anyway, you should leave now," she finishes, dropping the hand. "I'm busy and you're pissing me off."

He's in no mood to leave, to go home and be by himself. Not after the existential baggage thrown at him.

"What're you busy with tonight." He presses up behind her, leaning over her shoulder. His chest expands as he inhales, feeling the pressure of her spine against his ribs. "That transplant?"

He tilts his face close to hers, so he can watch her eyebrows twist in thought.

"I'm still collecting samples. I'm trying to remove this heart as cleanly as possible, all the valves and vessels intact so that I'll have a decent model to build my prototype—" she stops, suddenly aware of his intense closeness.

"Go on. I'm listening." He offers, at her cheek, his fingers delicately sliding over hers as she traces her scalpel over dead flesh. "Intently."

He watches her lips fall open. She can't stop the impulse to share her ideas with a willing ear. She gesticulates excitedly, describing some procedure Tom knows nothing about, and cares little about, while he stares down the thin line of her throat.

It's when she turns her head, that in her hurry her nose nudges up against his. He feels her hot breath on his, and he feels her quivering beneath the hand he places at her belly.

She jabs an elbow back into his ribs, and he grunts.

"Stand at a distance," she warns.

Ignoring the directive, he grips the scalpel, through her fingers, and guides it to the cadaver's neck. "Tell me," he murmurs into her curls, slicing through the jugular. "Why do you prefer the company of this dead man to your living brother?"

"Because he doesn't argue with me," she says, taking the scalpel back. "He doesn't make my life harder—" His fingers circle her gloved wrist in retaliation. "—He doesn't give me a constant throbbing headache—" His thumb presses the outline of her wedding ring beneath latex. "—He lays there and lets me do what I want with his body..."

The end of Tom's mouth curves.

"You're disgusting," she accuses. "Shut up."

"I haven't said anything."

"Stop thinking it."

Tom hides his grin against her neck. "I wonder if Krum knows—" Imprinting one soft kiss into her skin, he feels her openly shudder against him. "—that he's clearly in over his head with you—"

An elbow jabs, hard and abrupt and fierce into his stomach—

—Tom finally steps back.
She turns. Staring him down, through wet, hurt eyes, breathing harshly. Looking astounded. Betrayed.

The unsaid accusation makes his skin itch.

"You reacted," he says, his voice a low, rough vibration that she'll feel in her throat and chest. "It's your fault too."

Tom watches the outline of her mouth shake, as if from an earthquake beneath her flesh. Her body's gone rigid, her mind is scrambling to normalize—to minimize this moment.

"Then I'm sorry," she says, her voice strained. Her eyes flash with poorly-concealed hurt. "I want you to go home now. It's late and I don't want..."

"Don't want what?"

She won't say it.

"Go home."

Two hours later, cigarette smoke pollutes Tom's tiny bedroom.

He's shirtless, sprawled across his duvet in deep lethargy, listening to the mechanical swishing of the fan. His eyes flutter against the bleak intensity of the single bulb in the room.

"Ah—ah—harder—harder!" a woman's breathy voice cries out.

His hand is down his boxers, chasing release. He grunts in rhythm to the mewling, sex-sounds of the pixelated brunette on the laptop streaming porno. Knees to hard floor, getting it from behind. Tom doesn't have to look at the screen to know she's not comfortable in the slightest. His mind swaps reality for fiction, makes her a toy—rewrites the suffering as pleasure. There is plenty of paraphernalia to help with that. Is he even enjoying this? He doesn't want to be.

...lets me do what I want with his body...

...your body...

...our bodies?...

His sister has been reckless. Insinuating the impossible. A shrew, and a virgin, oblivious to how volatile anatomical reactions are. How inspiration can be simple or complex, wanted and unwanted. Mere words—a soft, warm hand at the face—can trigger a freight train of arousal, shoving Tom further and further to the chasm of unwanted fantasy.

 Fucking his palm with reckless abandon, he tries to squash the filthy want, banish it—ejaculate—before it can become a horrible, shameful, and lingering thing.

Gone, he decides post-orgasm. It's gone.
It's not.

Tom erases his browser search history, then stalks to the shower to furiously scrub himself. On his return to bed, he grabs a diet Coke from his fridge. He hasn't eaten anything else all day, but he doesn't care. If hunger is the disease, then perhaps starvation is the disinfectant and perhaps it will kill the rot inside him. He grabs his remote and clicks on the TV and starts his DVD player.

*Casablanca.* Tom's been told it's one of the greatest films ever made. He's yet to figure out why.

The beginning is a fugue—slow, colorless, out-dated dialogue—and he finds his hand drifting down his boxers out of boredom. Annoyed at once more falling prey to bodily weakness, he wonders if his sister is still angry at him. Hermione doesn't hold grudges for long. If she's reliable at anything, it's forgiving him in a timely and convenient manner.

Stroking himself with one hand, he grabs his phone with the other and sends a text.

**Hey, smart one.**

She's awake, clearly on her phone, because the response is instant.

*Why are you still up, Tom?*

Bossy, encroaching. But not mad.

Propping a pillow behind his head, he grunts.

**Masturbating.**

*Gross. Why did I ask?*

**No clue.** Not at all bothered by his sister's natural inclination of disgust toward him, his eyelids flicker with fatigue. *So does Krum snore?*

A short pause, then:

**Listen for yourself.**

The next received text is an attachment, a sound clip—which when Tom clicks, plays the loud, thunderous roar of her husband breaking the sound barrier.

It dampens his erection slightly but it makes him laugh.

**That's miserable.**

*Don't remind me.*

**You chose this man, Hermione. You have no one to blame but yourself.**

**You chose a gay man who snores.**

*My husband isn't gay, Tom.*

Not this banal argument again.

It's an impressive feat of his sister's—virginity—that she can't see past the thinly-veiled shutters of her marriage. Or refuses. Tom, of course, had suspicions from the moment he met Viktor Krum,
shook that large, rough, calloused hand with suspiciously manicured fingernails. Or was it the moment he was introduced to the sportsman's china collection? No... it was the moment Tom saw Krum's beard. That was the giveaway. Perfectly groomed, not a strand out of place. Immaculate. Only a gay man or a psychopath could ever maintain facial hair so well. And Hermione isn't stupid enough to fall for a psychopath.

One look at Krum's texts to his 'teammates' would hold the necessary evidence to assert Tom's claim, though he knows Hermione will never encroach that boundary.

She's only interested in encroaching boundaries with her brother.

Still vigorously stroking himself, he writes:

**Explain why your husband isn't fucking you right now, Hermione.**

Grunting, his ministrations speed up.

**Why he isn't holding your legs apart, his mouth hot on your soft, pink clit.**

**Have you ever even had a proper orgasm?**

His language—the ineloquent delivery, the question—startles her, he can tell. Unsubtle, unbrotherly. It's not even flirtatious. It makes her combative.

*What the hell's wrong with you????*

*Sick bastard.*

*I should block you.*

**Go on then.**

Tom bites at his snarling lip, grunting, working himself with aggression. His sister won't block him. She loves him. Too, too much. She has confessed this herself.

**Why are you so obsessed with sex?**

He's trying to get off. That's not the point.

**Because I'm not dead yet, Hermione.**

*Well, I have better things to think about.*

**Such as?**

*I'm just saying, my life doesn't revolve around doing the deed.*

'Doing the deed'. His sister, the virgin queen.

*And even if my husband was gay, I'd be okay with it.*

**You're ridiculous.**

*There's nothing wrong with someone being gay, Tom. You should broaden your horizons.*

His sister—with her broadened horizons—has somehow missed the point of her own marriage.
What's more, the conversation has killed his erection.

Glowering at his phone, Tom sends a 'k'—rude, abrupt, dismissive—and ends the talk. He shifts his attention at the TV playing the scene of Casablanca where the main leads finally come together, locking in a passionate kiss. Silhouettes swirl in a room of shadows, and Tom feels sordidly out of place. He can't get off to it, though still he watches. Props himself on his elbow, clicks his remotes, replays this scene near a dozen times, hard at scrutiny—trying to decipher the kiss. The act of a kiss is girlish, stupid, infantile, but there is something in the emotion 'love' that is beyond him. He doesn't even know how to fake it.

Agitated, Tom clicks the TV off. He twists into his covers, trying to sleep. It's near impossible. His shower-damp body, the wet towel on the floor, the smell of stale air and cigarettes, the room's equatorial warmth are all disablingly sensual. He wants to fuck, wants release, wants to be inside—

Facedown into his pillow, he groans.

His phone lights awake with a message on this side table, and fingers scramble to pick it up. His sister?

No. His new gay best friend.

Awake, Tommy?

I'm bored.

Let's kill something tonight.

Chapter End Notes

Let me know if you're shipping Tom/Hermione, wishing they learn to be decent siblings, or hoping one of them kills the other, lmao.

Not that it needs to be said, but things will only get more dysfunctional from here.

Thanks for reading!
Chapter 6

Like him Grindelwald is a man with unscrupulous interests. Like him he is also a chronic insomniac, and the messages ping one after the other through the dead of night, all with the tenacity of a drunken ex-girlfriend that Tom would surely like to kill.

Hungry, gorgeous?

I bet you are.

Well put the porn away, Tommy, because you know it's all FAKE, don't you? It won't fill that dark hole inside your chest.

I have a REAL treat for you.

Subway station on 8800 Willow Ave. You'll know when you see it.

Bring your favorite knife.

.D.

Don't worry, it's not me.

Raunchy theatricals aside— it's enough to pique his interest.

Warm, wet, smoky night; it makes the world feel melted, like a unfinished ice cream cone or another slick thing he might want to put his tongue on. Tom feels hungry for the vaguest inexplicable reason, as if he's been given too little skin and has too many teeth to bite back with.

He parks a block down and walks the distance. There's an impatience, a festering neurosis, to his demeanor. Grey hoodie hides dark hollows beneath his eyes which hang like battle wounds, black gloves conceal hands quivering with adrenaline— small cleaver, meat cutter, the handle remains tucked inconspicuously inside his belt.

A broad shouldered young man stalking streets as if he owns them sends a message.
Everyone, the pair of long-legged female joggers, the old man juggling groceries, the mother on her phone pushing along a stroller—

Everyone crosses to the other side of the road.

This response is instinctive. Tom knows it's called self-preservation. It means they comprehend that the danger threatening their existence is not war or famine or the supernatural; it is only a quiet, personal fear of running into someone like him.

In the daytime the subway station would be a seething mass of humanity, littered with people from every walk of life shoulder to shoulder, in each other's faces, no personal space; In the middle of the night it's a quiet, deserted vestibule fit for a crime.

It is pitch dark, outside the steady beam of phone light where Tom stands. Dark above, dark below and a tunnel of black. The air is just as stale and empty soda bottles clunk against his shoes, as stationary as the old train that sits with its doors open.

He squints through the doors but after a few steps inside he detects a repugnant smell, body odor, male definitely. Masked by a thin layer of cologne.

There it sits, his treat, whom Tom quickly profiles as a fairly athletic middle-aged white man. Though now he sits cowering, hidden in a row of seats near the very back of the compartment.

The voice: “W-who are you?” Sounding panicked, frightened, guilty.

So very, very guilty.

Tom stands quiet, shining his phone light, inspecting this man with raised brows. He had not expected dialogue. A part of him is disappointed, because he certainly would have prepared a dramatic speech if that were the case. The fact of the matter is Tom is too eager tonight to be bothered with aesthetics.

“Hello?” A different voice rings out from the darkness. Higher, a very young person’s.

And that's when a messy head surfaces from the seat next to the man. It's a child.

A child?

Man and child. The seedy situation throws Tom. He stares unblinkingly, as if trying to hash out the answer to two and two. But eventually, the numbers make 'four' in his mind again—a creeping sneer of disgust appears on his face as it clicks together, and oh, he finds the answer so very revolting.

"You. C'm'here," Tom commands the young boy, who hurries over at once. Then, eyes noting intently as the man sinks guiltily into the seat, he quietly asks, "Is this your father?"

The boy, who looks no older than five, anxiously rattles his head.

Tom's brows raise. "Do you know him at all?

This time slowly, almost fearful of the confession, the boy shakes his head.

Tom redirects his phone light and studies his eyes—bright green—and finds no redness, swelling, dilation, or any other signs of drugs. On the visible arms and knees of the boy, there is no scarring or indication of abuse. Unless the abuse is underneath the child's clothes. A terrifying thought—
"May I touch your head," he asks politely, and waits until he is granted permission—a small nod—to continue the inspection. He’s seen Hermione do this more than enough times with blunt trauma victims. His fingers trace along the scalp, finding a small indentation in the back of the head, near the occipital bone. A blow, likely by a large object. The child has been injured, kidnapped, and was likely headed for abuse.

"He gave me candies," the child confesses, in a fearful whisper. "He said I wouldn’t feel anything. I didn’t eat them though…I kept them under my tongue and spitted them out…they tasted really bad."

Ah yes.

The motive is all-too-evident.

Beautiful.

Glorious.

Gellert was right; this is a real treat.

Tom holds out his palm, and the silent authority of the gesture beckons the child to meekly drop the uneaten pills into his hand.

"Thank you." He pockets the pills, and crouches on his knees. Eye-level with the child now.

"And what’s your name?" he says, his voice low and intent.

"Harry," the boy answers fearfully.

"Harry." Tom smiles, pleasant. Placating. "I want you to do something for me, Harry. I want you to go into—" He nods at the dim fluorescent bathroom stall sign outside the train "—and lock the door and wait until I come get you. Just be a few minutes." Reaching into his pocket, he removes a tangled pair of headphones and presses them to the boy’s hand with his phone. "Here. Listen to music while you wait."

Harry nods, his pursed mouth trembling, and quickly scurries away.

Running one hand over his already perfect hair and pressing his lips together, Tom stands to full height again, right in front of the man. Shoulders sharp, he tilts his head to the side, observing at the shrouded figure with a predatory gleam. He opens with a smirking drawl, a taunt:

"Little boys. Really?"

He listens to the pathetic cries of denial (You’ve got it wrong! I swear I didn't do nothing yet!). Oh, but you were going to weren’t you? If I hadn’t caught you. Tom hates the retort. It's just an excuse. I didn’t do nothing yet. As if the interruption of a crime is enough to absolve a crime itself. The chance of killing a potential pedophile sends a dark shiver down his spine. The catharsis will be unequivocal, on par with a long over-due therapy session. His face mirrors the grim expression he sees, but his insides are on fire, eager for a butchery where he doesn't have to hold back. Who will ever miss a child predator?

“You know.” Tom removes his cleaver, weighing the weapon in his hand, watching the man’s face morph to sheer horror. “I’m doing you a favor here… You get that, don’t you?”

The cleaver is no heavier than a kitchen blade but will cut on first contact, even with minimum
pressure. Its serrations will be like waves, but not randomly like on those cheaper knives—this is Tom’s most expensive cooking utensil. It will slide in smoothly and do maximum damage on the way out, like the barbs of a fishing hook.

For some reason when Tom sees his reflection in the steel, his mind flicks away, his handsome face reminding him of his father’s. Tom can hear him now, the empty space in his mind where he belongs, the absence itself like a kind of memory. You can do anything you want as long as you get away with it. Father said morality was inherently flawed, it was only as staunch as the world would allow it to be, and the world outside their white-picket fence life was full of brutal people, the vilest sort of criminals.

Father forgot to mention he was one of them.

"Close your eyes son."

Shadows fell inside his room, and adult teeth shone like knives, the wooden bat outstretched in his hand.

Hits came to his stomach swift, steadfast, methodical.

Tom remembers his heart racing in violent excitement. By the end he remembers laying on the floor laughing—great big wheezes.

He has no idea why he ever laughed. Father had a terrible sense of humor.

Father was also a master at creating situations where Tom was forced to learn a skill or suffer grave consequence. Self-defense, for instance.

"Fight against it—fight me!"

Large, barbarian fingers laced through Tom’s hair, driving his skull into the pavement. He remembers the crystalline crunch of his bone. For an instance his eyes were pressed to the hard ground and he was lost in pain, and Father’s arms plunged Tom’s head underwater. His entry into liquid like a slap to newly birthed flesh; his eyes, already open, adjusted to the darkness. He was total, pure awareness, especially in those seconds before blackout.

His father, above all, taught him rage.

When metal bites into wall, a rush of cloth warns Tom that his victim has hurled himself out of the cleaver’s trajectory.
Annoyed at this willful defiance, Tom glares coldly. "How dare you," he says without any inflection.

The man's survival instinct has kicked in. Eyes narrowing, he lunges at Tom, tackling him with the force of a college football player, grabbing at his shoulders, shoving at him back fiercely.

A hard fist wallops at Tom's face.

Pain radiates from his face, the familiar sensation of a black eye, rendering him temporarily blind, followed by a blow to his gut. His body careens away from the force, and then his arm retaliates with a far more trained punch to the man's stomach. With his two hands he grasps the man's head and brings his knee cap up to the nose; there is the sound of a blunt crack! and Tom releases the greasy-hair slicked head.

Blood rushes down the man's snarling face.

Eyes narrowed, Tom steps back and pulls his cleaver from the wall, just as the man's unveiling a shiv from his jacket.

The knife throw is easy to dodge.

It's not until Tom feels the first real sight of harm coming to himself that his mind suddenly becomes very alert. The man makes a desperate scramble, grabs the knife and jabs it into Tom's thigh, fist tightening crudely, veins of his arm pulsing—and just as quickly, Tom buckles against the ground, panting.

Hot, searing pain rushes to his extremities.

Snarling cruelly, Tom finds his rage, his stupid, unguided rage—he only comes to the realization then that he's clenching his hand as the cleaver swings. He's not a honed assassin, a novice at best—but he swings—slashes—eager to hit whatever part of the man's body that he can. This assailant is not inexperienced—the sudden vertigo of being flung back by the brutish arm leaves Tom toppling out of the halted train across a plain of cement.

Tom hears a snap—and if it's bone, he will never be sure...his knuckles are so very white—He stands and grabs the cleaver again—He swings—swings like he doesn't care if his rotary cuff permanently tears from the sheer force of it—The metal sounds with a resounding crack! across the center of the rear of the man's head, so violently that Tom immediately feels his hands screaming in surprise at the sudden impact—the broken away wood of the handle clatters into the ground—the metal latches against skull—the man—crumbles, buckling like a curtain to the ground.

"Shut up!" Tom stabs at the loudly groaning man again...again...again. Until he can no longer be certain if he is doing so to ensure the man was dead or if he is simply taking out his spite...when his arms shake from the fall in adrenaline and his hands are no longer capable of holding onto his weapon...He drops the cleaver aside.

It happens in a heartbeat, in the space between one breath and the next. Tom's hands move to cup the man's bloodied chin, to cradle the curve of his damaged skull, and he is surprised by how little effort it has taken to dispatch him.

A little squeeze of throat muscle and he will be dead.

Less trouble than peeling an orange.
His quavering fingers tighten, tighten, tighten—the breathing stops. It's beautiful. Profound, seeing light leave the man's eyes, a vindication Tom cannot even begin to comprehend, at least, not yet. It is euphoria beyond anything before, a heat soaring through his veins. In this rare golden moment he feels like a hero.

He feels godly.

One minute the man was right in his face, more alive than he had probably ever been, and now...

Now he's meat on the floor.

Tom calmly brings the blade under his shirt, tucks it into the back of his Levi's.

At this unholy hour Hermione's curls are piled atop her head in a sloppy high-bun, and the hideous pink slippers on her feet drag along the cool wooden flooring of her kitchen.

She sets on the backwards chair across from him, legs sprawled in her familiar unlady-like way, and inspects his injured face with the clinical scrutiny she knows he hates.

"So you got robbed and the man ran away," she repeats dubiously, dabbing at the blood of his busted eye with a damp tissue. "What were you even doing out so late?"

"Grocery shopping." He winces as she applies stinging ointment to his lower lid.

Hermione stops, studies his face for a long moment, noting the tension in his jaw and the careful blankness behind his eyes.

The lie earns him a swift punch to his shoulder.

"I've seen the absolutely pathetic state of your fridge," she snaps. "If you actually did your groceries, then I wouldn't have to worry about feeding you all the goddamn time, now would I?"

Ten minutes, Tom counts, for a throbbing headache to emerge. It takes ten minutes for him to regret coming to his sister's house. There's a blade-wound scorched in his thigh which requires medical attention and a dead body sitting in the trunk of his vehicle parked outside, yet it is Hermione's tendency to fixate on the completely wrong thing that pisses him off the most.

His shoulders stiff, he reclines back, lights a cigarette.

"I haven't asked you to worry about me," he says, between puffs.

Hurt crawls over her small, sleep-worn features.

She exhales, angry, and a flurry of small, ineffectual punches come at his chest, the fury of a girl eternally pissed at her brother.
"You—" One punch. "—know—" Two punch. "—it's not that—" Three punch. "—easy."

He grips her wrists as she goes in for the fourth, sliding and pressing his thumbs at her pulse, and holds her in stasis. "That'd be a foul in the ring," he informs, lip curling.

"We're not in the ring!" she riles back. "We're in my goddamn house. And I'm not in the mood to have you sit here and blatantly lie to me about—"

"May I have another sandwich please," Harry chirps, seated atop the high chair, fingers sticky with peanut butter and crumbs, observing on.

Freezing mid-fight, they both turn their heads to stare.

Hermione wrings her wrists back. "Sure you can, angel," she says, her voice pitching unnaturally high and cheery. "You can have anything you like."

She stands up to lift the young boy, playfully jostling him in her arms.

Tom observes from his chair, with raised brows, this strange performance that is his sister. She sets the child on the counter, kisses its cheek, and begins assembling the sandwich. She liberally and evenly spreads peanut butter across two slices of bread, adds a layer of sliced banana, and pours a tall, cool glass of milk. While the young boy eats quietly, she cleans his circular-framed glasses and fusses over his sticky hands. The finishing touch, she presses another doting kiss to the little bruising scar on his forehead. And then Tom gets it—this, like his kill, is also therapy. Hermione is playing the mother she never got to have. He already knows the next thing out of her mouth will be:

"All right, Tom. Get over here. Now your turn."

He laughs, breathless. Incredulous.

"My wounds run a bit deeper," he murmurs.

Some change in her posture (the dip of her shoulders, the curl of her open hands) gives an indication that she understands. Of course she does — they lived the same horrible childhood — but it's not a conversation for today.

She tosses a dish rag at his head.

"Keep pressure on it."

Tom smooths out the fabric and wraps it around his aching thigh, pressing the flat of his arm to taper the bleeding. "I think the child's been hit on the back of his head. Can you tell if he's concussed?"

"He hasn't shown any signs but I'll take him in for a CT scan in the morning, just to be safe," she says. "We'll also have to contact the police."

"Don't!" the boy pipes, his eyes growing wide. "They'll send me back to my aunt and uncle! I don't wanna go back there! Please let me stay with you, Tom!"

Tom gives a blank stare.

"I'm sending you away in the morning," he affirms, irritably, with a silencing glare when the boy attempts to protest.
"Do you want a sandwich too? With milk?" Hermione asks, making her way back to him, face etched with concern.

Too many calories. His mind and stomach are at war; mind will reason he doesn't have time to burn them off. "Just some coffee," he says. "Black, no sugar."

Hermione scrunches her nose. "I don't know when you developed the most austere habits about food."

"I'm just not hungry."

He feels the weight of her gaze sloping along his arms, where the majority of his musculature is focused, down the neat and rigid angles of his body, lingering at the narrow waist he has worked hard to maintain. She gives her own hidden meaning with her frown, a you don't fool me.

But before she can pick the argument, her husband enters the room.

Krum, of towering height and robust stature, looks freshly showered. His prickly-black hair is damp, his lower half is wrapped in a towel, and there is a mask of some green cream over his face. The sight terrifies Harry, who likely fathoms a swamp monster has emerged from nowhere.

"We have a kid now?" Krum says, with a good-natured laugh, rubbing at his wife's shoulders.

"No," Hermione murmurs, with a tone of disinterest. "Tom brought him."

"Tom has a kid?" Krum's grin broadens. "So I'm an uncle?"

"No, it's not his—" Hermione stops. And sighs. "Can you go wash off your face mask, sweetheart, you're frightening little Harry."

"Little Harry," Krum echoes fondly. He disappears, reappearing a minute later with a clean face and shirt on but the child is not any less terrified. Harry hobbles off his high chair and quickly gets behind Tom, who he's seemingly designated as his savior.

"Help!" Harry squeals.

"Go sit down," Tom commands, annoyed, and the child scampers back to the high chair.

He leans in, presses his fingers between his eyes, gives a sigh. "I need to figure out what to do with this loud, irritating thing."

Hermione picks the panicked child up in her arms and presses a flurry of soothing kisses to its cherub cheek. "He's not a thing," she says, with warm affection. "He's a lovely, little human boy. And he's grown attached to you...You saved his life."

"Completely unintentionally," Tom utters darkly.

He's a twenty-five-year old man and while it is unhealthy to possess lingering apathy for near every living creature on the planet, there is a safety to it. He is rational enough to know a child's safeguard is a job for social workers, child protective services, or those those who volunteer to be foster parents—Idiots with practiced empathy. Not those like him. He's never had an animal he didn't want to kill, let alone a child, and he can't bear to think what one may suffer under his guard. He's been so distant with near all creatures in his existence that very rarely has their suffering crawled into his psyche.
"So what happened to you?"

Ignoring the nonchalance of this question, Tom sends a murky look at his sister's husband. It hasn't slipped his attention that the rugby-player stands five inches taller and weighs sixty pounds of additional muscle, and of course he has fantasized about killing Krum, choking him, shoving him down the stairs, ramming his head between a car door, but it is an impersonal fantasy, for he would likely want to kill anyone who married his sister.

"Tom got stabbed," Hermione answers, her fingers pressing along the bones of his knuckles, checking for breakage.

"You got into a fight?" Krum says, raising his thick brows. "Outside the ring? Did you at least win?"

"Of course," Tom says caustically. "I always win," he makes a point to stress at the larger sportsman, though the hostility goes unrequited.

Krum, the supportive brother-in-law, gives a grin.

"No doubt you do." He places a hand at Tom's shoulder that gets angrily shrugged off, the hostility, again, unnoticed. "Saw that last match." Krum walks away, grabbing a protein shake from the fridge. "Our boy has the fiercest left hook I've ever seen, Mione. Get him started and he's a detonator at work. All pow-pow-pow—" Krum mimics the motions with his fists. "—anyway—I bet he could easily go pro."

Hermione, her fingers now lingering at his blotchy, discolored cheek, frowns. "Tom doesn't need to go anywhere."

Going pro isn't on his radar. He's worked hard to maintain his middle-of-the-pack reputation, to avoid attention and the danger that would come with it. The last thing he needs is media prying into his life, his past...his medical history.

It's clear the fellow sportsman has caught on.

"Tom's calculated about his losses," Krum says, legs splaying so widely on a chair it's as if he's spilling out of it. "I've seen him...Footwork's too precise...And he never takes a hit too bad. He only loses when he has to. He may play the welterweight division but I bet he could easily take down a man twice his size."

Let's find out, Tom thinks darkly, as Krum stands, watching the outline of his broad shoulders recede from the room.

He feels a whack to the back of his head.

Through dark-rimmed eyes, he stares his sibling down with impressive hostility.

"Shut up," she grumbles.

His sister, the mindreader.

His anger is quickly replaced by the hard pang of pain beaming down his leg. He slumps forward, feeling a nauseous rush of warmth to his head. "See the way she treats me, Harry," he utters, dizzy. "Adding insult to injury. Bet she wishes she got to stab me with the knife herself."

"Hermione's a meanie," Harry agrees through a muffled mouthful of sandwich, eager to remain in
Tom's good graces.

"Eloquently put," Tom says, trying to lift onto rickety limbs, but fails to steady himself and nearly slips. Hermione catches him; she grabs his arm, pulling it over her shoulder, and clasps a hand at his waist.

Then they're moving. Pressure has built behind his eyes, making it difficult to see straight. The hallway drifts in and out of focus.

Many shaky steps later, the support ends and he feels his ass land on a cold and hard surface—the rim of the bathtub. One leg in, one leg out. He hears the faucet start, feels cold water pooling around his socked toes.

"Your jeans are covered in blood."

"I'm menstruating," he offers, with a sordid half-smile. "Now I know how the other half lives."

His sister, not amused in the slightest, gives a disparaging sigh. "The injury's worse than I imagined." She sounds serious, tense. "I'm going to strip you so I can make the stitches."

"Might be mutually convenient to let me bleed out."

"Tom," she says, like the sound of his name is an argument unto itself.

*You always think you know best,* he berates in the comfort of his head, but knows he must swallow his pettiness hard and fast, like a pill. There's no room for suicidal musings tonight. There's also no graceful way to take his jeans off, and she doesn't try. She unzips him, hooks her fingers in the belt loops, and yanks the dirtied garment down his hips quickly.

A moment of quiet pervades, likely wide-eyed staring on her part, and an effort to stay lucid on his.

At last, she says, very uncomfortable, "I—Look, I've got to remove your underwear too."

Pain pounding at temples, he feels his eyes roll to the back of his skull, wondering what the hell he did to deserve this. Death by emasculation. Is this the biblical punishment for murder? Old testament? If it is then he and God will need to have a very frank talk at confessional next sunday.

"Don't worry, the door's locked," his sister continues awkwardly, determined to make the situation worse than it already is. "Viktor won't see anything—inappropriate."

Tom has wondered, often in life, if Hermione tries to be deliberately provocative, or if she is simply incapable of comprehending her own innuendos. Her mind is a labyrinth in which he feels lost. Seventeen years of suffering her company has not brought him closer to the truth. It's the appeal of contradiction, he decides—the doctor and the killer. The stethoscope and the blade. She who preserves life and he who...

Well.

He feels her fingers—soft, warm, irritatingly feminine—grip the elastic of his boxer briefs at his hipbone and slide the garment down his thighs. As an athlete who's spent more than enough time in crowded locker rooms, Tom is numb to nudity, disinterested by male genitalia. Hermione, on the other hand…

A long, alarmed pause.
"Tom," he hears her low murmur.

"Yes?"

"What do I do about…" she trails, clearly overwhelmed.

Tom laughs, almost certain her face has gone bright red. She has never seen anything so magnificent.

"My eyes are up here, Hermione."

"I know where your eyes are," she huffs. He feels a snapcap of painkillers pressed into his palm, which he downs instinctually. "You need stitches 'round your upper thigh. I'm just trying to figure out how I'm going to work around your…" She can't even say it. "How can you possibly be hard right now?"

"Blood gets me going."

"Your own?"

Pills take little time to numb his nerves and make him not give a damn.

Leaning back against the tiled wall in languid ease, summoning all the arrogance of a greek statue, he smiles. Hazy. Irreverent. "It's out of my hands now. I defer to you, doctor, to handle my anatomy as you see fit."

With a long sigh, Hermione slides on her gloves.

"You think you're so slick," she murmurs, gently nudging his erection out of the way so that she can clean the knife wound. "But you're nothing more than a cunt."

His shoulders give a slight twitch, fighting the sting of alcohol-coated gauze sliding across his lesion. "I think you mean a dick."

"No, I won't make anymore phallic associations with you."

His sister, spoiling his fun. "Imagine what Freud would say," he chuckles.

"This is why you can't play armchair psychologist, Tom. You always name drop the worst people."

"But imagine if we went to a family shrink," he continues, smirking. "If they made us sit on that great big sofa, ten feet apart, dumb Krum in the middle—"

"—Terrible—"

"—and asked you what you thought about my penis."

Hermione takes a towel and applies firm pressure to his wound without letting go, waiting for the bleeding and stinging to die down.

"I think I'd die from the humiliation," she utters.

After his pain settles, her steady hands are hard at work on the canvas of his flesh. Tom looks away, though he knows it will be quick, clean, meticulous. Hermione doesn't make mistakes. They hurt very little, as expected. She eases each stitch in with the slow precision he's seen her use with fragile fibers, with glass slides beneath microscopes, with tender myocardium flesh. Her touch is so
light, it's almost as if his wound repairs itself. Every so often her gloved knuckles brush the rim of
his bare cock, sending a delicious sliver of excitement through him. He exhales quietly, feeling the
heat of her hands permeating the gloves at his most volatile skin. How hard he'd cum right now.
She could give him the best and worst experience of his life, if she wanted.

It's quite miserable.

"There," she says, softly, at last.

Quelling his thoughts into submission, Tom utters a gravelly 'thanks'. He feels her naked, ungloved
hands grab his face, bringing his eyes down to meet his.

She smiles wearily, gently now, her fingers brushing stray hairs off his forehead. "Love you, love
you, love you," she whispers. "Now don't go getting stabbed again." She leans in to press a kiss to
the edge of his mouth.

He cups her chin before she can pull away, keeps her edge pressed to his, just a few seconds
longer. "How else will I keep your attention?" he murmurs.

The remark earns him another whack to the back of his head.

"Sure you don't want to stay here?" Tom asks for the third time, starting the engine and checking
the rearview mirror as he backs out of the driveway. "My sister's home is nicer than mine."

The child, in the passenger seat, squirms. Glancing out the window, Harry waves timidly at
Hermione standing in the open door of her wide hallway, and then watches as the large house
shrinks into the distance as they drive out of the shiny, gated upper-middle-class neighborhood.

"Krum is scary," he whispers.

Tom chuckles, arm leant out the open window, lighting a cigarette. "I'm much scarier," he assures.

"What will you do with the body Tom?"

"What body?"

"The dead one in your trunk."

The child is perceptive.

Tom exhales a wispy stream of smoke, as he spins the steering wheel with the heel of his palm,
turning onto an unmarked back road where trees are spindlier, branches more brittle, in every
groove and bump and crevice.

"I'll figure something out. Make it disappear somehow."
There is methodology to murder, and if Tom had a week to prepare in advance, he'd have the clean-up sorted out. Gellert was right about him needing to learn to kill under time constraints. Efficiency is a valuable skill, which is why an impromptu, spur-of-the-moment murder sets Tom up with a unique challenge: garbage disposal. Dump it in the river? Bury it in the woods? Procure an incinerator?

"Have you ever killed anyone before, Tom?"

The child asks this in a small, fearful, yet curious voice.

Occupied in thoughts of purchasing an incinerator and how much it would cost, Tom glances at his rearview mirror and rolls the steering wheel, shrugging. "Don't know."

"Why not?"

"Because, Harry," he says, still exhaling smoke, a deep, exasperated sigh into the abyss of the night. "You know the candy that man tried to give you?"

The child nods solemnly.

"I've been on it for most of my life," Tom says. "There's no way I can remember everything I've ever done."

"Oh." A confusion that overtakes Harry's face, and his eyes flicker toward his lap in quiet frustration. "Please don't tell the police I ran away from home, Tom."

Now the truth finally outs.

Tom's mouth curves, wry. "You ran away, did you?"

"I had to!" the child shouts, defensive, his fists balling at his sides. "They put me in a cupboard."

"Who did."

"My aunt and uncle...they're evil, Tom."

Tom tosses his cigarette out the window and scoffs. "You're too young to know what evil is."

"I know what evil is," Harry whispers. Hunched low in his seat, he looks every bit the part of a petulant child. From where Tom is sitting, he can make out nothing more than top of Harry's badly cut hair and the dirtied soles of his too-big, hand-me-down shoes.

He's an orphan, that's for sure.

Making a turn onto his block, less rich and safe and suburban than his sister's, Tom cruises past a cracked sidewalk littered with injection paraphernalia, the splash of color in walls from the lurid graffiti. From upper windows comes the boom of music. Hookers stalk the streets in skimpy outfits and high boots looking for work, their bodies as thin as pins, bones jutting out through pallid skin.

No place for a child.

And yet.

"Let me stay with you," Harry persists. "I hate my family. I hate them."

For the briefest of moments, Tom hesitates. Then a coy and controlled smile settles on his face,
toying with the hard line of his mouth. Calm, dark and frightfully monotone, he says:

"And what would you like me to do about your aunt and uncle, Harry. Kill them? Cut them up and bury their body parts across their well-maintained lawn, as a sort of scavenger hunt for the police? Because I could. *Easily*. I'd be the worst tragedy that's ever struck their lives and I'd *enjoy* it."

The boy stares into his lap, as if struggling with his conscience, a firm face of displeasure. "It's okay, you don't have to do that," he says after a minute. He glances up. "Honestly I think you're a little bit evil too, Tom."

"Then you understand why I can't keep you," Tom says, eyes concentrating on the road. "I'm going to call the police in the morning."

"I said you're a little bit evil," Harry persists. "But I don't think you're *all the way* evil...you saved me."

"That's because, Harry. I had *loads* of fun tonight."

Perhaps what makes Tom so dangerous is that he wasn't raised by women, not really. He was raised by his television.

He never knew his mother, only that she was a maid that was quickly blotted from existence after his birth. And then Jean Granger, the vile bride, who trotted into Tom's life when he turned eight, who loved pill bottles more than she ever loved Tom.

*eat this candy, Tom, now this one, now this one now swallow*

*I don't care if it tastes bad now swallow*

*stop bothering your new mommy now swallow the candy now go the fuck to sleep*

*look at your sister ignore the vomit on her cardigan what a sweet serene child already asleep*

*never fights back*

*be a good child like your sister, Tom.*
Lightning flashes through the small living room. Wind rattles the guttering outside and rain beats against the single pane window—the dark lullaby of an abrupt storm.

Curled up on his pull-out sofa, Tom jolts into wakefulness. Thunder rings and outside, a pale blue crack of light is slowly gaining in intensity along the eastern horizon but this is not what has disturbed him.

It's the boy, standing awake at this godforsaken hour, sweaty strands of hair plastered his forehead, nose scrunched. Petulant little brat.

"What are you doing." Tom mutters groggy, lip beneath the thick skin of his quilt.

"Got scared. Kept having nightmares about the bad man. Can I sleep here with you?"

"No," Tom says shortly. "I'm not your mother."

With that he closes his eyes, willing himself to fall asleep again. When his breathing begins to level out, he feels the small weight of the boy climb atop his knees.

He opens his eyes and glares.

Harry sits mouth puckered, arms folded, refusing to be budged off.

Tom sighs, lifts him up by the armpits and mechanically drops him on the other side of the pull-out sofa.

"Stay there," Tom grumbles, nudging his nose into his pillow as he curves away.

It's not more than a mere seconds later, that a small body's pressing itself to Tom's back. An insistent tug comes at his collar.

"Please…" comes the child's quiet whine. "Don't make me go back to my uncle's, please please…"

The 'please's go on for a full ten minutes before Tom's staring at the wall in wide-eyed, bloodshot disarray, lost in existential crisis. Though he would never harm a child, he twists around to clasp a hand over the orphan's whining mouth. He removes the body compressed to his side like a leech with one arm, rigidly shoving him the full length of the bed away.

"I'll talk with my sister in the morning…I'll convince her to let you stay at hers for the time being," Tom informs, cold and curt, glowering through tired red-rimmed eyes. "Now go to sleep."

Harry shakes his head ferociously, a furious pout on his face.

"I want to stay with you," he wails, and squirming close once more, wraps his arms around Tom's waist, burying his face into his side. Cuddling.

Sprawled on his back, Tom blinks widely, raking a hand through his hair in frustration, not quite sure what the hell he's gotten himself into. Even Bella isn't this persistent, and he can usually kick her out with some rudimentary manipulation when she becomes clingy. But he cannot condemn a child to the streets. He has no experience dealing with something so small and helpless, and he fears he may have no leverage in the situation. How does one barter with a five year old?

He picks up his phone, furiously typing a message to the only confidante he has:

I'm going to drive a blade through your skull.
The response is instant.

*Hello to you too, gorgeous.*

*Can't sleep?*

*Have fun tonight? Get your fix?*

Tom grits his teeth, fingers typing.

**I killed your man.**

**What do I do with the child?**

*You can do whatever you like to him.*

*He's yours to play with.*

;)

The implication makes Tom drop his phone.

He stares at the device, stunned. His breathing's gone shallow. He feels unsanitary. For once in many years of his life, he feels a genuine trill of horror—he no longer feels apathetic, but cold and disgusted beyond belief. Covered in slime and maggots, dripping with the putrid rot of something so terrible that he can not approximate it in words.

Unlatching the sleepy boy from his side, he shoves him to the other side of the bed, not violently, merely enforcing a necessary physical separation.

"What is it?" Harry yawns, confused.

"Shut up."

His sense of propriety tarnished, Tom cannot look Harry in the eye. He sits up, burying his head in his hands. He wants to tear out his eyeballs. The insinuation alone makes him feel horrible and filthy—

He picks up his phone again, types furiously:

**You're a sick motherfucker.**

**You're not?**

*You think you get to grandstand when you killed a man in cold blood tonight?*

*Tell me, did you have fun playing hero?*

**I would never rape a child.**

*That's your problem, not mine.*

A rage of violence rises somewhere within Tom, like a wave trying to overwhelm his senses. His mouth curls, snarling, seething — outraged.

**I'm really going to kill you, Gellert.**
Yeah?

You're a fucking monster.

Pot. Meet kettle.

I won't be merciful.

I'm going to find you and destroy whatever power, fortune, legacy you hold. I'm going to tear your bones out and feed them to dogs. I'm going to savor every second of your demise.

That's what I like to hear.

Looking forward to it, Tommy.

Tytl <3

Chapter End Notes

Sorry to end on a dark note. I want to make clear nothing heinous happened to kiddo!Harry, except for getting hit on the head. Tom stopped that crime in its tracks. Nothing bad will happen to kiddo!Harry in this fic, except that he's stuck with Tom, who'll have to live out his worst nightmare of having to be responsible for a kid. Fun times.

Let me know what you think!
The morning opens in mania.

A furious click-clack of the keyboard. An increasingly unbearable spin of the CPU cooler fan. A hoodie drawn over unwashed hair as he stares the illuminated screen down with unnerving, near-hostile focus. He is less handsome and polished today, less 'Tom Riddle', less the cover of People's magazine and more a real human, like the ones you see in the streets. He doesn't care. Not when the world's vaulted knowledge sits at click of mouse and touch of fingertip.

He flits near one hundred tabs, scrolls pages of social media, criminal directories, search engines, even the Russian ones, endless text racing past his blurring vision — unable to find a single piece of information about 'Grindelwald'. No digital footprint.

It grinds Tom's teeth. He feels harassed by the invisibility of his friend. He throws off his hoodie, rakes a heavy set of fingers through his hair. Rubs the heels of his palms against his shot eyes. "Fuck with my head," he yawns. "I'll tear yours off."

A reassuring mantra.

A promise.

Knowledge and progress and murder and science and power and truth and justice and god—the higher ideals don't care about beauty. They have always been morbid, ugly, unsafe, insane. Tom has lived twenty-five years of life, never hitting beneath the glass of his own surface. But some things need authenticity.

For some things 'Tom Riddle' must be authentic.

Even if only in the privacy of himself.

That's where [V0ld3m0rT] comes in.

He gets on his hidden VPN and over the next few hours hacks his way into long-buried government archives, encrypted FBI databases, hidden criminal records. He glares through dark, sunken eyes at white pixels against black as fragments of code clog the gears of his mind. Incessant fingers drum keys. He scans letters on the screen, rapidly roving line to line, Infiltrates site to site, database to database. He walks a tightrope, fights walls of cybersecurity. One wrong move will reveal his IP address, his identity, get him arrested. Tom can lose his entire life in a few clicks.

He won't.

He hacks chatroom conversations, high-profile private ones, populated with hackers, millionaire merchants of drugs and weapons, and dangerous criminals, the ones responsible for the market economy crashes, the bombings, the recessions, the missile strikes, the ones that rig the elections and start the wars, the ones responsible for every front-page tragedy in the world — the other 'hims'.

The investigation accomplishes little.
In the scummy underbelly of the internet, no one comes forth with much detail. No one will risk self-incrimination. The other 'hims' are as selfish as Tom. Response varies from conspiracy to misdirection. Occasionally, a half-truth.

Grindelwald? Sure I've heard the name. He's got more money than god—
—tech wizard or something—
—mines consumer data for identity theft, financial fraud, you name it—
—stay the hell away from him unless you want your life ruined—
—owns a lot of banks. A LOT of banks—
—runs a child trafficking ring with absurd prices but I'm not telling you how I know that—
—a wealthy entrepreneur that finds gaps in the economy and fills them—
—a satanist that practices black magic—
—fills consumer needs—
—just another evil, rich, white guy—
—a wealthy politician—
—not a politician but he has trade agreements with world officials that keep him out of legal trouble—
—a smart businessman—
—the top one-percent of the top one-percent—
—one of the guys no one knows about, the guys that are invisible—
—all I know is he makes snuff films on the internet—
—fills consumer demand and supply—
—even if the media knew about him, they wouldn't do a story on him. Not if reporters cared about their careers—
—friends in high places—
—throws fantastic parties—
—untouchable—
—rules the world—

And then finally [V0ld3m0rT] gets:

Had a friend who was recruited for one of G's organizations at a party. Said pay's good but the work gave him nightmares. Signed an NDA and had to flee the country when he quit.
He was found 'suicided' a few years later.

Of course Gellert has no problem quietly assassinating anyone he deems a loose end—but why the interest in Tom? Aside from the obvious gay crush.

Is Tom being recruited?

A child’s chin sets on his shoulder. Freshly roused from tossing and squirming against him all night, Harry has climbed the back wheels of the computer chair. His hands grip Tom's hoodie sleeves to hang on. He maintains a stream of questions, letting Tom know at least one of them slept well.

“What are you doing?” comes the spirited chirp.

“Nothing.”

“Can I help?”

“No.”

“It looks fun. Pretty please can I help?”

Tom swivels his chair around, toppling him off like a domino, though it turns out to be a very bad game of dominos. It's a game of ball. A child's low center of gravity allows for rebound; a rubber ball against the wall can only bounce back. In seconds Harry is on his feet, buoyant, perky with energy. Seeing opportunity for easy access to Tom's lap now, he begins an upward trek, climbs Tom like a monkey ascending a tree.

Tom grabs him by the armpits and sets him back on the ground. “No,” he says, stern.

“I'm hungry,” comes the next whine.

“Then go eat.” Tom turns to stare at the screen, fingers beating keys. He cannot waste energy with childish games, not when adult games are being played. He feels certain he is in a crime thriller film with the villain being Gellert, even if he distrusts his own narrative. His thoughts burn with many perceived plot holes. One, if Gellert is as powerful as his reputation bids then why waste time provoking a nobody like Tom? Two, what does does he hope to gain from this, as he calls it, ‘friendship’? Three and most important, why hasn't he tried to kill Tom yet? Delaying a murder is like delaying an orgasm—there's no point. If Tom was Gellert, he would've found and killed Tom already.

Then again, maybe Gellert can afford to waste time, and men, and money.

And Tom's brain cells.

Maybe the villain is just bored.

*What a pointless villain.* Tom thinks as he types code, knowing he could do a better job. Case in point, the next minute passes in hacking onto the interface of Hungary's military database. Then again, maybe not, because right after that, a wall props and Tom gets thrown out of the system. His screen flickers with errant code fragments, freezes.

Crashes.

He slams his laptop shut. "Fantastic." Exhales through his teeth.
He hears the noise of dishes clattering.

The glance made over his shoulder is instantly regretted. It’s as if a drunken cyclone has erupted in his kitchen, cans and bottles strewn across the floor. His lower cabinets have been excavated, by the infestation. Now it digs to the back of Tom’s fridge, throwing out the salad bowls and diet Cokes and egg whites and protein drinks, on the prowl for acceptable sustenance. “Do you have pizza?”

“Do I look like someone who eats pizza?” Tom says dryly, just looking to be alone in this moment. Reaching into a drawer he pulls out a cuban cigar, and using a cutter slices the end with great care. His most expensive vice, but a good appetite suppressant.

“Well, can you order me pizza?”

“Sure.” Tom, mid-slow drag of the fat thick blunt, remains resolutely faced away from the mess. “And why don't I call the police while I’m at it?”

The child halts mid-protein drink toss, stiffening at the threat. Stills. He spins, mouth puckered and ready to bawl.

"Tom—"

“Then clean it up,” Tom says, face hard, angrily exhaling smoke.

As the ultimatum enters the air, the child scrambles, shoving dishes wherever they fit, kicking and throwing foodstuff under the table out of sight. It will suffice. Tom isn't much for cleaning either; one does not need to be when one is only responsible for oneself. What matters is that Hermione won't see a mess when she arrives. Tom knows the argumentative nature of his sister, and he isn't in the mood for any form of harassment from her unless, of course, it's sexual.

Speaking of sexual harassment.

A sudden rapping on his door.

Tom remains on his ass, puffing his cigar and ignoring the sound, wondering how his morning can possibly get any worse.

The knocking intensifies. "It's Bella, darling!"

Bella is speaking with a terrible French accent today. If she has decided to switch accents on him, it means she has been watching foreign movies. Bella, much like Tom, has no sense of who she wants to be. She makes a dramatic hand gesture that goes unnoticed, because Tom isn't looking at
The thing Tom sees are breasts, which are visible through her black, low-cut dress. She looks like the villainess of an esoteric gothic film that Tom has never bothered to watch. They are in very different films today. Tom knows her point here is to get laid. He's certain she's practiced her dialogue for what will be another uncomfortable fantasy session. ‘Pretend to be a brooding vampire, Tom! ’ ‘Shove me against the wall and fuck me like in the movies, Tom!’ ‘Make it hurt like you can't get enough of me, Tom!’ Tom's acting skills aren't that great.

He dodges her sloppy kiss, for he's already brushed his teeth. "It's only been three days," he says.

"That's a long time for couples to be apart," she insists.

"All right." He's in no mood to argue with a dumb bitch. He's trying to end this conversation with minimal effort.

Her mascara-heavy lashes bat rapidly. What would be harmless flirting if Tom didn't see the morbid determination in it. She won't leave until she's had her—literal—fill of him.

Next comes the suggestive dip of her bare shoulder.

And at last, a simpering, "So can I come in?"

Tom grips the pane, standing wedged between her and the door.

"I'm busy," he says, his tone calm.

The darkly-painted mouth twists. Finally her gaze falls over the whole of him. She will notice he is less polished and more mundane today. Disheveled mess of hair, faded hoodie, rumpled boxers.

"Why are you half dressed?"

The great joy of solitary living is that one can go without pants for as long as one pleases. He doesn't have to justify this to her.

But he will screw with her.

"I'm cheating on you," he scoffs, deliberately and blatantly playing on her worst insecurities.

"Joke," he backtracks. "I'm playing video games. It's my day off."

Too late. She's suspicious now. "And why can't we spend your day off together?" she says—hisses, pushing at his arms, trying to get past him while he stands there, a brick-wall. "That's what couples do."

Bella's somehow forgotten he has exceptional arm strength. He grips one shoulder, holds her in place as she squabbles against him, fighting to get through, until she's exhausted herself.

She falls back with a huff.

"There's someone in there with you isn't there?" she says, voice brimming with hurt.

Tom glances over his shoulder.
A five-year-old is punting soda cans into the laundry hamper.

He turns back around to Bella and says, "Yes."

Her face crumples with hurt. "Is she a better fuck than me? Is that why you're breaking up with me like this, you *cruel* monster?" she says bitterly.

Tom stands quiet, unbothered. Thinking.

Breaking...up. Her words are interesting. He's breaking up? This is how normal men get rid of their girlfriends isn't it? Is that what he's doing now?

What a perfect modern out.

*Breaking up.* Such a simple solution. It absolves one of all effort. It's even better than murder, because there is no clean up, and because it's socially acceptable. Encouraged even.

Why didn't he think of it sooner?

"That's a great idea. I'm breaking up," he says.

And shuts the door.

Turning around, he leans against it. Closes his eyes, and breathes. Feeling successful in having maneuvered himself out of the social interaction with no loose ends.

His eyes open to find the child staring at him.

"You have a girlfriend?" Harry, for some reason, looks hurt and upset.

"I did. But I took care of it."

"What about Hermione?" comes a follow-up.

Incorrectly grasping the question, Tom says, "Impossible to get rid of her." He stalks back to his desk to resume his work. "On the subject—get the mess hidden away before my sister gets here or she won't shut up about it."

Harry freezes mid-punt. "When’s she coming over?" Excitement—likely at the prospect of food—takes his voice.

"Soon. To take you to the hospital."

The excitement curdles into anxiety.

"Are they gonna give me a shot?" Harry says, sounding panicked.

"Don't know," Tom says, monotone, doing nothing to quell this fear. He opens his laptop, starts it, and draws on his headphones.

"Can you come too?"

Tom's eyes remain on his screen. "No. I’m busy."

"*Please.* Please please..."

The whining goes on for five minutes, proving a great distraction, even through headphones.
With a disgruntled sigh, Tom finally stands.

Stalking over, he yanks the child off the floor, wrapping a strong arm around his waist, carrying him sideways like a bundled roll of carpet.

He sets the child on the counter for inspection, his gaze sweeping over the round face.

"Listen," Tom says, palms on the granite edge. "No matter how many times you say that word, I'm not keeping you."

The face scrunches, and the eyes glisten with tears.

"Please..." Harry whispers, clasping his hands together. The child could act in melodramas. "Please please please don't send me back to my aunt and uncle...They're mean to me."

"I'm mean too."

"You're less mean," Harry persists, which is quite an assessment to make about Tom Riddle, and then the boy is back to his climbing ways. Two stringy arms wrap around Tom's shoulders; the boy has trapped him in a hug. "You're my friend," he insists, burrowing his head forcibly under Tom's chin.

It's plain to see why this child got abducted.

Grabbing the back of Harry's shirt, Tom yanks him off and slides him back on the counter.

"You shouldn't trust people so easily," he says, reproachful. "Adults shouldn't want to be your friend. The ones that claim they do—" He pauses, mouth tightening. "Those aren't the type of adults you want to be around."

"How come?" the boy says.

Tom exhales, rubbing his fingers at his brow, looking to the side. How do you explain 'rape', 'exploitation', and 'grooming' to a five year old?

Simple answer: You don't.

Those are all adult words with no space in a child's vernacular.

Taking a smarter route Tom opens a drawer, removes a swiss paring knife. Pretty little thing. Delicate, with a wavy edge, and a red handle. It's one of Tom's favorite knives and will wound when used correctly. If employed at the right vessels—jugular, carotid—it can kill though such an attack requires anatomical precision beyond a child's capacity. An excellent practice blade still. Tom too received his first blade at five along with lessons on the neighbor's pitbull. Father said the best gift to bestow a child is instruction in self-defense. Father often gave gifts of this nature.

Tom lowers his head a bit, leans in with some theatrical flair. He holds the blade out, the handle up to the boy in offering, eyes sly and conspiratorial.

"The next time someone puts a hand on you." His mouth twitches. "You just..." He makes a clicking sound with the back of his tongue, "chop their fingers off. Not many. Two or three. Just for fun."

Harry looks stricken.

But he reaches to grip the handle, curiously, tentatively. He holds the blade, weighs it inside his
palm. "S'too scary." He vigorously shakes his head, handing it back to Tom who presses it to the counter with sharp end faced away in one swift move.

"Better to fend for yourself than to rely on others," Tom advises.

Harry, troubled by the wisdom he has received, shakes his mop head, jumps the counter. Sinks to his knees, latches onto Tom's leg — sympathy tactic. The sort of melodrama that would surely work on Hermione.

It won't work on Tom.

Still, the child persists. "I won't bug you if you let me stay here," he rattles, anxious and breathless, squeezing Tom's knee. "I won't ask for pizza. And if you don't tattle to the police, I wont tattle to your sister about the dead body in your trunk... I'll keep all your secrets. Please."

Staring down, Tom tilts his head.

"Excuse me?" he says, brows raising.

Is the child...blackmailing him?

By the time Hermione finally arrives, Tom's laying on the sofa with his eyes squeezed just awaiting an end to his newly-proscribed torment. The child is sprawled across his stomach, swinging his legs, immersed in a game he has downloaded onto Tom's stolen phone.

When Tom opens his eyes, he finds his sister standing in the doorway looking amused. She is wearing a skirt, a mid-thigh floral fabric he can't tear his gaze away from. Ridiculous gesture of femininity. Stupid. Disturbing. It doesn't suit her. Her legs are too delicate. Who dressed her this morning?

"You didn't knock," he says, feigning offense. "I could've been naked."

"I've seen everything at this point," she intones dryly, and greets the young boy running to hug her by picking him up and pressing a flurry of kisses to his face.

"All right," Tom says, standing, yanking his hoodie off, if only so she'll have a good view of his shoulder muscles as he stalks to his room. "Be a pervert then." Pleased to be relieved of child duties, he opens his laptop to resume his investigation.

From the kitchen he hears his sister manage the child.

"Did you bring me a peanut butter sandwich?" comes the chirp.

"I did. But I also brought you other things." Tom hears the clunk of boxes, his sister setting out tupperware. "Steamed carrots and broccoli!"

Harry's excitement is duly dampened. Tom listens to him shout, "I want the peanut butter sandwich!" while Hermione tries to cajole and coo and and choo-choo train foods into his mouth.
Minutes pass, whining rises and quells, and soon enough there are quiet sounds of hungry chewing, indication the child has been tamed.

Meanwhile, Tom's finger flicks across his mouse scroll, running through the endless script of a watchlist of Hungarian terrorist organizations.

His finger freezes.

Wait.

Gellert will not be on this list. He is not a trite villain in a children's novel trying to take over the world.

He already runs it.

With no effort, it would seem, because he has far too much free time on his hands.

"Deathly Hallows," Tom murmurs under his breath, and blanches in surprise at his own insight. Where did he get those words?

He remembers now.

Gellert's livestream.

That was the name of Gellert's livestream.

Tom types 'Deathly Hallows' into the search bar.

An incredulous scoff.

The top result is a funeral company. He clicks the website to find little information present. Just a black interface. No address, hours of operation, detail about funeral arrangements or the owners. All that exists is an ABOUT US page.

Tom clicks it:

We are a global organization of likeminded people here for all your DEATHLY needs. We are everywhere and our only tool is LOVE. We come from all kinds of backgrounds with our main shared characteristic that we’re a coalition, curious and open-minded. While many of our operations require anonymity for the safety of our members, we strive to create a better community of understanding between us and for the BETTERMENT of mankind.

L.

I.

C.

L.

And beneath that.
By now Tom is fairly certain the site is a front for some sort of violent cult run by Gellert. There is simply no other explanation. Problem is there isn't any further information to dissect.

He decides to hack the site.

As expected it's heavily encrypted, elliptic curve cryptography, complex integer algorithm sequences he hasn't seen in years. He supposes going to college—though he never finished the degree—wasn't entirely useless after all.

He doesn't get far before he feels a hand press at his shoulder. The same irritatingly feminine hand slides behind his head, cradling his skull, fingers threading through his hair.

"Tom," her soft murmur.

A box is set at his desk and Tom stares at it. Three compartments. Little peeled apple slices. Perfectly symmetrical heart-cut strawberries. Neat, white sandwich squares with the crusts taken off. It is children's food and it has been prepared, with great care, to be aesthetically pleasing.

His sister is shrewd.

She has been reading psychiatry books.

"I've put Harry down for a short nap," she says, quietly, leaning against his desk. "Can you eat or do I have to feed you as well? Because I'm not leaving today until I've actually seen you eat."

Tom stares down the tupperware, calculating the damage. Two thousand five-hundred calories. That's how much a grown man is meant to eat daily. Tom hasn't eaten that much in three weeks. He should eat, but he can't. There's power in restriction. He likes that it gives him power over himself, a vengeance against the uncertainty of his mind. Should Tom find himself going off the rails, he can restore order with a brake. The power to kill himself—a necessary failsafe.

But his sister can't understand. She doesn't know the sort of negotiations a person like Tom must make with himself. She has little appreciation for his jokes; she would not like his honesty. It would pain her to have to hear him explain himself.

So he won't.

His fingers wrap the soft flesh of her forearm. He tugs her close, to that her bare thigh bumps his bare knee.

He smirks sharply up at her.
"Sit in my lap and feed me," he says.

He expects to be rebuffed, a smack to the back of his head, but she—determined to win their little spats for once—takes the bait.

"Fine," she huffs.

Tom raises his brows.

He gives a breathless laugh.

Biting his lower lip, he stares brazenly as she straddles one skirted leg determinedly over his lap. His sister, a former debate club president, has finally figured out how to win *one* argument with Tom.

Tom has no problem losing this one argument to Hermione's skirt. He can lose to it everyday, multiple times, all day long. The shorter the better. The provocation of her thighs spreading at the junction of his abdomen makes him grunt softly. She leverages her weight to his left thigh, avoiding pressure to the stitches in his right. What a thoughtful sister.

"Okay?" she murmurs, looking anywhere but at his face.

"Uhuh," he breathes, eyes glued to her hips, feeling a lowering of mental faculties — blood redistributing from his brain to his most tender organ with little effort. He grows unsubtly hard underneath her. She squirms as he scoots them tight. He's glad she came wearing a skirt. He likes the warmth of that soft, plush cunt. Only the thin fabric of her underwear in the way, her pussy pulse throbs against his stomach. A delicious second heartbeat to his own.

"Comfy?" he breathes at the shell of her ear. His fingers return to intercepting code on the screen behind her head, as she brings a quarter sandwich to his mouth. He takes it in one swallow, licks her index and middle fingers, biting at the flesh of her thumb.

"Ow!" she hisses, wringing her hand back as though he's committed a grave injury. "Why are you so inappropriate?"

His sister, queen of irony.

"You wouldn't like me if I was appropriate," he says, eyes glued to the screen, scanning and trying to decipher lines of code in his mind. "You wouldn't know what to do with me."

"I've never known what to do with you," comes her inciting huff.

Hermione doesn't know when to shut up.

Annoyed and provoked, he nudges his torso against her plushy cunt. He feels her body twitch, hears her murmur 'Tom' in argument.

He presents his counterargument, an agonizingly slow grind at the soft, little cunt.

She gives a sharp exhale and a more insistent 'Tom'.

His name sounds more an obscenity now than it ever has leaving her angry mouth. With a brusque kiss at her cheek, Tom relents, "This is just how biology works, Hermione."

"I know how biology works," she grits, between exhales, bringing another quarter sandwich to his mouth—somehow *still* determined to feed him. "You dog."
Tom swallows the proffered bite, licks her fingers clean, and pushes against her cunt again. He feels her hips push back as she gives an aching groan. "This is all your fault, Hermione," he breathes at her temple. "You’ve had seventeen years to figure out what you want to do to me."

"To you?"

"With me," he corrects. "Freudian slip."

"It's distasteful that you keep evoking Freud," she grits. "He was a gentleman and a scholar, not a sex fiend like you."

Sex fiend? He grinds her cunt, and she grinds right back. "Get your mind out of the gutter, Hermione. You're a doctor for christ's sake."

"Seventeen years spent in your utter fuckery and I've still got no clue what the hell your problem is," she riles back, between pants.

Tom's shoulders tighten.

He straightens his spine and drops pretense, his taut stomach pressing hard against her cunt. He hears a sharp, hitched yelp—of unadulterated surprise—from her lips. She quickly buries her face into his bare shoulder, to hide her expression, and he thinks, What a glorious sitting position.

His fingers return to the keyboard. As Tom breaks through the first wall of encryption, the code clears.

On the screen it reads, in flaming bright letters: BURNING PINK.

How theatrical.

Definitely Gellert.

"What burns pink?" he says. "Besides your face."

"Excuse me?" she mumbles, exhaling rhythmically to the forceful friction from his undulating body. She presses a gasping, angry, open-mouthed kiss to naked muscle, in a sort of fuck you that gets lost in subtext. Not terribly effective.

"It's chemistry. Trivia really," he says, his large hand moving away her curls, clasping at her nape to hold her steady as she feeds him another sandwich square. He makes a show of sucking her fingers clean and grinds his body hard, retaliatory into her soft, little cunt. Seventeen years, she says. Still doesn't get it, she says. Higher education has been wasted on his sister. "What substance burns pink. I know it's metallic… Strontium chloride…no, that’s red… calcium…barium…"

"Lithium chloride," she pants.

Tom freezes, his body growing rigid. His sister groans softly as the aggressive stimulation to her cunt stops.

Yes.

Yes.

Yes.

He presses an appreciative kiss to the edge of her mouth, grabs her by his fingers underneath her
armpits, and mechanically lifts her off his lap. "Hey—" And throws her to his bed. Landing sprawled on hands and knees, Hermione looks like an awkwardly displaced kitten. She stares at him, hair tousled over shoulders and face bright pink, eyes wide in embarrassment and confusion.

"What's the—"

"Quiet," Tom says tersely. He leans his elbows on the table, clawing both hands through his hair, deep in thought.

Think.

Think.

Finally it strikes him.

He reaches into his pocket and removes the pills he confiscated from Harry the night before. Sets them down on the his table. Studies them beneath his lamplight. Blank white capsules. Likely homemade. He takes out his lighter and sets one on fire.

It burns pink.

"Lithium chloride," comes the murmur behind him, and he nods. He reaches into his drawer and removes and removes his cigar cutter, and slices the other pill in half. White powder. Harry was never meant to eat these pills. He was meant to give them to Tom. Tom was meant to find these pills.

Tom is meant to be investigating Gellert.

That is all Gellert's design.

Tom goes back to the ABOUT ME page and stares at the letters sprawling down the page.

L.

I.

C.

L

LiCl is the abbreviated form of Lithium Chloride. But why is that important? It may also be an abbreviation for something else. The C...Company? Conglomerate? Tom glares at the screen, grinding his jaw. He can't figure this out without context. He needs more.

"Hello?" Hermione says from his bed, sounding irritated. "I'm still here. Are you ignoring me now?"

Shoulders tensing, Tom freezes.

Swivels his chair.

His eyes rake over her mussed appearance, crawling up her legs. A different kind of awareness pulses behind his lashes.
The rigid whitecoat bitch is gone, and in her place is a deliciously warmblooded and pink thing sprawled on his bed. Pink mouth, pink tongue, pink face. He wants to find out if her cunt is as pink. He wants to taste it and see if it tastes the way he's imagined. He thinks it will taste better, since he's starving. He'd continue this investigation on the bed if he wasn't so wired right now. Still...

"Take that off." He nods at her skirt.

"Excuse me?"

Tom's gaze latches onto her eyes, which shine with a mixture of confusion, anger, and hurt. "What?" he says, rudely. "You want in my lap. Well I want that stupid skirt off. It's in the way." He wants her underwear off too, so he can feel her raw, hot and open and bare, against him while he solves this. The softness and slickness of her... that'd be absolute heaven.

The open pervertedness makes her mouth waver.

Next, a scowl of dignified outrage.

A pillow is aggressively chucked at his head.

"Are you mentally ill? Have you forgotten your pills?" she says, furious. "You're talking to your goddamn sister."

Tom catches the second pillow thrown at his face, spinning freely in his chair. Always the pills. And what's her excuse?

"Right," he says, tonelessly, "In that case—"

She yelps, making a dash to the door as he chucks the pillow at her head with just as much aggression.

"I want my goddamn sister out of my room," he finishes, hard and stiff. With a cold, abrupt shove, he knocks the box of food she had tediously prepared off his desk into the trash. He revels in the hurt that floods her widened eyes. Mentally ill, she called him. It makes something shrivel up inside Tom. It makes the blood in his veins run cold. He has no appetite now. He thinks fuck her. He can make a sport out of pissing her off too.

He swivels away, yanks his drawer open. Tears the cap off his damned pill bottle. He makes sure she can see him swallow, see him suffer. He will make this her punishment as well as his.

The pill burns and aches as it squeezes down his throat.

"There," he shudders, glaring at her. "Numb and neutered, how you like me. Happy?"

"Tom—"

"Get out."

Chapter End Notes

Classic step-sibling fuckery amiright?
Let me know what you think! I do love your analyses. By the way Bella is in no way gone from Tom's life. She's got a big role to play in this fic.

Apologies if I haven't responded to your review yet. I'm getting to it ASAP.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!