Fostering a Nightmare

by NinjaFairy

Summary

A ten-year-old foster child named Tom Riddle showed up on the Granger's front doorstep with his social worker in the summer of 1990. Hermione spent the following years adjusting to life with her new foster brother; so, she never realized how often he kept an eye on her. "I've always watched you, Hermione; and you've always been mine."

[Magical AU]
A New Brother

A/N: I do not give trigger warnings. There will be content in this story that may make you uncomfortable. The two things I will absolutely never write are graphic rape scenes or pedophilia, but everything else is fair game. You've been warned.

My beta/muse is my best buddy, Radiant Innocence. Go check out her stories on FFNet, because they are pretty awesome, and she is pretty awesome. She made the banner for this story, as well. It makes me happy. If you follow me on Tumblr, you can see all of my trashy Tomione fanart. Username is NinjaFairy86.

Anyway, here's another Tomione story from me, to you.

Synopsis: Tom Marvolo Riddle wasn't born in 1926 - he was born in 1979. After being shuffled from foster home to foster home in the greater London area, he finally settles down with a foster family that he's stayed with longer than a few months: the Granger family. Hermione's parents are well pleased that the ten-year-old boy has acclimated to their family so well, but Hermione's not so sure that's the real reason why he's decided to stay... [Magical/AU]

Chapter One: A New Brother

How could one truly tell when they were having a nightmare?

Did one know once they woke up in a cold sweat? Was it when a person woke up in tears, screaming their head off? Or could a person be subconsciously aware during their nightmare, and twist it to their favor?

It was difficult to remember what life was like before her parents started fostering the nightmare. It was like looking through a dirty window: you could make out the shapes of the grass, the trees, and the lovely flowers – but the dirt caused the scenery to become distorted. The grass was barren. The trees were gnarled. The flowers were wilted. Life was meant to be picturesque, but she could see her new life for what it really was now, through that dirty window – a nightmare disguised as a well-mannered, little boy.
A well-mannered, little boy with charcoal hair, charcoal eyes, and a charcoal heart.

When he spoke to their parents, he was all yes ma'am, no sir, and could you please pass the salt. When he spoke to her when they were alone, his words were dipped in acid first – to make the corrosion permanent.

Like any acidic corrosion, it ate away at her. It ate away at her mind. It ate away ate her heart. It ate away at her confidence, but she had refused to let it eat away at her soul.

She would never let the nightmare corrode her soul.

Hermione Jean Granger had decided that she was going to be subconsciously aware, and twist the nightmare into her favor.

The preparations were almost complete.

The new furniture was flawlessly arranged. The blue plaid bedspread was neat, and tidy. The matching curtains were drawn back, letting plenty of natural sunlight in on the desk positioned by the window. Everything looked perfect.

Hermione put her hands on her hips proudly, and smiled to herself. She was so happy that her parents had left her in charge of adding the final touches to the room. The pillows were fluffed, the hangers were in a neat row, and all the newly purchased boys' clothes were folded precisely in their corresponding drawers.

Now, all that was left to do was to wait. She felt excited, and nervous. Her new foster brother would be arriving soon. The time. What was the time? She ran out of the room, and down the hall to her room to peek at her clock: fifteen minutes until two in the afternoon. Fifteen more minutes!

Their summer was going to be perfect. Hermione had it all planned out. They were going to go swimming at the pool down on Howard Street. They were going to get ice cream sundaes every Saturday afternoon. They were going to visit the library, and talk about all the things they enjoyed. Her parents even said they were going to visit the zoo and the Natural History Museum in London at the end of the summer. It was the perfect way to end the summer before they'd start their fifth year at school together.

The sound of the doorbell ringing through the house jarred Hermione out of her thoughts. Were they early? Was he already here? She grasped the cool banister, and ran down the stairs, unable to control her beaming smile. Her father had opened the door right as she was three steps away from the bottom. She slid to a screeching halt.

There he was, standing on the front porch next to the a neatly dressed social worker. Hermione's eyes traveled over him quickly. He had charcoal hair, charcoal eyes, and fair skin. He was wearing a worn Manchester United shirt, faded blue jeans, and hand-me-down trainers. Her heart dropped when she noticed the black trash bag that he was holding over his shoulder. Her mum had told her that foster children had little in the way of belongings. It made her feel so…sad.

"Good afternoon, my name is Hugo," her father introduced himself. The woman started talking with her father, but she took no notice of their words.

He was staring at her.

Just…staring at her.

He hadn't even looked at her father when he'd opened the door. Hermione's smile had faltered for
just a moment when the boy didn't return it, but she'd recovered quickly. Mum had told her that he would be a shy, and a little out of sorts. She'd said not to expect him to want to socialize much, because he would probably be overwhelmed. He needed time to acclimate, she said. Her parents had briefly explained to her how most foster children grew up and it had broken her heart. Hermione wanted to make her new brother feel welcome, and loved. She wanted to make his life better – to make him happy.

"Please, come in. Make yourselves right at home." Her father stood aside to let her new foster brother and the social worker in, then closed the door.

"Jean! They're here!" Her father called toward the kitchen, then looked back at the boy, and smiled. "Tom, I'd like you to meet our daughter, Hermione. She's been very excited to meet you."

Hermione smiled at him, and took this as her cue to hold out her hand to shake his. Tom's face was blank as he looked at her extended hand, then lifted his eyes to meet hers. He held her eyes for several moments before lifting his free hand to shake hers. He'd made her a little worried for a second – she didn't think he was going to take her hand at all, at first.

"It's so nice to meet you, Tom. I think we're going to have lots of fun together," Hermione smiled enthusiastically.

Her heartbeat slowed down when a small smile curled the corner of his mouth. "Yes. I think so, too."

Hermione swallowed, the saliva thick on her tongue.

It took him fifteen seconds to let go of her hand.

She knew, because she had counted.

The first night of Tom staying with them had been a bit more uneventful than she had been hoping for. They had sat down for dinner in the evening, as her parents tried making casual conversation.

The only problem was, Tom hadn't seemed up for casual conversation. He answered their questions efficiently, and with as little words as possible. She'd also noticed his eyes would occasionally dart over the dining room before they settled back to his plate. Then, he had gone up to his room and went straight to bed.

Tom really was just a quiet, well-mannered boy. Hermione had to be patient. Once he was comfortable with his new life here, she knew they would be the best of friends. She was sure of it.

After having decided that she was done thinking about the night before, she decided to watch her favorite Saturday morning program: Wide Awake Club. She didn't care for watching television much, but the show was educational. Rather juvenile, but still educational.

Hermione turned the television on, and laid down on her stomach on the living room floor. She watched the screen with mild interest, and swayed her bare feet back and forth lazily behind her.

Hermione blinked in confusion when the channel changed to the news. Was she laying on the remote again? She lifted herself up to look underneath her, but it wasn't there. *That was odd.*

Once she'd turned around, she'd discovered the reason why the channel had changed. It was Tom. He was sitting on the loveseat, with remote in hand, leisurely flipping through the channels.

"Oh, good morning, Tom. I was watching something. Did you want to watch it with me?"
Hermione asked politely.

Tom continued flipping through the channels. Without looking at her, he said, "No."

Hermione blinked, and sat down on the sofa. Mum had also said to be especially nice – that foster children could sometimes be a bit sensitive.

"Alright. We can watch something else, if you'd like," she said carefully.

"That's what I was planning on," he said sharply.

Hermione's eyes widened at his rude behavior, but kept her mouth shut. She didn't want to disappoint her parents by not listening to them. "O…kay. What do you want to watch, then?"

"I don't know."

"Do you like Nickelodeon?" she asked.

His upper lip curled in disgust. Okay. So, he didn't like Nickelodeon.

"Disney?"

Sneer.

A moment later, his sneer was replaced by rapt fascination. Hermione turned her head to the television to see what he was so eager to watch.

There were three men in a dark room. One of them was chained against something, while another one was asking him questions. The man chained to the wall looked like he was in pain. Hermione didn't like it.

"Can you change the channel, please? We're not allowed to watch this kind of stuff."

"No."

The man chained to the wall refused to answer the questions. A dial was turned. There was a buzzing sound, and the man began shaking violently. Hermione stood up, covered her hands over her eyes, and shook her head.

"I don't want to watch this! Please, change it!" she begged.

That's when she felt someone standing behind her, and her hands were ripped from her face. Tom was gripping her hands in his, and digging his chin into her shoulder uncomfortably.

"Watch," he commanded quietly. He was forcing her to witness the scene play out. The man's fingers bent at weird angles from the electrical currents. The light bulb in the room flickered as he screamed. It was too much. Hermione began crying.

"Shh, no need to cry, Hermione," Tom soothed, and wiped her tears away with his fingers clumsily.

"I don't want to watch this. Let's watch something else. Please."

Tom went to reply to her, but then the sound of shuffling feet was coming down the stairs. He moved away from her to grab the remote, and changed it back to the channel she had it on. Her mum walked into the room wearing her fluffy robe and slippers.
"Oh, good morning, you two. You were watching the Wide Awake Club? That's one of Hermione's favorite programs," she said between yawns.

"Yes. Hermione was excited to watch it with me," Tom stated before Hermione could say anything. He switched to a sad tone, "I wasn't allowed to watch the tele at the last place I lived…"

Jean Granger's face took on a fleeting look of sorrow, before it was replaced by happy determination. "Hermione, that was so thoughtful of you, dear!"

Hermione felt her cheeks go pink at being falsely praised.

"Well, you'll be allowed to watch the tele here, Tom. Hermione doesn't watch it that much, but you're more than welcome to it. Now, I was thinking about whipping up a traditional English breakfast today! Eggs, bacon, beans, tomatoes, and toast! How does that sound?"

Tom gave her a shy smile. "That sounds delicious. Do you need any help?"

Jean beamed at him. "Thank you so much, Tom, but no. I just want you two to relax, and enjoy yourselves. Hermione, why don't you show Tom some of your toys?"

Hermione's eyes widened slightly. Tom turned to her, and smiled.

"Sure. That sounds like lots of fun."

Hermione thought that showing Tom her toys wasn't as much fun as it should have been.

He'd ripped the head off one of her dolls. He hadn't even apologized for it.

Patience. Her mum told her to have patience. So, patience is what Hermione forced herself to have.

If Hermione had thought that Sunday was going to be any better than Saturday, she was sorely mistaken.

They had all stopped by the local toy store after church for Tom to pick out his own toys, but he hadn't wanted anything. So, Hermione picked out a nice bug catching kit for the two of them to play with in their backyard when they got home.

Everything was going rather well. Tom was looking through the bushes in the backyard and Hermione was weeding through the flowers.

"Have you found anything yet?" he called from the other side of the yard.

"No, not yet," she called back.

Hermione carefully moved a clump of rosebushes aside to peek in. She sighed dejectedly, and released the leaves. Not even a grasshopper. Suddenly, a large butterfly with orange, brown, and black colored wings fluttered by, and landed on a nearby flower. Hermione stilled, afraid to make any sudden movements. She willed it to stay put, stay put.

Hermione swooped the bug catching net with careful precision down onto the butterfly, effectively catching it without harm.

"I caught a butterfly! Tom, I caught a butterfly!" she squealed in delight.

Tom rushed over to her. "Let me see."
"Quick, get the identification booklet! What kind is it?" Hermione asked, ignoring his demand in her excitement.

Tom sighed, and pulled the booklet out of his back pocket. He flipped through the pages, and his eyes flicked across the words quickly. "It's a Speckled Wood."

Hermione had transferred the butterfly to the viewing case while he had been looking in the booklet. She held the viewing case as she peered over his shoulder to look at the page. "What does it say about them?"

Tom looked directly in her eyes then. The corners of his lips curled up slowly, and his eyes sparkled. "It says that their lifespan is only seven to twenty days."

Hermione's eyebrows furrowed. She held the viewing case a little tighter. "Okay. What else?"

"The males use their wings to scare off intruders."

She looked down at the viewing tank in curiosity. "Oh, that's interesting. I wonder if this is a male, or a female. Hey!"

Tom had snatched the viewing case out of her hands. Hermione tried grabbing it back from him, but he twisted his body this way, and that to get away from her. He quickly opened the viewing case, gently pinched the butterfly's wings together, and picked it up.

"What are you doing!? Once you touch their wings, they can't fly again!" Hermione yelled, still trying to reach her short arms out to stop him. He just held her back with his free hand. Without any warning, he used that same hand to shove her back. Hermione dropped the net, and landed on her bum in the soft grass.

"Really? Is that so?" he asked in interest, not looking at her. His attention was focused solely on the butterfly. He switched his hold on the butterfly, holding it by its body instead.

Hermione watched the scene unfold in horror as the butterfly beat its wings frantically, trying to escape. Tom grabbed a hold of one of its wings, and gently pulled up, up, up until the wing separated neatly from its body. The butterfly fluttered its one remaining wing weakly against Tom's fingers.

Hermione couldn't hear it, but she imagined the butterfly was screaming. Or, maybe, it was the ringing in her ears. She didn't find her voice until he'd pulled the other wing off, leaving the butterfly earthbound.

"You've...you've killed it!" she cried out, finally bringing herself up to stand.

"No, I haven't. It's still alive. See?" he said, and shoved the insect in her face. Hermione's eyes crossed momentarily, and she tilted her head back away from it in disgust.

"How is it supposed to live without wings, Tom? It needs to fly."

"No, it doesn't. I can keep it here - in this case. I can take care of it."

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "That's impossible."

Tom lowered the butterfly back in the viewing case. Hermione watched in morbid fascination at the way it wobbled this way and that, now that it didn't have its wings. The poor thing - its freedom was stolen.
Hermione scowled at him, feeling angry at something innocent being wronged. "I'm telling."

Tom's attention snapped back to Hermione in an instant. "Go ahead. Tell on me. Tell on the poor, little foster boy."

She paused momentarily at his last comment, deciding on whether she should go and tell. She watched the poor butterfly walk aimlessly in the plastic case, and glanced at the butterfly wings in the grass. Her resolve hardened and she shoved past him, and walked through the back door. He trailed behind her, but kept his distance.

"Mum! Dad!"

"We're in here, dear," she heard her father call from the kitchen.

Hermione stomped down the hallway, and through the dining room before she found herself in the kitchen. Tom was still behind her. She couldn't see him, but she could feel him.

"What's wrong?" her mother asked, looking slightly concerned.

Hermione pointed her finger accusingly at Tom without looking at him and said, "He ripped the wings off the butterfly I caught!"

Her parent's eyes were trained behind her at Tom, but they didn't look upset. They looked… concerned? Why did they look concerned?

Hermione turned around. Tom was standing there in the entryway, holding the case, and holding back tears in his eyes. His bottom lip quivered.

"I…I didn't mean to! I just wanted to look at it. I saved the wings. Can we fix it? Can we take it to the veterinarian? Maybe they can glue them back on?" he asked hopelessly. The saltiest of tears began to trail down his pale cheeks. Hermione's hand lowered slowly as she stared at him in shock. That… little… liar.

Jean leaned down to hug Tom, and smoothed his hair. She pulled herself away to look at his face and said, "Accidents happen, Tom. Don't worry about it."

His lower lip trembled as he looked at her. "Can… can I keep it?"

Jean's face fell at his believable innocence. "Oh, Tom. I'm afraid that it won't survive."

"See? I told you!" Hermione stated triumphantly. She knew she'd been right.

"Hermione!" her parents berated simultaneously. Hermione shrunk at her parent's tones. Tom started sobbing.

"Hermione, I think it's best if you went to your room for a little while," her father said calmly.

"What? Why? That's not fair! I didn't do anything wro -"

"Hermione," her father warned. He meant business, and Hermione wasn't about to argue with him.

"Fine," she said through gritted teeth. She narrowed her eyes at Tom. Her mother was hugging him, trying to calm his tears. In the midst of her mother's limbs, she could see his victorious smile.

Hermione turned in a huff, and walked upstairs to her room. It wouldn't be so bad staying in her
At least she'd have her books to keep her sanity.

It had been several weeks since the butterfly incident, and Tom had been acting better acclimated to his new home life when compared to his first weekend. No watching questionable movies, no breaking her toys, and no ripping apart butterflies. He'd been rather…pleasant to be around.

Trips to the library with her parents and Tom were her favorite thing about her summer. Hermione thought they might be Tom's favorite thing, as well. As soon as they set foot through the double doors, he was gone. Gone, looking through shelves, never staying in the same place for very long. He'd take books off the shelves about anything, and everything. He was sorely disappointed that he was only allowed a twenty-book limit for check outs.

Buying into his disappointment, her parents made two to three trips a week. Hermione hadn't minded, but was a little miffed that whenever she'd asked if they could go more than once a week, she was told *no*, sweetheart, not *this* week.

Oh, well. She knew they would start telling Tom 'no', too. It was only a matter of time. They only told him yes so much to appease him. For now, she would just enjoy the extra library time.

After returning home, both of them, with twenty books each - no less - had begun reading in the drawing room. It was a nice, comfortable silence that they'd both preferred. Tom was reading about ancient Greece and Hermione was reading about the human skeleton. Her mum had even brought in orange scones, and tea for them to share. It was a perfect afternoon.

Well, it was a perfect afternoon until Hermione opened her big mouth. Curiosity, and her need for conversation were to blame.

"What is your favorite thing about ancient Greece?" she asked.

Tom pulled his eyes away from his book to look at her for a long moment, then looked back down to his book. He turned a page and said, "The Trojan War."

*Surprise, surprise.*

"Really? Why is that?" she asked conversationally.


"That's not *all* that happens. I prefer to believe that the foundation of the whole myth is based on love," she stated.

Tom scoffed at her. "*Love*? The whole war started because the Greek gods were vain idiots."

Hermione frowned. Okay, *technically* he was right, but she didn't want to agree with him.

"Paris and Helen fell in love," she said.

Tom rolled his eyes. "*You're* so naïve."

"I am not!"

"Are so."

"Am not!"

Tom set his book down, and grinned. "Are so."
Hermione felt angry at his grinning face, and wanted to hit him, but she refrained. "You're mean."

"And you're stupid."

Without thinking, she threw her book at him, and hit him square in the chest. Tom's face twisted with anger. Hermione glared at him, bracing herself for him to retaliate.

But, instead of retaliating like any normal ten-year-old boy would do, he picked up her book, and began flipping through the pages.

Hermione frowned in confusion. "What are you doing?"

Tom didn't say anything as he looked at her. He raised an eyebrow, tilted his head, and slowly tore a page out of her book.

Hermione's eyes went wide. She lunged for the book, but he used his feet to keep her away. "Stop! Stop it! That's not mine – it's the library's!"

Tom said nothing, and his expression said nothing as he tore another page out. And another. And another. He was nonchalantly tossing each page to the floor as he did so.

"STOP!" Hermione screamed, and jumped on him to make a grab for the book. They both tumbled to the ground in a mess of limbs – both trying to tear the book from the other. They had both been so busy wrestling on the floor, they hadn't noticed her parents walk into the room.

They heard a gasp and then, "What in the world is going on here!?"

Tom and Hermione stilled, and looked at each other with wide eyes. Then, they both slowly turned their faces to witness the shocked expression on their parent's faces.

They both jumped apart, stood, and looked at their toes. Hermione didn't know when it had happened, but she had ended up with the torn book. She hid it behind her back sheepishly.

"Care to explain? Tom? Hermione?" her father asked. Hermione stepped forward before Tom could.

"Tom tore the pages out of my library book!" She knew he couldn't get out of this one: the evidence was all over the floor.

"Only because Hermione threw the book at me!" Tom defended.

"Because you called me stupid!"

"Because you are stupid –"

"That's enough," came her father's loud voice. Tom and Hermione stopped arguing with each other. "Hermione, you know better than to throw things at people."

Hermione jaw dropped. Tom looked smug. How was he getting out of being in trouble again?

Her father turned to Tom and said, "And Tom, you should know better than to call people names."

The smug look on his face fell. Victory.

"Both of you are going to clean this mess up, and go straight to your rooms to think about what
They both muttered underneath their breaths.

"And no trip to the ice cream parlor after supper tonight," he added.

"What?" said Tom.

"That's not fair!" said Hermione.

"It's not up for debate. Clean, then rooms. Now," he said, and left the room.

"Mum, that's not fair! Tell him," Hermione whined. Hermione had been looking forward to the trip to the ice cream parlor all week.

"I'm sorry, dear. Better listen to your Father. Consider this a lesson learned on both your parts," her mum said, then also left.

Hermione turned, and started picking up the pages angrily. She just wanted to clean up, and go to her room to get away from Tom.

"It's all your fault, you know," he said.

Hermione's nostrils flared, but she kept her mouth shut. He wasn't even helping. She didn't care. After she picked up all the papers, she grabbed her book, and went to walk out of the room. But, before she left, she paused. Tom watched her curiously.

She glared at him before she walked over to the desk, and began opening drawers. After she stuffed a roll of clear tape into her back pocket, she popped an orange scone into her mouth to hold, since her hands were full.

Hermione gave Tom one last menacing glare with the scone hanging out of her mouth, and walked out of the room.

It didn't make any sense. No matter what Hermione did, the tape wouldn't stick the pages together. The tape stuck to her fingers. It stuck to her clothes. It stuck to her hair. It stuck to everything else, but not the book.

Tears of frustration began rolling down her cheeks as the tape that stuck to her fingers simply slid off the pages.

When she told her parents at supper that she'd failed at putting the book back together, they'd told her that her and Tom would have to pay for the book out of their allowance. The book cost twenty pounds! Twenty! It wasn't fair, but her father said she was partly responsible, since she'd thrown it.

It also wasn't fair that Tom looked pleased when she said the tape wouldn't work. He had to pay ten pounds out of his own allowance money, too.

He shouldn't be pleased over this matter. Not at all.

It really wasn't fair.

On the following Saturday, Hugo said the only way Hermione and Tom could earn a trip to the ice cream parlor after supper was to clean the kitchen spick and span. Hermione didn't want to
clean the kitchen with Tom, but she really wanted a Turkish delight ice cream sundae.

So, begrudgingly, she grabbed the broom and dust pan, while Tom grabbed a washcloth and a spray bottle. They got to work without a fuss.

After some time had passed, they heard Hugo's voice from the living room, "You have five minutes to finish cleaning if you want to go. I hope you're almost done."

Hermione stilled, and looked at the stack of dishes in front of her in the sink. There was no way she was going to get all of it finished in five minutes. Tom walked over with the washcloth and spray bottle in hand, and nudged her out of the way with his body.

"Hey!" she admonished.

Tom rolled his eyes and opened the cabinet she had been standing in front of. "I need to put these away. Now, shut up, and open the dishwasher."

"You can't tell me what to do!"

Tom glared at her. "Do you want to get ice cream tonight, or not?"

Hermione faltered.

"Exactly. I don't want to miss out on getting ice cream again, because you are too slow. So, shut up, and open the dishwasher," he repeated firmly.

Hermione sighed, and did as he said. Tom wiped the dishes in the sink quickly, before handing them to Hermione to put in the racks.

Right as Tom handed Hermione the last fork, Hugo walked into the kitchen. "Are you two finished yet?"

Hermione shut the dishwasher door quickly, and turned it on. She smiled at her father and said, "Finished!"

Hugo smiled at the two of them. "See what happens when you two work together? Things go much more smoothly. Alright, let's get going. You two deserve some ice cream."

Hermione and Tom gave each other a look for a moment, before they both hurried after him.

Hermione glanced at Tom during the car ride to the ice cream parlor. He had his head pressed to the glass of the window, and his eyes flicked back and forth quickly at the scenery passing by. Her parents were talking about something to do with their dental clinic, so she tuned them out.

"Thank you," she blurted out quietly, not even sure what had possessed her to say it. She was still mad at him over the book.

Tom turned his head to her, and his eyes narrowed suspiciously. "You're welcome," he said slowly.

Hermione felt her face burn and she turned her head quickly to look out her window. She stole a quick glance back at him. His head was pressed up against the glass again, but this time there was a small smile on his lips.

She didn't need to explain why she thanked him. He already knew.
It had taken several weeks for Hermione to get over how Tom tore up the book. Not only because she had to take it out of her allowance, but because it had taken a sizeable chunk out of her pride, too.

Hermione had begun to talk to Tom again, other than when it was absolutely necessary. She’d be lying to herself if she’d said she didn't miss his company when he wasn't being mean. Having a sibling was harder work than she had originally anticipated.

It was a nice day today, so they were riding their bikes on the sidewalk in the front of the house. Tom was being annoying with ringing his bell repeatedly, but it was far easier to deal with than arguing.

Hermione rode her bike to the end of the street, and stopped. The plastic ribbons on her handlebars swayed when she shuffled her bike back around.

That's when she noticed a stray kitten, all fluffy and grey, mewling next to the neighbors trash bin. Hermione froze, not wanting to scare it away, and not wanting to attract Tom's attention. She glanced down at the far end of the sidewalk.

Tom's back was to her. He was propped up on his bike, but he wasn't riding it. Instead, he had found a tree branch, and was hitting their mailbox post repeatedly. Good.

Hermione kicked out her bike stand, and carefully made her way toward the kitten. It noticed Hermione, and started inching away from her.


Out of nowhere, a cardboard box was slammed over the kitten, effectively trapping it. It cried. Tom was grinning wildly at the box, and the corners were giving away under his weight.

"Tom! Let it go! I almost had it!" Hermione cried out, trying to pry his hands off the box.

He shoved her hands away, and grinned maliciously at her. "Hey, Hermione. Want to see a magic trick?"

"What?" Hermione thought of the butterfly, and she panicked. "No!"

Tom's smile was calculating. "So, is that a yes?"

"I just said no!"

"I'm going to make this cat disappear," he said.

"You're bluffing," she said, crossing her arms. "You can't make the kitten just disappear like that. You're not a real magician."

Tom's grin turned into a determined smirk. He picked up the stick he'd used to hit the mailbox post with, pulled it back behind him, and swung it at the box at full force.

Hermione cried out when the box went flying into the road. She looked around frantically.

"Where is it? Tom! Where is it!"

The look he turned on her was cold – his smile gone. "Magic," he said coldly, and walked back to his bike.
Hermione had checked around the trash bin, inside the cardboard box, and had said 'here, kitty, kitty, kitty' for fifteen minutes.

The kitten was nowhere to be found. She couldn't find it anywhere.

She looked back at Tom, who was down the sidewalk again. He was ringing the bell on his bike.

Over, and over, and over again.

A/N: Thanks for reading. I hope you enjoyed it.
Chapter Two: My Sister

Sorting back-to-school supplies was one of Hermione's favorite things about going back to school. All her supplies were spread out in front of her on her bedroom floor. Hermione was sorting her color-coded folders when her door opened.

Tom was standing in her doorway, snapping a lime-green snap bracelet to his wrist repeatedly.

Hermione looked up at him from the floor. "It's rude to just barge in someone's room without knocking, you know."

Tom just shrugged, and continued snapping the bracelet. "I know. I just don't care."

Hermione sighed. Today was a good day. Today was a happy day. Today was school supply sorting day.

Hermione had meant to ask him what he wanted in a polite tone, but instead said, "Go away."

Tom's snapping stopped and he scowled at her. She was confused when he actually slammed her bedroom door closed. Was that it?

Her door was flung back open. Tom was standing there, holding the doorknob. He said nothing as he slammed the door closed again. Then, he opened it, and slammed it closed again.

Tom continued doing this for about thirty seconds before Hermione finally said something.

"Knock it off, Tom!"

Tom opened the door and calmly said, "No."

He slammed the door closed.

"Stop it!"
He opened the door, and smirked at her.
"No."
He slammed the door.
"Now!"
Open.
"No."
Slam.

Hermione jumped up, and lunged at him when he opened the door again. His wide eyes, and slack mouth were telltale signs that he hadn't been expecting it. Good.

They fell together in the hallway. They were kicking, screaming, and hitting each other. Hermione clawed at his face. Tom pulled at her hair.

The fight hadn't lasted long before Jean ran up the stairs, and pulled them apart.

Hermione felt satisfied when she saw the trickles of blood ooze down Tom's left cheek.

"What is going on here!? Why can't you two get along without trying to kill each other?" her mum asked.

"She attacked me first!" Tom said, and pointed to his bleeding cheek. "See?"

"Hermione?" her mum asked expectantly.

"He...he kept opening and closing my door!" Hermione winced at her own statement, realizing how dumb it sounded out loud.

"So, you attacked him?" Jean asked, bewildered with her daughter's behavior. Hermione cast her face down in shame. Jean closed her eyes, and pinched the bridge of her nose.

"I hate to do this, Hermione, but you're grounded."

"But...mum!"

"No 'buts'. No checking out books from the library. For a week."

Hermione's jaw dropped. The smug satisfaction on Tom's face was just begging to be smacked off.

"Fine," she said morosely, and went into her room. She closed the door behind her. That's when she noticed the lime-green snap bracelet on the floor. It must have fallen off when they fought.

With the injustice still fresh in her mind, Hermione picked it up, and threw it into her trash bin bitterly.

If she couldn't have her books, then he couldn't have his stupid snap bracelet. She knew he probably wouldn't care, but it was a small consolation.

It was the little things in life.
It had only been two months into the school year before Tom had gotten his first suspension. Oddly enough, her parents weren't upset with him, but with the school. She couldn't blame them, though. Even she thought he had been unfairly suspended.

The principal said that due to the nature of the altercation, he was forced to stay fast to his decision.

An older boy named Caleb Hinckley had come up behind Hermione during recess while she was skipping rope, and shoved her onto the pavement. Her knees and palms were scraped badly enough that it left blood on the tar immediately. She'd cried, and cried, and cried. The boy had laughed cruelly at her pain.

The boy went from laughing to howling in agony in an instant. Hermione wiped away her tears in time to see Tom straddling the boy. He was holding the bigger boy by the front of his uniform, and was driving his fist into his face savagely. Blood painted his knuckles crimson. The boy's head banged back against the pavement with each blow.

Hermione watched in horror as Tom was pried off the boy by two teachers. Once Tom was off Caleb, she heard him growl out, "Don't you ever touch her again." Then, he spat in the boy's face. Before Tom was lugged off, they'd looked at each other. It had only been for a moment, but she'd seen all she needed to see - that rage in his eyes. Tom was taken to the principal's office, while she was brought to the school nurse. Caleb had been rushed to the emergency room.

Her parents had kept them both home on Tom's suspension day, and took them to a museum in London. They weren't going to punish Tom for defending Hermione.

And, honestly, she couldn't blame them.

Hermione stood next to Tom while they looked at the oil painting on the wall, and smiled. He glanced at her from the corner of his eye with a raised brow, and looked back up at the painting without saying a word.

Maybe having a brother wasn't so bad.

Hermione was beyond ecstatic when her parents told her and Tom that they would allow them to go trick-or-treating by themselves this year – as long as they stayed in their own neighborhood, of course.

She bounded down the stairs after she had put the finishing touches on her costume. She was dressed head to toe in black, and was wearing a cat-ear headband she'd had sitting in her drawer.

Jean walked into the foyer, and smiled at her daughter. "Oh, Hermione! You look so adorable! Oh, wait! I have just the thing," she said, and then began digging through her purse sitting on the side table. Jean pulled out a stick of eyeliner, and walked over to Hermione.

"You won't be a very good cat if you don't have proper whiskers," her mum said with a half-smile. Hermione tried to protest when she noticed Tom leaning up against the doorframe, watching them in amusement; but her mum just batted Hermione's hands away.

Hermione's eyes stared at the top button of her mum's blouse and she allowed the coolness of the eyeliner to slide across her cheeks. She'd noticed that Tom wasn't even dressed up. Now, she felt like a silly, little child and embarrassed beyond reason.

She heard Tom chuckle quietly from the doorway while Jean drew a little, black oval on her nose.
Her eyes flicked over to him and she frowned. Was he laughing at her?

"What are you laughing at? Where's your costume? Aren't you dressing up?" Hermione asked as her mum finished drawing on her face.

Tom raised an eyebrow and scoffed, "Everyone knows you don't need to dress up to get candy."

"No, Tom. Hermione's right. I'm sure we can throw something together quickly. Let me think, let me think," Jean trailed off down the hall and things could be heard falling in the closet.

Hermione knew she was grinning stupidly at Tom's sour face but she couldn't be bothered to care. If she had to dress up, then so did he.

"Come on, Tom. It'll be fun," Hermione teased.

Tom eyed her in distaste, and crossed his arms. "She better not make me look ridiculous like you."

Hermione's mouth hung open from his insult, but she quickly snapped it shut again when she heard her mum coming back down the hall. She was carrying a faded red bandana, and an old, leather jacket.

"I think we can turn you into a pirate with these, Tom," Jean smiled at him. Tom grumbled, and shifted his weight under Jean's expectant look. "Listen, it's not going to be that bad. You could honestly get away with just wearing the bandana. Come here, let's put it on."

Jean tied the bandana over a frowning Tom's head, and knotted it at the nape of his neck. Hermione couldn't help but giggle at him. He looked like a grumpy pirate. She covered her mouth to stifle another giggle bubbling up from her throat. His eyes snapped to her, and his frown got deeper. She really didn't care.

"There! Perfect. Oh, wipe that look of your face. You're going to live, Tom. Just think of all the candy you'll get," Jean said with a wink. Tom's lower lip jut out a little further as he sulked.

Before Tom had more time to sulk, the doorbell rang. Jean was at attention, and grabbed the treat bowl. Hermione was only slightly embarrassed that her house was the only house in the entire neighborhood that handed out pencils and toothbrushes on Halloween.

Jean ushered them both out the door after the first trick-or-treaters left with their sweaters, trick-or-treating bags, and a quick go-over of the rules to follow.

"Stay together. Don't talk to strangers. Don't go into anyone's house. Stay in our neighborhood. Don't eat your candy until we check it," Jean recited.

Hermione was growing impatient and she could tell Tom was, too. "We know, mum. Can we go now?"

Jean looked between the two of them like she was contemplating something. "Tom, it's your job to protect your sister, alright?"

Hermione frowned, and was about to tell her mum, in the politest way possible, that she didn't need him to protect her, and that they weren't technically siblings; but, before she could open her mouth, Tom had said, "Don't worry. I will."

"Good," Jean smiled at them. "Alright, go on, you two. Make sure you're back here by 8:30! Set the alarm on your watch, Hermione."
"I will! Bye, mum!" Hermione said, and went to leave, but her mum grabbed them both in a one-sided bear hug. She felt Tom tense up beside her.

"I love you. Both of you. Go, have fun," Jean said with a smile, but her eyes were watery.

Before Hermione had gotten to ask her what was wrong, Tom had grabbed her hand, and pulled her out the door. He dragged her halfway down the block before she was finally able to pry her hand away.

"We're passing by all the houses, Tom," Hermione stated.

Tom ignored her. He tore the bandana off his head and shoved it into his back pocket. He reached for her hand again and said, "Come on. This way."

Tom managed to drag Hermione past two more perfectly lit up and decorated houses before she wrenched her hand away again. "Where are you going? You keep passing the houses! Are you sure you know how this works?"

Tom rolled his eyes. "Of course, I know how this works. Why are you always so stupid?" he snapped, then grinned mischievously at her. "We're going to the best house first. Someone at school told me that they hand out full-sized Double Decker bars."

"Full-sized Double Decker bars?" Hermione asked skeptically. "Are you sure?"

At this, Tom's mouth curled up again. "You'll see. Don't you trust me?" he asked, his hand outstretched, waiting for her.

Hermione felt hesitant as she looked at his hand. Did she trust him? Tom wasn't always nice to her; but, then again, what brothers were? Although, he did always keep a good eye on her – she'd noticed. Whenever they played together, he was always nearby. Whenever they were at school, he always kept glancing at her during lunch, or recess. Whenever they were at home, he was always right with her. Some of the time they got along alright, but other times…well, not so much. Her dad had said they were too alike for their own good. Hermione didn't say it out loud, but she disagreed with her dad. Her and Tom were nothing alike.

Tom raised his eyebrows expectantly, and outstretched his fingers even further. She stared at his hand; it was the same one that had pummeled Caleb Hinckley's face after the boy had shoved her down. The same hand that had protected her. Hermione swallowed, and placed her hand in his.

Tom's face grew arrogantly triumphant. "Come on," he said excitedly. "I know a short cut."

Tom gripped her hand as he led them in between houses, and through their neighbor's shrubberies. Hermione protested that they shouldn't be slinking around in the yards at night, but Tom hushed her up quickly. "If you keep complaining, you're going to get us caught," he'd said quietly. Hermione didn't want to get caught. Her parents would never allow her to go trick-or-treating without them again; so, she listened to Tom and kept quiet.

After weaving in and out of various alleys, driveways, and bushes – they'd finally come to a stop behind a bush. Tom pulled her down into the wet grass abruptly.

"Hey! Watch what you're-" Hermione started, but Tom put a finger up to his mouth. Hermione clamped her mouth shut. She watched with wide eyes as Tom slowly lifted himself to peer over the bush. That's when she heard the sound of groups of children laughing, of children chorusing 'trick-or-treat', and of the elderly commenting on how cute or scary a costume was.

That should be us right now, Hermione thought bitterly. She looked at her watch. It was already
five minutes until eight and they hadn't even stopped by a single house yet. If this house Tom wanted to go to wasn't handing out full-sized Double Decker chocolate bars, she was going to be very cross with him.

"Oi! Caleb! Let's go up to this house!" came an unfamiliar voice, but the voice that followed it was familiar.

"Bloody Hell! Slow down. You know I can't walk fast right now," said the familiar voice.

Hermione peered through the bushes. Her eyes went wide when she saw Caleb Hinckley shuffling up the sidewalk toward the house they were hiding by. One of his arms was carrying his full candy bag and the other was tied to his chest in a sling. She had heard that Tom had fractured Caleb's collarbone in the fight last week, but she hadn't seen the proof of it yet. His face was covered in face paint, but she knew there were fading cuts and bruises underneath it all. A strong emotion inside Hermione swelled up, but she didn't know what it was. It wasn't a bad emotion, but it wasn't necessarily a good one, either.

"Tom, what are we-" she said, but he cut her off by holding his hand over her mouth. She glared at him, and felt the sudden urge to bite his palm, but refrained. Lucky him. Tom wasn't even looking at her. The object of his full attention was Caleb. Hermione didn't like the anxiety brewing in her belly.

Caleb and his friend walked by the bush they were hiding behind, but didn't see them in the dark. They were about halfway up the driveway when Caleb dropped to the ground, and started convulsing violently.

"Caleb? Caleb!" his friend yelled, not knowing what to do. He panicked, and ran back out into the road. His voice sounded further away. "Help! Help! There's something wrong with my friend!"

Hermione ripped Tom's hand from her mouth, ran over to Caleb, and dropped to her knees beside him. He'd stopped shaking, but now he was unconscious.

"I think he had a seizure!" she exclaimed. "Someone needs to call an ambulance!"

Tom didn't say anything in return, so she looked up at him. He had picked up the candy bag Caleb had dropped, and was rifling through it. "Tom! This is no time to be going through his candy. This is serious."

The corner of his mouth twitched up when he looked at her. There, in his hand, was a full-sized Double Decker chocolate bar. "Told you so," he said triumphantly.

Hermione's jaw dropped. "We are not stealing his candy."

"Finders keepers, losers weepers," Tom said as he casually kicked Caleb's foot, and grinned. Both of their heads turned when they heard the sound of footsteps running toward the driveway. Tom hauled Hermione up by her arm and said, "Run."

"What? I'm not-"

"Now," he ordered, and pulled her along with him. Hermione's heartbeat thud, thud, thudded from running at full speed back through the shrubberies, through the backyards, and in between the houses. Her chest felt like it was on fire by the time they reached their street.

By the time they reached their driveway, Hermione had finally caught her breath enough to say,
"We shouldn't have just left him there."

Tom scoffed. "He was fine. People were coming to help him. Why do you care about him, anyway?"

"I don't like him in the least, but we shouldn't have taken his candy. It's wrong."

Tom stopped walking, and stared at her incredulously. "No, what he did was wrong. He needed to be punished."

Hermione tensed up at the severity of his tone. "What do you mean? You mean when he tripped me last week, right? You're punishing him by taking his candy?"

At this, Tom gave her a slow smile. It looked like he was smiling at a secret joke. "Yeah. Sure." The way he smiled at her told her something completely different.

Hermione jumped when her wristwatch started beeping. Tom stared at her wrist. Her jaw dropped. "Great. That's just great! It's time to go home and we didn't go to a single house, Tom!"

she said, waving her empty bag in front of Tom's face as proof. He snatched it from her, and poured the candy from Caleb's bag into hers.

"Hey!"

Tom rolled his eyes at her, and had begun walking up their driveway. Hermione stomped behind him, thoroughly annoyed. Right when they reached the front door, it swung open for them. Hugo and Jean were waiting for them.

"Right on time," Jean smiled at them. "How was trick-or-treating? Did you two have fun?"

Before Hermione got a chance to tell them all about how their night really went, and about how Tom kept them from going to a single house, he said, "Oh, we had lots of fun. Look at how much candy we got!" Tom held Hermione's candy bag filled with Caleb's candy up for them to see.

"Oh, wow! But where's your bag, Tom? Did you lose it?" Hugo asked once everyone was inside. Once again, Tom had beaten her to it.

"No. Hermione said we should just share our candy, instead of getting double the amount. Something about not wanting to get cavities," Tom lied smoothly.

Her parents beamed at their daughter, and commented how very proud they were of her for making good choices when it came to their dental health. Her face flushed.

Hermione stared at the back of Tom's head. Oh, he was good. She didn't know whether to be upset that he was lying to her parents, or impressed that he was getting away with it. He made it nearly impossible to tell her parents the truth. His lies were so believable, that it made her truths seem farfetched.

Tom had made sure to make it completely impossible to tell her parents what had really happened. He did so by thrusting the bag of candy into her hands before she could object.

"Here, Hermione. I want you to have it," he said.

Her parents gushed. Hermione smiled sweetly. Two could play at this game.

"But, Tom," she said thoughtfully. "You deserve candy, too. You worked so hard for it."
Tom's eyes tightened on her, but his smile remained the same. "No, I insist you take it, Hermione. Consider it your…reward."

At this, Hermione faltered. "Reward? For what?"

Tom stepped toward her, and wrapped his arms around her. She went rigid in his embrace, and held the candy bag limply at her side. He leaned close into her ear and said, "For being such a good sister."

"Oh, Tom. That is so sweet of you to say!" she heard her mum say happily.

Tom squeezed her once before letting go. Her mum thought it sounded sweet, but Hermione heard something else entirely. What is was, she did not know.

Her parents told them to go upstairs, and get ready for bed while they checked their candy. They both went into their rooms to change into their pajamas. Once Hermione was finished, she made her way to the bathroom they shared to brush her teeth.

Hermione looked at her reflection. She realized she was still wearing her cat-ear headband; so, she took it off, and set it on the counter. She was halfway through with brushing her teeth when Tom walked in. They said nothing to each other as he squeezed the toothpaste onto his brush.

Hermione spit the spearmint foam from her mouth and said, "I know you really wanted that candy; so, why did you give it to me?"

Tom looked at her reflection in the mirror, and continued brushing for a few seconds, then spit. "I don't want the candy."

Her eyes narrowed at his reflection in the mirror. "Why?"

Tom slowed his brushing and looked down at the counter, as if he was contemplating something. Then, he pulled his toothbrush out of his mouth. The corner of his lips curled up and his eyes leveled on hers. "Because, I already got what I wanted."

She frowned slightly. "And what would that be?"

Hermione watched as Tom swished water around his mouth, and spit it into the sink. He washed his toothbrush off, and put it away. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and grinned at her in the mirror. "My treat," he said, and walked out of the bathroom.

Hermione froze. His treat? He hadn't gotten anything. Not a single thing. She glanced at the water faucet, and realized he had left it on. She pushed the handle down.

His treat? She put her toothbrush away, turned off the light, and walked to her bedroom.

His treat? The comforters felt cool against her bare legs as she slid into bed. She rolled over onto her side with her eyes closed, thinking.

His treat? The material of her stuffed bear her gran had gotten her felt smooth against her fingers. What had he received?

His treat? She could remember seeing the look on Tom's face before Caleb walked by. He hadn't been looking at her. He had been looking at Caleb. Tom had gone straight to that exact spot, and waited.

Hermione's eyes shot open. Had…had Tom known where Caleb was going to be? No. There was
no way that was possible. Right?

Tom had said he didn't want the candy, because he had already gotten what he wanted.

That's when Hermione knew what Tom had meant.

The punishment. Tom had gotten what he'd wanted, because Caleb had been punished. Right?

Hermione recalled an overheard conversation between her parents some time back - something about Tom going to some sort of...therapy. It was always on Tuesday afternoons when her mum took him. Hermione always helped Helen, the receptionist at the dental clinic, on those afternoons until her father was done. She remembered her mum saying that she didn't think Tom needed to go to therapy anymore, but his social worker had insisted that it was important. She didn't know much about therapy, but she knew it was to help people.

*His treat, his treat, his treat.*

Maybe the social worker was right; maybe Tom just needed some help.

Hermione hadn't slept well that night. Her dreams turned into nightmares; they were the color of charcoal, and the sound of white noise.

It was the most wonderful time of the year; that's what the Christmas carolers sang in the most convincing cheer, anyway. Their cheer was infectious – infectious like the common flu, more like; it left you with a dull headache, and feeling slightly nauseous to your stomach.

Hermione wanted to feel cheerful; and she did, to an extent. It was Tom's wrapped gift to her sitting underneath the tree that was causing apprehension and anticipation to bubble and fester in the lining of her stomach. His sly smirk whenever he caught her eyes didn't make her feel any better about it.

Tom had taken a seat right next to Hermione on the couch in the living room, and was carefully eating one of the mince pies that her mum had baked. Her dad was sifting through the presents, then he handed everyone one of their gifts to open. Hermione's heart sped up when her father handed her the gift from Tom. It wasn't very large, and easily fit on her lap. She wanted to know what it was, but she didn't at the same time.

"Go ahead and open yours first, dear," her father had told her mum. Jean smiled at him, and opened her gift. It was a red cashmere scarf.

She gushed for a few seconds before turning to Tom. "Your turn, Tom."

Tom set his mince pie down on a plate, and turned his gift over curiously. He looked at Hermione. It was her gift to him. She swallowed nervously, unsure of how he was going to react to it. She thought it was a good gift, but one could never be too sure with Tom. He had so much personality, yet none at the same time.

He opened it, and said nothing for several seconds. His eyes stared at the book sitting in his lap. *The Iliad* was printed in gold letters across the brown cover.

Hermione began to fidget when he didn't say or do anything. She said, "It's okay if you don't like it. I got it at the book store on Fifth Street, so you can exchange it if you-"

"No, I…I like it," he said quietly. His dark eyes lifted to look into hers. "Now, open yours."
She didn't allow herself to be bothered when she followed his command. She carefully unwrapped the paper from the gift, which revealed a book about…she turned to look at Tom, shocked.

"Butterflies?" she asked suspiciously.

The corner of Tom's mouth twitched. "What? I thought you loved butterflies, Hermione."

Hermione went to open her mouth to tell him that his joke wasn't funny, but she heard her mum clear her throat. She smiled sweetly at him and said, "Yes, I do love butterflies. Thank you so much, Tom. It's a very nice gift. You're so thoughtful. I can't wait to read it."

Hermione wished terribly that the smug satisfaction would be wiped clean from his face. "I'm glad you like it."

The rest of Christmas day was as wonderful as it could get. There was a mess of wrapping paper and ribbons scattered throughout the living room. The house smelled of roast, and of potatoes, and of sage. There was the sound of her mum singing along to Christmas carols on the radio in the kitchen. The air tasted of peppermint and hot chocolate. She got to talk to her gran on the phone. Even Tom talked to her for a few minutes, although they hadn't met yet. She told them she was going to bring them a special treat when she came to visit. Hermione felt cheerful.

Bedtime had come far too soon. As she went to shake her comforter out on her bed to straighten it out, she heard a loud thud on the floor. She looked down, and noticed it was the book that Tom had given her. Hermione tilted her head to the side in confusion, because she didn't remember putting the book on her bed. When she picked it up, a piece of paper fell out, and landed on the floor.

Hermione set the book back on her bed, and picked up the paper. After she turned it over, her eyebrows shot up underneath her bangs.

There, on the other side of the paper, was a crude crayon drawing. It looked like it was…the two of them standing next to each other, holding hands. Hermione's forehead creased. It was really quite an awful drawing, but at least he tried. Her eyes traveled to the words underneath the drawing and her breath caught in her throat. The words 'My sister' had been written in smudged black crayon. He had made sure to emphasize the 'my' by underlining it three times. It had looked like he had pressed the crayon exceedingly hard.

Hermione tried to swallow the saliva that wasn't in her mouth. If any other foster brother had drawn this for her, she might have thought it was sweet, or endearing - but not with Tom.

Never with Tom.

A/N: I've fallen in love with writing this story, and I hope that you love it, too. Thank you to Radiant Innocence for being my cute, lil' beta fish and inspiration machine. If you love Tomione, go read her story "Darkened Desire". She's working on updating that story soon.

Thank you.
Tuesday afternoons made for dull afternoons; but rainy Tuesday afternoons were even more dismal. Was it possible to die of absolute boredom? If it were true, Tom was certain he was going to drop dead within the next few minutes. This boredom was excruciating. Please, for the love of God, put me out of my misery.

Tom eyed the self-important man sitting across from him in his self-important leather chair, sitting in the most self-important manner. The therapist. He internally scoffed. He was just an old fart who was starting to get liver spots on his balding head who just thought he knew what he was talking about. Tom has been to enough therapists to know the type and Mr. Humphrey fit the bill.

The therapist thought that he could get Tom to talk more by sitting in silence for the first half of the session, but Tom was already familiar with that technique. If the old fart thought that he was going to get Tom to talk just by sitting in an uncomfortable silence, then he was sorely mistaken. Tom wasn't the uncomfortable one; no, he was just the bored one.

So, for an entire fifteen minutes, Tom remained silent – the only noise being offered was the annoying ticking sound of the stupid clock on the wall.

He sighed, and noticed a Rubik's cube sitting on Mr. Humphrey's desk that hadn't been there last week. He'd never played with one before; so, why not now? Without asking, he picked it up, and started fiddling with it. It was rather pathetic when colored stickers on a shifting cube was more entertaining than a person; but, now that he thought about it, most people weren't that entertaining to him. Dull – all of them.

He thought of his sister and the corner of his mouth quirked up in amusement. Well, almost all of them.

"Ah, I just bought that yesterday. Have you ever played with a Rubik's cube before, Tom?" Mr. Humphrey asked conversationally.

Tom deflected his question. "Those books," Tom said, pointing with his chin to the shelves sitting behind the man. "I already know what they say. They say that there's something wrong with me."
"There's nothing wrong with you, Tom. Your brain just works a little differently than some people, that's all. There's nothing wrong with that," Mr. Humphrey stated calmly.

"I don't need your books to tell me that, sir. I already know that my brain works differently," he said. His words were condescending, but his tone was polite. Tom didn't need him to tell him anything – he already knew he was special. The old fart would never understand just how different he really was.

The man paused, equally miffed and amused by Tom's sarcastic intelligence. He leaned back in his chair, and considered Tom before changing the subject. "So, you haven't spoke of your sister yet today. How is she?"

Tom's fingers stilled on the Rubik's cube for a moment before continuing. "She's well."

"Are you two getting along better?"

"We always get along," Tom said with a little force behind his voice, not bothering to look at the man. What right did he have to talk about his sister? None, what…so…ever.

"Oh? Well, that's great news. So, no more incidents at school, then?" the man prompted.

Tom smirked down at the Rubik's cube. The old fart thought he was so clever, didn't he? Well, he was cleverer. Incidents at school? No. Just no more incidents where he got caught, but he wasn't going to tell him that. "No, of course not."

"I think we should talk more about that, Tom. Is that alright to talk about?"

At this, Tom looked up at the man innocently, and blinked several times. "Talk more about what, sir?"

"Well, I'd like to talk more about how you felt when you got into the fight with the other boy – when you hit him," at this, the man took some notes on his yellow-lined paper. Why did they always use yellow-lined paper? Was it some sort of requirement? He supposed one wasn't allowed to be a crackpot therapist unless one used paper the color of piss.

"Well, it hurt my hand a bit, I guess. I had to have it wrapped up for a couple of days," Tom shrugged.

The man chuckled lightly. "You are too smart for your own good, Tom. Did you know that?"

Tom's mouth curled up slowly as he continued twisting the Rubik's cube. Click, click, click. At least someone was finally noticing his cleverness; but Tom knew what the man was really after - he was after Tom's secrets.

"I know what you want," Tom slowly tapped his index finger to his temple exactly three times. "You want the key. You think it's in those books, don't you?" he asked, pointing lazily to the books behind the man again.

The man turned around to glance at the books, then back at Tom with a slightly puzzled expression on his face.

Tom let a sly smile stretch across his lips as his gaze leveled on the man sitting across from him. "You won't find the key there, sir. I've already swallowed it whole and you'll never find it," he ended in a humored sing-song voice.

Mr. Humphrey's eyes widened slightly at Tom's chorus. The man jolted when the timer went off,
signifying that Tom's session was over with. With a final *click, click, click*, Tom set the Rubik's cube down on the man's desk and said cheerfully, "See you next week, Mr. Humphrey."

Then, Tom simply walked out of the office without waiting for the man to say goodbye in return.

Mr. Humphrey's troubled gaze traveled from the door where Tom had just left, to a perfectly completed Rubik's cube sitting on his desk.

*Tick, tock, tick, tock* went the stupid clock.

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Drawing pictures for her parents for Easter had been Tom's idea. Hermione had been disappointed in herself for not thinking of it first, but she was bound and determined to make sure her drawing was *better*. Everyone knew that girls drew better than boys. It was a *fact*.

They sat together at the dining room table, sharing a box of crayons, and sharing their ideas.

Hermione was finishing up her blue bird drawing. It was surrounded by colorful Easter eggs. She peeked at Tom's drawing a few times. It looked like a horrible representation of their family. He had tried, at least; but hers looked *far* better.

His current drawing reminded her of the drawing he had given to her on Christmas – the drawing that neither of them spoke of. She had taped it to the inside of her closet door next to a few other drawings she'd made. The bright colors of her other drawings clashed horribly with his all-black one. Sometimes, Hermione thought that his drawing was trying to swallow hers whole, but she knew that was silly. They were only drawings.

Hermione scribbled the blue crayon to finish the bird's wing, and set it back in the box. It was finished. She held it up proudly with a smile.

"What did you draw?" she asked conversationally, and peered over his shoulder again. He turned his body away from her, and colored furiously.

"I'm not done yet," he said irritably.

Hermione waited patiently for several minutes before he set the black crayon down.

"Alright, finished," he said, and showed her his drawing.

The drawing looked to be of their family: there was her father, her mum, Tom, and…

"Is that me?" she asked incredulously, narrowing her eyes at his paper.

The corners of Tom's lips curved upward mischievously. He looked at his drawing and said, "Yeah. I drew you with all your hair chopped off. You know, you'd make an ugly boy."

Hermione felt a jab of pain in her chest at his words. They'd been getting along so well and he always ruined it. Why were brothers so mean?

"Yeah, well…you're…” Hermione fumbled with her words. "You're stupid."

Tom's face darkened. His eyes flicked to her drawing. He snatched up the black crayon, and pressed the wax harshly onto the paper. The bluebird had been swallowed whole.

Without thinking, Hermione shoved Tom out of his chair, and onto the tile floor. His eyes went wide with shock, then he glared at her. After that, he got up, set his crayon and drawing down
calmly, and left the room without a word.

Hermione blinked in surprise. Surprised at her behavior, and at Tom's reaction.

She was worried. She was almost hoping he'd retaliated like he usually did instead of just walking away.

Hermione hid her library books underneath her dirty laundry hamper in her closet that afternoon. She didn't want to take any chances.

"HERMIONE JEAN GRANGER!"

She had no idea why her mum had yelled at her from downstairs like that, but she was terrified to find out. It couldn't have been that bad. She'd been reading, and doing homework all day.

Once Hermione stepped into the dining room, her jaw dropped. It was that bad. There were crayon drawings of birds, flowers, and...was that her frolicking through the grass? – all over the dining room wall. They looked just like her drawings.

"I-I didn't do it, mum!"

"I don't want to hear it, Hermione. This is getting ridiculous. You've never done things like this before," Jean paused for a moment, her voice getting softer. "Is this because of Tom?"

Hermione's brows furrowed in confusion. "What?"

"Tom. Are you acting out because we decided to foster Tom? Are you jealous, sweetheart?" her mum asked.

Hermione thought for a second: was she jealous?

"Maybe a tiny bit, but not enough to color on the walls! Mum, I swear I didn't do it. It must have been Tom."

"Tom has been at his friend Joseph's house all day. Besides, no offense to him, he cannot draw this well. Don't tell him I said that," Jean added quickly.

Hermione made a face. "Tom has friends?" Since when had that happened?

Her mum rolled her eyes. "Yes, Hermione. Tom has friends. Now, since he hasn't been here all afternoon, how was he able to do this?"

"I…I don't know…"

Her mum shook her head, and sighed. "You know where the mop bucket is, Hermione. Use soap, and warm water. Your father isn't going to be pleased with this."

"But, mum!"

"I don't want to hear it, Hermione. Just clean it up. I'll be in the living room, watching the tele," she said in a tired voice, and left the room.

Hermione felt angry at Tom for tricking her mother, and felt ashamed for disappointing her. Unfortunately, Hermione's anger showed through while she filled up the bucket with water. Water had sloshed everywhere, and she'd made a bit of a mess.
A half an hour had gone by, and she'd only cleaned away half of the drawings. It wasn't perfect, as the color remnants were smudged into the paint. Her father was not going to be pleased.

The front door opened, and closed. Hermione cringed at the idea of her father finding out, but there was little to be done about it now. She mentally braced herself for being reprimanded again for something she didn't do. She could hardly contain her loathing when it was Tom who had walked into the room. He looked down at her, amused.

"Why, hello there, Cinderella. Seen any rats walking around down there?"

Hermione sneered. "Only you."

His grin only widened. "Have fun cleaning up your mess. I'll be up in my room, reading," he said cheerfully, and walked out of the dining room.

"You mean your mess!" she called to his back.

"I have absolutely no idea what you're talking about, Hermione," he said from the stairs. Was it possible to hear a grin in someone's voice? Because she heard his. It made her furious. Absolutely furious.

"I hope you fall down the stairs!" she yelled after him. And she really did. She wished he would fall down the stairs, and twist his ankle, or something. It would be so simple – he would be walking up the stairs, slip on the lip of his next step, and simply stumble down.

Hermione scrubbed hard at the wax as she envisioned her angry thoughts in her head, when she heard a succession of heavy thuds followed by a scream.

She scrambled up from the floor, and ran into the foyer hallway. She met her mother along the way, who had run out of the living room. Jean gasped at what she saw, and Hermione just stared in shock.

There, at the bottom of the stairs, was Tom. He was holding his left ankle, and pain was etched into his face. Silent tears were beginning to roll down his cheeks.

Jean spent enough time to make sure he hadn't broken anything, then left to go call Hugo to let him know she was taking Tom to the hospital.

"I'm sorry," Hermione blurted out without thinking. Tom's face screwed up in pain and confusion.

"What are you talking about?" he managed to squeeze out.

"For you falling," she said lamely.

Tom looked at her incredulously. "Shut up. It's not like you pushed me."

Hermione's brows furrowed in thought. "No," she started slowly, "but I told you I hoped you did. Then I thought about it in my head. I wanted you to twist your ankle."

Tom's eyebrows shot up in surprise, then lowered down as he looked at her suspiciously.

"You... thought about it?" he asked carefully.

Hermione went to reply, but her mum had walked back into the room. "Alright, let's get you two into the car. Your father is meeting us at the hospital once he finishes with his current patient."

She watched her mum remain calm while she drove, even though Hermione could tell she was
panicking. Tom was sitting in the front seat. She could tell he wasn't crying anymore, but his face was scrunched up in pain.

Hermione knew she hadn't pushed him down the stairs, but it didn't stop her from feeling guilty about it for some reason.

She studied the side of his face while he wasn't aware. Her fingertips brushed together. The feeling was unpleasant, and sent shivers down her spine. They were still pruned up from washing the crayon off the walls.

Her eyes narrowed at the side of Tom's head – all previous feelings of guilt gone.

Hermione was suddenly glad he fell down the stairs. He deserved it. And she'd figure out how he got away with the drawings. One way, or another.

After spending two hours at the emergency room, the results of Tom's x-ray had come back. The doctor and her parents stepped out of the room to view the x-ray, and discussed the findings. They had told Hermione to stay in the room with Tom.

Hermione wasted no time once they were alone. "How did you do it?"

Tom was swinging the tubes to an empty IV bag from its hook purposelessly while he laid in the bed. Without looking at her, he drawled out, "Must have missed a step, I suppose. Clumsy me."

"You know what I'm talking about," Hermione growled out lowly.

Her statement got his attention on her. His lips curled over his teeth in a roguish smile. "I'm afraid that I don't, Hermione. Please, tell me."

"How did you color on the walls when you were at your friend's house?" she asked impatiently.

"Oh, that," he said, and his grin widened. "Guess you'll just have to figure that out, eh?"

"Tom! Tell me," she whispered harshly, and stomped her foot in frustration.

Tom's smile fell from his face in an instant, his face going cold. "Probably the same way I fell down the stairs."

Hermione briefly wondered if it was possible for one's heart to fall out of one's chest. Was it? She didn't know, but it felt like hers might have.

Her parents walked back into the room with the doctor. From the look on their faces, it looked like good news.

"Nothing's broken – just a sprained ankle. You'll need to take it easy for about a week. Use an ice compress and take aspirin for the pain, then you'll be right as rain," the doctor said optimistically.

The doctor's optimism didn't seem to faze Tom in the slightest. "I'm not allowed to walk?"

"I'm afraid not," the doctor said sadly, but then he smiled. "But, I'm sure your sister would be willing to help you, and keep you company."

Hermione's mouth fell open, but she shut it quickly. Tom looked at her reaction curiously.

"At least you two won't get into any fights with Tom's ankle injured like that," Hugo joked, his awkward chuckle dying on his lips after being severed by his wife's controlled stare.
Her father had been right. They hadn’t gotten into any fights; not of the physical nature, anyway. His injury didn't stop them from squabbling when they were annoyed with each other. Tom had taken full advantage of being injured by ordering Hermione around like a servant, and she hated him for it.

Her mum had decided to take the week off from the dental clinic to take care of Tom, but she still had to go over all the patients’ documents from home to make up for her absence. So, her mum was relying on Hermione to do the smaller tasks to help take care of Tom after school; which, in her opinion, were the most humiliating ones.

If Tom wanted juice, she brought it to him. If Tom wanted a snack, Hermione climbed on a chair in the kitchen to reach the cabinets to get it for him. If Tom was chilly, she covered him with a blanket. If Tom got hot, she uncovered him. If Tom had to use the loo, she had to help support his weight, and walk him there. She knew he was enjoying every moment of his bedrest.

He had tried telling her that his foot had an itch that needed scratching, but she had told him right where he could put his foot, because she was not going to be scratching it for him. He had just smirked at her.

Tom was relishing in her humiliation, and she thought that she just might hit him for it. But she knew that would make her mum upset, so she didn’t – even though she really wanted to.

From the look on Tom's face, he knew she wanted to hit him, and he also knew that she wouldn't. His smirk widened.

Brothers were so stupid.

The smell of sizzling bacon wafting upstairs was what woke Hermione up on a sunny morning in late July. She managed to roll herself out of bed, and made her way to the bathroom.

While she sat on the toilet to relieve herself, she noticed that Tom must already be awake. There were drops of water all over the floor, and he had left his dirty towel half hanging out of the laundry hamper.

Hermione rolled her eyes. Boys.

After she was done, she went to go brush her hair. Unfortunately, she couldn't find her hairbrush anywhere. She looked in the drawers, in the cabinets underneath the sink, in the linen closet – it was just gone. Her eyes narrowed in speculation at the dirty towel Tom had left behind. She quickly pulled the small trash bin out from underneath the sink, and sighed dejectedly when she didn't find it in there. Okay, so maybe he didn't throw it away like she'd thought.

"Oh, well," she said to herself with a shrug. She grabbed an old hair tie out of the drawer, and tied her wild, frizzy bedhead back at the nape of her neck. It would just have to do until she found her brush.

While Hermione walked down the stairs, she kind of hoped she wouldn't find it, because most of the bristles were missing, anyway. It would be the perfect excuse to get a new one. She’d have to ask her mum.

When she walked into the dining room, Tom glanced at her expressionlessly. He was helping set up the table for breakfast. His hair was still wet, so she knew it was him who'd made the mess in the bathroom, but she didn't bring it up. It was too nice of a morning to start out by bickering.
"Good morning, dear," she heard her father say from his spot at the table. He was surrounded by papers from work.

"Good morning! Do you need any help, mum?" she asked.

"Yes. Could you come pop some bread in the toaster for me?" Jean asked.

Hermione agreed to help her gladly. In no time at all, the entire family was sitting at the table together, enjoying breakfast, and pleasant conversation.

Sadly, it was interrupted by a crash, a flutter of feathers, and food flying across the table. Hugo's reading glasses were knocked off his face. Jean screamed. Hermione jumped up from her seat and her chair knocked to the floor. Tom sat in his seat, his eyes trained on the brown barn owl that was currently eating the bacon off his plate in mild interest.

A stunned silence rang throughout the room.

Tom casually picked up one of his pieces of bacon, and fed it to the owl. He turned his head to Hugo and asked, "Can we keep it?"

Hugo stuttered, and readjusted his glasses. "N-no, I think not," he said. Tom sulked, but it didn't stop him from feeding it. Hugo continued, "Curious. I wonder why it's awake during the day. Perhaps it was hungry?"

Hermione had the sudden urge to touch it; but when she reached out to stroke its feathers, it turned its head, and flew back out the open window.

Tom rolled his eyes at her. "Nice going. It probably thought your hair was a wild beast."

"It's not my fault; and shut up, my hair isn't a wild beast."

"Yes, it is. Hey, what's that?" Tom asked, and pointed down at her bare feet. When Hermione looked down, she noticed she was standing on papers. She picked them up.

"They're letters," she started, and her eyes widened. "They're addressed to us!"

"To whom?" her mum asked.

"Me and Tom!" she said, and Tom snatched his letter out of her hand. "Hey!"

"Hogwarts? Sounds like a disease," Tom scoffed. He broke open the seal and Hermione followed his example. Their parents were still too shell-shocked from a barn owl ruining their breakfast to get up, and read the letters with them.

_Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry? _This had to be some sort of elaborate joke Tom came up with. After Hermione was done reading, she looked at Tom. His eyes were big and his mouth was hanging open.

"Ha-ha, very funny, Tom. What kind of joke is this?" she asked, waving the letter in his face.

Tom's head snapped up to her. "I had nothing to do with this," he said, and his eyes narrowed suspiciously at her. "But...why did _you _get a letter?"

Hugo finally looked at Hermione's letter. She watched his eyes dart across the paper quickly, and his eyebrows raised to his hairline. He looked shocked, and simply handed the letter to Jean, who ended up wearing a similar expression. Hermione didn't know why, but it unsettled her.
"How…how is this possible? Hugo?" Jean asked helplessly. Hugo just shrugged, and stared at his plate, lost in thought.

A sudden smile broke out across his face. "Let's not worry about this right now, shall we? That bloody owl! Let's get this mess cleaned up, and try to finish breakfast."

Even Hermione knew her father was deferring the real problem at hand – the problem that, apparently, according to these letters, Tom and Hermione were different.

It was later that evening when they were getting ready for bed that Tom had told her so.

"You know," he started to say as he buttoned up the front of his pajamas in the doorway of the bathroom as he watched her. "I knew you were different."

Hermione paused brushing her hair, and looked at him curiously. "What do you mean?"

Tom didn't say anything for a few moments as he stared at the brush in her hand, lost in thought. Instead of answering her question, he continued as if she hadn't asked anything at all.

"The first time I saw you, I knew you weren't like my other foster siblings I'd had. I couldn't figure out why, though," he said, then his eyes flicked back to hers. His face said nothing as he spoke, "But now I know."

Hermione swallowed nervously, not sure what she should say; or, if she should say anything at all. "I…don't feel any different."

A condescending smile slid across his face. "You've always been this way; so, why would you feel different?" he said. He took a step toward her in his excitement. "It just means that our brains work differently, Hermione. We're cleverer. We're special. We're the same."

The glee on his face both thrilled, and disturbed her. "How are we the same?" she asked nervously.

Tom's eyebrows furrowed in thought, as if he was trying to find the right words to say. Instead of speaking, he plucked the hairbrush out of her hands, and started to carefully brush her hair for her. Hermione was far too shocked to object, so she just stood there awkwardly while she listened to her brother speak.

"We both have magic, Hermione. We can do things that ordinary people can't do. Do you remember when I fell down the stairs a few months ago?" he asked.

She winced slightly when he hit a knot. "Yes."

"I didn't fall down the stairs."

Hermione watched her face scrunch up in the mirror and she stared at his eyes reflecting at her. "Yes, you did. I was there. We went to the hospital."

The corner of Tom's lip twitched up. He made her tilt her head back to brush the crown of her head; which wasn't necessary, considering he was much taller than she was now. Her dad said Tom looked at least two years older than Hermione did now, even though she was technically older than him.

It felt rather awkward with him staring down at her from this angle, so she kept her eyes trained on the ceiling above his head. "No, I didn't fall. You pushed me. With your magic. I felt it."
Hermione froze. Tom finished brushing her hair, and set the brush back down on the counter. "You know, I like this new brush better than the old one," he said offhandedly. Hermione spun around to stare at him.

"What do you mean, 'you felt it'?' she asked, ignoring his statement.

Tom grinned mischievously at her. "I felt this slight pressure - right here," he said, and gently laid his palm flat over her heart. "Then, the pressure did this," he said, and he shoved her into the bathroom counter. She gave out a yelp when her elbow collided with the counter.

"Hey! What was that for!?" she yelled, while rubbing her sore elbow.

Tom went to walk out of the bathroom. Once he was in the doorway, he stopped and said, "For pushing me down the stairs, you idiot."

Hermione suddenly wished she was better at using this magic stuff she was supposed to have. There was a certain someone she knew of who needed another trip down the stairs.

A/N: I had so much fun writing this chapter. I hope you had fun reading it. Special thanks to Radiant Innocence and VinoAmore for being my cute, little beta fish for this chapter.

On a side-note, I've had quite a few people ask me about the plot, and where I plan on taking this story. I have a long answer and I have a short answer. I'm not giving specifics, and I hope to remain somewhat vague.

The long answer: First, let's imagine the wizarding world, and how it was tainted by Voldemort during his reign of terror. Now, let's imagine what the wizarding world would be like if Tom Riddle wasn't born until 1979. Can you imagine it? Because I can, and now I'm going to build a whole freaking story bearing that in mind, because I'm fucking mental, apparently. It will follow Hermione and Tom living together in this new, untainted world. Hermione is still Hermione. Tom is still Tom. They are the ultimate foil characters; both of them will enhance, and contrast each other. They are both going to influence each other: in positive ways, and in negative ways. They are going to be real. They are going to be raw. They are going to be flawed. They are going to be human. Yes, even Tom. Don't worry, he'll still be the high-functioning sociopath that we all know and love. The most important thing I want to say is that Hermione is not going to be used as a rung on the ladder of Tom's climb for power in this story. Don't worry - that climb is still going to happen; just in different ways, and for different reasons.

The short answer: I plan on taking this story with me wherever my brain leads it. Would you like to join me?
This year’s back to school shopping was absolutely glorious. There were so many trinkets – so many things – new things and Tom wanted to learn about them all. He wanted them all. Unfortunately, he couldn’t resort to stealing - these people were witches and wizards, too. He knew he was more likely to get caught, so he had refrained.

That didn’t refrain him for asking his parents to buy him things – which he hardly ever did. It didn’t prevent Hermione from asking, either. Tom was sure his sister also felt frustrated when their parents said that they would only buy what was on their shopping lists for now, because they had no idea what that thing did, or what that contraption was for. The siblings had sulked for some time.

That was, until, they stopped to purchase their wands from Ollivanders. This was the moment Tom had been waiting for as soon as he had discovered that they would get a wand. He had thought it was a little cliché – something straight out of one of his sister’s fairy tale books, but it wasn’t enough of a cliché to quell his excitement. The moment he laid eyes on his wand, before he had even touched it, he knew it was his. He knew, because it had reminded him of a bone – it had reminded him of a story.

Tom had read in a book once that bones were supposed to symbolize mortality, but he didn’t like that explanation very much. He had also read in that same book that bones symbolized immortality, because after a person was long dead and rotted away, the one part of them that remained forever were their bones. Even after the dead were long forgotten, their bones always remained – never forgotten.

When his fingers gently grasped the handle of that pale wand, he thought of how he never wanted to be forgotten. The wand seemed to have agreed with him, because he had felt a surge of something shoot up his right arm. It left him feeling warm and cold and everything all at once.

Tom was secretly ecstatic when their parents let them keep their wands in their pockets.

Next, they had gone to purchase their school books. After they had grumbled that they should at least get to pick out an extra book to read, they were told that they could pick out two extra books
each. Tom had managed to convince Hermione to pick out two different books from what he had picked out, that way they could swap later. That meant four books total. Hermione had told him it was smart thinking. He had smugly agreed with her. She had rolled her eyes, called him a conceited idiot, and walked away. She had been smiling, though.

After shopping for their text books at Flourish & Blotts, they made their way to get fitted for their school uniforms. Hermione went first. Tom slouched back in his chair as he watched her stand awkwardly on the dais in front of the mirror while an older woman took her measurements. His parents were enthralled with the way the measuring tape magically floated around her. Tom was enthralled by his sister's awkwardness. Hermione had nearly lost her footing when the end of the tape flicked her nose by accident. It was hilarious, so he had laughed. She had scowled at him.

When it was finally Tom's turn to get fitted, Jean and Hugo realized they never got their crystal phials for their Potions class. Since getting their uniforms was their last stop, they'd decided to pop over quickly to purchase them. Hermione went with them, since she said that she remembered where they were.

Tom's nose scrunched up in distaste. She is such a liar. Sure, she knew where the phials were, but she just wanted to go look at those stupid ingredients again.

Tom looked down at the black material of his too-long robe bunched up around his feet, and kicked it off his shoe with halfhearted bitterness, which earned a few stern words from the tailor. He inwardly rolled his eyes at the older woman adjusting his robes. He was feeling a bit annoyed that he was left behind. Oh, well. It's not like it hadn't happened before.

A short amount of time had passed by when a short boy with dark, messy hair walked in with, who Tom assumed was, his father. He silently observed them from his place on one of the daises.

The other employee, a middle-aged man, came to greet the pair. "Well, look who the kneazle dragged in! It's been forever, James! How is life treating you?"

The bespectacled man laughed. "Can't complain. Life is going rather well," he then looked down at the boy, and clasped a hand proudly on his shoulder. "I just can't believe this one is finally starting his first year at Hogwarts!"

The tailor smiled. "They grow up fast, don't they? Say, isn't Lily due soon?"

"Merlin, I wish. Not until December, I'm afraid. Her morning sickness is still awful, so she tends to stay home most days," James said woefully.

"Aye, aye…poor girl. Tell her I wish her well," he said, then looked at the boy. "Alright, let's get you your robes! Are you excited?" he asked as he ushered the quiet boy onto the other dais next to Tom.

Tom observed the boy out of the corner of his eye. He was a scrawny, little thing with ugly glasses. Those things didn't seem to matter, though, because the boy stood up on his platform with almost as much confidence as Tom. He noticed that the boy's robes looked much more expensive than his. There was something about the boy that Tom didn't like, but he couldn't put his finger on it. Not as if Tom liked many people, but there was something about this boy that just rubbed him the wrong way.

"Oh, yes. I'm very excited," the boy said politely.

Tom rolled his eyes, and wanted to just be done with everything, so he didn't have to listen to their small talk anymore. He was hoping for something interesting, but found himself
disappointed. *Blah, blah, blah.* He was beginning to tune them out when he heard their conversation change.

"What house are you hoping for?" the tailor asked the boy. Tom was suddenly thankful he had the no-nonsense woman; he wouldn't have to be forced into speaking with her. She wasn't interested in small talk, and neither was he.

The boy glanced at his father, who was looking rather proud…and maybe with a touch of nostalgia in his eyes. "Well, my mum and dad were both in Gryffindor…"

"But what house do *you* want to be in, boy?" the man joked, knowing full well that his answer was being influenced by his father's presence.

"Gryffindor, I suppose. I haven't really put that much thought into it yet. Does it really matter?" he inquired.

His father barked a laugh. "Of course, it matters! No son of mine is going to be in Slytherin. Might have to disown you, if that happens. Oh, don't give me that look! You know I'm only joking. I would never do that," he said with a grin.

*Slytherin.* Tom hadn't had much of a chance to peruse through his books, but he'd discovered enough to know that *that* particular house was resembled by a serpent. Snakes were Tom's favorite animal, because…well, because he *understood* them, and they understood him. He didn't know why, but it was one of the first things he wanted to try and find out. He didn't know much about the house itself, but he felt like he *belonged* there – mostly due to symbolism, of course.

Before Tom realized what he was doing, he boldly asked, "What's wrong with being in Slytherin?"

James looked at Tom, and blinked several times before giving a small grin. "Oh, I never said anything was *wrong* with being in Slytherin. Merlin *himself* was in Slytherin! There's just some rivalry between Slytherin and Gryffindor houses. It's all in good fun. Are you going into your first year, as well?"

Tom nodded once.

"Then you'll see what I'm talking about soon enough. My son here, Harry, is starting his first year, too."

*I know,* Tom had wanted to say, *I've been standing right here the entire time, you dolt*; but he kept his mouth shut.

Harry smiled at Tom and said, "Maybe we'll be sorted into the same house together."

*Doubtful."

"Maybe," Tom said.

"Done," the witch who was tailoring his robes said; and with a snap of her wrist, the measuring tape rolled up a disappeared into thin air.

Thank *God.*

The bell on the door chimed and his family walked back in. "All done, Tom?" Jean asked.

Tom nodded, and hopped down from the platform. Their parents went to pay for their uniforms.
That's when he noticed Hermione fiddling with something in her hands. He frowned, and tilted his head to the side.

"What's that?" he asked curiously.

Hermione jumped, and looked at him with wide eyes. She quickly hid it behind her back. "Nothing!"

"Don't lie to me. I'm your brother," he snarled.

"I bought it with my own money, Tom. You can't have it. You'll just break it!" she snapped.

He licked his lips in agitation. "That's not fair. I was stuck in here, while you were off having fun. You need to share."

Hermione stuck her chin up defiantly at him. "No, I don't. It's mine."

Tom sneered at her; and then, he lunged forward. Hermione gave a sharp yelp in surprise. She hadn't been expecting Tom to go after her in the middle of a public place with people around, so she wasn't prepared. She'd lost her footing, and brought Tom down with her.

The pair of them toppling down together in a tangle of limbs didn't stop Tom from trying to pry whatever it was that she had clasped tightly in her fist.

It was the pair of strong hands wedging them apart that stopped them. It was Harry's father, James. He was smiling down at them.

"Now do you see why I told you that having a sibling so close in age wasn't always a good thing, Harry?" he called from over his shoulder in good humor. Tom glanced over to see Harry grinning down at them. Tom's blood boiled in embarrassment – all turbulence and rage. Was he mocking them? He really didn't like the boy.

"Maybe, but I'm sure you two don't fight all the time. Do you?" Harry asked in arrogant curiosity.

Tom went to open his mouth and tell the stupid boy that, no, they didn't fight all the time. They merely…disagreed - often. That's all they did – just disagreed.

Unfortunately, his parents were done paying for their uniforms. "They get along when they're reading," Hugo joked. He offered James a handshake. "Hello, I'm Hugo Granger. This is my wife, Jean. Thanks for stepping in, and preventing any further bloodshed."

"James Potter, and you're welcome. Glad to have helped."

At this, Harry hopped down from his dais after he was done, and walked over to them. He walked right up to Hermione, and stuck out his hand smoothly. "Hello. I'm Harry Potter. What's your name?"

His sister flustered a bit at his sudden presence, her face turning pink. She accepted his handshake and said, "I'm Hermione. Hermione Granger."

Tom's fists and chest clenched tightly, but he willed his face to remain unaffected. Jealousy was a powerful emotion. One should never underestimate the power of jealousy, and one should never underestimate the power it had to destroy.

It was in that very moment that Tom had decided that he hated Harry Potter.
Platform 9 and ¾ assaulted his senses once they had figured out how to pass through the wall. The sights, the sounds, the *smells*. All of it. It was overwhelming and it was madness and it was *life*.

The sound of a choked sob in his ear pulled him out of his daze. His mother was crying and hugging him again. She had cried often for the past several days. She had told him that she loved him, and that she would miss him, and that he must write at least twice a week. She also made him promise to keep his sister safe. Tom had wanted her to let him go in front of all these strangers, to prevent further embarrassment, so he had promised that he would do so.

Tom watched in amusement when it was Hermione's turn to receive the same treatment; the only difference was that Hermione had started to tear up, too. *Bloody Hell*. He really didn't feel like dealing with his sister being an emotional wreck for the next several hours stuck on a train together. She was annoying when she was like that; thank God that it didn't happen often.

After the final goodbyes were exchanged, they boarded the Hogwarts Express to find an empty compartment. Once they found one and put their luggage away, a chubby boy with big ears and crooked teeth slid the door open. Tom thought that he was an ugly, little thing.

"E-excuse me. Could I sit with you two? This is the first compartment I've found that wasn't full," the boy asked nervously.

Right as Tom was about to tell him that, no, he could *not* sit with them, his sister told the boy the opposite.

"Sure, that's alright. There's plenty of room in here."

Tom wanted to punch the shy smile and blush off the boy's face. He also wanted to give his sister's hair a good tug, but that would have to wait until another time.

He would never admit it, but he was rather nervous about what kind of punishment he would receive in the magical world for doing those things. Would they punish him by making him drink poison that killed you slowly? Would they punish him by turning his eyes into jelly? Would he be allowed to create something like that? Everyone on this train had magic, too. He had to be extra cautious.

"Thank you," the boy said. He put his luggage away clumsily, and sat down across from Tom and Hermione.

Tom eyed the boy across from him. The boy had magic, too; but Tom bet that his magic was *stronger*.

"My name's Neville Longbottom."

"I'm Hermione Granger," his sister said politely.

"Tom Riddle," Tom said coldly, and pulled a book out of his knapsack. He was thoroughly annoyed that Neville was there, and was entirely intent on *not* conversing with him – at all.

"So, are you two friends? I don't recognize your names," Neville asked curiously.

"No," Hermione said forcefully.

Tom's head snapped at her and he scowled. She looked at him and swallowed, realizing she'd made a mistake. He continued to look at Hermione. "We're *siblings*," he said forcefully.

Neville thought the statement was for him, but it was really a reminder for his sister.
"Oh! But don't you have different last names?"

Hermione was quicker to answer, and Tom wasn't happy that she was. "Oh, we have different last names because we're foster siblings. It's kind of like being adopted siblings, but a little bit different."

*A little less permanent, you mean,* Tom thought bitterly. He really didn't feel like talking anymore. His mood had turned acidic.

Thankfully, his sister kept the boy busy enough where he didn't have to talk to him. Unfortunately, they were so distracting that he didn't get very much reading done. Hermione went on and on, asking the stupid boy *question* after *question*. It went on like this for about an hour. She really had no self-control.

The fact that she had no self-control was solidified when she left *his* side to go sit next to the boy. He was showing her a book about different magical herbs that wasn't part of the required reading, so it was new to her. Tom glowered at the pair, but they didn't notice.

That's when Tom noticed that the boy's ugly pet toad had hopped underneath the bench near the door. His eyes slowly slid from the toad, then to Neville, and back to the toad again. A small smile arched on his face. It would be simple, really. They were both distracted. He could do it. He could get away with it.

Tom stood up. "I'm going to the loo."

Hermione and Neville glanced at him long enough to let them know they had heard him, then their noses were buried in the book, effectively and unintentionally cutting Tom out. His jaw twitched. He was glad that they were distracted, but he hated that *she* was distracted. *Whatever.*

On his way out of the compartment, he quickly snatched up the toad, shoved it into his robe pocket, and left.

Tom made his way down to the end of the train. He tried opening the very back door that led to the outside of the caboose, but it was magically locked. *Damn.*

His eyes darted around, trying to find an alternative. Well, he was sure a window was just as good as a door. He was pleased when he found the windows slid down without a fuss.

After he checked once more to make sure no one was watching him, he pulled the toad out of his robe pocket. His face scrunched up in disgust, and looked at the pitiful thing. The toad's gullet croaked and its eyes crossed when it looked at Tom. Who in the *world* would want a *toad* as a pet? He didn't understand it and he didn't want to try to.

Tom felt the familiar adrenaline pump, pump, pumping through his veins when he felt the air speeding over his hand that was holding the toad out the window. It was drying the toad's skin rather quickly. *Poor thing,* he thought sardonically. The scenery was speeding by in a green blur.

With wide, thrilled eyes and a lovely smile, he watched in morbid fascination as he slowly lifted one finger at a time away from the toad.

He lifted a first finger.

He lifted a second finger.

And then, a third.
He lifted his thumb and pinky finger at the same time, and it was gone.

Bye, bye.

Tom had wished the train wasn't going so quickly. He was disappointed he didn't get to see the aftermath of the chaos he had caused.

He pushed the window back into place, and made his way back to the compartment. Everything was as how he had left it – minus the toad, of course. He had left that thing somewhere flattened on the tracks.

Tom felt the adrenaline come back again once Neville realized that his toad was gone. The panic on the boy's face kindled the fire in Tom's veins and Neville's tears were petrol to fuel it.

When asked if Tom had seen Trevor, he said casually, "No. Perhaps it slipped out when I went to use the loo earlier?"

Neville's face looked hopeful, and he ran out of the compartment to search the train.

He looked up at his sister, who was looking at him apprehensively. He put on his best look of innocence for her, which was a mistake. Her eyes turned into slits. She knew him well enough that his feigned innocence was a sign of automatic guilt. The only problem was, of course, that he felt no guilt - only that fire.

"What did you do?"

"What do you mean?"

Hermione stared at him. She must not have found what she was looking for, because she shook her head. "Never mind. Just tell us if you see Trevor. I'm going to go help him."

His sister leaving the compartment hadn't been what he'd planned. Oh, well. It had still been worth it.

The Great Hall...most had heard about it, but actually seeing it for themselves was a completely different experience that the first years weren't quite prepared for. It was enormous. It was beautiful. It was...loud and mildly distracting with all the other students' voices echoing off the walls.

It was a lot to take in all at once, but not for a certain brother and sister. Their keen eyes took in everything. While Hermione catalogued it all in her mind, Tom was busy taking an inventory. Both were doing almost the same exact thing, but for completely different reasons.

They stood next to each other with the other first years at the front of the Great Hall. Hermione noticed a few of the other children they had met previously. She could see that boy, Harry Potter, with his wild hair. Her heart clenched in sadness when she caught sight of the red-eyed Neville. Poor thing.

They hadn't been able to find Trevor, but some of the staff promised to scour the train for the toad, and return it to him if they found it. Hermione had told Neville to remain hopeful. If anyone could find the toad, it would be them; and, of course, if not, he could always get another toad. That, perhaps, hadn't been the right thing to say, because he had started crying again. Hermione had felt bad, but she had never been good at being tactful.
She felt Tom nudge her shoulder impatiently to get her attention. When she looked up at him, he pointed with his chin silently to the front of the hall. So, she followed her brother's example and looked.

There, sitting on an old stool, was the Sorting Hat that they'd read about in their books. Hermione's heart raced. Which house would she be sorted into? Which house would Tom be sorted into? Would they be in the same house, or would they be in different houses? This anxiety was unbearable.

She could tell that Tom was also nervous, even if he didn't show it on his face. She knew, because of the way he was barely chewing on his bottom lip. It was the only way she could tell that he was feeling nervous about anything, which wasn't very often.

The first time she'd ever noticed it was on his first birthday with them as a family. Tom had chewed on his bottom lip when they were singing happy birthday to him, as he awkwardly sat in front of his chocolate birthday cake he hadn't asked for. The flames from the eleven candles had provided enough light for her to see his nervous tic.

Ever since then, it was something she had counted on – something she would never tell him that he did. She didn't have much leverage against her brother, so she was going to use whatever resources she had; and, his subtle lip chewing was one of them.

They stood together as names had begun getting called. She made eye contact with Neville, and smiled at him reassuringly when it was his turn. Their eye contact was lost when the hat was slid over his head, but his nervous smile was still visible. Hermione almost lost balance when she felt Tom bump into her.

"Oops," he said sarcastically. She glared at him, and gave him a little nudge of her own. He just looked ahead, and smirked.

Hermione's anxiety suddenly spiked when her name was called. She plopped down on the stool, and smelled mildew when the hat was placed over her head. The last thing she saw was her brother's impassive face chewing on his bottom lip again. Why was he nervous about her being sorted?

She didn't have much time to think about it before a voice started murmuring in her ear, but it sounded like the voice was talking to itself.

"Hello?" she whispered uncertainly.

"Ah, look at what we have here. I haven't see a mind like yours in quite a while," said the voice.

"Is that a good thing?"

"I suppose it would depend on who is asking, wouldn't you say? Now, where should I put you?"

She couldn't make heads or tails of what it was trying to say after that; so, she waited patiently. After several minutes, it finally yelled out, "GRYFFINDOR!"

A thunderous round of applause swept through the hall, but the Gryffindor table was the loudest. She smiled shyly, and made her way to her table. She didn't miss the leveled gaze her brother gave her when she walked by.

There was a succession of cheers, and then silence during the ceremony. Hermione watched nervously when it was finally Tom's turn. Part of her wanted Tom to be placed in a different house, but a small part of her wanted him to be with her in Gryffindor. He was the only person
she knew very well, and she was rather nervous around all these new people. She caught a glance at Neville sitting across from her and she realized that she wasn't the only nervous person here. She knew it shouldn't have, but it made her feel a bit better that someone else felt awful.

Her attention was brought back to her brother when she heard the hat yell out, "SLYTHERIN!"

There were cheers in the background, she swore there were, but they sounded muffled now. The way he stared at her as he walked to his table made her feel like she was the only other person in the entire hall. Once he sat down, the noise and chatter came back. Hermione shook her head, and blinked.

She knew it wasn't a good idea, but she decided to chance a glance at Tom again; and there her brother was - all scowls, and gripping silverware, and glaring at her like it was all her fault.

Hermione stuck her nose in the air, and turned back around, deftly ignoring him. Well, it wasn't her fault; so, there was absolutely no reason for him to be so foul about it.

The first year Slytherins and Gryffindors were supposed to be transfiguring their matchboxes into small animals of their choice today. Hermione was excited to be practicing Transfiguration in their class already - in the very first week! Professor McGonagall had been rather impressed with how quickly Hermione had transfigured her matchbox into a mouse. The attention received for her hard work made Hermione beam with pride.

That pride, however, had been short-lived. While McGonagall went to deal with Seamus Finnigan blowing his matchbox up (again), Hermione was distracted by a beautiful butterfly fluttering around her head. The wings were the color of the most vibrant orange she had ever seen on a butterfly.

Hermione held her hand up and the butterfly landed gently on her fingertip. She felt the corners of her mouth tug up involuntarily. Butterflies were much nicer to look at than the other half-transfigured rodents scurrying about. Plus, Hermione loved butterflies.

Before Hermione could fully enjoy the experience of having the butterfly on her finger, it's delicate wings began to furl in on themselves. It looked like the way burning parchment did when accidentally set on fire. Hermione squealed when she realized that the butterfly actually was burning, because it singed her skin. She gave a little yelp, and frantically shook the butterfly off her. It gently fluttered down, down, down until it landed on her desk, and turned into nothing but ash.

Before she could stop herself, she found herself turning around to look for her brother. She knew. She just knew. The triumphant smirk on his face was all the proof she needed. Her eyes narrowed when she saw Draco Malfoy snickering in the seat next to Tom. Of course, it figures that her brother would be friends with that vile brat.

With nostrils flared, she turned back around in her seat, and faced the front of the class. A part of her wanted to get him back for being miserable, but she knew it would just start that vicious cycle between them. If she retaliated, the fighting would never stop. So, for the rest of class, she ignored the feeling of her brother's eyes at the back of her head.

After class, Hermione stayed behind to ask Professor McGonagall to look over her essay that was due next week. She wanted to make sure it was perfect. She beamed when the older woman told her she'd done an exceptional job, and that there was no need to fuss over it.

Not wanting to be late for lunch, Hermione made a beeline through the empty corridors to the
Great Hall. That was, until she heard her brother call out her name.

Hermione's shoulders tensed up and she quietly groaned. She really didn't feel like dealing with him right now. She just wanted to eat. She did her best to school her features before whirling around to greet his eyes with hers.

"Yes?"

Tom's eyes studied her face curiously for a few quiet moments. "Did you like my gift?"

Hermione sighed, and rolled her eyes. "You call that a gift? I think I have a blister on my finger now because of you."

His eyes flicked down to her fingers, then back up to her face. A slow smile crept onto his lips. "Oh. Oops."

She huffed out her nose. "Whatever. I'm going to go eat."

Tom's eyebrows furrowed. "I didn't tell you that you could leave yet. I'm still talking to you."

"You can't tell me when I can leave. If you want to talk to me, then walk with me to the Great Hall. I'm hungry," she said, thoroughly irritated.

"You'd better watch what you say, sis," he said evenly.

"You're not the boss of me, Tom," Hermione spat out at him, and whirled around to leave.

But, before she could get far, Tom grabbed a fistful of her curls at the base of her skull from behind, and dragged her beside a statue. Hermione let out a sharp yelp, and clawed at his wrists. She felt his hot breath on her ear when he said with a deathly calm, "But, dear sister, have you forgotten? I am the boss of you."

Tom eased up on his grip on her hair, but didn't let go. "You are not," she said firmly.

This statement, in turn, caused his grip to tighten again. "Mum and dad told me to keep you safe. That means I'm the boss. Don't you remember?"

"Hah! The only person I need to be kept safe from is you, Tom. Let me go!"

"No."

Hermione had had enough. She lifted her right knee, and slammed her foot down as hard as she could on Tom's, then promptly elbowed him in the ribs. Tom grunted loudly, and couldn't choose between holding his foot, or his ribcage. If Hermione weren't so angry, she might have laughed at the sight.

His gaze had leveled on her – his eyes completely ignoring her wand pointed at his face. If looks could kill.

"You're such a brat," he forced out between gritted teeth.

"And you're such an idiot," she spat back, her wand still trained on him. He finally stood up straight and she eyed him cautiously. "What did you want to talk with me about, anyway?"

Tom's anger fled from his face and he pushed his breath out of his nose in a huff of annoyance. "I just wanted to talk to you about working on our Potions homework together."
Hermione blinked in surprise. "Oh."

Tom was looking at her like she was stupid, but she thought that he was the stupid one in this situation. She slipped her wand back into her robe pocket and said, "Why didn't you just say that? You didn't have to pull my hair."

"And you didn't have to try and leave," he said bitterly. She didn't understand why, but his statement made her feel slightly guilty. Slightly.

They walked to the Great Hall together, and made plans to work on their Potions homework over the weekend. It was these moments with her brother that Hermione liked best; she just wished they happened more often.

A/N: Thanks for reading. I hope you enjoyed it. Also, thanks again to Radiant Innocence and Vino Amore for being my cute, little beta/alpha fishes. Yes, that's what I'm going to call them from now on.

I'm sorry (not sorry) it happened, but RIP Trevor. I apologize, but I needed him to croak.

...Too soon?
Making friends wasn't something that Hermione had ever been good at. Her mum had always told her that she had an old soul - more mature, and wise beyond her years - especially when compared to most other children her age.

The other children in her class during her years at primary school would tend to avoid her, or tease her. The teasing was tolerable, at best - scraped knees, at worst.

Although, no one dared tease her after the incident with Caleb Hinckley. No one. Not even verbal. Everyone had left her alone; even the one person she considered a friend at her old school. Well, she hadn't technically been friends with the girl, more of...mutual study partners, but even Claire had avoided her after that.

Hermione had blamed Tom for it. She had brought it up once during one of the times they'd argued. She had told him everyone at their school was afraid of him, because he was a bully. He had just smiled one of his lazy smiles and said, "Good."

That was all. Good. He hadn't even cared she had no friends.

She felt like she shouldn't have been surprised that the same treatment was happening at Hogwarts - being the friendless outcast, but it had. It had surprised her. Even Tom had made friends.

Thankfully, she at least had Neville Longbottom. They usually ended up as partners in their classes, which she didn't mind. He was a bit shy, but he was competent. Honestly, it wasn't that the rest of the students were unfriendly, because they weren't. They were just a bit distant. If it weren't for Neville being so kind, she would have been absolutely miserable. She would have only had Tom for company. No, thank you.

In an effort to ease her friendless issue, Hermione had made sure to read all her books, front to
back, and back to front. She wanted to know the ins and outs of magic. She wanted to be accepted by the other witches and wizards in this new world.

Also, she wanted to know everything.

Hermione had been certain that if she had impressive knowledge about various topics, it would impress the other students; but, unfortunately, it had only seemed to annoy them. Why did she always annoy people? Her mind couldn't figure it out.

Shun, shun. Hermione had been shunned.

She knew so. She'd realized it the moment she overheard Harry Potter and his best friend, Ronald Weasley, whispering about her during their Potions class with Professor Slughorn. They had thought they were being discreet, but they weren't. No, no. Not at all.

Why was it so wrong for her to answer questions that the professor asked? Aside from Tom, not many other students raised their hand. It didn't make any sense.

Ignore them, Hermione, her mum would have said. Rise above, sweetheart. Always do your best, and don't bother worrying about what other people think of you. Be true to yourself – that is what matters.

Her eyelids blinked away the prickling tears and her tongue swallowed the knot forming in her throat. She missed her parents. She missed her mum.

Rise above, sweetheart.

Professor Slughorn had asked to name three ingredients that could be found in the potion that cured boils. Dried nettles, snake fangs, horned slugs, porcupine quills, pungous onions, flobberworm mucus, ginger root, shrike spines.

Hermione knew more than three. Her hand shot up. She gave the entire list of ingredients. Sniggers from behind her followed. The knot in her throat formed again.

Rise above, sweetheart.

Professor Slughorn awarded Gryffindor house points, and showered Hermione with praise. Harry and Ron showered her with snark. The knot forming in her throat made her nostrils burn.

She would not cry. She would not cry.

After class, Hermione had been walking down the hallway with the rest of the students by herself. That was when she overheard what finally released the floodgates.

"I mean it – honestly! Old Sluggy only asked for three of the ingredients, and what does she do? Spits out all of them. All of them! She's such a show-off," Ron said. Harry hadn't said anything, but he had still sniggered. That was even worse. She'd thought that they might be friends, ever since he introduced himself in Diagon Alley, but she'd thought wrong, apparently.

She couldn't take it anymore. It was just like primary school all over again. She needed to get away, and get away now.

In her rush to find somewhere to hide, she accidentally bumped shoulders with Harry. Not feeling the courage of her house, she bent her head down, and continued her way down the hall in a hurry.
What she didn't see were two pairs of eyes watching her. One held concern, the other held a calm fury.

The assumption that Tom had made that Hermione would be back after her little episode in Potions in time for the Halloween feast had been an inaccurate one.

There he sat, cutting into his piece of honey glazed ham, when he noticed that his sister wasn't present in the Great Hall. He usually had no problem finding her mess of hair, which he liked to call 'the wild beast', in the crowd of students. His eyes found Neville Longbottom easily, which is who she usually sat with, but she was nowhere to be found.

The fork that held the piece of ham that was on its way to his mouth was dropped down to his plate with a loud clatter. Tom abruptly stood.

Draco Malfoy looked at him in bewilderment. "Where are you going, Riddle? The feast only just started."

"Not that it's any of your business, Malfoy, but I'm going to go find Hermione."

"Granger?" Draco asked, scandalized. "Why on Earth would you go looking for her?"

Tom stilled, and looked down at Draco with a hard expression. While he knew that most of Gryffindor house knew they were siblings, it wasn't something he'd talked about in Slytherin yet. It wasn't because he didn't want anyone to know, it was just more of…the topic had never arisen. Well, now it had arisen.

"Because she's my sister, you idiot," he stated halfheartedly. The look of pure shock on Malfoy's face, along with a few other of his housemates was magnificent. "Save me a plate of food, Malfoy, in case I don't come back in time to finish my supper."

All Draco could do was give Tom a numb nod of his head, and went back to eating his food in silence. Tom raised his eyebrow, and looked down at the other children sitting at the table. Every one of them cast their eyes downward, and continued eating. With one last glance at where Hermione should have been, he left the Great Hall to search for her.

Oh, how Tom loved ordering that aristocratic Pureblood prat around – how he loved ordering all the others in his year, really. Those poor, pathetic victims of privilege were already under his thumb; and all he had to do was show them a few charming smiles, some well-placed words, and his powerful magic. It was beautiful, really.

Tom stood at the bottom of the moving staircase, and thought. If he were Hermione when she was upset, where would he go? Well, she was a girl, first off; so, probably in the loo. He eyed the staircase that locked in place in front of him, and decided to take that as a sign. He ran up the stairs, and went down the corridor.

After he searched for around ten minutes, he finally found her. He watched her walk out of a stall, and rub her eyes wearily. He didn't know why, but he felt that familiar anger burn in his chest at the sight of her.

"You look awful," he said.

Hermione jumped in fright, and stared at him. "Tom!" she exclaimed, then her face turned sour. "What are you doing in here? This is the girls' bathroom."

Tom just smirked, and shrugged. He walked over to the pedestal of sinks located in the middle of
the room, and played with the handles as he spoke to her. "I don't see what the big deal is. A bathroom is a bathroom, in my opinion – toilets, sinks, and all that. Besides, everyone is in the Great Hall right now."

He came to a sink where the water didn't come out when he turned the handle. He frowned, and tried it again. Still nothing. He tilted his head to the side in mild interest when he spotted a little snake etched into the side of the faucet. His finger ran over it slowly.

"That one doesn't work," Hermione said.

Tom removed his finger from the snake, and looked at her. He shrugged at her words, crossed his arms, and leaned his bum against the sink to look at her. She was watching him. Good.

"The real question is, Hermione: what are you doing in here?"

Her mouth opened and closed like a fish out of water. "I-I wasn't feeling hungry."

"Liar," he sneered.

She gave an exaggerated sigh. "Fine! I got upset, alright? I needed some time alone."

Tom narrowed his eyes at her. "What happened, anyway?" he asked suspiciously.

"It's really not a big deal. I'm fine now."

"I said, 'What happened?'" he snarled.

Her eyes widened in surprise. She licked her lips as she thought of how to tell him. "Uh…I just overheard someone saying something not very nice about me. It really wasn't a big deal. I just miss Mum and Dad, so it kind of made it worse-"

"Who?" he interrupted.

"Huh?"

"Who said something not very nice?" he asked evenly.

"Oh, it was...it was Ronald Weasley. He's in Gryffindor – red hair."

"Potter's best friend," he spat in disgust. "Yeah, I know who he is."

"Oh," she said lamely.

Tom pushed himself off the sink, and walked toward her. He felt excitement pumping through his veins. "So, what are we going to do about it?"

"Do about what?"

Tom rolled his eyes at her. "Seriously, Hermione? Do I always have to do everything for you? This is why you always get picked on, you know. You never stick up yourself."

Her mouth fell open in disbelief. "Excuse me, but I do stick up for myself, thank you very much. I'm just not violent about it like you are."

Tom smirked down at her. "You don't have to be violent to get revenge, Hermione. Don't you want to get revenge on Weasley?"
Hermione faltered. Her eyebrows furrowed together, and her nose scrunched up as she thought. Tom liked it when she made that face. "Well, I suppose if we did something more...innocent, I wouldn't mind."

At this, Tom's lips slowly curved into a roguish smile. Hermione's eyes widened suddenly. She put one hand on her hip, and poked a pointed finger into his chest.

"Absolutely no bloodshed, Tom. I mean it."

Tom's grin broadened. "No bloodshed. Got it."

There hadn't been any bloodshed, but there had been an explosion during their next Potions class.

Ron Weasley's entire potion erupted in his face, and caught Harry Potter in the crossfire. The most disgusting looking warts Hermione had ever seen started sprouting from their skin. Oh, it was awful. Professor Slughorn had looked as if he was going to topple over from the noise of the students laughing, but managed to clean up the mess with a few flicks of his wand. He then sent the boys with a note to the infirmary.

Hermione turned to look at her brother at the table down from hers. She'd given him ingredients to make Ron's potion smell like rotten cabbages, not explode his face into an array of warts. To make matters worse, he got Harry, too. That wasn't supposed to happen. She narrowed her eyes at him. He noticed, and grinned harder at her.

Hermione gripped her quill tighter as she wrote down next week's assignment from the board. She'd have to talk to Tom later.

Hermione had finally managed to track down her brother in the library after supper. She wasn't happy with him and he wasn't happy with her after she reprimanded him about what he'd done.

Tom sneered at her. "Why do you even care what happened to them? I thought you wanted revenge."

"Yes, but it was only supposed to be Ron, and nothing that caused harm, Tom. We made an agreement!" she said in a harsh whisper.

He huffed air out of his nose and said, "No, you made that agreement. I just agreed that there would be no blood – and guess what? No blood."

Hermione's face relaxed and she sighed in defeat. "I just don't want to get expelled, Tom. Do you want to be expelled? Where would we go to learn magic, then? Hmm?"

Tom's hard expression faltered, and his eyes darted around them anxiously. He lowered his voice and said, "I...we - we wouldn't get caught. We're too smart."

Hermione raised her eyebrow skeptically. "Smarter than Dumbledore? Doubtful."

Tom said nothing to that, but his expression hardened again. He knew that she was right, and she knew that he didn't like it.

She took a step toward him, and lowered her voice to a whisper. "Listen, I'm not doing something like this again, alright? I don't want you doing something like this again. It's too dangerous."

Tom's face was the same, but something flashed in his eyes before he swallowed. "What? Are you
saying that you're concerned about my well-being?" he scoffed.

Hermione sighed in agitation, and rolled her eyes. Why was he so irritating and defensive all the time? It drove her batty. She turned away from him, and took a few steps before turning back around again. "Whatever you do, Tom, you're still my brother. Of course, I'm concerned about your well-being."

When Hermione saw that Tom had started unconsciously chewing on his bottom lip at her admission, she contained her wonder. He was nervous? Why would something like that make him nervous?

After she realized that he wasn't going to say anything else, she told him goodnight, and walked back to the Gryffindor common room.

After she said the password to the Fat Lady, and walked through the entrance, she heard someone call out her name.

She'd only been planning on going straight to her room to read before bed; but, apparently, Harry Potter had other plans for her.

"Hello, Harry," she said curtly.

"Hi, Hermione. I, uh, just wanted to know if you were alright," he said nervously.

Hermione frowned in confusion at his words. "Sorry? Why are you asking me if I'm alright? Weren't you the one who got sent to the infirmary today?"

At that, Harry laughed. "Yeah, I suppose you're right. Ron isn't very good at Potions, is he?"

Hermione's eyes went wide. Well, it probably doesn't help when people lace your cauldron with the wrong ingredients, she thought, but quickly shook it out of her head.

"But I was talking about the other day – what Ron said. Well, he…he shouldn't have said it. It was rude," Harry said, and scratched the back of his head.

Hermione frowned. "Laughing at what he said was just as rude."

Harry winced at her tone. "Yeah, I know. I'm sorry – really."

The scowl on her face dropped away in an instant. "Oh, well…if that's the case, I forgive you."

Harry gave her a brilliant smile and her heart fluttered. "Perfect!" he said, and stretched his hand out to her. "Friends?"

Hermione looked down at his hand, then back to his beautiful, green eyes. A slow smile crept across her face. She reached out to grasp his hand.

"Friends," she repeated with a small smile.

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Tom remembered the surprise he felt when he first saw his sister and Potter sitting at breakfast in the Great Hall together the day after they had made the potion explode.

After the initial shock wore off, it was quickly replaced by indignation.

How dare she? How dare she!
Stupid Weasley and Potter were to blame for her crying in the first place! Then he had helped her exact her revenge, he comforted her, and this is how she repaid him? By becoming all chummy with Potter the very next day?

He remembered the way his housemates called after him when he stormed out of the Great Hall. He remembered pacing back and forth in an empty classroom as he tried to figure out what he was going to do about this unforeseen turn of events. He remembered not being able to think of anything - especially after what Hermione had said to him.

*I just don't want to get expelled, Tom. Do you want to be expelled?*

Tom had remembered the way he ground his teeth together. He knew she was right. Why was it, that whenever he had that little voice of reason in his brain, it was always her voice? Always – without fail.

And so, listening to that little voice in his head, he had refrained from doing anything.

That was then, but this was now. Now, they weren't at Hogwarts. Now, they were at home.

Now, his sister had gotten a letter from Potter over Christmas vacation. The way she reacted excitedly when she saw the owl rapping on the dining room window grated on his nerves. The way she went on and on about his stupid baby brother to their parents irritated him. The way she rushed up to her room to reply to his letter set his chest on fire.

And, oh, how that fire burned.

Tom felt a smile slowly spread across his face as he watched Hermione rush up the stairs.

Her terrified screams he woke up to the next morning were like music to his ears.

Apparently, she didn't like sharing her bed with dead mice.

Tom closed his eyes again, and snuggled a little deeper into his pillows - a content smile upon his lips.

The music continued.

He loved it.

*Happy Christmas, Hermione.*

The rest of the school year passed by in a blur. Hugo and Jean wrote letters to Tom and Hermione about how proud they were that they were the top two students in their year. The amount of praise they both got from professors and other students made them swell with pride. While some students looked at Tom and Hermione with admiration, a few looked on with jealousy. It was concerning.

It was normal for people to be jealous, Tom had said. Hermione supposed it was true, but she couldn't understand why anyone would be jealous of her. But Tom? She could understand why someone would be jealous of Tom.

She wasn't a fool when it came to their appearances. Hermione was too short, too skinny, with hair that was too big for her head, and front teeth that seemed to have grown faster than the rest of her face. She knew she wasn't pretty like some of the other girls, but it was something she was fine with. There were more important things in life than her looks; and, honestly, she didn't like
having the attention on herself, anyway.

The case wasn’t the same with Tom – he seemed to thrive off the attention he got. Many of the girls in their year, and even some girls in second year, seemed to fancy him. He was tall, smart, and handsome – and he knew it, and used it to his advantage.

While Hermione read and studied until she fell asleep on her books, Tom spent hardly any of his free time doing the same. Everything just came naturally to him. It made her feel both emotions: she admired him, but she also felt a bit jealous. It wasn’t fair. It really wasn’t fair.

Everything had turned into a competition between the two, but she knew it was more on her part than on his. He had told her she was being idiotic, but she knew it made him work a little bit harder. If it made him work harder, that meant he was concerned enough that she would surpass him one day. It gave her a small amount of satisfaction that she had some sort of control over him.

Her social life had become much better after Christmas break, too. She’d found out that being friends with someone like Harry Potter had its perks. His parents were well known in the wizarding community, and many of the other children in the school knew him, so he was rather popular.

Being friends with Harry Potter made her popular by association. She didn't care much about popularity; if anything, it was a bother. One of the biggest perks was that everyone in Gryffindor had stopped teasing her. She’d finally found her place among them, just as Tom had found his place among the Slytherins.

Hermione smiled from her place on the sofa in between Harry and Neville, and sipped on her pumpkin juice while they spoke with the other students about the last Quidditch game of the school year coming up against Ravenclaw. She didn't like Quidditch very much, but it was nice to go cheer her fellow housemates on.

Yes, she had found her place at Hogwarts, indeed.

Tom and Hermione had only been home from Hogwarts for two days before their parents sat them down in the living room to have a very serious discussion with them. From the wary looks on their faces, it didn't look like it could possibly be good news.

Any kind of discussion that involved sitting down as a group, as a family, made his heartrate accelerate drastically. He caught himself biting down hard on his bottom lip, and stopped himself before he chewed it raw.

Was this it, then? Had they finally had enough of him? Was that horrid smelling social worker coming back to collect him in the morning? He glanced at Hermione, and wondered to himself: was it her? Had she told them what he did at Hogwarts? Had she betrayed him like that?

No. No, he told himself. She wouldn't do that to him; besides, she was in on it, too. It wasn't like perfect, little Hermione Granger would blab on herself. Also, she herself looked concerned. She obviously had no idea what the topic of discussion was going to be about, either.

If it wasn't her, then what could it be? He'd been perfectly well-behaved since coming here. Okay, well, not perfectly well-behaved, but he had been decently well-behaved. If Hermione weren't so bloody irritating…

"We wanted to talk with you about living with us, Tom. It was a bit of a rough start, and although things have improved, we were – uh…" Hugo started awkwardly, not quite sure how he should
Damn it all to Hell. Damn it, damn it, damn it.

Jean gave her husband a withering look, and took over the conversation for him. "We've filled out all the required paperwork to adopt you, Tom."

Silence.

"What?" Tom asked quietly, breathless.

Jean smiled the most beautiful smile just for him. "We want to adopt you, Tom. Officially. That is, if you'll allow us."

His mind was spinning and it couldn't calibrate fast enough for him.

*We want to adopt you, Tom.*

A safe home. A safe family. Permanence.

*We want to adopt you, Tom.*

No more shifting from foster home to foster home. No more wondering if the next place was going to be as worse as the last. No more potential abuse.

*We want to adopt you, Tom.*

Before he knew what he was doing, and he blamed the lack of calibration on his part, he leapt up from his chair, and enveloped Jean in a tight hug. She returned it easily. Tom couldn't see her face, but he knew that she was crying. Before, he would get annoyed with her crying so easily at those sappy animal shelter commercials, but he couldn't find it in himself to be annoyed with her now. If anything, he could use her tears to his advantage – to make everything more *real* for him.

"Thank you," he whispered.

Jean cried harder, like he knew she would. Her fingers that ran soothingly through his hair made his eyelids flutter closed involuntarily. The way her sobs made her ribcage convulse lulled his spinning mind. It was comforting.

*We want to adopt you, Tom.*

He opened his eyes, and looked at Hermione, who was staring at him expressionlessly from her spot on the sofa. His heart leapt at the sight of her once he realized what else this meant.

*We want to adopt you, Tom.*

*Hermione.*

She would never be able to leave him now and he would never leave her.

The humidity in the summer air caused her hair to cling to the back of her neck like a wet vine. Hermione rarely pulled her hair back, but it was something that was required for a night like tonight. Bed time was nearing, and there was work was to be done; she didn't want her hair getting in the way of that.

While Hermione was chasing fireflies in their backyard with a glass jar, Tom was crouched down
by one of the many trees in the forest line of their backyard. What he was doing, she did not know. She was curious to know, though.

Mum and Dad had told her to give him some time to himself - to let him process everything. The whole adoption process could be overwhelming, they had said. Even though Tom was a very mature child, and didn't show his emotions readily, it still would cause a lot of stress, they had said.

What they didn't realize, perhaps, that the whole adoption was a lot for her to process. She knew that they didn't mean to be forgetful of how she would feel about it, but she still felt bothered by the fact that they hadn't even sat her down and spoke to her of it first. Hermione was their child – their real child – no offense to Tom, but shouldn't she have had a say in it all? Maybe since they had sat down, and spoke of the entire proposition of having a foster sibling to her last year, and the possibility of adoption to her, they had assumed she would still be okay with it. She had been excited about the prospect of having a sibling a year ago; so, why wouldn't she feel the same now? It would have been hypocritical of her.

When she thought about it...what would she have said? Would she have said that, no, she didn't want Tom as her adoptive brother? Or, would she have said yes? Honestly, was there any difference between him being a foster brother, and an adoptive brother?

Hermione caught two fireflies in her jar in one fell swoop, and put the lid on. She frowned in thought as she looked at the fireflies flying around in the jar, blinking their lights. Her troubled gaze wandered from the fireflies, to Tom's hunched form by the tree line.

Was there really any difference?

She pursed her lips in speculation. When she really thought about it, she couldn't imagine Tom not living with them now. At first, she hated him, and wanted his social worker to show up on their doorstep, and take him away. But now...? The very thought of his bedroom being the guest bedroom again seemed foreign to her – it seemed wrong.

Tom had been living with them as her brother for over a year now. While his first summer with them had been rough, since then, it had been better. They still argued and fought often, of course; but wasn't that how siblings were supposed to be? She would be lying if she said that having someone around to talk to about things wasn't pleasant. Plus, none of the other children in their neighborhood, or their old school bothered her anymore. She supposed that dealing with only Tom was better than dealing with everyone else.

Hermione took a steadying breath, and walked toward Tom. When she reached his hunched over form, she saw that he had a small pocket knife, and was scraping away the bark on the tree. She plopped down in the grass nearby him, and watched quietly. She knew that he knew she was there, but he hadn't acknowledged her.

After a few minutes of silence, she finally asked, "Why are you collecting that bark?"

"Who said I was collecting it?" he asked, not looking at her.

"No one, I suppose; but what other reason could you possibly need it for?"

"Do I need a reason?"

Hermione blinked in surprise. She shifted her eyes from the fireflies in the glass jar in her hands, then back to Tom. "No, I guess you don't," she said slowly. "So, why are you scraping the bark off the tree, then?"
Tom stilled his scraping long enough to glance at her, his eyebrow raised. "I wanted to see its insides."

"Its insides?" she asked, her nose wrinkled in confusion.

Tom gave her one of his small, mischievous smiles – this one lazier than most, before scraping the bark away again. "Yes. I wanted to see its insides – its meat. I wanted to see what's underneath."

Hermione frowned. She knew that trees had rings, but she had never thought much about what was underneath the bark. She briefly wondered what the 'meat' would technically be called, but the sound of the knife cutting into the bark again pulled her from her thoughts. "But... why?"

"Because I just wanted to know," he snapped impatiently. Tom picked up a large piece of bark that had fallen into the grass, and held it out to her. She took it from him, not entirely sure why he had given it to her. He stood up, and looked at his work curiously. "You know, trees are kind of like people."

"How so?"

"Trees find their place in life, and sink their roots in deep – they stay there. They're stuck there. They can never leave. They have limbs. They have meat. Their bark is their skin," at this statement, Tom drove his knife into the tree forcefully, angrily. He scowled as he spoke, "If you cut them, they bleed their life out. All that sap leaks out, you know. All of their life."

Hermione stayed silent. She was equal parts enthralled, and petrified.

Tom pulled the knife back out of the tree, and looked down at her emotionlessly. "Just like people."

Hermione dropped the bark into the grass as if it had burned her.

He was gauging her reaction; she could tell. This was a test; although, what kind of test it was, she did not know. She looked at his line of sight, and realized he was looking at her jar. She stared at the fireflies, and thought about what he had said.

"You... you don't want to be rooted?" she asked slowly. Tom's eyes narrowed at her for a moment, then he said down next to her.

"Can I see?" he asked, motioning to the jar in her hands. Hermione wasn't a fool; she knew a change of subject when she saw one.

She pursed her lips together. "Only if you promise this isn't going to be a repeat of what happened last time you got ahold of an insect I found."

He sighed, and rolled his eyes. "I'm not going to rip their bloody wings off. I promise. Just let me see them."

Tom had never promised her anything before, so she had little choice other than to believe him. "Fine," she sighed, and handed him the jar.

She watched him nervously as he turned the jar over in his hands slowly.

"Do you know why they blink like that?" he asked her.

Hermione shook her head.
"It's how they talk to each other. It's how they communicate," he told her.

Hermione's interest piqued. "Oh, that's fascinating! Do you wonder what kind of things they tell each other? Do you think there are certain sequences that mean different things? Oh! What do you think they're saying to each other right now?"

Tom leaned away from her a little, and frowned. She felt her face heat up when she realized how close she'd gotten in his personal space in her excitement. She mumbled a quick apology, and backed away. They remained silent for a few moments.

"Give me your hand, Hermione."

"What? Why?" she asked suspiciously.

"Don't ask stupid questions. Just do as I tell you to," he bit out impatiently, holding his own hand out expectantly.

Hermione crossed her arms over her chest, and frowned. "It wasn't a stupid question. It's my hand, not yours; so, of course I'm going to ask – hey!"

While Hermione had been busy being Hermione, Tom had been busy being Tom. He'd snatched her hand in his in a vice-like grip. To her horror, she watched in slow motion as Tom brought his knife down to her open palm, and sliced a jagged cut down the middle. It had all happened so quickly, she barely had time to register it, or even cry out. Tom then sliced his own palm down the middle, and threw the knife down.

"What-what are you-" she spluttered in shock.

Before she could react properly, he had laced the fingers of his bloody hand with hers. Hermione's face scrunched together in pain and disgust when their palms slicked together from their blended blood.

Tom's eyes locked on hers in an intense stare. His charcoal eyes pulled her in, and swallowed her whole. "Your life is bleeding out like the sap. My life is bleeding out like the bloody sap; and now, we're sharing it with each other."

"Tom?" she asked hesitantly.

Tom's nostrils flared and he licked his lips as he leaned in closer to her face. Staring, staring, staring at her. She felt his bloody fingers squeeze hers once, and he said quietly, "We share the same blood now; now, we're rooted."

Hermione tried to swallow, but there was no saliva to help her.

"Rooted?"

"In the dirt," he said simply, as if it was the easiest thing in the world to understand. Hermione didn't understand, but she wanted to.

That's when she began feeling a tingling warmth. She wasn't sure if it was her accidental magic healing her hand, or if it was from the blood dripping between them.

Tom had finally let go of her hand. She quickly examined it to see that the warm feeling had been her magic – her hand was still covered in blood, but the cut was healed. When she looked back at Tom, she'd noticed that he was still watching her.
"What?" she asked.

The corner of Tom's mouth curled up and he looked away from her, and to the jar. "Nothing," he said, and began twisting the lid to the jar open; his blood caused his hand to slip several times.

"You promised!" Hermione admonished.

"Oh, shut up. I'm just letting them go. Were you planning on keeping them in here forever?" he questioned her, raising an eyebrow.

"Well…no, but-

"Perfect," he said, then tossed the lid down next to his bloody knife.

Hermione and Tom said nothing else to each other as they watched the two fireflies crawl their way up to the mouth of the jar, open their wings, and flutter off into the darkening sky together. They blinked their lights to each other the entire way; one never straying far from the other.

Hermione looked up at the side of Tom's face as he watched the fireflies join the other ones floating in their backyard in wonder. She knew that she acted older than her age, but it was in that moment when she realized that Tom didn't just act older than his age, didn't just look older than his age, but his soul was older than his age.

What had he seen before coming here? What had he experienced? How bad had his life really been to make him the way that he was? Hermione felt a pang of guilt rip through her when she realized that she had absolutely no idea, because she had never bothered to ask him – she had never bothered to find out. It was in that moment that she had decided that it was something she was going to bother herself with, even if he didn't want her to. He was officially here to stay, after all.

Without thinking, Hermione found Tom's fingers, and twined them with hers. He looked down at her, surprised. She grinned at him. He gave a small smile.

And there, they sat, their blood mixed together between their intertwined fingers, as they stared up into the night sky.

And there, they sat – rooted.

A/N: Yeah, yeah. I know there aren't fireflies in England, but let's just pretend the fact that Tom wasn't born until 1979 is the reason they're present in England now. Let's just call it the...Firefly Effect. Ba-dum-tss. Thanks to Radiant Innocence and Vino Amore for being my beta/alpha fishes again.

Also, I'm skipping forward two years. The next chapter will start off in their Fourth Year. You're welcome...? Maybe? I don't know about you, but I'm excited for the Triwizard Tournament. Fuck, yes.

Shout out to everyone who has commented, bookmarked, and given out those kudos! You guys are the freakin' bestest.
It had taken two years of challenges, two years of ups and downs, two years of living for the roots to take a firm hold in the dirt; but when it did, oh, when it finally did, it was a beautiful kind of chaos. The roots – some were gnarled and twisted, but deep. It was proof that not everything was perfect; but it was also proof that life wasn't perfect.

Life wasn't perfect, and that's exactly what made it perfect; it was something that should never be taken for granted.

The sunlight filtering through the leaves above her was something that Hermione also never took for granted. It was warmth, it was light, it was comfort. If she were to spend her free time doing anything before summer vacation was over, it would be this - lying in her backyard, underneath the trees, with a book in hand.

This – this was her happy place.

Hermione yawned. The only downside was that it made her a bit drowsy being wrapped up in all that warmth and light. She set her book down in the grass next to her, and closed her eyes; but just because her eyes were closed, didn't mean her mind was.

Her thoughts drifted over many things: her new class schedule, starting her fourth year at Hogwarts, her friends, her brother…

She caught herself unconsciously rubbing her thumb over the jagged scar on her palm. The corner of her mouth curled. The scar – it was a reminder – a reminder of a night that seemed so long ago, but only felt like yesterday.

He had a reminder, too; and that's what he'd called his scar – a reminder. But he didn't need to remind her – it was something that she would never forget.
She thought about how much Tom had changed over the past two years, and how much he also had stayed the same. He was still vindictive and intense at times, but he was better at controlling his temper tantrums now.

Every year, grades had turned into a competition. So competitive they were, they had been allowed shared use of a Time Turner from Professor McGonagall to attend extra classes last year. They were the first students to take that many classes. Their grades, of course, had ended up being the same.

It was known throughout Hogwarts that Hermione Granger and Tom Riddle were the brightest witch and wizard of their age.

They had their strengths and weaknesses, of course. Where Tom excelled in Defense Against the Dark Arts and Potions, Hermione excelled in Arithmancy and Charms. Tom hadn't seemed to have any weaknesses, but he'd admitted that he didn't care for Herbology much - something about being dirty and smelling like fertilizer. Hermione's weaknesses were Divination and flying.

Tom had laughed at her, asking what kind of witch she was if she couldn't even fly on a broom. After their parents had brought them to see the new Disney movie *Hocus Pocus* last year, Tom had asked her if she'd feel more comfortable flying on a vacuum instead. His laughter had been cut short by a well-placed elbow to his ribs. She smiled at the memory.

While Hermione was busy lost in her own sleepy thoughts, she didn't immediately realize the feeling of something cool sliding up her bare leg. When she did notice, she gasped in surprise, and sat up.

There, wrapping itself around her calf, was a young garden snake. Its head lifted toward her, with its tongue flicking out to smell and taste her skin.

Most people would have screamed and kicked the snake off them – Hermione wasn't most people; just like Tom wasn't most people.

Hermione shook her head, and rolled her eyes before falling back onto the grass again. "Tom!" she called out. "Come call your little friend off me before I unleash Crookshanks on it!"

She'd closed her eyes again; so, she couldn't see him, but the sunlight filtering through her eyelids darkened. She heard a deep chuckle sound above her.

"Why? He seems to like you so very much, Hermione," he said mischievously.

"Well, I don't. Tell him to go away."

Hermione listened hard to the words Tom hissed out at the snake, but none of it made sense – it never did. She let the hissed words travel deep into the recesses of her eardrums, and settle there. She'd never tell him, but she loved the way it sounded.

The first time she caught him talking to a snake caught her by surprise, but it excited her to no end. She'd asked him to speak to it more, and asked what it was saying. Again, and again, and again. The way it sounded was beautiful, and she wanted to learn it desperately. Dejection was the strongest word she could use to describe how she had felt when Tom told her that it was impossible to learn. She knew he took pride in the fact that no one else they knew could do it. It really wasn't fair.

After he spoke, Hermione could feel the cool skin of the snake leaving her leg. She felt Tom settle down on the grass next to her, but he didn't say anything immediately. She started dozing back off
again when he finally spoke.

"So, when are they arriving?" he asked, his sour tone obvious.

Hermione threw her forearm over her face and groaned internally, wishing desperately for the quiet again. She didn't feel like getting into an argument today. "They should be here at around five. Have you packed?"

"Unfortunately," he said sarcastically.

At this, Hermione turned her face to squint at him, using her forearm to help block out the sun. There were times she caught herself looking at her brother longer than she should. She didn't mean to, she really didn't; it was just – he had become so beautiful that sometimes she got caught off-guard by it. She'd thought seeing his face every day would make her used to it, but it hadn't. "It isn't going to be that bad, Tom. Maybe you'll even have fun."

"Hah. I can think of several things that would be more fun that attending a Quidditch game with Potter. Let's name some of them, shall we? It'd be more fun to brush my teeth with glass. It'd be more fun to drive Billywig stingers into my cornea. It'd be more fun to give a hippogriff a prostate exam."

Hermione scrunched her face up at the last one, and put her hands over her ears. "Oh, my God, Tom! That's disgusting. You're being dramatic."

"I can assure you that I am not."

Hermione sighed. "I don't understand why you dislike Harry so much."

"Oh, I don't dislike him; I loathe him," he said forcefully.

At his harsh words, Hermione sat up, and looked down at him. "But, why? You hardly know him. I know if you gave him a chance, you'd come to at least tolerate him."

Tom sat up, and frowned at her. "Why? Are you serious right now? I loathe him, because he walks around Hogwarts like he owns the place. I loathe him, because his grandfather's money has made him pretentious. I loathe him, because he's just another Pureblood prat who will more than likely contribute nothing to wizarding society, just like his father."

Hermione gaped at him, shocked. "That's a bit harsh, don't you think?"

"Please - you know it's true. You're just too nice to say so. The Potter family lives off the profits of a wizarding hair care product. Name three things they've done that is worth noting – no, name one," Tom sneered. Hermione's face was firm as she went to open her mouth, but he interrupted her, "And Lily Potter's work in potionering does not count."

Her face fell and she frowned at him. She glared at the triumphant look on her brother's face, and watched the corners of his mouth slowly curve up into a lazy smirk.

Tom had started picking bits of grass out of her frizzy hair when she said, "They're good people, Tom. Harry's parents are always helping others in need. It's not fair – the things you say about them. I really don't like it."

She watched Tom pick a longer piece of grass out of her hair, and twirl it between his fingers before he threw it. He gave her a cold smile. "Fine. I won't say anything bad about his parents anymore."
"And?" she asked expectantly, her eyebrows raised hopefully.

Tom scoffed, and stood up. "Nice try, sis. Not gonna happen."

Hermione pouted and her shoulders slumped in defeat. "Please?"

He stood over her menacingly, and gave her an intense stare with narrowed eyes. Narrowed eyes meant that he was at least thinking, which meant that he might give in. It didn't always happen, but she was still going to try.

She flinched when he reached his hand down to her expectantly, and took it cautiously. He yanked her up roughly and told her, "I promise I'll be polite to Harry and his family, and keep my mouth shut until we're at Hogwarts. That's the best you're going to get. Take it, or leave it."

A broad, excited grin broke out across her face. As sad as it was, this was better than she had been expecting. Hermione quickly hugged him and he wrapped his arms around her in return.

"I'll take it! Thank you, Tom."

He let go of her and said with a small smirk, "Don't mention it. Ever."

Tom watched Hermione and Harry entertain Potter's little heathen of a brother with an assortment of magicked toys from his spot at the dining table. He'd been a bit shocked, and somewhat envious, at the size and quality of the Potter's magicked tent; he would be a liar if he said he wasn't impressed – it was enormous.

The tent being enormous was good, of course, because that meant he would have an easier time avoiding Potter. Well, avoiding everyone, really. He really didn't want to be here – he really hadn't wanted to come. The only people, aside from Hermione, that didn't grate on his nerves was Mrs. Potter, Mr. Weasley and the youngest Weasley girl.

He slowly sipped his tea as he watched Hermione make the toddler laugh at a toy bird by circling it around his head full of fiery hair, and briefly wondered why in the world he was surrounded by so many damn gingers. Seriously, it was ridiculous.

"Hermione says you like honey glazed ham, Tom?"

Tom blinked and turned his attention from Hermione, to Lily Potter. She was standing at the end of the dining table, and smiled kindly at him. He really wanted to dislike her, but the only thing about her that grated on his nerves was her constant calmness. It was eerie, and made him uncomfortable. Didn't she ever get angry? Frustrated? Sad? It was unnatural.

He nodded at her question, and smiled politely at her. "Yes, but don't feel like you have to prepare that on my account. I don't want to cause you any extra work. I'm sure whatever you make will taste delicious."

"Oh, you're so sweet to say that! But I'm still going to make you ham; it'll be no trouble at all, dear," she said with an even bigger smile. "I'm just happy that your sister managed to convince you to come."

At this, Tom glanced at his sister, and the corner of his mouth twitched. "She's stubborn, that's for sure."

Lily laughed. "That, she is. She's such a sweetheart. Anyway, I should get supper started before we have to head to the tournament."
He nodded politely at the older woman, and took another sip of his tea.

He really didn't want to be here, but at least he was having ham.

Hermione had just set the toy bird floating around the boy's head down, when the front flap to the tent opened. James stuck his head in and said, "Oi! Harry! Hermione! Tom! Someone out here wants to say hello to you."

Tom raised his eyebrow skeptically. He couldn't think of a single person that would be here that would want to say hello to them all at once.

"Oh? Who is it?" Hermione asked.

James grinned, and said before his head disappeared again. "Just come out here, will you? Oh, Harry! Bring Charles with you, but make sure you put his coat on first."

"Will do," Harry nodded, and picked his brother up to do as he was told.

Hermione and Tom exchanged a glance and they both shrugged, then made their way out of the tent. Right when they were at the exit, they heard a rowdy laugh. They froze, and looked at each other. A grin broke out across Hermione's face and he did his best to keep his roguish smile under control.

Tom could recognize that mischievous laugh from anywhere.

"Professor Black," they said simultaneously, and pushed their way out of the tent.

They had been right.

There, standing near the roaring campfire, was their Defence Against the Dark Arts teacher talking with the older Weasley children. He, along with everyone else, was dressed in their Muggle clothing. It was a bit odd to see him wearing faded blue jeans and a leather jacket, but it suited him. His black curls fell back from his face when he threw back his bottle of butterbeer.

Sirius Black had already been smiling, but once he saw Tom and Hermione step from the tent, his grin bordered on ridiculous.

"Tom! Hermione!" he shouted out. He clasped both of his hands on each of their shoulders and said, "And how are my favorite pair of siblings doing?"

"Hey!" Fred and George shouted.

Sirius turned and looked at them, affronted. "You two are my favorite twins."

"We're still siblings, though," Fred joked.

Sirius waved the back of his hand at them. "Yeah, yeah," he said, and turned his attention back to Tom and Hermione. "So, how are you two doing? Have a good summer?"

"Oh, it was wonderful. Mum and dad took us to Paris last month," Hermione said.

Sirius raised his eyebrows. "Oh?" he asked, then his gaze traveled to Tom. He gave him a conspiratorial smile, and winked. "So, no mischief this summer? I'm disappointed in you, Tom."

At this, Tom grinned, but said nothing. Professor Black was, by far, his favorite teacher at Hogwarts. He'd caught Tom setting up what he'd thought was an innocent prank last year against
another student, but he had really been plotting revenge against an older Housemate that had called him and his sister... 

Mudbloods.

He'd never told Professor Black what he'd really been planning and he'd never told Hermione what some of the other students had said. They normally told each other almost everything, but he'd wanted to handle that little problem on his own.

"Really, Sirius? You shouldn't be encouraging that kind of behavior as a teacher!" James said with a laugh.

Sirius turned his head to James, and looked offended. "Oh, come on, James! You know I'm not allowed to do those sorts of things anymore – I have to live vicariously through someone."

Sirius gave Tom a wink. Tom smirked.

"Why Dumbledore hired you on as a teacher, I will never know," James muttered into the lip of his bottle of butterbeer.

"Oh, that one is easy. I was his favorite," Professor Black said, then gave Hermione and Tom another playful wink.

After supper, the Potter's, Tom, Hermione, and Professor Black made their way to the stadium. On the way, they ran into the Weasley's, and walked together.

Tom inwardly groaned. And, yet again, Tom was surrounded by far too many gingers for his liking. Hermione owed him for this – big time.

Once they got to the stadium and made their way up the many stairs, the Weasley's went their separate way to continue to the cheaper seats. James had bought better seats. Even though Tom had said harsh, yet true, statements about the man yesterday, he was thankful he paid for better seats. He hadn't felt like freezing his arse off in the higher stands.

They eventually got settled into their seats, and Tom held his tongue when Hermione plopped into the seat between Harry and Tom. Why had he promised her he'd keep his mouth shut? He didn't understand why he'd promised her anything to begin with. Then he remembered the face she made when she was frustrated – when her eyes got smaller, when her nose scrunched up, and when her lips pouted. Her brat face – that's what it was. She was a brat.

Well, if there was one thing Tom always did, it was keep his word. So, he'd remained silent.

He'd remained silent when the seating arrangement wasn't to his liking.

He'd remained silent when she laughed at Harry's terrible jokes.

He'd remained silent when Harry shared his food with her.

Harry then made a joke about her hair, and gently tugged one of her curls. Tom watched the way it sprang back up when it left his fingers.

Tom's fingers twitched and his blood set on fire. He needed to walk away, before he did something that would piss Hermione off.

He startled everyone when he stood up abruptly. They stared at him in confusion.

"Excuse me, but where's the loo?" he asked informally.
"Ah, we passed right by them on our way here. Just go back the way we came and take the first left. They'll be a large sign. Can't miss it," Sirius told him.

Tom gave a tight smile, thanked him, and left. He refused to look at Hermione when she gave him a questioning look.

He flexed the fingers on his right hand continuously as he envisioned himself pummeling his fist into Harry's face over, and over, and over again. He pictured a bloody nose, black eyes, and broken glasses. A pleasant shiver ran through him when he envisioned what would happen if the shards from the glasses embedded themselves into Harry's irises.

It was a beautiful vision, because Potter would lose his. It was a beautiful vision of crimson blood and green eyes mixing together. What a lovely shade it made in his mind.

He sighed, and loosened his jaw by swaying it side to side. He needed to calm down. He needed to control himself.

Tom had managed to find the restrooms in his quiet rage. He leaned over one of the sinks, and splashed cool water over his face. He closed his eyes, and fought hard to hear Hermione's voice of reason – her voice of logic.

What would she say to him right now, if she were here? What would she tell him?

He opened his eyes, and looked at his reflection in the mirror. He watched as his jaw ticked and his nostrils flared and his shoulders heaved.

She'd tell him to stop being dramatic – that's what she would say. You're making this into a bigger deal than what it actually is, she'd say.

Tom knew she'd be right, but he couldn't help it. He hated Potter. He hated what he represented. He hated how conceited he was. He wasn't anyone special. His grades were mediocre, at best; but just because of his last name, he could get nearly any job at the Ministry he wanted, if he wanted it. While Tom and Hermione had the best grades in all of Hogwarts in the last century, just because they were Muggleborn, their options were more...limited.

Tom had learned early on that the right name got you further in the wizarding world. Tom sneered. Pretentious Pureblood prats.

Banishing the last thought in his head, he straightened himself out, and steadied his breathing. Everything was fine. He would show them – no, they would show them. They would be better. They would be smarter. They would be stronger.

They would build their names up from the mud by turning the mud into bricks. Up, up, up to the very top. Him and his sister would be on a dais, and they would look down on everyone else who hadn't thought they were worthy before.

Tom could see it in his mind's eye; and, oh, wasn't it beautiful.

He sighed, and decided that he was calm enough to go back to the game. If he paid attention to the stupid game, and not Potter, then he would be fine.

Tom hadn't made it far out of the loo before he heard someone calling his name. He stopped, and turned his head to the side to see Draco Malfoy walking toward him. He inwardly groaned. The older man walking with a cane had to be his father – the looked almost identical. Oh, just bloody perfect. Tom was seriously regretting promising Hermione he'd come to this stupid fucking game.
Tom nodded. "Draco."

"Tom," Draco nodded back. "Father, this is Tom Riddle – my friend from Hogwarts that I've been telling you about. Tom, this is my Father, Lucius Malfoy."

The man's eyes seemed to light up with recognition at Tom's name. "Oh? Why, yes. Draco has told me so much about you, Mr. Riddle."

"All good things, I hope," Tom said charmingly.

Lucius gave a tight smile and side-glanced his son once before looking back at Tom. "Yes, of course. He tells me that you have been at the top of your year every year so far?"

"Yes," Tom said, and faked a modest look. "My sister, as well. Our grades have been tied every year."

The older man raised a single brow, and did his best to look down condescendingly at Tom. Tom wasn't ruffled in the slightest. "Impressive," he said, but hadn't sounded that impressed.

Tom willed his hatred to go away. It was a difficult task.

"Father, could Tom sit with us in the Minister's Box? We could upgrade his ticket…" Draco trailed off, hopeful.

Tom's ears perked up at this. He already had great seats thanks to James and Lily Potter, but they weren't sitting with the Minister of Magic. Tom thought that if the Minister of Magic was there, then there would be other important people he could be introduced to. His mind was reeling with all the potential scenarios that could happen if he went with Draco and his father, when the older man spoke again.

"We could, I suppose…" Lucius trailed off.

"I would be incredibly grateful, sir; but don't feel like you have to go out of your way on my account," Tom said. He played the humbled card, and played it well.

Lucius looked contemplative. "I'm not sure if there is an extra seat, Draco. There are only twenty, after all."

Tom had thought that Draco looked ridiculous pouting, and nearly rolled his eyes. Nearly.

A sudden thought came to Tom's mind as he watched Lucius consider Draco's request that made him almost panic.

Hermione.

If he went with Draco and his father, Hermione would be left alone with Potter. Not only that, but she would be upset with him. Well, her being upset with him, he could deal with. Honestly, he didn't really care that much about upsetting her. Rubbing shoulders with important people to help get their foot in the door would be worth her being irate with him. She'd thank him later. He knew she would.

Then, Tom thought of the way Harry's fingers brushed against one of her curls and…

"On second thought, sir, I almost forgot about my sister. I think she'd be worried about me if I didn't come back to my seat," Tom said with a polite smile, but internally, he was furious. He was
giving up an excellent opportunity, because Harry fucking Potter couldn’t keep his bloody hands to himself.

Draco and Lucius voiced their disappointment – Draco more so than Lucius, of course. Tom thanked Lucius Malfoy for his consideration, and made his way back to his seat.

When he arrived, he was happy to see that Potter was too engrossed in the game to pay anything else any notice. Even Hermione seemed to be interested in the game. Tom hated Quidditch; so, there he sat, pretending to be interested.

For just a moment, he cursed taking on the role of being the protective brother. He’d wished, for just a moment – only a moment – that she wasn’t his sister. Then, maybe, he wouldn’t feel so inclined to be protective of her all the time.

Tom glanced at her from the corner of his eye, and willed the moment to be gone. It was difficult.

The moment didn't want to go away.

If Tom had thought the way people conducted themselves during a professional Quidditch tournament was bad, the way they acted afterward was...borderline pathetic.

He hadn't even bothered formally excusing himself from the festivities once all the Weasley’s came over, and started causing a commotion. He'd walked into the section of the tent that he was sharing with Hermione, closed the flaps, and put up a quietening charm. He fell back on his cot, stared at the ceiling of the tent, and willed his headache to go away. He was just thankful that the day was finally over, and that he'd get some sleep.

Tom's head shot up when he suddenly heard Ron's voice yelling out about Krum again. That's when he saw a pajama-clad Hermione closing the flap back behind her, cutting off the sound of the irritating voices. He sighed, and sat up on his cot.

"At first I thought my Quietus charm wore off," he said tiredly.

Hermione gave him an amused look. "You mean the great Tom Riddle doubts the strength of his own charms?"

Tom snorted. "No. I've got a headache, so I'm not exactly in my prime right now."

He watched her as she rolled her eyes, and made her way over to her cot. She plopped down across from him, and started fiddling with the sleeves of her pajamas. He knew she wanted to say something, so he waited.

"Thank you for coming with me. I know you really didn't want to."

He looked at her, and raised his eyebrow. "You're right. I really didn't; yet, here I am," he joked half-heartedly.

"Oh, shut up," she said, but couldn’t stop a small smirk from forming on her face. The corners of his mouth curled up in amusement.

"I mean it, though. Thank you."

"Words are meaningless. If you want to show me your thanks, then prove it, sis," he said in a mischievous tone.
Hermione frowned at him. "How?"

Tom looked pensive for a few moments. "Sit with me and my friends on the Hogwarts Express when we go back to school next week."

Her mouth fell open. "What? No. You know your friends drive me mad. They don't even like me."

The smirk fell from his face as he stared at her pointedly. She winced once she realized how selfish she sounded. "Fine. I'll sit with you instead," she grumbled out. "But you'd better tell Malfoy to keep his mouth shut, or I'll keep it shut for him. His bragging irks me to no end."

Tom smiled. "Good; and don't worry about Draco."

"Yeah, yeah," Hermione yawned then, and rubbed her eyes. "Ugh, it's past midnight. I think I'm going to go to bed now."

Tom nodded. "Me, too."

They both crawled into their own beds, and got underneath their covers. Tom turned the table lamp off, and felt thankful that neither of them could sleep unless it was completely dark. His head was killing him and the light didn't make it any better.

"Good night, Tom," she said sleepily.

"Good night, Hermione," he replied.

The small amount of light filtering through the flaps leading to the living quarters of the tent made it possible to see, but just barely. Tom watched Hermione toss and turn for a while, before she finally settled down, and the rhythm of her ribcage evened out.

A few minutes later, she rolled over in her sleep again, and faced him. His eyes traveled from her face, to her hair, to her shoulder, down her forearm, until it finally rested on her hand hanging off the side of her cot.

Tom slowly reached his hand across the space between them, and let his fingertips barely touch hers. He slowly slid them up the inside of her palm. He licked his lips when he found the scar, and touched it carefully.

His eyes flicked to her face. Once he saw that she wasn't going to wake up by him touching her hand, he decided to slide his open palm against her fingers.

Tom watched in a possessed sort of fascination at the way he made her sleepy index finger trail across the scar on his palm – her nail gently scraped against the slightly raised flesh. The muscles in his lower abdomen tightened, and made him shiver.

He brought his hand back to his face, and ran the scar over his lips - his mind a turbulent tempest. The dull throb in his left temple worsened.

Not once, while he dragged his bottom lip against his palm, did he take his eyes off Hermione.

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A/N: Be still, my heart. Analyze that last part as you will. I wanted to publicly clarify that the 'blood ritual' in the last chapter did not involve magic of any kind. That was Tom being a symbolic little shit. Thanks again to Radiant Innocence and VinoAmore for being my cute lil alpha/beta fishes, and thanks again for all the comments, kudos, and bookmarks!
Also, if you'd like to see my Tomione fanart and all the other Tomione/Harry Potter crap I post, you can follow me on Tumblr! Username is ninjafairy86!
A Promise is a Promise

Chapter Seven: A Promise is a Promise

The last Saturday before returning to Hogwarts was to be spent as a family day, their parents had said. One last day together before the new term started. As much as Tom yearned to be at Hogwarts, he had to admit that he always enjoyed his summers off with his family. His family.

It was still a somewhat foreign concept to him - being part of a family. He'd always assumed that he would live his life being shifted from foster home to foster home until he was eighteen, and was forced to be on his own.

That had been what he'd assumed, anyway.

For once, in his entire life, Tom was glad that he had been wrong about something.

He glanced at his parents, who were currently appreciating an old painting of one of the most unfortunate looking couples Tom had ever seen. It was of a man named Arnolfini, and his wife. He had tuned out the docent – who was a middle-aged man with an obnoxiously posh voice – almost as soon as he'd opened his mouth. He glimpsed at Hermione, and noticed that she didn't seem to be that interested in the painting, either.

He nudged his elbow against her arm to get her attention. Once he had it, he pointed to the painting with his chin, and said with a mischievous whisper, "Think their children ended up as ugly as they are?"

Hermione let out an undignified snort to hide her laughter; which earned her curious looks from the other visitors in their group, and a sharp look from the docent. She covered her mouth, and mumbled out an embarrassed apology.

Once the attention was off her and back on the painting, she gave Tom a disapproving frown. "Behave yourself," she whispered.

He just looked down at her, and smirked. "Never," he whispered back.

She rolled her eyes, and then the group moved onto the next painting. This one, Tom had to admit, had far more attractive people as the focal point. There was a half-nude man asleep next to a beautiful woman with dark blonde curls, who was watching over him. He also took note of the child-like satyrs playing with what looked like some sort of weapons and armor. The sound of the docent's irritating voice making noise again made Tom grimace.

"Ah, the story behind this is quite possibly one of my favorites here. This piece, titled Venus and Mars, was painted by Sandro Botticelli around the year 1485. It depicts Mars, the God of War, and Venus, the Goddess of Love. Now, some of you might know the story of these two. Venus was betrothed to Vulcan, the God of Fire, but let's just say that Venus found Vulcan a bit…dull," the man said, and had tried to pause for dramatic effect. Tried, at least. Tom nearly rolled his eyes.

"Mars, on the other hand, was anything but. Mars was chaos; Mars was disorder; Mars was exhilaration that breathed life into Venus – what she'd so desperately craved in a lover, but never received from Vulcan. And, so, a forbidden love formed."

"Venus was the opposite side of the same coin – she was calm, merciful, and vigilant. She was everything that Mars wasn't. Now, what Botticelli captured so beautifully was the aftermath of
their love affair. Notice how Mars has succumbed to sleep, and notice how Venus watches over him. This may seem innocent enough, endearing even, but it symbolizes something much bigger. Venus is the Goddess of Love, and Mars is the God of War – he is telling us that, no matter what, love conquers war – that love conquers all."

"Oh, that is so beautiful," Jean whispered to no one in particular. Others in their group agreed with her sentiment. Tom bit back his annoyed sigh, and tried to be respectful of his mother.

"Oh, you might also be interested to know that from their affair, a daughter was born – the Goddess of Harmony, Concordia. What is interesting about this, is how the Romans used the unity of deities representing Love and War as allegory. In most other paintings of the pair, Mars is always seen as being at ease in Venus' presence," the man finished, and started answering questions from the group.

Tom frowned as he looked at Mars' face again. It looked like he was catching flies. How idiotic. At first, he had been somewhat impressed by the painting, but now? Now, he was bored and disappointed. Why did romanticists always ruin things?

"I doubt their daughter turned out unfortunate looking."

Tom glanced down at Hermione, who was wearing a playful smile. The corner of his mouth curled up at her statement, and he looked back up at the painting. "You never know," he said thoughtfully, his eyebrows raised. "I've seen plenty of good-looking people produce horrendously ugly children."

Hermione shook her head, and laughed quietly. "You're terrible."

Tom shrugged lazily. "It's not my fault that it's true."

"Doesn't mean you have to say it," she whispered. At this, Tom turned on her, and smiled sardonically. "The truth hurts sometimes, doesn't it?"

"Sometimes it's not nice to be hurtful," she retorted.

"Are you saying that I should lie instead?"

She faltered. "Er – well, no."

"Oh, so you meant to say that I should only lie if it's to spare someone's feelings," he pressed.

"You're putting words in my mouth now," she said with a slight frown.

In the blink of her eyes and the beat of his heart, he saw an opportunity to relieve his boredom. "No, I'm not. You're spewing them out all on your own. Nothing new there, though. Just another serious bout of verbal diarrhea," he grinned wickedly, and wanted to play their little game.

She glared at him. "I do not. Stop being an idiot."

His wicked grin turned into a half sneer. "But, sis. You just told me that I shouldn't lie."

He watched in giddy excitement as her nostrils flared, and her jaw set. "I know what you're doing, Tom. Nice try," she told him.

Tom narrowed his eyes at her, then sighed dramatically. He turned his head away from her and glared at the painting on the wall. His attention focused back on the sleeping Mars and he secretly
wished that he could take a nap, too.

He was annoyed, but he knew everything would be fine. School was starting in two days, which meant they would be riding the Hogwarts Express.

The corner of his mouth curled up in triumph, because he knew what that meant.

The day to leave for Hogwarts had finally arrived and Hermione felt anxious. She didn't mind sitting with her brother, if it was only her brother, but it wasn't. His friends, for the most part, left her alone at school; but it always felt awkward and forced when she was around them. She felt disappointed that she wasn't sitting with her friends, but a promise was a promise.

In the compartment with Hermione and Tom were Draco Malfoy, Blaise Zabini, and Theodore Nott. She'd briefly wondered where the two dumb ones were, and almost felt a little bad when she couldn't remember their first names. She knew one was Vincent and one was Gregory, but she couldn't remember who was who. Honestly, it probably didn't even matter that she couldn't remember their names, anyway. They didn't say much.

Hermione shifted in her seat next to Tom awkwardly, and had to remind herself why she'd agree to sit with him to begin with. It was the only way to stop herself from standing up, and walking out of the compartment. The air was thick with tension, and only Tom seemed to be comfortable one. She was glad it wasn't only her that was uncomfortable – his friends were, too. They kept shifting their gaze toward her before averting it elsewhere.

They didn't care for her and she didn't care for them. Gryffindors versus Slytherins, and all that tosh. Not that she bought into the house rivalries often, since her own brother was in Slytherin, but that didn't mean that they liked her.

Her friends weren't entirely thrilled that she wouldn't be sitting with them this year, but they had understood once she explained why. Well, Harry, Neville, and Ginny had understood, at least. Not Ron, though, but he'd live. Hermione knew that Ron didn't like her brother, but he never vocalized it.

Hermione let out a sigh at the thought.

"What's the matter?"

She looked at her brother and said, "Oh – nothing. Just thinking."

Tom raised an eyebrow and stared at her for a few seconds before turning away. "Your friends will live without you for a few hours, I'm sure. There's no assigned homework yet, after all," he drawled.

The three other boys in the compartment sniggered at his statement. Hermione glared at them, and then at Tom. "I do not do their homework," she bit out defensively.

"Of course, you don't," Tom said.

Hermione silently fumed, and was suddenly regretting agreeing to sit with him. She should have known that he'd be a show-off in front of his friends. This definitely was not a fair trade-off; at least Tom got to watch a Quidditch game – Hermione was stuck staring at their stupid faces. It really wasn't fair.

While she sulked in silence, Tom had decided to ruffle up the top of her hair affectionately. "Doesn't my sister look so adorable when she pouts like that?"
Her eyes went wide, and face went pink in embarrassment when the boys laughed again. She quickly smacked his hand off her head, and tried her best to smooth her wild curls back down. "That's it, Tom. I'm leaving," she muttered, and moved to get up; but, before she could, Tom had slung his arm lazily over her shoulders to pin her back to her seat.

"Oh, come on, sis," he said in an amused tone, but his eyes looked at her threateningly. She knew he was trying to silently remind her of her promise. "You know I'm only teasing you."

Hermione didn't like the way Tom was when he forced her to be around his friends. He always managed to end up making her the center of attention and she didn't like it one bit. Thoroughly annoyed, Hermione decided to do her best to ignore him by pulling one of her textbooks out to read.

It was difficult, though, considering he'd kept his arm over her shoulders, even after she'd tried to shrug him off three times. He had just given her one of his warnings looks again, but said nothing. She'd rolled her eyes, and had continued reading.

For the most part, she'd tuned their conversations out during most of the ride as she read. Dull topics, mostly. Quidditch, the latest broom models, gossip, classes, girls. Honestly, she was surprised her brother was contributing to the conversations at all. None of them were things that truly interested him, but maybe he was just being polite.

Hermione quickly threw that thought out of her head, and almost snorted out loud. She knew him the best and she knew he wasn't being polite for their benefit.

She snuck quick glances at the boys, and nearly shook her head at the admiration in their eyes. She'd always known that Tom was a bit popular; what, with his looks, his grades, and his charming personality.

Hermione wasn't sure if she liked this Tom. He was always different around her – more relaxed. Probably because he didn't have to act around her. She'd already accepted him as he was, even though he could be a complete arse sometimes.

Maybe he was afraid that not everyone would be as accepting of the real him.

She was about to go back to her reading when her brother's smooth voice cut through the compartment. "So, Malfoy. What was it that you wanted to tell me? You said in your letter that your father heard about something interesting at the Ministry…" Tom trailed off, and tried to not sound too interested. Hermione knew better, so her ears perked up. If Tom was interested in something enough to ask, it had to be for a reason.

Draco went to open his mouth to tell him, but stopped. He glanced apprehensively at Hermione. Tom frowned at Malfoy's reaction.

"She won't tell the other Gryffindors, Malfoy," he told him. Then, he turned his head to look at her, and idly twirled one of her curls hanging off her shoulder before giving it a small tug. "Isn't that right, sis?"

Hermione swallowed, and nodded at him. "Yes."

Tom stared at her and a slow smile spread across his face - his charcoal eyes attempting to suck her in, and swallow her whole. "Promise me."

"You already know that I won't te-"
"I said *promise me, Hermione,*" he interrupted in a sing-song voice.

At this, she couldn't keep herself from rolling her eyes at him. "Ugh, *fine. I promise. My God. I'm sure it's nothing worth repeating, anyway.*"

Tom, Theo, and Blaise laughed at Draco's expense, and the boy's pale face reddened in embarrassment and anger. "It actually *is* worth repeating, thank you very much," Draco said, and managed to straighten himself out. He leaned forward, and spoke in a hushed voice, "*My father says that there will be a tournament* held at Hogwarts this year. Students from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons will be coming to *Hogwarts* for a chance to participate in it."

Hermione was pulled forward slightly by Tom's arm when he leaned in closer to hear Draco. "A tournament? What *kind* of tournament?" Tom asked, his voice sounding covetous.

"The kind where there will be three tasks that the players will have to complete to move onto the next round. *Very dangerous,*" the blonde boy said eagerly, seemingly enjoying the fact that his information had grasped Tom's avid attention.

Tom hummed to himself, leaned back again, and brought her with him. She felt herself getting agitated rather quickly. She needed a break from them, even if it was for a few minutes.

"*Tom?*" she asked, interrupting their conversation.

He looked down at her questioningly. "*Yes, Hermione?*

"*Can you get your arm off me, please?*

"*Why? Planning on leaving?*" he asked. She felt his arm get heavier.

"*No, but I do need to go change. We'll be arriving soon,*" she said, and felt somewhat embarrassed to be having this conversation in front of his friends. She heard Draco let out a quiet snort, and could see Blaise smirking his *stupid* head off. She was beginning to think he was going to give her a difficult time, but felt relieved when he lifted his arm.

"*Be quick,*" he told her.

She jumped up, and grabbed the bag with her uniform in it. "*Yes, my Lord,*" she said sarcastically, and with very little humor. She felt annoyed at being bossed around by him.

Tom pursed his lips in thought, and tilted his head to the side. "*Lord,*" he tested the word slowly, then a wicked smile curled on his face. "I quite like the sound of that."

"I'm sure you would, you egotistical arse," she deadpanned. Tom's mischievous smile widened at her words and she couldn't help but notice how the other boys seemed to freeze at her words. Perhaps they just weren't used to goody two-shoes Granger swearing.

Hermione left to go find a free restroom to change in, and thought about the looks Tom's friends had on their faces. They were all Pureblood children, so they probably already thought they were better than her. She knew that wasn't the case, though; and, honestly, she didn't *care* what they thought of her foul language.

The Great Hall was filled with the irritating noise and chatter of the aftermath of the Sorting Ceremony.

Tom glanced over at Hermione, and saw that she was chatting with her friends excitedly – a
permanent smile plastered on her face. She never looked like that when she was in the company of him and his friends. An irrational jealousy hemorrhaged through him when he thought about how eager she looked when she went to ride with her friends on the carriages earlier. He'd tried to convince her to ride in his carriage, but she wasn't having any of it.

*A promise is a promise*, she'd said.

He knew that she had been right and he knew he was being selfish, but he couldn't bring himself to care. In the end, though, he had let her go without a huge fuss. He didn't want to be seen as clingy in front of his friends, because he was definitely not clingy.

*Friends*, Tom thought as he examined them surrounding him at the Slytherin table, *could be considered a loose term in this situation*. The only two that didn't completely irritate him were Blaise and Theo, but he wouldn't consider them friends, per se. More like *stepping stones*. He did have to admit that Draco was slowly getting better, but he still had his moments.

Tom had thought how he'd always felt somewhat aggravated that having talent alone might not get him what he wanted – it was all about having the right name that helped nudge open that door the rest of the way. All the students he surrounded himself with had those last names. They didn't deserve them.

While Tom had been busy being bitter, Headmaster Dumbledore had brought himself to stand behind the podium. Tom did well to contain his excitement. If what Malfoy had said was true, then there was a chance at getting the recognition he so rightly deserved.

"Attention, attention!" Dumbledore called out, and magicked his voice to resonate throughout the hall. "I'd like to make an announcement: this year, Hogwarts has been chosen to host a very special event – the Triwizard tournament! In case you've never heard of it, the tournament brings together Hogwarts and two other magical schools – Durmstrang and Beauxbatons. Delegates from both schools will be arriving the day before Halloween. A single student from each school will be chosen at random as a contestant to compete."

Tom's heart thump, thump, thumped as he hung on every word the old man spoke.

"Let me warn you now: this tournament is not for the faint-hearted. There will be dangers that you will face that you have never faced before. Eternal glory is what awaits whoever wins, but it won't come easy. There will be three tasks, and whoever is chosen must survive those tasks to be named the victor."

Tom felt himself practically salivating at having such a beautiful opportunity.

"Unfortunately, the Ministry has decided that, for safety reasons, there should be certain rules set in place; one of them being that no student under the age of seventeen may enter the tournament - *no exceptions,*" Dumbledore finished.

And, just like that, his beautiful opportunity was thrown into the mud, stomped on, spat on, and then promptly set on fire. He wasn't the only one, apparently. There was booing and hissing coming from all four tables. The Headmaster bellowed out for the students to be silent. They listened.

"Any student *age seventeen and older* who wants to enter the tournament will have a chance to do so the night before Halloween, but we'll talk about all of that later. For now, let's eat," Dumbledore said, and with his arms opened wide, the start of the Welcome Feast began.

"My father didn't tell me that rule," Malfoy muttered.
Tom picked up his fork, and stabbed at a boiled potato irately. "Yes, that would have been nice to know. Would have been much easier to avoid that disappointment," he said harshly.

"You would have put your name in?" Blaise asked doubtfully.

Tom chewed his food slowly as he thought, and caught Hermione's amber eyes with his. She smiled at him.

Tom swallowed his food, and then told Blaise, "I would have won."

It was the first Thursday in the school year and Hermione could barely contain her excitement. Thursday afternoons was a double period of Defence Against the Dark Arts with Professor Black. She wasn't bad at Defence, but it wasn't her strongest subject. Professor Black made class very stimulating, and preferred hands-on teaching methods.

She'd arrived at class a few minutes early to set up her desk, and noticed that she wasn't the only one. There were several other students from both Gryffindor and Slytherin who had already arrived – her brother being one of them. He had already claimed a seat in the front row, and wasn't surrounded by his usual posse, so she decided to plop down in the chair next to his.

Tom looked at her in mock surprise before he smiled. "Oh? Sitting with me instead of your friends today?"

Hermione had started pulling her things out to set up before class started. She paused in the middle of leaning over to grab her things to look at him. "I felt like sitting with you today, but I can leave if you want-"

"Oh, shut up," he said in a bored tone, and leaned back in his chair as he looked down at her. "So, how do you feel about the whole Triwizard tournament thing?"

At this, Hermione huffed and rolled her eyes. "Idiotic, if you ask me. Pretty much every male in Gryffindor who is under-age has been griping and complaining about it since it was announced that they couldn't enter," she muttered as she continued to rifle through her bag, and then dug out her quill. She frowned at it as she twirled it around in her fingers, then looked up at Tom. "It's quite irritating, really."

Tom raised his eyebrows as he mulled over her words.

Once she was finished setting up, she asked, "How have the boys been in Slytherin? Have they been complaining?"

Tom let out a quiet snort. "Quite the opposite, actually. Us Slytherins are all about self-preservation, you know. Most of us aren't willing to risk our safety for eternal glory," he drawled out sarcastically.

"I suppose you're right."

"I'm always right," he whispered in a playful tone.

Hermione said nothing, and shook her head at him. The rest of the students started filling in, and class started once Professor Black came out of his office.

"Welcome back, students! Welcome back," he greeted boisterously. "Now, unfortunately, we're stuck in this classroom together for the next two and a half hours! Hopefully everyone is wearing their antiperspirant. Hah! I jest, I jest. Oh, don't give me that look, Mr. Finnegan. Where was I?
Oh, yes! We're here together for the next two and a half hours, but when have I ever made a class feel like it lasted two and a half hours, eh?" Professor Black asked enthusiastically, and most of the students sniggered.

"Actually, on second thought, maybe you shouldn't answer that question," he added offhandedly, then waved his wand. Several different diagrams unfurled themselves from the boards – most of them about the same magical creature. Hermione recognized it immediately.

"Erklings," Hermione and Tom whispered simultaneously. Their heads snapped to look at each other quickly and they both wore knowing smirks before looking back up at Professor Black.

"These little gremlins are called Erklings. Nasty creatures, they are. Does anyone know why?" he asked.

Tom and Hermione didn't raise their hands. They'd promised Professor Black back in second year that they would give the other students a fair chance to answer first.

"Mr. Thomas?" Sirius called on Dean.

"Aren't they dangerous because they lure children into the forest to eat them, sir?" Dean asked bluntly.

The professor's tone and look became grim. "Yes, you're absolutely right, Mr. Thomas. Five points to Gryffindor! These creatures are dangerous, because they will actively seek out human children. Thankfully, they're mostly found in the Black Forests of Germany and the Ministry there has put strict regulations to help control their numbers, so an attack hasn't happened in nearly two decas-

There was a sudden crash that made everyone jump, and several people scream. Hermione instinctively darted her head around the room to look for the source of the noise.

"Don't worry, kiddies! Professor Oh-So-Serious will protect you!" chirped out a voice that was the equivalent to nails on a chalk board.

"Peeves," Tom growled out. He let go of her wrist, and put away his wand. When had he even grabbed his wand? Or her wrist, for that matter? She hadn't even noticed.

"Peeves, you're disrupting my class. Leave," their professor said firmly.

At this, Peeves floated over Sirius on his back. He grabbed his ankles over his belly, and shook his rump at the class. "Oh, no! Oh, no! Professor Oh-So-Serious isn't being any fun! Looks like the mangy mutt won't be able to protect you from being eaten, kiddies! Write your mummies and daddies good-bye! Send them all your love, because you're going to be gremlin food in the morning!" he teased in a sing-song voice.

"PEEVES!" Professor Black bellowed.

Peeves floated back to sitting cross-legged, and blew a raspberry at Sirius. "You used to be more fun when you weren't an old fart!"

The little poltergeist zoomed out of the classroom with a cackle, and left a mess of falling books and flying parchment in his wake.

Hermione looked down to see her supplies an utter mess. So much for being early to prepare for class.
"I'm not an old fart," Professor Black said unhappily.

The weeks at Hogwarts had gone by and the weather had grown colder. As the weather grew colder, the anticipation built. It had been nearly two months since the initial announcement of the tournament, but not even time had stunted the flow of conversation about it. Everyone was excited about it, even if they were pretending not to be; and today was no exception.

All the students of Hogwarts had been on the edge of their seats when the students from Durmstrang were announced. In they came, all extravagance and show, with their back flips and fire magic tricks.

"Do you know who that is? That's Viktor Krum!" Theo exclaimed in a hushed voice. Why was that name familiar to Tom?

"Why would he be here? Doesn't he play for the Bulgarian National Quidditch team?" Blaise asked.

"He does, but he's still a student. This just keeps getting better and better," Draco said as he craned his neck to get a better view.

That's when Tom remembered how Ron Weasley kept going on and on about Viktor Krum after the Quidditch World Cup. How could he have forgotten? Oh, yes. Probably because he didn't care. That's right.

Next, the students from Beauxbatons made their entrance in a somewhat similar fashion. Showy, and rather irritating – like they were trying too hard. He had been wondering about how the delegates from Hogwarts would have made their entrance had the tournament been hosted at one of the other schools. He couldn't imagine them making any kind of entrance that would make them look so ridiculous.

He looked on in wonder when a large metal box was brought forth. Headmaster Dumbledore waved his hand over it and the metal melted away to reveal a large, wooden cup. The cup had a crackling white-blue flame inside. Tom couldn't take his eyes off it.

"Anyone who wants to enter for a chance to compete in the Triwizard tournament only has to drop their name on a bit of parchment into the flames. You will have from tonight after supper, until before the Halloween feast begins tomorrow night to enter you name. Remember: only those ages seventeen and older may enter. No exceptions!" Dumbledore reminded them.

Tom was still somewhat bitter over it. He wasn't feeling willing to risk his safety, but the very thought of winning something as big as this was just so…tempting. He knew the Daily Prophet would probably be covering it, which would mean recognition. It would mean his name might be known throughout the wizarding community, even if for only a little while. It would be a start, at least.

After the feast, Tom had found himself sitting with Hermione on the benches as they watched people enter their names into the goblet. He kept an inventory of each person who had entered from Hogwarts, while she read quietly.

At first, he had been curious, but it had gotten dull rather quickly. The only form of entertainment had been when the Weasley twins thought they tricked the age line Dumbledore had drawn, and had been sorely mistaken. He watched on with a giddy sort of delight when his bossy sister told them that it wasn't going to work. She had been right, of course. It hadn't worked and he was glad for it. It was far more entertaining to watch the boys grow into old men, and wrestle around on the
"Idiots," he muttered. Hermione hid her laugh behind a cough. Tom smirked.

The double doors of the room opened with a bang and the group of Bulgarian students marched in, with Viktor Krum in the lead. The entire room had gone silent. Even the Weasley twins had stopped their arguing. The older boy went to drop his name into the goblet, but when he did, his eyes wandered over to their direction.

Krum's dark eyes landed on his sister. The corners of his mouth turned up into a small smile – a small smile that had been meant for her.

After that, the Bulgarian turned, and walked out of the room.

Tom's lips formed a thin line and his eyes narrowed at the older boy's back. Tom glanced at Hermione, and saw her cheeks stained pink and her eyes shyly averted back down to her book.

Tom closed his eyes, and breathed in and out unsteadily through his nostrils. He opened them again, and watched Hermione turn the page of her book.

He didn't like the way Krum had looked at his sister. He didn't like it one bit.

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A/N: This chapter is more subdued, I know. The calm before the storm? I expect updates to be once every two weeks after this until December. I have another Tomione story for a competition I'm working on that is due at the end of December that I need to finish, plus it'll be the end of the semester. Yay, finals! Not.

Thanks to Radiant Innocence and VinoAmore for always being there to help me with this story. Also, thanks to everyone who has read, commented, bookmarked, and given kudos! It makes me smile when I read them. Oh, my heart.
The Halloween Feast this year was, by far, the most eventful as of yet. The Goblet of Fire had been brought out and it had spewed forth three names out of the fire - one student from each school.

From Hogwarts; Cedric Diggory.

From Beauxbatons; Fleur Delacour.

From Durmstrang; Viktor Krum.

Harry and Ron had practically lost their minds when Viktor's name had been called. They prattled on and on about how he was definitely going to win the tournament. There was no way – absolutely no way that Cedric or Fleur would win. It would definitely be Viktor, Ron had said. Ron was always a bit biased when he came to his favorite Quidditch player, though.

Hermione felt her heart beat a little harder when she heard Viktor's name, but she ignored it.

She thought about the way he had looked at her last night, but she ignored it.

She dug into her supper as her housemates blathered on and on about the tournament, but she ignored it.

"Let's order some hot chocolate!"

Ron groaned, and let his head loll back against the booth they were sitting in. "Hermione, I think I'll vomit if I have any more sweets."
She grimaced. "Well, it's not my fault you gorged yourself on cauldron cakes."

"Well, it's not my fault Harry bought so many," he mimicked her tone.

"Hey, don't bring me into this. I didn't force you to eat them," Harry joked.

The waitress came over just a moment later and Hermione ordered two cups of hot chocolate to go.

Ron held his stomach at the mention of sweets, and groaned again. He made to get up and said, "Ugh, I think I'm gonna be sick."

Hermione shuffled out of the booth to let him out. They watched him cut his way through the crowd toward the restroom.

"Maybe I should go make sure he's okay," Harry wondered.

Hermione nodded. "Yes, I think that's a good idea. Go help him. I won't be here when you get back, by the way."

"Oh?" he asked.

She gave him a small smile. "I'm supposed to meet Tom in a few minutes. We're picking out Christmas gifts for our parents."

Harry smiled at her, and went to open his mouth to say something, but then they heard someone yelling – something about somebody making a mess on the floor. Their heads snapped in the direction where Ron had gone.

"You should go," she told him.

"Right. See you later, Mione," he said, then left.

Once her hot chocolates arrived, she dropped money onto the table, and left with one cup of hot chocolate in each hand. She'd managed to cut through the shoppers without spilling a single drop. Her eyes scanned the crowd, looking for her brother.

And, there he was, leaning up against a lamp post with Daphne Greengrass talking his ear off. He didn't appear to be irritated, but she knew that he was. He'd admitted to her how irritating Daphne was on more than one occasion. Honestly, though – who didn't irritate her brother?

She bit back a smile as she walked over to him. Once he saw her, he looked relieved.

"There you are," he said to Hermione, effectively cutting Daphne off mid-sentence. The girl looked miffed.

"Here I am," she echoed, and handed him one of the cups. "I got you a hot chocolate, by the way. You're welcome."

"Perfect," he said, and took it from her gratefully. "My hands are bloody well freezing."

"You are a wizard, you know," she joked, but he just gave her a withered look. She smiled, and went to take a sip out of her cup.

Daphne cleared her throat and it caused both Tom and Hermione to stop mid-sip to look at her. The siblings had forgotten she was there.
"Oh, I'm sorry, Daphne. If I'd known you would be here and I had enough hands, I would have brought you one, too," Hermione lied politely.

Tom raised his eyebrow curiously at Hermione, and took a slow sip of his hot chocolate.

"Oh, it's alright," the girl said, and made a show of pulling up her expensive jumper to look at her watch. "I was just leaving, anyway. I promised Pansy I'd help her shop for a dress for the ball. Bye!"

Hermione waved good-bye politely and Tom did nothing.

She turned to him and asked, "Ready?"

He nodded, and walked next to her as they weaved through the crowd.

"And you say I'm horrible," Tom said abruptly. She looked at him, confused.

"What do you mean?" she asked when they reached the door to Honeydukes. Even though their parents were dentists, they really enjoyed the quirky candies of the wizarding world.

Tom opened the door for her and they both walked into the sweet shop. Tom whispered in her ear humorously, "You had absolutely no intention of bringing Greengrass a hot chocolate."

Hermione's face turned red and she knew it wasn't because of the cold. "You don't know that. I just might have."

Tom straightened up and the corners of his mouth curled into one of his diabolical smiles. "Don't lie to me, Hermione. We both know that even if you could have magically grown a third hand to hold another cup, you wouldn't have gotten one for her."

She scrunched her nose up at him, and chose to pay special attention to a display of Glacial Snow Flakes. She picked one of the boxes up, and pretended to read it. "So what? You do it all the time."

Tom plucked the box out of her hands, and looked at it curiously. He raised his eyebrows, and handed it back to her. She watched him take a long sip of his hot chocolate again, then he said with a devilish grin, "I think I might be rubbing off on you, sis."

Hermione scoffed and rolled her eyes, then set the box back down. "Unlikely, little brother."

Tom's grin fell. Hermione basked in his irritation, and offered him a sweet smile.

"Don't call me that," he snapped.

"Don't call you what?" she asked, her grin widening.

"You know what."

She knew it irritated him, but she couldn't help it. "Little brother," she said in teasing a sing-song voice.

Hermione watched in delight as his nostrils flared. He did that whenever he got annoyed. Their little game – it was entertaining sometimes.

"Whatever," he said nonchalantly, and took another sip of his hot chocolate. He smiled. "I'm still taller than you."
"And I'm still older," she grinned.

The smile fell from his face again and she was about to tell him to stop being so sensitive, when she'd noticed that he wasn't looking at her anymore, but over her shoulder instead.

"Don't look now, but that Bulgarian buffoon is staring at us," he whispered to her, but still kept his eyes trained behind her.

Hermione blinked in confusion and she felt her heartbeat accelerate. "Wait, what?" she asked, and went to turn her head to look. Tom caught her chin in his free hand before she could look, and turned her face to look back at him – his face mere inches away from hers.

"What part of 'don't look now' do you not understand? I swear, you never listen to me," he whispered harshly.

"Oh, shut up. You don't listen, either," she said, and swatted at his hand. "You're looking; so, why can't I?"

Tom scowled at her for a few moments, before deciding to let go of her chin. He refused to look at her now, and was staring at the other shoppers in the store instead. Hermione tried to skillfully sip out of her hot chocolate as she turned her head to peek behind her. When she did, her heart felt like it had plummeted to her gut like a rollercoaster.

There, quite obviously trying to pretend to look at a display of sugar quills, was Viktor Krum. And there he was, glancing in their direction every few seconds.

They caught each other's eyes, which caused Hermione to promptly suck in a gulp of air mid-sip, and choke on her drink. She turned back around with her hand to her chest, and spluttered and coughed and gasped until she was done. She looked up at Tom with wide eyes. He just raised a bored eyebrow at her – the rest of his face blank. Her face felt like it was on fire.

"Better now?" he asked.

Hermione nodded awkwardly. "Y-yes."

Tom sighed agitatedly, and shook his head. "Ignore him. He's probably some weirdo who heard we have the best grades in school, and wants our help doing his schoolwork. Let's just hurry up, and get mum and dad something."

"Yeah, you're probably right," she said. Tom turned, and started looking through the merchandise. She knew her brother had told her to just ignore him. She'd meant to listen – she really had. The problem was... she wasn't quite sure schoolwork was the real reason Viktor kept looking in their direction.

She turned her head back to look again. Viktor smiled at her. She smiled back.

Hermione turned back around, and felt her smile widen.

It was like Tom had said – she never listened, did she?

It was the day of the first task and the entire school was feeling the anticipation building. Students were wearing different colors to cheer on their favorite champions – most of them being Hufflepuff colors. The students of Hogwarts wanted to cheer Cedric on, obviously.
Hermione sat with her friends on the benches, and waited for the tournament to start. As much as she wanted to enjoy this, she felt nervous, and a headache was beginning to form behind her eyes. Whether it was from stress, excitement, or the loudness of the crowd; she did not know.

The entire crowd had nearly lost their minds when a dragon was wrangled into the center of the arena.

"That's a Swedish Short-Snout," she gasped.

"Do you know how hard it's been to keep this secret? Merlin, I'm glad it's started now. I didn't know how much longer I could keep it in," Ron sighed in relief.

Harry's head snapped to him and his mouth went slack. "You knew?"

Ron grinned. "Charlie."

Harry closed his mouth, and gave an approving look. "Right. Wow. You're right. Can't believe you managed to keep your mouth shut this long."

"Shut up, Harry," Ron said, but smiled. Hermione just shook her head at the two of them.

"Still, I can't believe they're going up against dragons! That's incredibly dangerous! What was the Ministry thinking? Allowing children to go up against a dragon. They could be killed!" she chided.

"Buzzkill," Harry joked.

"I'm being perfectly serious. What if that was one of you down there?" she asked.

"Uh, yeah…no thanks," Ron said.

"No way," Harry agreed.

"Exactly," she said smugly.

Cedric was the first to go up against his dragon. Hermione watched on in horror as Cedric fumbled with deciding on what he should do. She was happy that he'd finally managed to come up with a plan by distracting the dragon by transfiguring a large rock into a golden retriever. Hermione knew the dog wasn't real, but it didn't stop the panic from setting in when the dragon turned its attention on it.

"Wicked," Ron said in amazement.

As the dragon got closer to the dog, Cedric got closer to the eggs. Right when the dragon was inhaling to singe the dog into oblivion, Cedric grabbed the golden egg. This, in turn, twisted the dragon's attention back on Cedric and it let lose its fiery breath on the boy.

Hermione gasped, but was so happy to see that he'd managed to walk away from the task with just a few burns on his face.

"This is ridiculous. Look at poor Cedric!" she groaned.

"Come on, Hermione. Stop complaining, and just enjoy it. It's not like he's dead or anything," Harry told her.

Hermione grumbled that he had come pretty close to dying, as a matter of fact.
While everyone was waiting for the dragons to be switched out, she searched the crowd for her brother. There were so many people, so it was rather difficult. She thought to herself to look for the person who looked the least thrilled to be there, and snorted at her own joke. Ron had asked her what was so funny and she had told him not to worry about it.

After searching for a few more minutes, she'd given up. They'd brought the second dragon out – a Common Welsh Green, Ron had said. It was Fleur Delacour's turn, and Hermione couldn't decide whether she was happy hers was so dull, or disappointed.

"Seriously? All she did was put it to sleep. Boring," Harry complained.

"Common Welsh Greens are rather passive compared to other breeds. She got off lucky, if you ask me," Ron replied.

Hermione didn't quite understand the appeal of all this. Was it because she wasn't born and raised in the magical world? Or maybe she was just a total buzzkill.

In no time at all, a Chinese Fireball was brought out. It was Viktor Krum's turn. Hermione felt even more anxious than before, because Ron had told them that this breed was especially aggressive.

Thankfully, just like Fleur, Viktor hadn't taken very long. He'd blinded the dragon, and snatched up the egg all in the span it took for her to take a sharp inhale.

Cheers sounded around her. Before she knew it had even happened, the task was over.

She would be lying if she said she wasn't glad for it.

He was watching her again.

Viktor Krum.

Hermione had been working on her homework in the library when she swore she felt a pair of eyes on her. She'd used her curls as a shield for her to peek through to see who was looking at her as she pretended to write with her quill.

She'd seen his dark eyes peek through the books on one of the shelves nearby.

At first, she had just ignored it like Tom had told her to, but it was difficult. She didn't know why, but seeing Viktor sneak about made her heart race like mad, and not in a bad way. It was exciting, sort of. No boy had ever paid her attention before; and this wasn't just any boy – this was the famous Viktor Krum. All the girls, and even many of the boys, followed him around the school grounds.

At first, she had ignored the signs. That first heated glance he gave her the first night he was there. The lingering glances toward her at Hogsmeade. The quietly observing her through the shelves in the library.

At first, she had just ignored Viktor, because her brother had told her to. She knew that Tom was just trying to look out for her, but Viktor was just a boy. It's not like he was some evil, vile…

Hermione straightened out, and had decided that she was done with ignoring him. Her head snapped where Viktor was peeking through the shelves, and made eye contact with him. His eyes widened and he jumped, which caused him to trip over a book cart, and fall to the floor.
"Oh, my-" she breathed out in surprise, and ran over to see him sprawled awkwardly on a pile of books. She stood over him, and he looked up at her. "Are you alright?" she asked, concerned.

A sweet smile that stuttered her heart graced his face. "I am better now," he told her.

Hermione took in the state of him. He was lying in what looked to be an extremely uncomfortable position on top of at least twenty books, with an empty book cart half-lying on his right leg. How in the bloody world could he be better now? Unless…she felt her face heat up when she suddenly realized that he was flirting with her.

"Oh," she said dumbly, and blinked several times.

He smiled at her, and then laughed at himself.

She was vaguely aware of how he stood up, and waved his wand to put the books back into place.

She was vaguely aware of how he asked her if she'd do him the honor of attending the Yule Ball with him.

She was vaguely aware of how she'd said that yes, she would love to go with him.

What she wasn't vaguely aware of, though, was the way her heart beat, fluttered, flew when he had kissed her knuckles.

Oh, no. She was acutely aware of that.

Hermione Jean Granger finally understood why the other girls acted like complete imbeciles when it came to boys. This dizzy feeling was addictive.

She wanted more.

Girls.

They were irritating.

They were infuriating.

And they wouldn't leave him the bloody hell alone. He'd sought out his sister as refuge from the giggling gargoyles. If there was anyone in the school that he could vent to about his troubles, it would be her. She herself often complained about the nature of silly little schoolgirls in general.

Tom was, once again, thanking whatever deities existed that his sister wasn't anything like them. She could still be annoying, but at least not like…like them.

He'd finally found her hidden away, reading, in her favorite alcove in the Clock Tower.

"If I had known the tournament would cause me these many problems, I would have never been excited about it happening here in the first place," Tom complained.

Hermione glanced up from her book to look at him. "What problems?"

He gestured with his hands frustratingly in front of him before saying, "Girls!"

"Girls?" she asked in surprise.

"Girls," he repeated seriously.
She let a slow smile spread across her face as she looked back down at her book. "Sounds like a personal problem."

Tom frowned at her. "This is serious, Hermione. I can't stand it. I've been asked out by so many girls this week that I've lost count. I'm going mad," he complained, and ran a hand through his hair. He plopped down next to her.

"If you just said 'yes' to one of them, then they would stop asking you," she said simply.

He blinked, and narrowed his eyes at her in thought. "But I don't want to go with any of them. This whole ball is senseless."

"It's supposed to be fun, Tom. I know it's not exactly your cup of tea, but maybe you should try your best to enjoy it?" she asked.

Tom was quiet for a few seconds, then asked her suspiciously, "You don't seem stressed out about it like most other people are. Why?"

Hermione's face warmed under his scrutiny. "Why should I stress out about it?" she asked defensively.

He looked thoughtful for a moment, then sighed. "Well, I suppose you don't have much to worry about. It's not like you have hordes of boys asking you to the ball."

Hermione slammed her book closed. "Excuse me?"

"What?" he asked with a raised eyebrow. "It's not like you've been asked to the ball, so you don't understand the stress level-"

Tom was shocked when she jumped to her feet, and punched his shoulder. Hard. He stood up, and towered over her in anger, but she had just as much anger to match.

"What was that for?" he snarled at her.

"For being an insensitive jerk!" she snapped back.

"How, exactly, am I being an insensitive jerk?"

"You're being an insensitive jerk by assuming that I haven't been asked to the ball by anyone! What are you trying to say? That no one in their right mind would ask me? Is that it?" she yelled at him, and shoved her open palm into his chest at the end of each question. He let her.

Tom went rigid at her words. He stared down at her, his face and his mind going blank. "Has someone asked you?" he asked quietly.

Even though Tom had gone quiet, Hermione hadn't. He knew she was beyond furious, and adequately offended. He knew he wasn't trying to offend her, but she took offense to it, anyway. He didn't need to apologize; he'd done nothing wrong. It wasn't his fault that she'd jumped to conclusions.

"As a matter of fact, yes. Someone has asked me and I told them I'd go with them," she shouted, her temper and her curls flared out around her - wild and reckless.

He felt his jaw tense once before he asked calmly, "Who?"

At this, Hermione finally stilled for a moment as she considered his question. Her face then
became determined and she shoved her book into her bag, then slung it over her shoulder. She tilted her chin up defiantly at him, and said, "You know what? No. For once, I'm not telling you a damn thing."

"Hermione," he warned.

She stomped her foot once and he noticed the frustrated tears beginning to form in the corners of her eyes. "No! I don't have to tell you everything that goes on in my life, Tom!"

And with one last glare, she turned around, and stormed away from him.

Tom shook in a quiet fury as he watched his sister walk away from him. The fury he hadn't felt in so long was building, swelling, climbing, ascending, bursting out of his chest and bleeding like spilled sap across his skin. It felt sticky. It felt hot. It felt like fire.

The fury needed to go away, so he punched the stone wall three times in an attempt to banish it from his body. It needed to go elsewhere – this fire. He'd stopped shaking, but the fire was still there.

He knew, because his knuckles were now red like fire and they burned like fire.

He needed to find out who was taking his sister to the Yule Ball, and he needed to find out now. He needed to find out now, before it was too late. It was his job - his job to protect her. He needed to keep her safe.

As he marched through the corridors, and down the halls to the dungeons, he ignored everyone and everything. Everything - except for that fire.

The burning in his knuckles, and the burning in his chest wouldn't let him forget.

Tom didn't know what had made him say 'yes'. He didn't want to go with the girl – not really. Maybe it was because he had been angry over the whole thing with Hermione.

The girl was pretty enough, he guessed. He knew that she had been asked by any boy brave enough to ask her, but she'd refused them all.

And now, he knew why. She'd told him she'd been waiting for him to ask her and that she'd been tired of waiting. She'd thought he was just being shy. Hah. She was high if she thought he was ever going to ask her, but…he knew an opportunity when he saw one.

Tom loved recognition, after all.

He could deal with her irritating accent for one night if he had to in order to gain it.

Hermione had been avoiding him.

Ever since that afternoon in the Clock Tower the week before, she'd refused to speak to him – even during classes. A larger part of him was annoyed with her childishness, but a smaller part was grateful for the extra time he had now that he wasn't spending it with her. He needed that time to figure out who in the Hell was taking her to the ball.

First, he'd tried to figure it out himself, but he'd found out nothing. His first thought was that Potter had asked her and the very thought had made him nearly hyperventilate with rage. She knew how he felt about Potter. But, no…no. He'd found out that Potter was going with one of
the Patil twins.

At first, he thought she might be going with one of her other friends from Gryffindor; maybe Weasley or Longbottom, but he had discovered that they already had dates, too.

Then, he’d asked Blaise, Draco, and Theo to find out what they could, but they came up empty-handed, as well.

Here it was, the afternoon of the bloody Yule Ball and he still hadn’t the slightest clue whom she was going with.

"Maybe she isn't going with anyone?" Theo had asked during breakfast that morning.

"No," Tom had said distantly, and shook his head slightly as he frowned at his plate of food. "No, she wouldn't make something like this up."

"Maybe she's too embarrassed to tell you," Draco had laughed. "No offense, but it's not like your sister would have the pick of the litter, if you know what I mean."

"I'm sorry, but did I ask for your opinion, Malfoy?" Tom had snapped.

Draco had mumbled out a 'no', and went back to eating his breakfast. Tom had glared at an oblivious Hermione from across the Great Hall for a few seconds, before storming back to the dungeons to fume in privacy.

He hadn't left his dorm all day, and it was now two hours before the ball. He knew he should be getting ready soon, but he couldn't bring himself to begin. The fire was flowing through his veins again. It was burning him. It felt hot. It needed to be released.

Tom snatched the closest thing near him, his bedside lantern, and hurled it across the room. It shattered into a brilliant array of crystal fragments. It only helped a little.

The sound of mattress springs made Tom turn his head over to the source. Blaise had been writing a letter to his mother. Right. He'd completely forgotten. Oh, well. He didn't care that Blaise had seen him throw a fit.

Blaise was looking at him impassively now, but Tom knew he was studying him – trying to figure out how to best approach him, and whether it was worth it to approach him at all in the first place. That's why Tom was irritated by Blaise the least – he always thought before he spoke.

"I know it's not my place to ask this, but I'm asking as your friend, Tom. Why are you so upset about not knowing who your sister is going with?" Blaise asked carefully.

"Because, Blaise," he said quietly as his eyes snapped back open. He didn't look at the boy, but stared at the scar on his hand instead. He slowly licked his lips. He felt so far away - so detached, and lost from everything at the moment. "No one deserves my sister."

No one.

No one else.
The roots were deep – impossible to change, but the resin that dripped from the wounds in the bark were highly flammable. A tiny little spark, and now it was set ablaze.

And, *oh*, how that fire burned.

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**A/N:** So, you know how I said I wouldn't be posting this chapter up for maybe two weeks? WELL GUESS WHAT GUYS IT MUST HAVE BEEN A TYPO I GUESS I MEANT LIKE TWO DAYS LOL OH WELL

In all seriousness, the next chapter probably won't be posted for another week or two, but WHO AM I KIDDING IT'S THE YULE BALL AND THE SECOND TASK NEXT CHAPTER AND OMFG I'M LOSING MY DAMN MIND!!! I wouldn't be surprised if I finished writing that shit out within the next few days.

Special thanks to Radiant Innocence and VinoAmore for being my little fishies, and special thanks to YOU GUYS OMG. I'm still losing my damn mind over how much people love this story! ILY GUYS!!!
He saw her first.

The sound of white noise filled his ears. The air escaped his lungs and his heartbeat had left him.

She still looked like herself, but she looked…not like herself at all. Tamed was the wild beast. Replaced was her sensible clothing. Gone was his sister.

There, at the top of the staircase, was an imposter. A doppelganger. A giddy schoolgirl. Hermione didn't look like herself anymore. She'd changed. He felt offended by the disappointment he felt with her. How dare she change herself for someone else?

He saw how her eyes flicked down to him, and how her mouth went slack for a moment. Had he made it that obvious on his face how upset he was? Probably not; but she knew him best, after all.

Tom was intensely aware of the way people whispered, and stared at her in awe.

He hated it.

What he hated even more, though, was the way she gave a shy smile to the Bulgarian. He felt like he should have known better. Oh, he should have known. The way he'd looked at her – the way he always had seemed to have been around. What a fool he had been.

If it weren't for the fact that they were surrounded by people, he would have crushed Viktor Krum. Tom imagined taking that stupid staff Krum always walked around with, and knocking him flat onto his back. A gleeful tremor coursed through him like a river when he thought about how he'd slowly, ever…so…slowly, push the end of the staff into his jugular. Tom would then watch on with an acute sense of gratification – he knew he would – when Krum's dark eyes bulged out the harder he pressed. He'd beg. He'd make him beg. He'd beg and he'd plead and
he'd implore for Tom to stop – all with the beautiful, expressive language of his eyes.

He wouldn't stop if he started, though.

He knew he wouldn't stop.

She saw him first.

There he was, standing at the bottom of the stairs, near the entrance to the Great Hall. Something foreign grasped her heart in a vice-like grip, and sent numb shockwaves through her. It felt new. It felt unfamiliar. It squeezed and it clutched at her heart and it wouldn't let go.

One shaky gasp for air made her realize that she didn't like this feeling.

One shaky exhale of air made her realize that she didn't like the sight of Fleur Delacour on her brother's arm.

It was perfectly normal, of course, to feel that way. That's what she told herself, at least. They always had their ups and downs, especially in the beginning; but she'd grown accustomed to Tom being in her life now. They'd grown close over the past four and a half years. They'd go everywhere with each other, they'd do everything together, they told each other nearly everything. There were several times where strangers even thought that they were twins.

Of course, it was normal to feel a little jealous to see her brother spending time with someone else. It was irrational, but normal. Yes – completely normal.

So, she swallowed her irrational feelings, and finally noticed Viktor waiting for her at the bottom of the stairs. She took his offered arm, and let him lead her through the doors to the Great Hall with the other champions. She did her best to ignore the feeling in her heart, and the feeling of those charcoal eyes at the back of her head. She did her best to enjoy the evening.

And she did. Hermione was actually enjoying herself, despite the frigidity between Tom and herself. She danced and she danced and she danced until she felt dizzy. The room was spinning and she was hot. Viktor, being the gentleman that he was, offered to go get her a drink. She smiled at him in thanks, and sat at her seat at the champion's table.

Hermione was still basking in her light-headed bliss when the sound of the chair scraping against the floor next to her jarred her from her thoughts. Tom plopped down next to her, and looked rather detached and annoyed. She glanced at him, then looked away. Her spine straightened, and she crossed her arms, refusing to look at him. She was not going to speak to –

"You're acting like a child," he told her.

She nearly gave herself whiplash from turning her head to look at him so quickly. He was lounged back in his chair, lazily chewing on the end of a straw. He was looking at her expectantly, his eyebrows raised.

Hermione pulled her eyes away from the straw hanging out of his mouth to scowl at his eyes. "I'm the one acting like a child? Who's the one who had their friends snooping about, trying to find out who was taking me to the ball when they didn't get their way, hmm?"

Tom stopped chewing on the straw, and glared at her. "If you had just told me, I wouldn't have had to snoop."
"You had no right to snoop to begin with," she countered.

Tom leaned forward in his chair, and sneered, "You had no right to lie to me."

Hermione scoffed, "Choosing not to divulge information isn't considered lying, Tom."

Tom took the straw out of his mouth, and studied her face for a long moment. Then, he leaned back in his chair, and started chewing on the straw again. "It is to me," he said frostily.

Hermione raised her head to the ceiling, and let out an exasperated sigh. She didn't look at him when she asked, "Shouldn't you be with Fleur?"

She saw him shrug out of the corner of her eye. "Probably," he said carelessly. "I got sick of her, and dumped her on Roger Davies."

Hermione looked at him again with wide eyes, and ignored the new feeling that invaded her emotions. "Tom, you can't just dump your date on someone else!" she whispered harshly.

The corners of Tom's mouth furled up in one of his signature smiles. "Of course, I can - and I did. She was driving me nuts, honestly – griping and complaining about how Hogwarts and the education system here are flawed. Davies' date was too sick to attend and he'd been staring at Delacour all night – quite embarrassing, really – so I thought, 'Why not?'."

Hermione's mouth hung open and she stared at him. He grinned triumphantly at her. She blinked herself out of her stupor. "You…I have no words. None."

"That'd be a first," he said sarcastically.

"Oh, go away, Tom. You got rid of your date. We both know you didn't want to go to the ball to begin with; so, why are you still here?"

"Because I love making your life miserable?" he teased.

Hermione didn't know why, but what he said made her angry – irrationally so. She just wanted to enjoy herself. She just wanted to have fun. She just wanted that damn drink and what in the world was taking Viktor so long?

As if on cue, Viktor came back to the table with drinks in hand. He handed one to Hermione, and took the other seat next to her. The seat he sat in was, in fact, not his seat. Tom was currently in Viktor's seat and Hermione knew that Tom knew he was, the prat.

Viktor leaned over to look at Tom. "It looks like you've lost your date, Thomas."

Tom didn't look at Viktor, but at the crowd instead to watch Fleur and Roger dance together. "It's Tom," he said quietly.

"Vat?" Viktor asked over the music.

Tom pulled the straw out of his mouth, and threw it over his shoulder. He leaned so far forward toward Viktor that Hermione had to awkwardly lean back in her chair to give him space. The cold glare that he leveled on her date sent a shiver down her spine.

"I said…my name is Tom, you idiot," he spat venomously. He stood up abruptly from the table, and walked away from them.

Hermione stared after her brother in shock. She turned back to Viktor, who looked equally
offended and puzzled. Hermione shakily lifted herself from her seat. "I'm so sorry, Viktor. I – I'll be right back," she told him. Viktor didn't say anything, but nodded. He did not look pleased.

Damn it, Tom.

He'd controlled himself so much better than what he'd originally anticipated. Tom was rather proud of himself, actually; but he knew that Hermione wasn't. He rolled his eyes. Oh, no. Not at all.

She'd followed him down to the dungeons, ranting and raving like the lunatic that she was. He didn't want to talk to her. He didn't even want to look at her right now.

"Tom Marvolo Riddle! You get back here right now!" she yelled from somewhere behind him.

He ignored her, and kept walking. He had kept walking – that was, until, he felt something solid hit the back of his head. He froze, and slowly turned around to see Hermione in all her brilliant rage. Her carefully pinned curls were a frizzy mess now, just like they should have been to begin with. Her chest was heaving in pants – whether it was because she was angry with him, or out of breath from chasing him down, he did not know. Honestly, it was probably both. He didn't care.

When he noticed that she only had one of her heels in her hand, he frowned, and looked down. And there it was on the floor – her other heel.

Tom looked back up at her slowly, and asked her in quiet disbelief, "Did you really just throw your shoe at me?"

Hermione huffed, and pushed a curl out of her face, frustrated. "Why, yes. Yes. As a matter of fact, I did," she stated sensibly, but did not look at all sensible. Oh, but of course. Of course, she could act sensible and angry all at once. It drove him absolutely mad.

"You're crazy. Did you know that? What in the Hell in wrong with you, Hermione?" he asked.

Hermione scoffed indignantly and her eyes darted around in disbelief before they finally settled back on him. "I'm crazy?" she asked indignantly, and patted her chest with her hand as she spoke. "Me!? What is wrong with me?"

"I didn't stutter," he said indifferently.

Hermione was still holding her other shoe when she thread her fingers into her hair, and started grasping at clumps of her curls. She really did look like she was going crazy – absolutely batty.

He felt a little worried when she made determined eye contact with him, and promptly stormed up to him. She shoved his shoulder with the shoe in her hand, and said, "No! The real question is: what is wrong with you, Tom? Why do you hate Viktor so much? He hasn't done anything to you!"

He froze at her question. What could he tell her? What should he tell her? He didn't even know. Should he tell her that he was having his stupid abandonment issues again? Should he tell her that he hated how she looked like this different version of herself? Should he tell her that he wanted to destroy whatever boy even so much as touched her -

Tom's world suddenly staggered slightly to the right and he had to recalibrate himself. Realization dawned on him then. He wasn't just angry that Hermione hadn't been honest with him. He wasn't just angry and insecure that a famous Quidditch player had asked her to the ball, and was stealing all her attention away from him. He was angry for a completely different reason than he'd
originally thought.

He was jealous. He knew the emotion for what it was now.

Tom couldn't tell her that. He couldn't, he shouldn't, and he wouldn't. So...he didn't.

This realization didn't make things any easier for him. If anything, it made things worse. It was a warm breath blowing oxygen onto a dying fire – it was the breath of life.

It was a realization he wanted to defer.

Tom grabbed her hand that was holding her shoe, and angrily yanked it out of her grasp. He threw it down to the floor and spat, "Don't ask what's wrong with me, Hermione, when you're the one attacking me with your damn shoe."

Hermione scowled up at him, yanked her hand out of his grasp, and seethed, "If you weren't a complete and utter arsehole, I wouldn't feel inclined to attack you with my shoe!"

"Yeah? Well, if you weren't such a spoiled brat, then maybe I'd feel less inclined to be an arsehole," he barked back, bringing his face closer to hers in his anger.

Hermione let out a frustrated scream, and shoved him. He stood rooted to his spot as he glared down at her. He let her have her temper tantrum. He always did.

"Are you seriously mad at me, because I didn't tell you who I was going with? My whole world doesn't revolve around you, Tom!" she yelled at him.

But I want it to, he'd wanted to say.

"That's adorable that you think that," he'd sneered hatefully instead. His heart seized at the sight of fresh tears rolling down her face at his words, and watched the way it cut a clean path through her make-up.

"Happy Christmas, Tom," her voice was quiet and defeated and bitter. She gathered her shoes, and calmly walked away from him.

She walked away and she left him there to fester in his own anger and self-loathing. He let out a frustrated scream once he lost sight of her, and stormed back to the Slytherin common room.

As he layed there in his bed that night, he thought of the way she looked. He knew he'd hurt her feelings. He kept telling himself he'd done nothing wrong. He wouldn't apologize. He would never apologize. He lied to himself and he lied to himself until it had become the truth.

After he was done lying to himself, he went over his plans for retribution.

After he was done going over his plans for retribution, he tried to sleep. He tried to sleep, but it wouldn't come.

Two months had gone by since they'd fought. She wouldn't speak to him, wouldn't look at him, wouldn't even breathe the same air as him if she could help it. Tom absolutely hated it, but it gave him more time to formulate and oversee his retribution. Once Krum was out of the picture, she'd see clearly again. She just needed her head out of the clouds, was all.

The plan had been set, and timing was everything.
Theo had concocted a slow-acting potion that caused severe abdominal issues. That's how Theo had worded it, anyway. Tom had asked him if hospitalization would be necessary after ingestion; Theo gave him a sly smile and told him that he wouldn't be sent to the school infirmary, if that's what he was asking – that there may even be some internal bleeding involved. Tom had given a twisted smile and his body had shivered in anticipation.

Thank Merlin for Theo, thank Merlin he was a twisted little *fuck*, and thank *Merlin* he was gifted in potionering.

Malfoy had been *somewhat* hesitant about it, of course; but he said he'd still go through with it – he would be the one to distract Krum, and everyone else at the Durmstrang table, so that Blaise could slip a few drops into Krum's goblet. Since the Durmstrang students had arrived at Hogwarts, Draco had been brown-nosing their ranks – he'd said something about his *father* wishing he'd gone to Durmstrang instead of Hogwarts. Tom knew what it really was, though – he knew enough about Durmstrang to know that they didn't allow *his* kind there.

Which, of course, lacked any kind of sense. The two students with the highest grades were himself and his sister, who were – *wait for it!* – Muggleborns. Perhaps they wanted to feel better about themselves. Perhaps they wanted to feel falsely superior. Perhaps they were terrified that they really weren't.

Blood bled red, after all. Only a blind man wouldn't see that.

Tom absently tilted his head to the side in thought. Perhaps they were blind. He shrugged and downturned his mouth for a moment, before turning his attention back to the moment at hand – Krum's untimely forfeit from the tournament.

He'd wanted to *kill* him, originally; but that little nagging voice in his head – that *irritating* voice of logic and reason told him that murder was *technically* illegal, and that, *no*, there weren't any loopholes when it came to murder, Tom. He was sure that if he'd had enough time, he could have found a loophole, but time was something that he lacked at the moment.

Non-lethal, but *horrendous*, poisoning would have to suffice, instead.

Tom remained as inconspicuous as possible as he ate his breakfast in the Great Hall, and watched Draco chat up Krum and a few other Durmstrang students, when Theo plopped down next to him. When Tom glanced at him from the corner of his eye, he noticed the boy grinning from ear to ear.

Tom picked up his coffee, and smirked into the lip of the cup knowingly. Before he took a sip, he raised his eyebrow, and asked, "You mean the tournament?"

Theo's hands stilled temporarily while spreading the butter, and his idiotic grin widened even more. He moved to pour himself some tea and he said, "Yeah, sure. The tournament. Can't wait to see how that pans out, yeah?"

Tom hummed in response, and set his cup back down. He found he was automatically looking for Hermione; which she, to his surprise, wasn't in her usual seat. It was well into breakfast; so, where could she be? Library, perhaps?

Oh, well. He had more important things to concern himself with right now. As if on cue, Blaise
walked into the Great Hall. Tom watched on in giddy anticipation as his carefully laid out plan was unfolding right before his very eyes. He watched Draco pull out some sort of rare magical artefact to show the students at the table. Draco had all their rapt attention. Whatever it was that he'd brought out, it was good; no one was paying any attention to what was going on around them.

All Blaise had to do was spill a few drops into his goblet and –

Tom watched on in horror as Blaise started talking to Draco. What was he doing? What was he doing!? Tom could see that Draco looked concerned. He slipped the artefact back into his robe pocket, excused himself from the table, and followed Blaise out of the Great Hall.

On the way out, Blaise sent a purposeful look at Tom, silently beckoning him to follow. Tom took one last sip from his coffee and nudged Theo, who looked utterly dejected. "Come on, Theo. Let's go."

Theo nodded glumly, and followed Tom out of the Great Hall. All Tom could think of is that Blaise had better have a damn good excuse why he ruined the entire operation. If it had been anyone else, he would have assumed the worst; out of the three of them, though, he knew that Blaise would be the least likely to back out of something without having a good reason.

Knowing that was the only reason why he reigned his temper in when he slammed the door behind him and Theo. They met in one of their usual places – an abandoned classroom that must have been used for an outdated class from decades ago. There were still diagrams and measuring tools that had to have been obsolete in the wizarding world today. They looked ancient, and entirely useless.

"Blaise…" Tom started, but Blaise intersected.

"We can't poison him, Tom," he said.


Tom ignored Theo, and leveled a cold gaze on Blaise that was positively lethal. "I thought we had this discussion already, Blaise," Tom said quietly. "I already told you why I needed this done. Hermione-"

"That's exactly why I didn't do it, because of Hermione," Blaise stared back at Tom stoically, but Tom still noticed the way the tendon in his neck twitched nervously. Tom was known amongst them for his temper tantrums.

Tom took a steadying inhale, and raised his eyebrows in mock interest. "Oh? Explain it to me, then; explain to me how not following through is supposed to help my sister. From my standpoint, it seems like that would be the complete opposite."

Blaise's face took on a defeated look. He sighed, and ran a hand over his face. He kept his hand over his mouth for a moment as he looked at Tom; he looked as if he was contemplating how to say his next words. Tom didn't like it.

"Just spit it out, Blaise," Draco told him.

Blaise dropped his hand again and sighed. "Fine, fine. We can't poison him, because you're going to need him today."
Tom narrowed his eyes suspiciously and his lips formed a tight line. "Why? What does this have
to do with my sister?"

"I don't know all the details, but I overheard that she's being used somehow in the task today. Krum is meant to rescue her," he said.

Tom's eyes widened and his chest constricted and he shook his head and no, no, no. He stormed over to the door, and was about to throw it open when Blaise called his name, and told him to stop.

"It's too late, Tom. The judges – they've already taken her."

Tom froze and his eyes darted frantically over the door in front of him before it finally settled on his hand, which was still holding the door knob. His hand fell and he turned slowly to see the shocked faces of Draco and Theo, and the determined face of Blaise staring at him. Tom licked his lips slowly, and gazed at the floor. Then, his face twisted into something ugly.

"They… took… my sister?" he asked carefully, as if he hadn't heard him correctly the first time.

Blaise nodded once, and said nothing else.

They took her – his sister. His sister!

He shook and he trembled and he vibrated with an overwhelming amount of fury. His vision blurred. His heart tried to rip out of his chest. The bile coating the lining of his stomach churned violently. He needed her voice, her logic, her reasoning – but he couldn't find it, couldn't grasp it, because she was gone – they took her, they took her, they –

"The fuck!" Draco yelped out when an empty glass beaker exploded on a nearby shelf.

Tom shook and the air shook and the tables shook and the chairs shook and the room shook. She wasn't there she was gone they took her they took her.

Hermione.

He grabbed the side of the table next to him, and used all his strength to send it crashing to the floor with a loud bang that echoed throughout the room. He was panting and gasping and begging for air. He needed to stop – he knew he did. His eyes fluttered closed and he absently ran the fingers over the scar on his palm. With a contented sigh, he'd realized that he needed it.

He needed her.

Talk some sense to me, Hermione.

Tom couldn't stop bouncing his leg, couldn't stop pacing, couldn't stop worrying. He'd never felt this kind of panic before. His heart was wound up so tightly in his chest, he felt like it was going to snap like a rubber band.

"When is he going to stop doing that? It's putting me on edge," Draco whispered to Blaise and Theo, and tightened one of the complimentary transfigured blankets around his shoulders tighter. Tom stopped long enough to shoot Draco a warning look, then continued his frantic pacing again.

"How would you feel if your sister was currently underneath the Black Lake, surrounded by temperamental mermaids, and Merlin knows what else?" Blaise whispered back.
Tom froze again at Blaise's words. "Fuck," he whispered to himself, and ran a hand haphazardly through his hair for the hundredth time that day.

Theo cast a concerned glance in Tom's direction before he said, "I guess I don't really know. Don't have a sister. Wait a tick, all of us are only children. We don't have any siblings," Theo added pensively.

"Right. So, maybe we should just keep our mouths shut about it, then," Blaise sighed agitatedly, and continued to watch the surface of the water. Tom appreciated the harsh tone of Blaise's words and it was another reminder of why he was irritated by Blaise the least.

Tom stopped pacing, and grabbed the rail to lean over the edge again. They were on the top platform of the structure where the champions had to return with their possession. Tom scoffed out loud at the thought, which earned him a few odd looks, but he ignored them.

He'd recalled Dumbledore's words: They'd had something precious stolen from them.

For something to be stolen, it needed to be theirs to begin with.

Hermione was not Krum's. She did not belong to him.

Hermione belonged to –

Tom saw her head break the surface of the water and he took in a shuddered breath. Without a word of warning, he snatched the blanket wrapped around Draco's shoulders away unforgivingly. Draco voiced his protests, but it fell on deaf ears. Tom shoved past onlookers, and became increasingly frustrated whenever someone got in his way. He needed to get to her, he needed to –

He rushed down the two flights of rickety stairs to get to the first landing. Right when he got to the first level is when he saw officials hauling her out of the water.

Tom went to hurry over to her, but a man he didn't recognize reached out his arm to stop him from getting to her. His fist was tightening and perfectly willing and itching to punch the man. But before he could, Dumbledore calmly laid a hand on the man's shoulder.

"Let him pass, Greene. That's his sister they just pulled up out of the water. I imagine he must be concerned," Albus said, and gave Tom a sympathetic smile. Tom didn't take the time to thank him. But if he was being honest, even if he had the time, he probably wouldn't have, anyway.

The man moved his arm out of the way. Tom rushed to Hermione, and dropped to his knees in front of her – dropped to his knees for her in clemency. He didn't want her to be angry with him ever again – not like that, not like how she had been. He grasped her shocked face in his hands, his eyes desperately searching hers.

"Are you okay?" he breathed out.

Her amber eyes looked deeply into his charcoal ones in wonder. He realized that she was searching his face, too. She slowly latched her shaking fingers around his upper arms. He watched water drip, drip, drip from her nose, from her eyelashes, from her chin. Her lips were blue, and it made him feel livid. He watched as she struggled to catch her breath from being underwater for so long. His palms clumsily pushed the wet curls from her pale face. Her eyes fluttered closed when he did so.

Then, they snapped back open and she stared up at him again. She wasn't searching anymore – she'd found it. "Yes. I'm okay now," she said softly.
Hermione didn't say anything when he tore his jumper off, leaving him in only a white t-shirt, and pushed it over her head. He helped her pull her shivering arms through the sleeves and it swallowed her whole. He wrapped the blanket around her and he wrapped his arms around her. He set his warm cheek on top of her wet hair. She was so cold and he didn't care that she was making him cold in the process. He felt Hermione wiggle her arms out from the front of the blanket, and wrap them around his waist.

"I forgive you," she whispered into his neck. He hadn't needed to apologize to her. She already knew. Tom let out a shaky breath he hadn't known he'd been holding, felt himself instinctively relax against her, and his hold on her tightened.

Him.

It was him.

Hermione belonged to him.

Even if she didn't know it.

Even if she didn't accept it.

It was the truth.

A/N: Fuck...me...up. I poured my heart and soul into this chapter. Hopefully it shows through. Special thanks to Radiant Innocence, VinoAmore, and Chaco for reading through it for me. And I'm serious this time when I say don't expect a new chapter for another two weeks. Seriously. SERIOUS. Look at me trying to convince myself that I'm not gonna do it. Isn't that so adorable. ANYWAY.

THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR ALL THE COMMENTS! It's seriously the best thing to wake up in the morning with a cup of coffee, and read through them. ILY SO MUCH MY BABY BOOS
Chapter Ten: Damp Heartbreak

Him.

It was him.

The way he dropped to his knees in front of her left her feeling warm, despite being in frigid waters just moments before. The way he looked into her eyes with genuine concern – he had been worried about her in a way she'd never seen before.

Hermione knew that Tom was overly protective of her, but he was also overly stubborn and unapologetic. The fact that he was down before her now on his knees, almost as if he was in prayer, spoke volumes.

She'd been so angry with him since Christmas. The way he'd acted was bad enough, but the way he'd spoken to her so hatefully…it had hurt her in a way he'd never hurt her before. Tom had lashed out at her in other ways in the past, and she, him – most of them petty, and lacking any real spite. Those fights always lacked any deeper emotions – all superficial. Whenever he'd had those moments, it was more of him being difficult when he was bored, or for his own personal entertainment.

That Christmas night had been different, though; she knew it. His words had never been laced with so much acid before – so much corrosive acid. It ate away at her, and ate away at her. It kept her up some nights, those nights where she cried herself to sleep. It wasn't even his words that chewed and gnawed at her heart – it was in his tone – it was in his eyes.

Hermione was now staring up at those same charcoal eyes in awe. Gone was his anger; it was replaced by emotions Tom never readily showed anyone before - not even her. The way he grasped her face so desperately left her feeling breathless.
"Are you okay?" he'd asked.

Hermione could only stare up at him, her words gone. Tom pushed her clinging hair away from her face with his warm hands and she felt peaceful when he did so. Her eyelids fluttered closed at the contact and she thought: was she okay? Was she, really? For two entire months, she'd stewed over his hateful attitude, her heart hurting, waiting for an apology that she was sure would never come. Sure, she'd been upset, but…

She'd missed him - so much.

Her eyes snapped back open to stare up at him again. The apology she'd waited two entire months for was right here in front of her and he hadn't even uttered a single word. Actions spoke louder than words, after all. A warmth that felt like home spread throughout her.

"Yes. I'm okay now."

Before she knew what was happening, Tom had yanked his jumper off him, and pulled it over her head quickly. All she could do was stare up at his face as he gently led her freezing limbs through the sleeves. She noticed how flushed his cheeks were from the cold and she wanted to touch them – to fix his tousled hair that he'd ruined when he pulled his jumper off.

But she didn't.

She was going to, but she didn't. She didn't, because he'd pulled her into a hug that shocked her into silence. Tom never hugged anyone. The only two times she could think of where he'd initiated a hug was their first Halloween together; which, if she were being honest, shouldn't even count as a real hug – he was just being a manipulative little arse back then. The other time was when he hugged their mum when she told Tom they wanted to adopt him.

Sure, there had been plenty of times where their mum would still catch him off guard, and hug him – which he always rolled his eyes when she did so – but he never pulled away from her. He always let her hug him and he'd return it quickly, as if to just get it over with. It seemed he always did it more for her benefit than for his.

So, the fact that Tom initiated this hug made her temporarily forget how to breathe. He felt so warm – so, so warm.

She laid her head on his shoulder, and stared in fascination at the way his Adam's apple bobbed. "I forgive you."

Tom let out a sigh next to her ear, and held her tighter.

Him.

It was true, then.

He'd really been sorry.

Hermione nestled her face into Tom's neck, closed her eyes, and smiled.

The moment of clarity had worn off by the time they all got back to land, where Hermione was harshly thrown back into reality. There were groups of people chatting together amicably after the tournament was over with. She felt somewhat claustrophobic with everyone surrounding her. There was Viktor, Harry, Ron, and Ginny. And there was Draco, Theo, and Blaise, although she was sure the only reason why they were there was because of her brother. Speaking of her
The way Tom fussed over her now almost bordered on ridiculous. She'd never quite seen him this bad before, not even when she accidentally tripped down the last few stairs on one of the moving staircases when they were in second year.

*Are you hurt anywhere?*

*Are you cold?*

*Are you hungry? Do you want something to eat?*

*Thirsty? Theo, go get her some warm pumpkin juice.*

*Are you sure you're warm enough?*

He kept checking over her person, lifting her arms, lifting her damp hair, checking her face, her neck, turning her around to check her shoulders – oh, *Merlin*, she'd had enough. This was embarrassing and *everyone* was staring at them.

"Tom!"

He dropped one of her arms he was currently examining, and looked at her intensely. "Yes?"

Hermione inhaled slowly before saying, "I'm okay. Everything is alright now."

He narrowed his eyes at her, as if he wasn't entirely convinced. She stared into his eyes purposefully. "I promise, Tom."

The conviction in her words seemed to be enough to finally convince him to give her some space. "Fine, fine," he said.

"Actually, Tom, I was wondering if I could speak to you for a moment - privately," Viktor said, which caused Hermione's head to snap in his direction and her eyes widened.

No. No, no, no, no, no.

Her eyes wandered to Tom as she tried to calm her mild panic. His face betrayed nothing, but the tendons in his neck jut out each time he clenched his jaw. She knew he was furious with Viktor. She knew Tom probably viewed her being taken as entirely *his* fault.

She also knew what Tom did to anyone who he thought hurt her.

The corner of Tom's mouth twitched up in a half-smirk. "Sure," he said, then turned back to Hermione, "I'll be right back."

She said nothing, but gave him a meaningful look that she hoped he understood. The other corner of his mouth twitched – he understood. Whether he was going to listen or not, she had no idea.

Hermione watched on nervously as they walked away, and out of earshot. She could still see them, but not hear them. *Oh,* how she *desperately* wanted to hear them. She was only half paying attention to the conversation her friends were having, when she caught Zabini's eyes. He was looking at her curiously, and angled his head slightly to the side. She frowned at him, and turned her attention back to her friends.

"-can't believe he transfigured his head into a *shark!*" Harry exclaimed in his excitement.
"From what I heard, he meant to do a complete transfiguration, but didn't manage to get it quite right," Ginny said with a humored smirk.

"So what? It was bloody brilliant!" said Ron.

Hermione's worried gaze lingered back to Tom and Viktor and she couldn't stop fidgeting with the sleeves of Tom's jumper. For every second that passed and she saw that Tom wasn't pummeling Viktor into a bloody pulp, she relaxed a bit. Perhaps Tom didn't blame Viktor? It looked like they were having a perfectly normal conversation. Her eyes narrowed suspiciously.

Actually, on second thought, maybe that should concern her more? Tom didn't typically do normal conversations, but he was rather good at acting...

She didn't have much time to think on it, because they were coming back. Hermione tried to read the expression on their faces without being too obvious about it. They both looked so...normal – at ease.

Hermione quickly turned her attention back to her friends. She started when she felt a gentle hand at the small of her back.

"Still doing alright?" Tom asked her.

All she could do was stare up at him, give him a small smile, and nod. "Yes. I am a bit hungry now, though," she trailed off.

"Ahh, it is almost time for supper. Maybe we should all head to the Great Hall?" Viktor offered Hermione his arm with a polite smile.

Hermione felt her face warm up and the butterflies fluttered in her gut. She took his arm, and nodded. "That sounds like a good idea," she turned to her friends, "Are you guys coming along?"

"Are you kidding? You had me at supper," Ron joked.

Hermione rolled her eyes, then looked at her brother with hopeful eyes. "Tom?"

Tom gave her a small smile, and shook his head. "Nah, you go on ahead. I'll be there in a bit."

She looked at him for a few seconds, trying to get a read on him. He didn't seem angry, so she decided not to be worried. "Alright," she started slowly. "Library tomorrow morning?"

Tom nodded again, his eyes never leaving hers. "Nine A.M. Sharp."

Viktor and her friends began walking away, but Hermione turned her head back one more time to look at Tom, and grinned at him. His small smile got a little bit bigger, just for her.

Her heart swelled. She was so happy to have her brother back again. She'd missed him so much.

He shoved his freezing hands into his pockets, and watched pensively as Hermione and her friends walked toward the castle. Blaise, Draco, and Theo didn't say anything as they also watched them. They stood together in silence, the biting wind whipping at their faces and hair.

Tom tilted his head to the side, not taking his eyes off their retreating forms. "Theodore," he started conversationally.

Theo's head snapped to Tom, curious and hopeful. "Yeah?"
Tom's eyebrows rose and a calculating smile slowly formed on his face. "Feel like taking on an extra credit assignment?"

The excited grin that overtook Theo's face was all the answer he needed.

It had been several weeks since the second task and Hermione was on cloud nine. The leftover bits of snow were starting to melt away, classes were going well, her and Tom weren't fighting anymore, and she had a…a boyfriend.

She felt giddy using the word, even if it was only in her head.

The way Viktor touched her hand to get her attention when she was studying made her smile. The way Viktor tucked that stray curl behind her ear made her blush. The way Viktor stumbled over her name, not matter how many times she tried correcting him, was endearing.

The way Viktor kissed her made her feel dizzy.

It was always soft and sweet and awkward; the way first kisses should be. His teeth would often bump against hers, or he would breathe through his nostrils too harshly and loudly.

But it was still sweet, in a way.

Hermione was happy.

He couldn't bear the sight of it – the sight of them together. It made him sick. It made him feel physically ill. Tom wished he was being dramatic when he thought this, but he wasn't.

The memory of accidentally stumbling upon them, seeing them smiling at each other as Viktor brushed a wisp of hair from her face right before he leaned down and –

No.

Chills prickled his skin and his eyes watered and his eyelids fluttered rapidly, but they never closed.

No.

Tom felt the jealousy roil in his stomach and he dry-heaved over the toilet again, wishing and praying to feel empty - to feel this thing go away. Nothing else came up this time – not even his jealousy. It left his mouth tasting bitter and he knew it wasn't because of the bile.

He sat back on the cold stone, and leaned against the wall. He tiredly closed his eyes, and let his head loll back with a dull thud. It felt painful; so, he did it again.

And again.

And again.

Harder this time.

The pain made stars dance in front of his eyes and he temporarily forgot the vision that had previously been burned into his retinas.

It came back, of course. It always did.
Tom ran his palm over his face. He felt exhausted and drained. His hand settled over his mouth and he stared at a crack in the stone floor aimlessly.

He'd told himself that he was going to wait until the last task. He'd told himself that he wasn't going to do anything yet. He'd told himself that Krum would be gone in June and they would never see him again. He'd told himself that he didn't want to fight with Hermione again. He'd told himself that he would be good, for her.

He moved his hand from his mouth, ran the same hand through his hair, and suddenly felt determined.

He was so tired of trying to be good.

A cruel smile formed on his lips.

So, maybe he should stop.

Hermione knew she should stop, but she couldn't stop herself from sniffling, from crying, from her heart aching. She needed him - needed Tom.

After checking the Great Hall and the library, she moved onto the dungeons. He had to be there – he just had to be. She knew where the entrance to the Slytherin common room was, but she didn't know the password. She'd calmed herself down enough to wipe away her tears, sat down against a nearby wall, and waited for someone to come in or out.

A few minutes had passed when she heard the bricks in the wall begin to grate together, and fold in on themselves. She jumped up from her seat on the floor, and hoped that it was Tom.

It wasn't. It was Pansy Parkinson; who looked shocked, and somewhat appalled, to see Hermione standing there. "Dear Merlin, Granger. What in the hell happened to you?"

Hermione ignored her statement, and quickly asked, "Do you know if my brother is in there?"

Pansy eyed her skeptically from head to toe and said, "I don't know. Why?"

Hermione sighed, and pulled at the sleeves of her robes to keep her irritation in check. "I just need to speak with him. It's important. Could you please get him for me?"

"I'm not your personal servant, Granger-"

"If you don't go get him right now, you'll regret it, Parkinson," Hermione sneered in a way that wasn't normal for her. She didn't have the patience to deal with her at the moment.

Pansy sneered back, "I don't have to listen to you."

Hermione got close to the girl's face, raised her eyebrows, and asked quietly, "How do you think my brother will feel when he finds out that I politely asked you if you would go get him for me, and you refused?"

Pansy's eyes widened slightly, then narrowed at Hermione as she took a step back. Hermione stared at her expectantly, eyebrows still raised. She knew she shouldn't have used Tom as a threat, but it was effective. Almost everyone in Slytherin listened to Tom; although, she wasn't completely sure as to why…

"Fine," Pansy finally said. She turned back around, whispered the password, and slid back in
between the opening bricks. Hermione rocked back on her heels as she watched the bricks grind shut again, and waited as patiently as she could.

Only a few minutes had passed before the brick wall opened again and Tom walked out.

To say he was shocked when she threw herself against him and started sobbing would have been an understatement. She felt his arms wrap around her tentatively and she cried harder into his shirt. Hermione was vaguely aware of Tom moving them somewhere off to the side; where to, she wasn't sure, because her face never left his shirt.

She felt his hands smooth down her hair in a comforting way and she felt the way his breath warmed the top of her head whenever he whispered his calming words to her, even though she wasn't really listening to what he was saying. His presence was comforting enough.

"Hermione?" he asked carefully. He put his hands on her shoulders, and pulled away from her to look at her face. She was embarrassed to be crying in front of him, so she stared at her tears and snot that had collected on the front of his shirt instead.

Tom firmly held her face in his hands, and lifted her chin. "Hermione, look at me."

So, she did.

She watched the way his eyebrows furrowed together in concern. "What happened?" he asked darkly.

Hermione choked back a sob and said, "V-Viktor-"

Anger flashed on his face. "What did he do?"

"He-he…it was so odd. Everything was fine yesterday – I thought everything was fine. Well, everything seemed fine, and then today he was just – he just -" Hermione struggled to find her words between her hiccupsing breaths. Her eyes darted frantically while her brain worked, then they finally landed back on his dark ones. She blinked and said, "He broke up with me, Tom. He said he didn't think it was working out – that we were too…different. What does he mean by different, Tom? What does that even mean?"

His eyes narrowed in thought for a few seconds before he said, "I think you know what he meant, Hermione."

Her eyes widened at his words in surprise. "Because we're – because I'm…?"

Tom nodded only once. She started crying again.

The fingers that were curled behind her ears rubbed comfortably on her scalp and she closed her eyes for a few seconds before he pulled her back into another tight hug. Tom held her to him again, cradled her head, rubbed her back, told her everything was going to be alright – told her that he was there for her, and don't worry, Hermione, everything was going to be okay.

Her cries calmed and she sighed. "You're right – it'll be okay. He's just a stupid boy. I'm being silly for getting this upset, aren't I?"

Tom pulled away from her again, and ran his thumbs across her cheeks to wipe the tears away. He smirked down at her and said, "Maybe just a little bit silly."

Hermione gave a small smile, and swatted at his arm playfully. "Oh, shut up, you idiot."
"If I'm an idiot, then so are you."

She rolled her eyes.

"Just…forget about that arse, alright?" he said.

The corners of Hermione's mouth curled up mischievously and said, "Who?"

Tom grinned down at her and pressed his palm against her cheek affectionately. "That's my girl," he chuckled darkly.

Hermione's smile fell from her face and she stared at him for a long moment while his hand lingered. He stared back. She brought her hand up to his, and squeezed it. He dropped it from her face, but she didn't let go.

"Thank you, Tom," she told him.

He raised his eyebrow, and tilted his head to the side, "For what?"

Hermione let go of his hand, and smiled. She hugged him one last time and whispered into his chest, "For everything."

Tom walked into the fourth-year dormitory with an idiotic grin on his face, and plopped down onto his bed. He found himself playing with one of the tassels on his bed curtains merrily, basking in his high spirits.

"What's got you in such a cheerful mood?" Draco asked from the spot on his bed, with books spread about him.

Tom's smile widened and he lifted his head up to look at the blonde boy. He ignored his question and asked, "Say, where's Theo?"


Tom's smile turned into a smirk and his head fell back on his pillow. His hand wandered to the front of his shirt, and absently played with the damp heartbreak that had accumulated there. "Oh, I just wanted to thank him, is all."

Draco raised a curious brow. "For?"

Blaise didn't look up from the parchment he was writing on at his desk, and said in a bored tone, "Probably for destroying his sister's relationship."

Tom shot up, and narrowed his eyes at the side of Blaise's face.

"What? How?" Draco asked quickly.

"How do you think, Draco? He's had Theo working on a new…project again," Blaise said.

Tom ignored Draco, and asked Blaise, "It sounds like you don't approve, Blaise."

At this, Blaise lifted his head from his parchment, and looked at Tom. Blaise tilted his head slightly, which Tom knew meant he was thinking before he spoke again. "It doesn't involve me; so, it's none of my business."
"You're right – it isn't," Tom parried.

Blaise closed his eyes, and sighed. "Listen, I understand why you did it."

Tom's heart froze and his body froze. "Oh?" he asked quietly, raising his eyebrows in mock interest.

Blaise nodded. "Yeah, sure. You already said it, remember? He's not good enough for her."

Tom's heart started again and he relaxed. "Right, he isn't."

"He's got a good name and he's definitely wealthy enough, but he isn't really Hermione's type, is he? All brawn, and not much brain, yeah?" Blaise said artfully, his dark eyes settled knowingly on Tom's.

Tom's chest seized up again, but he kept his face impassive. He was telling Tom something else, too.

He was quietly telling Tom that he knew. He continued to stare dangerously at the boy, waiting for his next words.

Blaise knew Tom got the message and an amused smirk formed on his lips. He went back to writing, and said, "It's quite alright, though. I really do understand."

"You do?" he asked suspiciously.

Blaise's slanted eyes glanced up at Tom one last time, his face serious now. He nodded once and said, "I imagine you must be a bit more…protective of her, considering you've never had a sibling before."

"You're right. I haven't," Tom deadpanned.

"Which is why I understand, Tom; so, don't worry about what I think about it."

Tom's hand tightened on the soaked part of his shirt and said, "I appreciate your understanding, Blaise, but I honestly don't care what you think about it."

Blaise didn't say anything else. He just continued writing with a barely-there smile gracing his lips.

Tom glared at him.

Draco looked back and forth between Tom and Blaise a few times, shook his head, and went back to reading.

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**A/N:** I am complete and utter garbage and I REGRET NOTHING. You'll eventually find out what Theo did, but not right now. NOT RIGHT NOW, MY HOMIES. Thanks to my lil fishies Radiant Innocence, VinoAmore, and Chaco for helping me again. I know that you guys don't feel like you do much to help me, but you listen to me spew my ADHD fueled Tomione garbage almost daily, which is a huge task all in itself.

And a huge thank you to everyone who has commented, kudos, and bookmarked so far. I can't tell you how many times I've read through your comments again and again when I was having a hard time focusing on writing this chapter. ILY BABY BOOS
After Tom was done stewing over Blaise's words, he made his way to look for Theo. Really, they needed to find some sort of system to communicate with each other better – Hogwarts was far too large to go traipsing through to look for someone.

Thankfully, he was positive he knew where Theo was. So, Tom made his way up the moving staircases to the seventh-floor corridor. As he walked up the stairs, his mind drifted back to Blaise. Tom was nervous; which was saying something, because Tom was hardly ever nervous. He didn't think Blaise would say anything about his discovery; which, now that he thought about it, he could easily deny. Tom had never admitted to anything, but he'd never not admitted to it, either.

His silence was incriminating and he was kicking himself for not realizing that sooner. He'd been so caught off-guard that he hadn't had adequate time to recuperate. Tom was sure that Blaise would keep his mouth shut, he usually did, but he couldn't be entirely sure. That paranoid part of him, that fight-or-flight foster boy part of him, was thinking of all the ways that it could be used against him. Perhaps he should think of a way to keep Blaise's mouth shut…

As he waited for one of the staircases to shift, he thought of Hermione again. He honestly wasn't sure if he wanted her to know anything. Tom knew that she would be appalled by the very idea of it and he couldn't entirely blame her for it. She was his sister – in a legal sense, of course. But technically, when it came down to it? She wasn't his sister.

Tom took in a shaky breath, and tried to think back to when his opinion of her had changed. At what moment, at what time, had he stopped viewing her as his sister? Truly?

Was it when he saw her arm in arm with Viktor Krum at the Yule Ball? That's when he'd labeled his intense jealousy, that was for sure.
Was it, perhaps, when she told him that she'd been asked to the ball?

Maybe it was back when they were both twelve? On that summer night, with the news of adoption still fresh on his mind, and their shared blood still fresh on their tangled fingers.

Or, perhaps, he never viewed her as his sister at all.

Tom thought back to the very first moment he saw her, all gangly and bushy haired and wild-looking, standing on the stairs. He remembered how he'd felt then, the confusion – that familiar pull of something he couldn't quite place. He remembered not knowing what to think of her then, but had refused to show it. Then, when he had touched her hand…

She had felt familiar then and it had bothered him greatly.

What kind of foster boy knew familiarity? He'd been shifted from foster home to foster home since birth. He never knew his parents, never knew his family. All he knew was the harsh reality that no one had wanted him and he'd accepted it. If no one wanted him, then he didn't want anyone else, either. He didn't need anyone else – only himself. That's what he'd told himself for most of his life, anyway.

Tom had hated her, at first. He'd been cruel to her. She'd represented everything he secretly wanted in his life, but knew he would never have. But she'd kept being…her, which made legitimately hating her difficult. She wasn't like any of the other foster siblings he'd had; she was different, he knew.

And then, he'd finally figured out why she'd been different and why he'd been inexplicably drawn toward her; it was magic. The discovery that they were both the same had been… well, enlightening.

Tom viewed them being brought together as a sign. What were the odds of two magical children in the Muggle world meeting and living underneath the same roof?

None, in his mind.

The chirping of birds brought him out of his thoughts. He glanced at the white doves perched in their globe-shaped gilded cages before heading to a painting of a country landscape hanging from the wall. Tom peered down both ends of the corridor. Once he saw that no one was there, he pulled out his wand, and waved it.

The painting parted open with a quiet creak and Tom slipped in, shutting it soundlessly behind him. He walked through the narrow passageway and he could hear bubbling liquids, licking flames, clanging equipment, followed by a slew of curse words. Tom let a quiet laugh out his nose at the sight of Theo.

There he was, rushing back and forth between all his work stations he'd rigged in the unused boys' lavatory that no one knew about. They'd found it by accident back in second year, and claimed it as theirs. Not like anyone else knew about it to lay claim to it, of course.

Tom walked into the center of the room, and continued watching in mild amusement as Theo moved from cauldron to cauldron, muttering to himself.

"No, no, no. That's not the right color. Why is it not the right color? It's supposed to be sage, not emerald," Theo mumbled to himself. He measured a spoonful of a greyish powder, and sprinkled it in the cauldron, which promptly started to boil over, sizzling out the flame underneath it. Theo jumped back and shouted, "Bloody fucking bollocks! No, no, no! That wasn't supposed
to happen, either!"

Tom pulled out his wand, and decided now was the best time to make his presence known. Honestly, when Theo was in his makeshift lab, he was sure a bomb could go off and the boy wouldn't even notice.

With a swish of his wand and a few words, Tom cleaned the mess up for him.

Theo whirled around in surprise, and pushed his work goggles on top of his head. "Oh, hello, Tom. I didn't hear you come in."

"I don't think you would have, not over all that noise you were making."

Theo grinned, and rubbed the back of his hand against his forehead. The action left a trail of something dark smudged across his skin. Now that Tom was closer, he could see that Theo was a complete mess. The only clean part of his face was where his goggles had been.

"So, how did it go? Did it work?" Theo asked enthusiastically.

Tom leaned against one of the sinks that wasn't housing one of Theo's many cauldrons, and said, "It went perfectly, Theo. You're a genius at inventing new potions, really."

Theo's grin broadened at his praise.

"Will there be enough of it to keep Krum away until he leaves in June?" Tom asked.

At this, Theo's nose crinkled and he tilted his head in thought. "Until June, eh? Yeah, I'd say there should be. It only needs to be administered once every couple of weeks. Of course, this is my first time testing this potion out; so, I'm not sure if he'll build a tolerance to it. It's entirely possible, but I'm sure I can create a more concentrated version of the potion -"

"Theo, you're rambling again. Short answer, please," Tom interjected.

"Uh, right. Sorry about that. Anyway, the short answer is 'yes'. There should be enough to last until June; if not, I can just make more."

Tom pushed himself off the sink, and walked over to the potion in question. There were several vials of it bottled on the shelf. He picked one of them up, and read the label Theo put on it. His eyebrows raised up in mild surprise.

"Unattraction Potion?" Tom asked, gently waving the bottle back and forth to get Theo's attention. "Not very original, is it?"

Theo shrugged, and continued stirring the potion he was working on. "Nah, not really. I figured it was simple enough. You can rename it, if you want."

Tom's mouth downturned at the idea and he set it back on the shelf. "No, that's quite alright. It's your potion, after all."

Theo hummed noncommittally in response to Tom's words, then he asked, "Oh, are you able to get more of Hermione's hair for me? I accidentally set the strands you gave me too close to the flames, so they burned up."

Tom gave him a withering look. "Seriously, Theo?"

"What?" he asked, somewhat indignant. "I didn't mean to, but I'll need more if you want the
potion to work properly."

Tom sighed. "Fine. When will you need it by?"

"Hmm…the sooner, the better, honestly. But next week should be fine."

"Alright. I'll get it to you by next week."

Theo grinned at him. "Perfect."

Even though Hermione had told Tom that she was being silly for being so upset over what happened with Viktor, and reassured him that she really was fine, the truth of the matter was, she wasn't. Not completely, anyway. She'd really liked Viktor, and couldn't for the life of her figure out where it had gone wrong. It couldn't just be because of her blood status, because he knew she was a Muggleborn beforehand. They had gotten along perfectly fine and he always acted like he was interested in what she was saying. The boy had seemed content to just sit there and watch her study, for God's sake.

The abruptness of it all was rather jarring, she supposed. Hermione didn't like not understanding something, so it was only natural that she wanted to understand where things went wrong.

Unfortunately, she was far too embarrassed to approach Viktor, and ask him about it. She was also afraid of feeling rejected again. What made things worse is that he was so nice when he broke up with her. He was all, I'm so sorry, Hermy-own-ninny. You are such a nice girl, Hermy-own-ninny. It's not you, it's me, Hermy-own-ninny.

It made it somewhat difficult to be angry with him; which, she was angry with him, of course. Another thing that made the whole situation difficult was the fact that Viktor's little fan club sent cruel looks and jabs her way after he broke up with her, as if it were entirely her fault.

Bloody brainless girls. You'd think they'd be happier that she wasn't with him anymore.

Hermione threw herself back against the armchair she was sitting in and groaned. Crookshanks took the opportunity to jump into her lap, and comfort her in the only way he knew how.

"What's wrong, Hermione?" Ginny asked.

Hermione brought her head back up to look at the girl sitting on the sofa across from her, and absently pet the orange fluff of fur in her lap. Harry and Ron had glanced up from their parchment to look at her.

She sighed and said, "Nothing. I'm just over all this tournament business. I can't wait until things go back to normal."

"Why? The tournament has been the most entertaining thing to happen at Hogwarts in years," Ron said, and grunted when his little sister gave him a swift jab to his ribs. "Ow! What was that for?"

"For being dense," she responded.

"Hermione, just forget about that git, alright? You deserve better than that," Harry told her, which made Hermione smile sadly. "Hey, I know! How about we do something fun this weekend?"

"Like what?" Hermione asked, "I'm not quite sure I'm in the mood to do anything…"
"Oh, come off it, Hermione! Isn't there a Hogsmeade trip this weekend?" Ron asked.

"You're right, Ronald. I think there is. We should all go together – do something fun. The snow is gone now, so it'll be perfect weather," Ginny added optimistically.

"How about we go get ice cream? My treat," Harry added.

Hermione groaned, and threw herself back against the cushion again. As fun as it all sounded, she wasn't sure if she was in the mood to do those things. And what if she saw Viktor? She wasn't sure if she could handle the embarrassment of seeing him again so soon. It was bad enough seeing him in the Great Hall, but there were enough bodies around to help put distance between them. If they ran into him at Hogsmeade…not so much.

"You know," Harry said in a sly tone, "We could always visit the book store…"

Her head shot up to look at him.

Harry smirked at her in triumph. "I'll buy you a book if you come."

She scowled at him. "That's incredibly sneaky of you, Harry Potter."

He grinned at her. "So, is that a yes?"

She pouted and grumbled, "Fine. But I get to pick out any book I want!"

"Me, too!" added Ginny.

"Wait, what?" Harry looked at Ginny in confusion.

"Wait, what about me?" Ron asked indignantly.

"Oh, shut up, Ronald. It's not like you enjoy reading," Ginny said sarcastically.

At first, Ron had looked offended, but then he'd accepted what she said with a shrug of his shoulders. "Yeah, I guess you've got a point there."

Hermione couldn't help herself, and smiled, despite her terrible mood. Her friends always made everything better.

Going to Hogsmeade with her friends had been a good idea, in the end. They'd kept her so distracted that she'd barely thought of Viktor at all.

It was still a little chilly out, even though it was in the middle of April. They'd decided to still have ice cream, anyway, and just got some hot chocolate to warm up afterward.

Hermione found herself rocking back and forth on the balls of her feet impatiently.

"Merlin, don't worry, Hermione. The book shop isn't going to get up and walk away," Ginny joked.

"Oh, shush. I'm just excited," Hermione said half-heartedly.

Ginny grinned at her, and looped an arm through hers. "I don't know about you, but I'm going to look for the most expensive book there is," she whispered conspiratorially.

"Ginny," she warned.
"What? I was only joking!"

Hermione hummed sarcastically.

"I really was," Ginny pouted.

Hermione was about ready to tell her that she was full of it, but Harry and Ron finally showed up.

"Alright, bill is paid. Ready?" Harry asked.

"Yes, sir!" Hermione grinned.

They made their way into Tomes and Scrolls and the musical twang of the bell hanging over the door sounded their arrival. The girls split up, both intent on finding a book that interested them. Ginny, of course, headed toward the sporting section and the boys followed behind her. Hermione rolled her eyes. Ginny was the girliest tomboy that she had ever known.

Hermione pursed her lips in thought, trying to decide which topic she wanted to search in. She'd been struggling a bit in Defence Against the Dark Arts more than she'd like to admit; so, maybe something in that topic? She wandered down the stuffed rows toward the back of the store, intent on finding something of interest.

After around ten minutes of perusing the shelves, she finally found something. *Dark & Dangerous Creatures Through the Ages.* It wasn't much, but it was definitely informative. There were creatures in the book that she hadn't even heard of before.

As she made her way to the front of the store, she couldn't stop an excited grin from forming on her face. She couldn't wait to show the book to Tom; she knew that he would love it. He was all about the darker stuff in the wizarding world, after all.

"Finally! We were beginning to think you'd gotten lost," Ron said.

Hermione frowned slightly. "We've only been here for maybe fifteen minutes, Ronald."

He scratched behind his ear and said, "Yeah, well, it feels like it's been a lot longer than that."

"Oh, stop being so selfish," Ginny nudged him as she walked by, carrying a somewhat large book. Something about Quidditch, Hermione was certain. She slammed it down on the counter, which earned a stern look from the shop employee, and grinned up at Harry. "I'm ready when you are!"

Harry ran a hand through his wild hair. "Merlin, I'm beginning to regret this," he muttered under his breath.

"What was that, Harry?" Ginny asked.

"Nothing! I didn't say anything," he said as he dug through his pockets to fish out his money, and paid for their books.

Shortly after leaving Tomes and Scrolls, Hermione spotted her brother with his friends. She grinned, looked down at her book excitedly, then looked back up at him again. She hurried over to him and shouted, "Hey, Tom!"

Tom turned his head to look in her direction. His brows raised when his eyes landed on her and he began to smile. His smile and eyebrows suddenly fell when his gaze traveled over her shoulder. Hermione halted mid-step, and turned her head to glance behind her. Harry, Ron, and Ginny were
standing behind her. She looked back at Tom, and frowned in thought. Was he seriously being moody because her friends were nearby?

Choosing to ignore his change in demeanor in favor of her excitement, she held out the book to him and said, "Look at this book, Tom."

Tom looked back down at her curiously with a raised eyebrow, and took it from her. He flipped it over in his hands and asked amusedly, "Dark & Dangerous Creatures Through the Ages? Is it any good?"

"I only just got it; so, I haven't had a chance to look through it yet."

He tested the weight of it in his hand. "This looks expensive, Hermione. Did you already blow through the money Mum and Dad just sent us?"

She blinked in confusion. "What? No. Harry just bought it for me."

Tom froze. He suddenly outstretched his hand to return the book to her. "Oh? Is that so?" he asked in mock interest.

"Uh…yes?" she half-asked, and carefully took the book back from Tom. Tom glared at Harry. "Krum only dropped her a few weeks ago and you're already trying to swoop in to save the day, huh, Potter?" he sneered hatefully.

Harry looked equal parts confused and annoyed. "What? No. I was only trying to cheer her up-"

Ginny butt in, and waved her book in his face mockingly. "He bought me a book, too, Riddle. Does that mean he's interested in me, too?"

Tom ignored Ginny, and stepped up to Harry. Tom practically towered over him, but he still stood his ground. Tom spoke so quietly, so dangerously, that Hermione barely caught his words. "I swear to God, Potter, if you even think about touching her, I'll break your fingers one…by…one."

That was it.

Hermione felt absolutely livid. She handed her book to a wide-eyed Ginny, who hastily took it without a word. Then, she grabbed Tom's wrist and bit out an, "Excuse us, please."

No one said anything as she dragged Tom over to a small alley in between the book store and the shop next door. Once they got to the alley, he yanked his wrist out of her grasp.

"I'm not a child, you know," he said coldly.

Hermione waved her wand and cast a quick Muffliato charm. She turned on him and said crossly, "Are you sure about that? Could have fooled me."

Tom didn't say anything; he just shoved his clenched fists into his pockets, and glared down at her.

Hermione closed her eyes, rubbed her forehead with her fingers, and sighed tiredly. "What in the world is the matter with you, Tom? What you said back there was completely out of line."

"Are you sure about that?" he mimicked bitterly.

Her eyes snapped open at him, and scowled. "I know you don't like Harry, but he's my friend, Tom. One of my best friends. I don't particularly care for your friends, either, but I don't go around..."
saying rude things to them."

The scowl left Tom's face and he shrugged one shoulder nonchalantly. "You could, you know. I wouldn't mind."

Hermione groaned out a quiet, "Oh, my God!", threw her head back to look at the beautiful sky, and silently prayed for patience. She slowly inhaled, then looked back at him again. He was angry – she knew he was. Well, he wasn't the only one.

"I don't understand why you're so upset. It's just a book."

Tom inhaled deeply through his nostrils and tactfully said, "I just don't want to see you…upset so soon after…him."

Hermione felt her scowl soften in mild shock. "You...you seriously think that Harry is...interested in me? In that way?"

He said nothing, but the way his jaw clenched was all the answer she needed. She couldn't help herself – really, she couldn't. Before she realized what was happening, she began to laugh. Tom looked somewhat shocked, but then scowled at her again.

"It's not funny," he admonished.

"I'm – I'm sorry, but it kind of is," she said in between her giggles. Once she calmed down, she spoke, "I do not view Harry in that way, at all. He's my friend."

He still had his cold gaze leveled on her. Hermione grinned up at him and said, "Oh, stop looking at me like that, Tom."

His lips formed in an almost-pout and he continued to look at her, the scowl not leaving his face. "No."

"You're acting like a child again."

"I am not."

"Yes, you are," she told him in a sing-song voice.

The corner of his mouth twitched in an almost-smile, but he tried to hide it. "Shut up."

"Never," she grinned.

A small smile started to form on his face. "You're a brat," he said half-heartedly.

"If I'm a brat, then so are you," she mimicked his words from weeks ago.

They looked at each other with the same half-smirk on their faces for a few moments. For some reason, Hermione thought of everything her brother had done for her; how he'd protected her in his own way (which she didn't completely agree with his tactics), how he'd always been there for her whenever she was upset. She thought about how little their television was used at home, because they'd preferred to read to each other, instead. She thought about all the times they'd go exploring in the woods in their backyard together. She thought about how he always made time just for her to meet at the library every weekend.

She didn't realize until now how grateful she was that Tom was in her life and she'd never really told him so.
And, before she knew what she was doing, she'd told him so with a hug and the words, "I love you, Tom."

He stiffened in her embrace, and didn't return it. She grinned to herself at his obvious discomfort. "I – uh…" he trailed off uneasily.

She removed herself from the one-sided hug, and told him, "It's okay. You don't have to say it back," she smiled mischievously. "I know how you are. I just wanted to tell you how much I appreciate having you as my brother. That's all."

Tom stared at her quietly for several moments, his dark eyes leveled on her. He seemed to shake himself, and visibly relaxed then. He grinned roguishly and said, "Well…I guess I'm rather amazing, aren't I?"

Hermione's face turned warm and she half-heartedly shoved his shoulder. "Oh, shut up, you arse! I was trying to be all sentimental, and then you go and ruin it!"

"I mean, you should know better by now, really."

She rolled her eyes and huffed, "You're right; I guess I should. So, are you better now, then?"

Tom gave her a withering look and raised his eyebrow. "I was fine to begin with."

She huffed indignantly, "Liar."

Tom smirked down at her. "Maybe a little bit."

"You still need to apologize to Harry."

"Fat chance."

"Tom," she warned.

"Hermione," he mimicked her tone.

"You're impossible! What am I supposed to tell them now?" she asked.

He shrugged, and made to leave. "Don't know, don't care."

She let out a frustrated groan, and followed him.

She'd had to make up excuses for his horrible behavior again later that day.

She always did.

He was her brother.

And she loved him.

So, of course she would always protect him.

Even when he was wrong.

Tom couldn’t sleep. He was sure it was well into the early morning hours at this point, but no matter what he did – no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t sleep. Her words kept revolving
over and over again in his head, haunting him.

I love you, Tom.

That's what she'd told him earlier. Their parents had said it to him often, but Hermione had never said it before. She hadn't really needed to, though. He already knew she cared about him, but to hear it for himself...

He'd wanted to kiss her then. He wanted to kiss her, and not in the innocent way Krum had. He'd wanted to erase all evidence of the other boy, until it was him, him, only him that she thought of. He'd wanted to push her up against the brick wall and grasp at her hips and dig his fingers into her waist and pull at her curls. He'd wanted her to do the same to him. Oh, how he'd wanted to; and oh, how it physically hurt him that he couldn't.

He couldn't do it, because he knew she'd hate him if he did it.

Tom rolled over onto his side, and slid his hand underneath the cool side of his pillow. He stared into the pitch blackness that was his bed curtains. It felt different when she said those words to him. It held more weight for him – it felt heavier. Her words pressed him further and deeper into his mattress - further and deeper into the recesses of his own head. It kept him trapped there. The thoughts were climbing at the back of his mind, and spreading through him like a disease – this disease was one he never wanted to be cured of.

Infect me, pollute me, contaminate me.

One thought he had, the fact that Hermione didn't mean her words in the way he wanted her to mean them, left him feeling a whole new level of emotions. He felt bitter and he felt frustrated and he felt angry and he felt...oddly confident.

He knew that she would say the words, and mean them in the way he wanted...one day.

He knew that she would.

He already knew that he was everything that she wanted.

He already knew that he was everything that she needed.

And...he would show her.

He would prove it.

A/N: Okay, I don't know about the rest of you, but my favorite part was when Tom tl;dr Theo when he started rambling about his potions. I KNOW there were probably like TEN other things in here that I should love more, but that one was it. Anyway, thanks to my fishies Radiant Innocence, VinoAmore, and Chaco for helping me.

And THANKS TO ALL OF YOU OMG. I'm sure most of you know that I've fallen in love with writing this story, but all the support and encouragement from you guys have helped tremendously. SO I THANK YOU GOOD SIRS/MA'AMS/PERSONS.

Also, if you celebrate it, Happy Thanksgiving! ILY BABY BOOS
Another factor to consider when it comes to the goblin rebellions that took place in the early eighteenth century, are the various wand legislations that had been in effect back then. Much of the civil unrest in the goblin community stemmed from being denied the use of a wand. Which, in my opinion, they had every right to be upset over. Goblins have magic, like us, so there was really no excuse …

Hermione crossed out the lines on her parchment with her quill in frustration, and dropped her head in her hands. Why did she always go off on a tangent in her papers? Professor Binns never complained about her doing it like some of the other professors did. Honestly, she didn't even think he ever really bothered reading their papers, anyway. She really needed to hunker down, and focus. School was ending in just a few weeks, so she really needed to finish all her work before exams started. She was in the middle of rubbing her eyes when she heard someone call her name.

It was Daphne Greengrass. The pretty girl pulled out the chair next to her, and smiled brilliantly. Hermione eyed her warily. It's not that she didn't like Daphne – she was a nice enough girl – she just wasn't quite sure what to think of her. Hermione often got the impression that the only reason why she was so sweet to Hermione all the time was because Tom was her brother. It was quite obvious that the girl had a little crush on him.

"I've been looking everywhere for you, Hermione."

"You have?" she asked in feigned interest, and picked her quill back up to begin writing again. **Liar.**

Daphne's smile broadened. "Yes! I've been meaning to ask you something."

**Lord, please don't let it be about helping with schoolwork or Tom.**

"Oh? What is it?"
Daphne began chewing on her bottom lip, and nervously fiddled with the ends of her perfectly straight hair. Hermione found herself mildly annoyed that the girl didn't even possess split-ends. **How unfair.** "Well, I was wondering if you'd tell me what kind of things your brother likes."

Hermione turned her head to look at her, and scrunched her nose up in confusion. "What he likes?" she echoed dumbly.

"Well, yeah. He doesn't talk very much, and doesn't show his interests in obvious ways. You're his sister; so, I figured you'd know what he likes best."

Hermione tilted her head to the side in thought. "Well…he likes to read, mostly. And-" she paused, and suddenly realized that she didn't want to tell Daphne what kinds of things her brother liked. It was her secret—their secret. Hermione was the only one who knew what kind of books he really liked— that his favorite book was the Iliad. Hermione was the only one who knew that he liked scavenging for potions ingredients himself, because he liked being in control of things. Hermione was the only one who knew that the only sweets he liked to eat was chocolate and ice cream. Hermione was the only one who knew that he liked classical music best, and that he'd taught himself how to read sheet music. Hermione was the only one who knew the real him.

She stared at Daphne.

Hermione didn't want her to know what Tom liked best.

"And…?" the girl prompted, eyes wide and hopeful.

Hermione sat up straight, and inhaled sharply. "And he likes school," she said shortly. She sighed and asked, "Why are you asking me?"

"I just wanted to get him something, is all. So, you think he'd like a book best?"

She continued staring at the girl, and felt dazed. "Yes."

Daphne's happy grin would have been infectious… if Hermione didn't want to slap it off her face. "Perfect!" she said, and stood. "Thank you so much, Hermione! You're a lifesaver."

She forced a smile that hurt her cheeks. "Anytime."

After Daphne left the library, Hermione stared down at her essay again. She promptly scribbled her carefully thought-out words into a jumbled mess, crumpled it up into a ball, and shoved it into her bag angrily. She hauled out her Charms book to read instead, but found that her concentration was gone. She couldn't stop thinking about her conversation with Daphne.

She thought bitterly about how she should have lied, and told her that he secretly likes sappy love poetry, instead. A quiet snort escaped her nostrils at the very idea of Daphne giving Tom a book about love poetry. Lord, how much money she'd pay to see his reaction…

Hermione grinned to herself, and turned the page in her book.

The very idea of how he'd react to that sort of situation suddenly put Hermione in a better mood.

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It was nearly time for the final task of the Triwizard tournament to begin, and **everyone** was either excited or on-edge. There was stadium-style seating to view the magical maze stretched out in all directions before them. It was truly amazing, and truly terrifying. The very thought of going in
there herself made her heart beat soundly against her ribcage. She could do it, if she absolutely had to, but she was thankful that she didn't have to.

"Who do you think's going to win?" Theo Nott asked excitedly to no one in particular.

Hermione had decided to sit with Tom and his friends for the last task, as much as she really didn't want to. He hadn't asked her to sit with him this time, but…well, she didn't know why, but she felt like she just had to for some inexplicable reason. Ever since that conversation with Daphne Greengrass, she had felt…oddly protective of Tom.

She didn't want to share his time with anyone else and that's what she continued to tell herself.

"Krum, of course," said Draco with an air of finality. She couldn't help but feel a bit annoyed at the mention of his name.

Hermione rolled her eyes and scoffed, "Well, I personally hope he trips on a branch, and loses."

Blaise and Tom let out undignified snorts at her remark, while Draco looked offended and Theo seemed unperturbed by it all.

"Shouldn't we be cheering Diggory on? He is representing our school, after all," came a female voice from behind them. They turned to look and see who spoke—it was Daphne Greengrass.

"It would be great if Hogwarts won the tournament, but let's be honest on who really has the best chance of winning here," Blaise said while turning his attention back to the maze.

Hermione's eyes snapped to Blaise and she scowled at him. She knew what he was implying. "Of course, we know who is really going to win here—Fleur Delacour."

Blaise looked at her and the corner of his mouth twitched up. "You really think so?" he asked in a condescending tone.

"I know so," she snapped back.

"Well, that is really interesting and all," Daphne started to say, and then wedged herself to sit in between Tom and Blaise. She continued, "But I really hope that Diggory wins."

Hermione narrowed her eyes at Daphne, but said nothing. She needed a distraction. So, she turned to Theo, who was sitting to her right and asked, "So, what kind of things do you like to do for fun, Theo?"

Theo's eyes lit up like she had just told him that Christmas had come early.

"Oh, Merlin," Draco groaned.

"Potions, of course. Do you like potions, Hermione?" he asked her excitedly.

She didn't know what it was about Theo, but Hermione decided that she liked him very much. He wasn't broody or rude like some of the other Slytherins. He was rather pleasant to be around. It was a nice change.

"Yes, I do like potions. It truly is an art form, isn't it?" she said with a smile.

Theo grinned, and leaned a bit closer to her in his excitement. "Exactly! I'd even say that it's a science, too. There are precise measurements and methods on how to prepare the ingredients. Did you know that there are better ways to prepare certain ingredients for some potions that aren't
even in our *text books*?"

Hermione shook her head. "No, I didn't know that. How did you find that out?" she asked curiously. She was genuinely interested to know.

"Oh, I experiment with them a lot, you see. It's all trial and error, honestly. Sometimes it works – sometimes it doesn't," he said with a shrug of his shoulders.

"That's…*fascinating*, actually. We'll have to get together, and exchange notes sometime. I'm all about learning new methods."

Theo grinned at her again. "That's a great idea! I even invent my own potions, too. I should show you sometime."

"Theo," Tom said and both Hermione and Theo turned to look at him. The look on his face was one that held a silent warning.


Had Tom *really* just shut Theo down because he thought he was being annoying? She was about to tell him off, but had gotten distracted when she saw Daphne pull something from her robe pocket.

"Tom, I got something for you," she said shyly. She handed him a small wrapped package. Tom looked down at the package in mild confusion.

"Oh? *Why?*" he asked suspiciously, and turned the gift over in his hand.

Daphne smiled, and tucked her hair behind her ear. "No special reason. I just wanted to get you something."

Tom smirked. "No special reason? You had it wrapped."

The girl's face turned pink. "Well, they offered free gift-wrapping with purchases, so…" she trailed off, sounding somewhat self-conscious; which Hermione knew she was anything but. "Just open it."

"Alright," he said, and began to tear the wrapping away.

Hermione resisted the overwhelming urge to slap the gift out of his hands. She felt as if her insides were shaking with a barely concealed rage.

Tom finished unwrapping it. It was a book. And, of course, it was on a topic that he would be interested in. *Perfect.*

"Thank you, Daphne. I appreciate it," he told her.

Daphne grinned up at him, and looped her arm around his enthusiastically. Hermione noticed how his shoulders hunched forward, tense. She knew he didn't want her touching him; so, why was he allowing it? Why was he letting her touch him like that?

"I'm so happy you like it, Tom!"

He forced a smile at the girl, and turned his attention back to the tournament.

As much as it irritated her, she needed to remind herself that it really *was* none of her business, and that Tom *could* take care of himself.
As much as she reminded herself, though, it did little to help her. She was still irritated by the whole situation.

She noticed that Daphne smiled at Hermione, and gave her a thumbs up. Hermione smiled back at the girl; Tom wasn't the only one who could force fake smiles in their group.

She also noticed that Blaise had witnessed the little exchange between the two with unconcealed amusement. The smile on his face was absolutely wicked. Hermione glared at him, and turned away. Bloody prat. She should have sat with her own friends. Her entire mood had turned sour.

It was then announced that Fleur Delacour was the victor of the Triwizard tournament.

"Told you so," she bit out at a shocked Blaise, got up from her seat, and walked away from them and into the cheering crowd.

Frustrated tears stung at her eyes and she couldn't figure out for the life of her why.

As time went on, and the end of the school year had drawn to a close, Hermione had noticed she'd been spending less time thinking of Viktor. And, of course, the very thought of realizing she'd not been thinking of Viktor caused her to glance at him from across the Great hall.

Hermione frowned suspiciously at what she saw. His body was facing her, but his head was turned to the side to speak to another student. That wasn't what made her suspicious, though. What had made her suspicious was that it had looked like Draco Malfoy had squeezed something into Viktor's goblet. It had all happened so quickly, she couldn't be sure what she'd actually just seen.

The gears in her mind started turning. What had Malfoy just done? And, more importantly, what was it that he put in his drink? She knew how pretentious he could be, and knew that he probably only hung around Viktor purely for his own self-image.

She took a bite of her lunch and chewed slowly, lost in thought. It looked like some sort of liquid. A potion, perhaps? But what kind of potion would he want to put in Viktor's drink? If it had been before the last task, she'd assume that Tom had put him up to it to try and ruin his chances of winning as a form of punishment, but…the last task was yesterday.

So, what could he possibly be doing it for?

Hermione glanced at the Slytherin table, and found Tom sitting with Blaise and Theo. There was nothing out of the ordinary with them; they were chatting amicably while eating their lunch. She chewed on her bottom lip, and wondered if maybe she was being paranoid about the whole thing. Maybe she'd just imagined what she saw.

She was about to turn away and shrug the whole thing off, when she saw Theo pull out his potions text book for class, and began reading. At first, she didn't think anything of it. At first, she knew it was completely normal for someone to pull a book out at the table, and begin reading after they were done eating.

Her eyes widened when she remembered what Theo had told her yesterday – how he loved inventing new potions. She remembered how Tom had seemed displeased that Theo had mentioned it to her. Before, she'd just thought that he was getting annoyed with Theo's excited conversation.

Now, though, she wasn't so sure.
And, just like that, the pieces of the puzzle began clicking into place.

Had Theo created a potion and Draco was giving it to Viktor without his knowledge? But…why? Why would they do something like that? She scrunched her face up in confusion.

An acute sense of awareness nestled snugly into her bones as she looked at her brother from across the hall. Tom.

The real question was: how long have they been slipping it to him?

Hermione slowly ate the rest of her lunch, and looked back at Draco. She licked a bit of gravy from her lips, and decided that she'd have to find out for herself.

Many of the students lingered in the Great Hall after lunch, since it was the last day of school before everyone would be leaving the next day. Draco Malfoy happened to be one of the students who had lingered, much to Hermione's pleasure. She was happy that Tom and his other friends had left some time ago. Now, all she had to do was wait for Draco to leave and she would follow.

After another twenty minutes of waiting, she began to get mildly annoyed. The boy talked far too much for his own good. He was still chatting up the students at the Durmstrang table with zero evidence of leaving anytime soon.

Thankfully, much to Hermione's relief, he finally made to stand, and said good-bye to his friends.

Hermione rolled her eyes, and thanked whatever deities existed in this world that he was finally leaving. She shut her book, and followed behind him out of the Great Hall.

She knew that he was probably headed back down to the dungeons to the Slytherin common room. While he was stopped to wait for one of the moving staircases to shift over, Hermione came up beside him.

He jumped at her sudden presence, and put a hand to his chest before relaxing. "Bloody Hell, Granger. You should say something before sneaking up on someone."

She blinked up at him. "I didn't sneak up on you. I'm just waiting for the stairs. It's not my fault you're so...jumpy."

Guilty conscience, Malfoy?

Draco frowned slightly, and straightened out his shirt. "I'm not jumpy," he muttered.

"Whatever, Malfoy."

The staircase shifted into place and they both made their way down the stairs. They walked next to each other for about half a minute before Draco asked, "Are you following me?"

She rolled her eyes. "In case you haven't noticed, I'm walking beside you. That doesn't constitute as following."

"You know what I meant, Granger."

"No, I'm not following you. I'm on my way to see Tom. I need to ask him something important," she said casually.

Draco seemed to relax a bit at her words. "Oh. I'm assuming you'll need me to go get him for you,
then?"

A small smile spread across her face. "If you could, please. That would be perfect."

"Uh, yeah. Sure."

They continued walking through the halls in the dungeons in silence. Hermione covertly got her wand ready and casually glanced around to make sure that no one was coming. Once she saw the coast was clear, she shoved Draco into one of the shortcuts to Slughorn's classroom that was hidden behind a tapestry.

Draco hadn't been expecting it, so he stumbled a bit. She took a second to cast a quick Muffliato while he was distracted. It didn't take him long to recover, of course.

"What the fuck, Granger?" he spat out, but went silent and his eyes went wide when he saw her wand pointed at his face. Hermione didn't waste any time.

"What did you put in Viktor's drink?"

He froze.

"Well?" she encouraged.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he told her in a flat tone that betrayed nothing.

Hermione jabbed her wand into the center of his collarbone and she narrowed her eyes. "Tell me."

He screwed his eyes shut and his upper lip quivered slightly. "You're bloody mental! Has anyone ever told you that?"

She gave him a sarcastic look. "Seriously, Malfoy? Do you really think that's such a wise thing to say to someone who is currently holding a wand at your chest?"

He opened his eyes back up cautiously to look down at her. It probably looked ridiculous, honestly. Here she was, a slip of a teenage girl, threatening an almost-man. "No, probably not. But I know you aren't really going to use your wand on me. You haven't got the guts."

Hermione glared at him, and prodded her wand once more into his chest and said, "You really don't know me well enough to make that call. Now, tell me what you did to Viktor's drink."

Draco clenched his teeth and hissed out, "I already said I didn't do anything to his stupid drink, Granger. Get it through your thick skull."

"Oh, my God. You truly are an idiot, aren't you?" she asked in amazement. She was getting increasingly angry, but she didn't know whether to laugh at him or not. "Listen, I know you did something, so don't play stupid. It doesn't look good on you."

He had the audacity to smirk at her and say, "What are you talking about Granger? Everything looks good on me."

Oh, that was it.

Hermione drew her fist back, and punched Draco square in the face as hard as she could. He howled in pain as his hand went to cover his mouth and he stumbled back from her. He pulled his hand away from his face – there was blood. He looked back at her in indignant astonishment.

Good, because it bloody well hurt her hand, too.
"You... you busted my lip, Granger. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

She ignored his words. "I guess you were right, Draco. I didn't have the guts to use my wand on you. Now, I'd very much like it if you'd go get Tom for me, please. Tell him I'll be in my usual spot," she said, and pushed the tapestry open with her uninjured hand.

Draco swallowed nervously, and nodded once. "And where would that be?"

Hermione smiled politely at him. "Don't worry. He'll know once you tell him."

Draco stormed over to the sitting area in the Slytherin common room, and plopped down on the sofa. A second-year boy who had already been sitting on the same sofa stared at the blood dripping from his mouth. Draco scowled, and gently touched his lips only to find out that he was still bleeding. He turned to the boy and snapped, "Piss off, you little brat."

The boy's eyes widened in fright. He jumped up from the sofa, and went to the opposite side of the common room.

Tom's eyebrows raised in surprise when he took in the sight of Draco sitting across from him. "What in the world happened to you?"

Draco nervously glanced at him, and quickly averted his eyes to a spot on the floor. "Your bloody sister is what happened to me, that's what."

Tom blinked in surprise. He leaned forward, and touched the bruise that was beginning to form on Draco's pale skin. "Hermione did that to you?"

"Yes," he grumbled quietly, and batted Tom's hand away from his face.

Tom leaned back in his chair, and grinned wickedly. "Hermione did that to you," he repeated, only it wasn't a question this time.

"Of course, you'd think it's funny that your sister punched me in the bloody face. You'd better not tell anyone, Riddle," he whispered grudgingly.

Tom's wicked grin just widened at his words. "Oh, no need to, Draco. You were so loud coming in, I'm certain half of the common room knows by now."

The blonde boy lowered himself further into his seat, and scowled. Then, Tom noticed his face change to one of recognition and he bolted upright. "Oh, bloody Hell! I almost forgot to tell you."

The grin on Tom's face faltered. "What?"

Draco's eyes turned serious. "I think she knows."

Tom schooled his features, but on the inside, he was alarmed. "What did she say?"

Draco leaned forward and whispered, "She said she saw me today – in the Great Hall. She said that she wants to speak with you."

Tom stood up quickly, and ran a hand through his hair. He took in a steadying breath. "Did she say where she'd be?" he asked calmly, and looked at the shadowy figure of the squid's tentacles in the lake instead of at Draco. He was furious that he'd been caught. This wasn't supposed to happen.
"All she said was 'at her usual spot.'"

_Right. The clock tower._

"Get yourself cleaned up, Draco. You're a wizard; so, why are you still walking around with blood on your face?" Tom drawled out dangerously. He left, and didn't bother staying behind to see the look on Draco's face.

He needed to find Hermione, as much as he _really_ didn't want to.

When he found her, she was pacing back and forth agitatedly, muttering to herself. Tom froze on the stairs, and watched her silently. He smirked to himself when he noticed her flex her bruised knuckles. Then, he licked his lips, and wondered how he could get this potential catastrophe to go his way.

Tom finished walking up the stairs to make his presence known. Hermione whirled on him, hands on her hips, and nostrils flaring. She wasted no time getting straight to the point.

"I saw Malfoy slip something into Viktor's drink today at lunch," she said accusingly, and he went to open his mouth to say he had _no_ idea what she was talking about, but she cut him off by poking one of her index fingers into his chest and said, "And don't you _dare_ insult my intelligence by telling me that you have absolutely _no_ idea what I'm talking about, Tom."

Tom snapped his mouth shut, chewed on his bottom lip, and frowned down at her. How did she do that?

She continued, "And I have a sneaking suspicion that it was something Theo concocted."

_Damn it, Theo._ How had this all unraveled so spectacularly? He needed to be careful about how he phrased his next words, "Hermione, why do you think I did something to him? I have no reason to."

Hermione faltered, and dropped her finger from his chest. She scrunched her face up in the way he liked and said, "Well, I thought it was maybe because that he broke up with me, and made me upset. I thought you might be trying to punish him somehow."

Tom huffed a quiet laugh out his nose, and shook his head. "Seriously? If I was going to do that, why would I wait all this time? He did that months ago. Although, it _would_ be a lie if I said that I wasn't tempted to punish him for doing that to you…" he trailed off.

She smacked his arm half-heartedly. "I'm being serious!"

"So am I."

She squinted at him warily for a few seconds. "Did you poison him, Tom?"

Tom stared at her for a moment, before he let out a laugh – a _real_ laugh, because of how ironic her question was. If she only knew that he'd been planning on legitimately poisoning Krum before the second task, she'd probably…well, he didn't want to think of that right now. She would still be pissed with him if she found out about what he'd really done. But, now that he thought of it, he didn't _technically_ do anything. He didn't make the potion; Theo did. He didn't administer the potion; Draco did. _He_ hadn't done _anything_ at all.

"Are you serious right now?" he asked after he stopped laughing. She didn't look amused. He rubbed his palm against the corner of his eye to rub a tear away, and said with a chuckle, "No. I
didn't poison him, Hermione."

He watched her poke her lower lip out in a pout. "Then what did you do? And don't lie to me."

Tom sighed dramatically, and threw his head back to stare above him. The pendulum swung above them back and forth, back and forth, back and forth. He brought his head back down to look at her and said, "I didn't do anything to him, Hermione. I swear. I promise. Why won't you believe me?"

Promises were a scarcity from him and he wasn't technically lying to her, so it easily rolled off his tongue. His promises were a rare currency that she always accepted as payment without question, and without doubt.

Hermione really should have worded her questions better. He didn't particularly enjoy not telling her the truth, but he knew she'd be thanking him for it, in the end. He knew what was best for her, after all.

Loopholes always made lying easier.

A/N: I'm...such...fucking...garbage. Seriously. Guys. I can't stop writing this story. I'm so glad I had the whole week off from work, because I pretty much just wrote and slept. Ugh. Thanks to Radiant Innocence, VinoAmore, and Chaco for listening to my bullshit, and always supporting me with this story.

And THANKS TO ALL OF YOU GUYS! Seriously. Can't get over all the love. omg. You're gonna kill me from smothering me too much. ily ily ily ily

ALSO GET READY FOR THE NEXT CHAPTER COS SHIT'S GONNA GO DOWN OMFG
It was dismal and rainy by the time the Hogwarts Express arrived at Platform 9 ¾. Hermione said good-bye to her friends, and promised to write plenty over summer break.

"I'll ask my parents about all of you coming over this summer for a week or two!" Harry called to her across the moving bodies on the platform.

Hermione grinned, and waved back. "That sounds fantastic! See you, Harry!"

She lost sight of him in the crowd, but heard him yell out, "Bye, Hermione!"

She rolled her luggage, and Crookshanks' carrying case off to the side of the crowd to wait for Tom. Where was he?

It was easy to spot him in the crowd, of course; it was like he grew seven or eight centimeters every bloody year. Her, on the other hand…well, not so much. She waved her hand, and called out his name. He smiled when he spotted her, and made his way over. Relief flooded through her when she saw that he managed to grab a luggage trolley.

"You've got all your things already?" he asked.

"Yes, somehow. I didn't manage to grab a trolley for my things, though; so, I'm glad you snagged one," she said, and started stacking her things carefully on top of his. Tom picked up her main school trunk for her, and heaved it on top of his.

"Won't that be too heavy to push now?" she asked.

Tom rolled his eyes at her, and smirked. "No, Hermione. Come on. Grab Satan, and let's go find Mum and Dad."
She picked up Crookshank's carrying case, and pouted at him. "How many times have I asked you to not call him Satan?" she asked, and brought the case up to her face. She crooned, "Don't listen to him, Crookshanks. It's not your fault he's always disgruntled and moody."

Crookshanks mewed in response.

Tom pushed the cart through the crowd and Hermione followed beside him. "I'll stop calling him Satan once he stops trying to claw my feet whenever I walk by him."

"He's a cat, Tom. It's in their nature. He attacks my feet, too."

"Nowhere near as much as mine," he muttered.

Hermione didn't get a chance to respond, because they passed through the barrier, and into the Muggle world.

Their parents were waiting for them on the other side and Hermione felt her heart swell with joy to see them again. She'd missed them so much.

"Tom! Hermione!" Jean called, and enveloped them both in a tight embrace at once. She felt her mum smooth down her hair, and sob, "I missed the two of you so much."

"We missed you, too, Mum," Hermione told her, and did her best to hold back her own happy tears.

Jean let go of them, but still held onto each of their shoulders. "Oh, my goodness! You've both grown so much. It nearly killed me that you weren't able to come home for Christmas this school year!"

"And I hate to admit it, but I'd say that you're taller than me now, Tom," Hugo laughed, and gave Tom one of those man-hugs where they gave each other a few quick pats on the back.

Tom smiled, and quickly returned the hug. "It looks like it might be that way."

"So, we were thinking of going out for supper tonight to celebrate. How does that sound?" Hugo asked them.

"That sounds perfect," Hermione smiled.

Tom shrugged his shoulders. "Doesn't matter to me."

Jean dabbed her happy tears away, and said with a grin, "I'm certainly okay with going out for dinner tonight. Whatever it takes to avoid washing dishes, right?"

Tom laughed, then smiled at their mum. "Right."

As much as Hermione loved Hogwarts and learning about magic, she always missed these moments with her family the most.

It was raining out; so, they were stuck inside, much to Tom's dismay. He'd complained, of course, stating how he'd planned on scavenging in the woods in the backyard again today and how utterly inconvenient it all was. Their parents both had to work shifts at their dental clinic that day, so he'd wanted to take advantage of their absence.

It's not that they disallowed them to venture into the woods; if anything, the magical world
interested their parents to no end. Tom had told her that it was rather exhausting having to explain what ingredients he found were used for which potions to them *every single time* he came back home.

She understood, in a way. It was nice having their parents be so interested in their unusual schooling, but having to explain things they learned back in first year multiple times to their parents was taxing.

Hermione was sitting cross-legged on the sofa in the living room, reading the book Harry had bought for her in her lap. She watched from her spot as Tom walked from room to room, complaining to himself about the entire thing.

"It's not as if the woods are going to get up and walk away," she called out to him, wherever he was in the house.

"That isn't the point!" he called from somewhere upstairs. She heard him coming down, and he entered the room. He had a small book in his hand – something about Herbology – and plopped down at the opposite end of the sofa. "The point *is*, I had plans today. Now, I have to wait. I don't *feel* like waiting."

Tom grumpily opened his book, and started flipping through the pages with a deep scowl etched onto his face. Hermione grinned at him, despite his sour mood. "You always get so irritable when things don't go your way."

He shifted in his seat, and side-glanced her before looking back down at his book. "I do *not,*" he muttered.

"Yes, you do," she said, and grinned bigger. Hermione flopped herself onto the couch so she was lying on her back, and shifted her body so she pushed the top of her head up against his side of his thigh. She set her book on top of her ribs, and looked up at him. He lifted an eyebrow, and looked down at her curiously. She smiled at him. His scowl softened.

"Oh, shut up," he said half-heartedly to her, and went back to looking at his book.

"*Never,*" she replied with a lopsided grin, and began reading her book, too.

They stayed like this for some time – both reading together, with only the rain pouring down to drown out the silence in the room.

Hermione was beginning to feel drowsy, then she felt a slight tugging at her scalp – Tom was absentmindedly playing with one of her curls that had fallen into his lap. She peered up at him, and watched him read. His lips were mouthing the words he was reading; which he always did whenever he was drawn into a book deeply. She felt her belly clench at the sight of him.

Hermione frowned at the feeling, and hastily looked away from him. She shifted onto her side to face the back of the couch, and propped her book up on the back cushions, so she could read without holding it. She read for a few minutes, and went to turn the page.

Tom thread his fingers through her hair on the side of her head and she froze. She glanced up at him again, but he wasn't looking at her – he was still focused on his book.

She turned the page, and continued reading as Tom continued to run his fingers through her hair above her ear. Her eyelids fluttered closed at the sensation.

"If you keep doing that, you're going to make me fall asleep," she said with a yawn.
She heard him chuckle quietly and he dragged his short nails carefully against her scalp. "Then fall asleep," he said.

Her cheek rested fully against the cushion underneath her. "But I don't want to fall asleep," she mumbled.

"I won't let you sleep for long."

Hermione hummed in response, and silently enjoyed his attention. Was it selfish of her to want his attention only for herself? She wasn't sure. Tom continued to weave his fingers through her wild curls for only a few more minutes before sleep finally consumed her.

He watched her sleep for a long time – just watched her.

He never knew something as simple as watching a person breathe could be so beautiful.

Something foreign gripped at his heart at the sight of her curled up next to him.

What was it?

Tom didn't know, but he knew that he didn't want the feeling to end.

So, he let her sleep, even though he'd told her he wouldn't let her sleep for long.

It was selfish of him, he knew. But…

He didn't care.

He wanted to be selfish. Especially when it came to her.

It was two weeks into their summer vacation when she got a letter from Viktor out of the blue. The surge of anger she'd felt had been overwhelming and she almost hadn't opened it.

Almost.

Curiosity had gotten the better of her and she finally read it.

She read through it once in agitation.

She read through it twice in confusion.

She read through it a third time with an abrupt understanding.

The memory of her arguing with Tom in the clock tower came flooding back to her. She'd accused him with no proof and he promised her he hadn't done anything. She remembered his promise that she so readily accepted. She also remembered the way he gnawed on his bottom lip anxiously.

His tell. Why did she not catch it sooner?

Hermione scowled at the letter in her hands, and shot up from her seat at her desk. She threw her bedroom door open, and stormed over to Tom's bedroom down the hall. She could hear him listening to classical music through his door - the cello. So, Bach, most likely. She resisted the urge to pound on his door with her fist, and knocked like a normal person, instead.
Tom opened his door, which let the music flow freely out into the hallway even louder than before. He still hadn't even dressed for the day; he was wearing a plain, white t-shirt and blue flannel pajama pants. He looked warily at her expression. "Yes?"

"You're a liar," she spat.

His eyebrows shot up. "Excuse me?"

She shoved Viktor's letter in his face and said, "Why am I getting a letter from Viktor Krum all of a sudden, Tom?"

His gaze fell on the letter in her hand and his expression darkened. "What did he say?"

Hermione opened up the letter as a show, her voice laced with sarcasm as she spoke, "Oh, you know! The usual stuff. He wrote how he was terribly sorry, and how he had absolutely no idea what came over him. He also said that he really does like me a lot - that he's never felt this way about any other girl before, and to please forgive him."

Tom clenched his jaw tight, and said nothing as his scowl was leveled on her. His obvious agitation fueled her for some reason.

"He even invited me to go visit him next month in Bulgaria," she dropped the letter to her side, and asked viciously, "Now, why would he suddenly say something like that, Tom? Hmm?"

"Maybe because he's an idiot," he said, then reached for the letter. "Let me see that."

She pulled it behind her back, and twisted her body away from him. "No. I want you to tell me the truth, Tom. I know you and your friends did something. I want you to tell me why Viktor broke up with me."

The tendons in his neck stretched tight. He sighed, and closed his eyes in defeat. "Theo created a potion that makes the drinker not attracted to a person. Draco had been slipping it into Krum's drink for months. I told them to do it," he said evenly, then finally opened his eyes to look at her – to gauge her reaction.

She could hardly believe his words. She felt betrayed, wounded, hollow, and angry. Her chest physically hurt. Is this what a broken heart felt like? She'd never felt like this with Viktor.

Hermione shoved him angrily. Tom lost his footing and his shoulder slammed into his door frame. He looked furious with her and she was glad that he was furious and she didn't care that he was and she wanted him to hurt like he had hurt her.

"How dare you," she managed to hiss out between clenched teeth as her throat started to close up from the oncoming tears. She felt so betrayed. She'd never felt like this with Viktor.

Hermione shoved him angrily. Tom lost his footing and his shoulder slammed into his door frame. He looked furious with her and she was glad that he was furious and she didn't care that he was and she wanted him to hurt like he had hurt her.

"How dare you," she managed to hiss out between clenched teeth as her throat started to close up from the oncoming tears. She felt so betrayed. "How dare you, Tom! You lied to me!"

Every inch of him looked drawn tight – as if he was about to snap at any moment. His nostrils flared when he pushed a loud exhale out his nose and he said, "I didn't lie to you, Hermione. You asked questions and I answered them. It's not my fault you didn't ask the right ones."

Her jaw hung open in disbelief and she scoffed. "You...are a horrible person. You're awful!"

"I was only doing what was best for you!" he bit back with a scowl.

"What was best for me? You think this – this," she hit his chest with the letter furiously, "is what was best for me!?"
"You-" she started, but choked on her words when the tears were finally freed and a single sob escaped her throat. Her voice quivered as she spoke, "You told me before that you thought withholding information was considered lying; Or," she added bitterly, "does that rule not apply to you?"

Tom froze, and stared at her in surprise. His expression softened. "Hermione, please," he started, and reached out a hand to touch her, but she slapped it away angrily.

"No!" she yelled forcefully, and stared at his feet. She couldn't even bring herself to look at his face. Then she said again, more defeated this time, "No."

She waited for him to speak. She waited for him to apologize. She waited for something – for anything.

The only noise she heard was his steady breathing, the melodramatic cello, and her heartbreak.

Hermione scrunched up her face, and tilted her head to the side as she stared at his bare feet on the floor. Her face kept twitching as she tried to control her flowing tears. "I trusted you," she whispered shakily to him and she started crying harder. She finally brought her eyes back up to look at his and what she saw was something she never expected to see on his face – regret. It wasn't enough to stop her from sniffling, and saying her next words, "I trusted you, Tom. You promised me and you lied to me."

His jaw was clenched and he kept flexing his fingers and he looked like he was trying to hold himself back – trying to keep himself in control. "I'm…I'm sorry."

She thought she'd wanted to hear his apology, but it made her temper flare furiously instead. "You're sorry? Sorry?! You made Viktor break up with me and you're telling me now that you're sorry?! Do you have any idea how long I stayed up every night, crying myself to sleep over it?" she asked, and shoved his shoulder once. He clenched his jaw, and stared down at her.

"Do you have any idea how it made me feel?" she shoved his shoulder again. He was trembling now, but she didn't care - she didn't care, because he lied to her and she wanted to hurt him with her words and she wanted to hurt him with her fists and she wanted him to be sorry and actually mean it and she just wanted to be able to trust him again and she didn't know if she ever could and it wasn't fair.

With one final heart-wrenching sob, she asked, "And do you know what the worst part of it is, Tom? I'm not even upset that I'm not with him anymore, because he didn't break my heart – you did. I hate you."

Before Hermione knew what was happening, Tom surged forward, grabbed her face roughly, and pressed his lips against hers.

It was all of their anger and it was all of their pain and it was all of them.

Tom's fingers bent into the curls behind her ears as he worked his lips against hers desperately in a way that she'd never experienced before. Hermione released all her anger and frustration onto him in return. He groaned in response, and hurriedly pushed her backward until her back was jabbed against the edge of the hallway table. She gasped in pain at the contact. Tom took advantage of her shock by hastily hooking his arms underneath her thighs, lifting her up to drop her bum onto the table, and nudged himself in between her dangling legs.

They broke apart long enough for him to rest his forehead against hers, and shared their panting
breaths. "Don't you dare say that again, Hermione. Don't you dare," he whispered dangerously, his voice shaking.

She glared at him, and hissed out with a cruel sob, "I hate you."

Charcoal eyes met ember ones with a spark and it set their whole world on fire.

Hermione grabbed at his hair roughly, and yanked him back down to her lips again in a searing kiss. It made him wince in pain and she found that she liked it.

She liked the way he slid his large hands up her bare legs, up to her hips, up her sides, and onto her face again. She liked the way he pressed his body up against hers. She liked the way he wiped away her tears with his thumbs as he kissed her. She liked the way he tasted.

She loved the way he made her feel and she also hated it. She wasn't supposed to like this – it was wrong.

Tom grabbed her by her hips again, and yanked her closer to him. She flung her hand down to catch herself on the table, and ended up knocking the flower vase to the floor with a loud crash.

The noise extinguished the flames.

"Tom? Hermione? What was that noise?" Jean called from the bottom of the stairs.

Tom and Hermione broke apart, and stared at each other. She held her breath, and tried not to panic. She stared at the hands that were fisted into the shoulders of his shirt – they were her hands. Her world was spinning out of control and she felt like she was going to faint.

Tom didn't take his eyes off Hermione when he called back, "I accidentally knocked the vase over! I'll clean it up. Sorry, Mum."

"Oh, was it that yellow one?" she asked.

"Yes!" he replied, and smoothed the palms of his hands over the tops of her thighs. Hermione stared down at the yellow fragments on the hardwood floor, lost in a daze. What had she done? What had they done?

"Thank God! I hated that one. Do you need me to bring up the dustpan?" she asked.

Tom swallowed, and blinked furiously as he watched Hermione's face intently. "No! I'll just use the one in the bathroom. Thanks."

"Alright. Just don't cut yourself!"

"I won't. I promise," he said, and winced at his words once he realized he'd said them.

Hermione scowled at him, and tried to push him away, but he refused to move. "Don't make promises that you can't keep, Tom," she spat bitterly, then hissed out quietly, "Now, let me down."

Tom narrowed his eyes at her. "No. Not until we're done having this conversation."

She scoffed. "Hah! You call this having a conversation? Whatever...this," she motioned with her hand hysterically, "is."

He brought himself even closer to her, which she hadn't thought was possible. Her heart beat wildly in her chest as she was acutely aware of his powerful presence. His eyelids lowered as he looked at her intensely. He brought his hand to her face, and ran his thumb slowly across her
lower lip until it caught on the corner of her mouth. She gasped quietly, and watched his lips as he spoke.

"You want to know why I did it what I did, don't you, Hermione?" he whispered to her and she felt his warm breath tickle the stray hairs that had fallen against her cheek.

She swallowed, and nodded dumbly. She nodded dumbly, because she couldn't think and she couldn't speak. It was overwhelming – he was overwhelming.

He leaned forward, and barely, just barely kissed her again and said, "Now you know why."

Hermione's eyelids fluttered closed with a frown and her fingers dug into the fabric of his shirt tighter. She needed to think, but it was so hard with his thumbs drawing circles like that and this was – no. She shook her head slowly.

No.

This wasn't normal and this wasn't okay and this was wrong, wrong, wrong.

"I'm your sister," she whispered in a confused tone.

The look on his face was suddenly fierce and he gently dug his fingers into her legs and said with conviction, "I've never considered you as my sister, Hermione."

Hermione shook her head, and tears began to spring back into her eyes again. "No. No."

"No?" he repeated, as if he almost sounded offended.

Her eyes snapped up to his and her expression hardened, even though tears were freely pouring down her face again. "No, Tom. Let me down. Please," her voice cracked under her plea.

Their eyes searched each other's for a few moments. Then, his shoulders sagged in defeat. He sighed, and backed away from her. He stared at the broken vase on the floor instead of watching her quietly pick up Viktor's letter, and step back into her room.

She gently closed the door behind her, slumped onto the floor, and wept.

She wept for Viktor. She wept for Tom. And, most importantly, she wept for herself.

He hadn't meant to hurt her.

He hadn't meant to kiss her.

He hadn't meant to admit anything to her.

He really hadn't.

She just wouldn't stop crying. He didn't know how to get her to stop. It was instinctive and it was involuntary and it was pure reflex.

Then, when she turned to hide from him behind the safety of her bedroom door, he knew that she hated him now. His heart felt heavy in his chest. It felt like little hooks were sunk deep into the bottom of his arteries – that must have been what that sharp sting was – and it pulled down, down, down with the weight of all his heavy burdens. But his heart couldn't leave him; it was stuck there - trapped there - to leave him feeling absolutely everything all at once and he hated it.
Tom was no stranger to rejection and it fucking hurt. It was because of her and it was because of him and it was because of this cruel fucking universe that had put him here with her underneath the same roof and he wished he'd never been placed here and he wished that he'd never met her and he wished that it would just stop.

He'd never felt this kind of pain so harshly before – this kind of pain that only Hermione herself could inflict upon him, because he'd given her the weapon to wield and he'd let her use it against him willingly with open arms.

And he didn't regret it, because he knew he'd do it all over again, if given the second chance. He knew that if he could go back in time, back when he was standing there on the front porch at only ten years old, back when the front door opened and he saw her first – he knew he would still choose to walk through that door again and shake her hand again and make her life miserable again and make his life miserable again, all just to have her near him, forever.

Tom's entire body shuddered when he finally breathed again.

He knew the truth for what it was now.

Tom Marvolo Riddle selfishly, selflessly, obsessively, entirely loved her.

And she hated him for it.

…he hated himself, too.

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_A/N:_ Is it presumptuous for me to say that I don't think you guys just read chapter thirteen? I think you just read my soul. My heart hurt writing this. I cried writing this. Ugh. Sometimes I think I am too emotionally invested in my story, but maybe that is a good thing. I dunno. Thanks to my fishies Radiant Innocence, VinoAmore, and Chaco. If you guys want, you can follow me on tumblr, too. Username is ninjafairy86. I mostly reblog Tomione bullshit, and post my artwork and writing.

I know I say thank you all of the time to you guys, but it doesn't feel like it's enough, you know? Anyway, tell me what you thought of this chapter, yeah? I'm dying to know. Thanks so much. ily.
The room was black.

Well, aside from the faint glow that was coming from her desk lamp nearby. She should be asleep, but sleep was cruel and it wouldn't come to save her. She should be angry, but she felt empty now; it was a heavy kind of hollow that pressed her down with its crippling weight. It was morbidly peaceful.

Hermione had her cheek pressed against the cool wood of her desk, and was staring ahead at nothing and everything. Her fingers were tap, tap, tapping slowly against her bottom lip. She could still feel the haunt that was his kiss there.

It was well after one in the morning now. She was exhausted, but her brain wouldn't stop putting logic and reason into a situation that literally defied all logic and reason.

None if it made sense – none of it.

His feelings for her made no sense anymore. Her feelings for him made no sense anymore. The entire world made no sense anymore and it was pointless trying to make heads or tails of it. That didn't mean that she wasn't going to try, though.

How could he do this to her? How could he do this to them? Everything was fine how it had been before; it wasn't perfect, but it was perfect for them. Tom was brilliant and entirely handsome and he could have his pick of anyone – literally anyone; and of course – of course – it would be the one person he wasn't allowed to have. How bloody like him – how typical of him.

A dull, but bitter anger coursed through her veins. Why had she kissed him back? Why? Was it because she'd been upset? Was it because he'd taken advantage of her emotions? Had he been trying to change the subject, and redirect her anger? It was Tom; so, it wouldn't surprise her. Bloody selfish, manipulative prat.

Honestly, she just wanted to sleep, and forget it all happened. She was tired. Maybe once she woke up in the morning, she'd discover it was all just a strange dream conjured up by her imagination.

But, if she'd dreamt up that she'd kissed her own brother, what did that say about her?

Hermione let out a puff of air that could barely be considered a sigh and her glazed-over eyes focused on her closet door. She'd left it open when she'd put her laundry away hours ago. Her eyes traveled tiredly over all the photographs she had pinned and taped to her door.

There were photographs on a magical loop of her, Harry, Ron, Ginny, and other friends in a terrible rendition of a collage. There were more photographs of her and Tom together throughout the years, both magical and Muggle. There were post-it notes stuck to remind her of things that had been important at some point in time, but they seemed completely irrelevant now. There were old drawings of hers that she'd always meant to throw away, but nostalgia just simply wouldn't allow it.

And then, she saw something black.
Her heart clenched painfully in her chest and her fingers stopped tapping against her lips. She lifted her head up from her desk, and narrowed her eyes at the door. She slowly rose from her seat, in a sleep-deprived daze, and walked to her closet. The black was stuck underneath everything. It needed to escape. She needed to get to it out. She needed it.

At first, she’d begun carefully unpinning and removing the photographs and papers one by one. At first, anyway. Then, she began to get more frantic. She ripped the post-it notes away and she snatched the photographs away and she tore the old drawings away, until there was just one sheet left hanging.

Her eyelids fluttered and her bottom lip quivered as she tried to hold back the new tears that were wanting to form. With shaking hands, she carefully – oh, so carefully – removed the last paper from her door.

There, on the faded sheet of paper in her hands, was the drawing Tom drew for her during his first Christmas with them. The crayon drawing of them holding hands that was entirely colored in black. The black crayon drawing that swallowed all her other drawings whole.

My sister.

Hermione sucked in a trembling breath when she read the words. She touched the terrible drawing of Tom, and smiled sadly.

My brother.

A dry sob escaped her. She wanted to cry again, but her body wouldn't allow it; her tear ducts were barren. With her feet thinking for her, they brought her to her bed. She laid down without bothering to cover herself up. She held the drawing against her chest like a treasure, and closed her eyes.

As she lay there in her bed, finally on the verge of sleep, she thought of Tom. Her heart broke when she thought of all the times they spent together – just the two of them. She thought of all their jokes and all of their laughter and all of their lies and all of their arguments. She thought of how unfair it all was. Was all of that gone now? Was it changed? Could she forgive him for everything he’d done? Could she trust him again? She didn’t know. She didn't know, she didn't know, she didn't know. Hermione needed more time to think things through without Tom being around in order to know; that's what she needed the most.

And what was worst about this whole situation is that, even though he'd broken her heart, even though he had lied to her and manipulated her and used others for his own selfishness – she still loved him.

But…was it in the way that…was it in the way that he apparently loved her?

No.

She shook the thought out of her head. No. It was preposterous. There was no way – absolutely no way.

His words rang through her head like an alarm – like a warning: I've never considered you as my sister, Hermione.

Wasn't it preposterous…?

Her heart felt like it was breaking again, knowing that nothing would probably ever be the same again after this.
As she sleepily slid her fingers over the jagged little scar on her palm, her heart mourned the loss of her brother.

She wanted him back; **desperately so.** It wasn't fair.

The blackness of sleep, the blackness of her room, and the blackness of his drawing swallowed her whole.

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The room was white.

Not that kind of white where you could make out the bumps and flaws of the spackle on the ceiling, but the kind of white that blinded you of its imperfections – the kind of white that made you squint to try and see it for what it really was, because it was too bright to see with your eyes wide open.

The early morning rays of sunshine streaming in through the window caused the shade to be blinding.

Tom lifted his hand up to one of the rays of sunlight coming through, and stared at the way it made his already pale skin on his fingers practically luminescent. He slowly moved his fingers, and turned his hand over. There was a familiar tug at his chest when he could make out the jagged edge of the scar on his palm.

White was supposed to be the purest shade.

White was supposed to signify innocence.

White was also supposed to represent **surrender.**

And, if love was pure, did that mean it was *this* shade of white? Did it blind you to imperfections? To flaws?

Love was white, because it was *blind.*

It was white, because it made you wave that little flag in surrender.

Tom dropped his hand back to his chest, and sighed. He knew it was well into breakfast – he could smell the half-burnt sausage, which meant dad was cooking again. But he couldn't get himself to leave his bed yet. He wasn't ready, as much as he hated to admit it. He wasn't ready to see her yet, because he was ashamed of himself.

Tom sighed in annoyance, and rolled himself out of bed.

He was beginning to think that white was overrated, and an utter pain in the ass.

After he was done getting dressed, and took a piss, he headed downstairs. He paused before entering the dining room, and took a deep breath. His face pinched together and he shook his head. Lord, he was being ridiculous. He needed to pull himself together.

So, schooling his features in his typical fashion, he entered the dining room to find his father burning breakfast in the kitchen, and his mum taking dirty dishes off the table. His chest felt tight with anxiety when he saw that Hermione wasn't down yet. He liked sleeping in, but *she* didn't. It was unusual that she wasn't down yet; so, he knew she was avoiding him now. He couldn't entirely blame her for it, but he still didn't like it.
Tom gave a sleepy nod to his parents, and plopped down in his seat. Jean walked behind his chair, ruffled his bed-head into even worse of a mess, and kissed the top of his head. "Good morning, dear," she said cheerfully.

"Good morning, mum," he replied. He started filling up his plate with the food that was already set out. The corner of his mouth twitched up in amusement when he tasted the charred bits of skin on the sausage. Tom remained hopeful that his father would learn how to cook breakfast one day and not burn it, but he knew that would probably never happen.

He swallowed his food and asked as casually as possible, "Where's Hermione?"

Hugo turned over a sliced tomato in the frying pan, and said, "She should be upstairs, I think – packing."

The fork that was halfway to his mouth froze. He felt his eyes squint in confusion. "Packing?" he asked – his voice sounded like a faraway echo to his own ears.

Jean hummed in agreement, and he turned his attention to her. She slid into a seat, and started piling food onto her plate. "Yes, she's going to visit Harry and her friends for a week or so. They're coming to get her in a bit. She didn't tell you?"

Tom frowned, and looked down at his plate. When had she made plans to leave? She'd never mentioned it before. The fork found its way back down to his plate. He'd suddenly lost his appetite. "No, apparently not."

"Oh, she probably just hadn't had the chance yet, Tom. Don't be too upset. They only just made the plans this morning," she said, and took a sip of her tea. "It was all very sudden, actually. You know how they are with making plans, though."

Tom hummed in reply, and said nothing else. There was that oh, so familiar rage twisting unforgivably in his chest. So, she was going to hide from him; she was going to run away from him – she was running away from him in favor of Potter. It was bad enough that she rejected him like she did, but did she really think that she could just sweep this all under the rug? That she could just forget? He would never just let her forget –

"Tom?"

He blinked, and shook himself out of it. The sound of clattering silverware against porcelain he hadn't even noticed happening ceased. He glanced over at his mum for a second, then stared back down at his plate to avoid her gaze. She looked concerned about him. He hated it when she looked concerned about him. It made him uncomfortable. "You were doing it again, Tom. What's wrong?"

It.

That's what his parents called it whenever his magic made things happen whenever he lost his temper. It never happened to Hermione like how it happened to Tom.

Tom didn't say anything, at first. He poked a hole into the thin membrane of his fried egg, and watched the yellow yolk spill out across his plate. It was delicate. It was fragile. One wrong poke, and everything would spill out.

He needed to be careful.

"I'm fine, mum," he said with a convincing smile, and took a bite of his egg. He forced himself to chew, and swallow. "You're right; it was sudden. Wasn't expecting it, is all."
Jean didn't look entirely convinced. "Are you sure?"

He grinned at her in the boyish way that he knew she liked. "Yeah. Just means I get the whole house to myself when you and dad go to work."

Hugo chuckled as he walked over to the table to take a seat. "Just don't go blowing the house up while we're gone," he joked.

Tom took a sip of his orange juice, and raised his eyebrows in a devious manner. "Does the garage count?"

Hugo threw his head back, and laughed. Jean shot Tom one of her 'mum' looks and his lips curled into a mischievous grin.

"So, how did the sausage turn out this time?" Hugo asked while he piled his plate up.

"Perfect," Tom lied, a playful smile still on his lips.

What wasn't perfect, however, was the conversation that he knew he needed to have with Hermione. He'd wanted to take his time eating breakfast, to delay the inevitable. But, he'd also wanted to rush through it, so that he could spend every free moment with her before she left – even if she didn't want to spend it with him.

He hated having such conflicting emotions. Or, just feelings, in general.

Tom stood outside her door for several minutes. He leaned his forehead against it, closed his eyes, and sighed as he listened to her shuffling around in her room. He wanted to slam his head against the door, and scream. He wanted to throw the door open, tell her she couldn't go anywhere, and that she had to stay.

He didn't want her to go.

He wanted to make her stay there – with him.

Tom's fingers that were gripping against the door jamb turned white as he shook. The memory of the way she kissed him back last night came flooding back behind his eyelids like a beautiful vision.

He wanted her to want to stay there with him. He wanted her to want him like he desperately wanted her. He wanted her to choose him, him, always him. But he knew, oh, he knew that he couldn't force her; and honestly, he didn't want to have to force her. He wanted her to choose him willingly – all the time, every time.

Why had she kissed him back, then? Just to easily throw him aside immediately afterward? She'd kissed him back; so, didn't that mean that she wanted him, too? Did she really hate him like she said? He wasn't convinced that she hated him completely. People said things they didn't mean when they were angry all the time.

Was she in denial, then? That had to be it. She was in denial – she was just confused and she was scared; that was all. She was probably being her analytical self, too – trying her best to put sense into a situation where it wasn't needed. What was that saying their parents always told them? Patience was a virtue?

Tom opened his eyes, and stared at her door. He steadied his breathing, then knocked twice.
"Come in!"

He could be patient – *would* be patient, for her.

Tom opened the door, walked in, and closed it behind him. Her back was to him. The sight of her struggling to shove her clothes into her trunk made him want to childishly rip it out of her hands, dump it out all over the floor, and shake her just to make her *see* him.

He wanted to, but he didn't.

"You're leaving," he stated calmly.

He wasn't sure what emotion he was feeling when he watched the way her shoulders tensed up at the sound of his voice, but it fucking *hurt*. He hated this. He should have never lost control last night. What a bloody fucking *idiot* he was. If he hadn't been an idiot, she wouldn't be leaving right now. His gaze leveled on her and she slowly turned around. Judging from her posture alone, she was preparing herself for another one of their explosive arguments.

"Yes, for Harry's birthday," she said guardedly.

Hermione's face faltered, obviously not expecting his question *or* his tone. "Oh, I…probably in a week – maybe two."

"Right," he said. Then, he pulled out her desk chair, and sat down.

She didn't say anything to him after that and he wasn't sure what he wanted to say, himself. He was gifted with the art of manipulation, but she always saw through him; she *always* saw right through him. It may never be right away, but she *always* found out.

Honestly, looking back at it all, he should have known better. That was one of the reasons why he loved her so much – she wasn't an idiot like the other people he knew. And she always – *always* – saw past his bullshit, even when they were children. Even their parents, whom were part of the small group of people he *did* respect, didn't see him the way he really was – the way *she* saw him.

She'd always seen him as he was, ever since they first met. Hermione knew him – the *real* him – better than anyone else and she *still* wanted to be around him. Why she did, he'd probably never know.

"Tom, I-" she started carefully, but he selfishly didn't want to hear what might maim him.

"No, Hermione. I want to say something and I want you to *listen* to what I have to say," he said forcefully.

Hermione frowned and her jaw ticked. She was getting agitated, he knew. "Alright. Fine," she said, and sat down on her bed with her arms crossed. "I'm listening."

As Tom thought of all the things he really wanted to tell her - of what he really wanted to say - he realized it would only hurt him, not help him. He wanted her to trust him again. He wanted to be able to reach his hand out to her again like he had when they'd gone trick-or-treating as children, when she'd been teased by others, when she'd been hurt, when she'd been sad, when she had *needed* him, and to have her take his hand blindly, because she *trusted* him again.

He'd broken toys. He'd broken faces. He'd broken bones.
He'd broken his promises. He'd broken her trust. And now, he'd broken her heart.

It was the first time in his entire life that he'd broken something, and entirely regretted it.

It was then he'd made a decision to prove himself to her. Pride made it difficult, but not impossible.

He held his white flag up in surrender.

"I know you're angry with me and you have every right to be, but..." Tom struggled with putting what he wanted to say into words, and all he could think of was yellow yolk spilling out across his plate. "I know you may not understand why I did the things I did and I realize now that I was being selfish and I was wrong. But when I told you I was sorry last night, I meant it."

She stared at him. Just...stared at him. "I'm not sure if I believe you, Tom."

His eyes traveled from her face, to the floor. "But I want you to," he said quietly – desperately.

"You can't always have what you want," she snapped back cruelly.

Tom glared at a spot on the floor and his teeth ground together. He slowly lifted his dark gaze back up to hers purposefully. "I know," he replied quietly.

_But I'll stop at nothing until I have you._

Hermione swallowed and her face took on an anxious expression, probably understanding the hidden meaning behind his words. He noticed the way she glanced at her closed door nervously. A puff of air escaped his nostrils. He stood, and pushed her chair back in. "Don't worry, Hermione; I'm not a danger to you," he told her resentfully.

She winced at his tone, and said, "Tom."

A tight smile formed on his lips. "No. I was being stupid. Let's just forget about it, yeah?"

Her eyebrows furrowed together in confusion. "Tom?"

He ran a trembling hand through his hair. The smile on his face hurt and it was getting increasingly difficult to keep himself under control. "Have fun with your friends, Hermione," he said, and turned to leave her room. His chest felt tight being near her and he just wanted it to _stop._

When his hand touched her doorknob, she yelled stubbornly, "Tom!"

He froze, and dared not turn back around. He waited. He waited and he waited and he waited and _dear God_ please just say something, Hermione.

"I don't hate you," she whispered.

Tom sucked in a sharp breath, and closed his eyes. "I know," he breathed in reply.

"I'll...I'll write you?" she asked hopefully.

The corner of Tom's mouth twitched up and he nodded. "Yeah," he said, and opened her door. "See you later, Hermione."

"Bye."
He closed her door, and walked into his room. Once he was behind the safety of his bedroom door, he dropped his mask. His lips curled over his teeth in an angry grimace as he pressed his back into the wall, and slid down to the floor. The heels of his hands pressed into his eyelids until he saw an explosion of constellations that didn't exist.

If he wanted her, he needed to give her space.

If he wanted her, he needed to give her time.

If he wanted her, he needed to be patient.

If he wanted her, he had to surrender.

The Potter household reminded her of her own home, only their house was a bit larger, and crammed full of magical things in every corner. Right now, it felt like it was mostly crammed full of people, more so than anything else. It was Harry's fifteenth birthday, after all. And it wasn't just his friends that were there, but his parent's friends.

There was food, drinks, games, and plenty of things to do to keep Hermione distracted from her straying thoughts. She never thought that Harry's little brother clinging to her leg almost constantly would make her laugh so much. She never thought that the sound of Harry and Ron bickering over Quidditch would ever sound so beautiful to her ears. She never thought Fred and George playing their childish pranks would entertain her. She never thought that acting like a teenage girl with Ginny would be a godsend. It was absolutely perfect.

But, there were often times when one of the adults would perform some sort of magic she hadn't seen before; or, she would find a magical contraption in the house that was fascinating; and the first thing she thought of, every single time – every single time – were thoughts like, 'Oh, I wonder what Tom would think of this?' or 'Oh, I wish I could show Tom.'

How bloody irritating.

Thankfully, she was so busy, that something would distract her from those thoughts. Unfortunately, it was still there in her mind, even if she wasn't consciously thinking about him. He was there – he was always there.

Lily asked her if she'd help frost Harry's birthday cake, so she could go help Charles in the loo after he'd had a little accident. Hermione happily agreed to help her, and began spreading the frosting over the chocolate cake. She thought about how chocolate was Tom's favorite, then shook it out of her head.

She watched from her spot on the grass outside as many of the party-goers participated in a game of Quidditch in the backyard. Fred had whacked the Bludger toward Harry, and almost hit him in the back of the head. Hermione gasped at the move, and turned her head quickly to the side to say something about safety concerns, but he wasn't there. Hermione blinked several times, then snapped her mouth shut. She continued watching the game by herself with a frown. Fred saw the look on her face, and grinned mischievously.

James and Lily would share a loving kiss; and Hermione's face would get hot and she'd avert her eyes, because she was thinking of a different kiss.

She'd find him in everything and it wasn't fair.

Her visit here was supposed to be a vacation – a distraction and it was becoming an utter failure. Sure, it was always typical for her brother to take up a lot of her thoughts, but not like this. These
thoughts were new. These thoughts were unwanted. These thoughts were wrong.

Hermione was picking at the bits of grass in front of her, and pulling the blades apart as she stared into the magical bonfire. It was mesmerizing to see different creatures take shape in the flickering flames, before fizzling out to take the shape of something entirely new. Magic really was incredible.

She wished that Tom could see it.

Hermione threw the bits of grass angrily toward the fire, but it landed nowhere near the flames. She sighed dramatically, rested her chin in her hands, and scowled at the fire. She didn't know who she was angrier with: Tom, or herself.

"What's got your knickers in a twist?"

The scowl fell off Hermione's face when she saw Fred plop down next to her in the grass. She felt her face warm up and it wasn't because of the fire in front of them. "Nothing. What makes you say that?"

Fred smiled. "Well, probably because you've been looking at the fire like it just ate your homework. Wait," he said, and shifted his eyes to the fire, then back to her. He leaned in closer to her and whispered, "did it eat your homework?"

Hermione scoffed at his terrible joke, and rolled her eyes. "It's summer, Fred. There is no homework."

He leaned back, and raised his eyebrows. "Oh, right," he said with another grin. "Unless, of course, you were just thinking about how I almost murdered Harry earlier."

"Very funny," she replied half-heartedly.

"I happened to think so. Absolutely hilarious, actually," he said with a playful wink.

Was Fred seriously flirting with her right now? He really had no shame.

"He could have been seriously hurt, Fred," she chastised.

"Ooo, I kind of like it when you reprimand me, Hermione. And besides, it's not like there was any bloodshed," he replied playfully.

Hermione blinked. For some reason, memories came flooding back to her of her first year at Hogwarts, of when Harry and Ron had teased her, and of when Tom promised retribution for their actions.

'Absolutely no bloodshed, Tom. I mean it.'

Tom's grin broadened. 'No bloodshed. Got it.'

Oh, she was over it. Completely over it. It wasn't fair that he wouldn't leave her mind. All she wanted to do was enjoy herself, but it was like he wasn't allowing her to forget him. He was so stupid and he was so selfish and he was so cruel. She wanted to forget his hands on her body. She wanted to forget his lips on hers. She wanted to forget how he made her feel. It wasn't normal.

She licked her lips, and suddenly realized that Fred was staring at her differently now. He'd never looked at her like that before. Her heart panicked in her chest when she realized that she was the
one who was leaning forward.

"Well, well, well. What do we have here?"

Fred and Hermione jumped apart, and stared up at a grinning Sirius Black. He leaned a little to the left when he took a step forward. Hermione narrowed her eyes at him – he was most definitely sloshed at this point.

"Oh, I didn't mean to interrupt anything. My apologies," he slurred a bit. Hermione was afraid he was going to fall right into the bonfire.

"Professor, why don't you come sit down over here with us? It's much…safer," she said warily.

His eyebrows shot up and he nodded. "Yeah, s'pose you're right."

Sirius plopped down in the empty space between Hermione and Fred, and fell back onto the grass. The teenagers looked at each other quickly, then back down at Sirius in concern.

"Uh…Professor?" she asked cautiously, and poked his arm.

"Shh," he said, and brought a finger clumsily up to Fred's lips. "Quiet down, Hermione. I'm trying to think."

Fred grinned behind their professor's finger. "I believe you're drunk, sir."

"I just might be," Sirius said, then opened his eyes in surprise. He stared at Fred through narrowed eyes, turned his head to Hermione, then looked back at Fred again. His eyebrows raised, and he let his hand fall back down to the ground. "And you're not Hermione. My apologies."

"You're forgiven. Want me to see if there are any potions that'll uh…help?" Fred offered.

Sirius grumbled something out, but it was gibberish at that point.

"I think that was a 'yes'," Hermione said. "I'll stay with him."

"Are you sure?" he asked awkwardly.

She gave him a small smile. "Don't worry about it, Fred. It's fine. Just go find that potion before he dies, or something."

Fred grinned, and left.

Hermione sighed dejectedly next to a now snoring Sirius. She watched Harry, Ron, Neville, and Seamus throw a Quaffle back and forth between them on the other side of the bonfire. They obviously hadn't witnessed the pathetic moment between her and Fred, which she was glad for. It was stupid, stupid, stupid of her to try and use Fred to distract herself.

How could she be surrounded by so many people, so many friends, and still feel so utterly alone? It's not like she could talk about her problems to anyone. If anyone found out about what happened - well, she wasn't sure what would happen, actually. What would her friends think of her? What would her parents do if they found out? Would they send Tom away? He was a right arse most days, but she couldn't bear the thought of losing him.

It was in that moment that she knew she wouldn't tell anyone about what he'd done. She couldn't help but feel this overwhelming desire to protect him, even when he probably didn't deserve it.

Unconditional love was such a complicating thing.
She'd write him tomorrow. Then, maybe she could relax a bit more.

When he read her letter, he imagined her saying everything right in front of him. He imagined the way her lips would move. He imagined the way she'd use her hands to speak. He imagined the way she'd stress certain words, always trying to get her point across.

He imagined how he'd get his point across, as well. He imagined all the ways he could get her lips to stop moving just by using his. He imagined all the things she'd say - all the noises she'd make when he did so. He imagined the way she'd smell and the way she'd sound and the way she'd taste.

Tom missed her and his imagination was a vivid, wild, cruel thing.

A/N: Drunk Sirius was there to save the day, guys. loool I know there's not as much going on in this chapter (as what you were all probably hoping would go on, wink wink), but they needed some time apart to sort through their bullshit. Hermione is still trying to sort through her bullshit and she will be for quite some time. My poor babies. Major thanks to Radiant Innocence, VinoAmore, and Chaco. I had a rough time with this one and they helped me so much.

And major thanks to you guys. I'm still baffled that so many people are enjoying my little fucked up brain child, but I'm happy that you are. ily baby boos.
When Hermione arrived back home after taking the portkey James set up for her, she found the front door to her house locked. Hermione set her suitcase down, and muttered to herself about how silly it was that she had to ring the doorbell to her own home. She also thought it was silly that she was a witch and she wasn't even allowed to use her magic to unlock it herself yet. Now that she thought about it, she was almost sixteen now – she should probably have her own key. She'd have to ask about that at some point.

Her thoughts were cut short when she heard the deadbolt being unlocked, and the sound of her father's voice coming from the other side of the door. Her heart beat wildly in her chest when she remembered one of the reasons she'd left to begin with.
Hugo opened the door with a loving smile, but she didn't see her father – she saw him standing frozen on the bottom of the stairs, his hand gripping the banister until his knuckles turned white. Her breath caught in her throat, and that longing feeling reared its ugly head yet again. The urge to shove through the door to get to him was overwhelming. She hated that she missed him so much. She was supposed to be angry with him; she wasn't supposed to miss him.

And yet, she did.

"Darling?" her father asked, concerned.

Hermione blinked, then forced a smile at her father. "Yes?"

"I asked if you needed help with your things?"

"Oh!" Hermione grabbed the handle to her case, and dragged it into the house so Hugo could shut the door. "Yes, please. It's a bit heavier now than when I left."

"The Potters always send you home with more things than what you arrived with, don't they?" Jean asked, leaning against the dining room doorway with a smile.

Hermione grinned. "Yes! Lily sent something for you, too, mum."

"Really? That's awfully sweet of her," Jean said, then suddenly frowned. She sniffed the air. "Oh, no! You'll have to show me later, dear. I might be burning our supper. I'll be in the kitchen if anyone needs me!"

Hugo chuckled when she ran back into the kitchen, and picked up Hermione's case. "I'm glad it's not just me burning our meals," he said, then passed Tom on his way up the stairs. "Honestly, it's a wonder either of you survived childhood with such terrible cooks for parents."

The corner of Tom's mouth twitched up in a barely-there smirk. "Honestly, I don't know how, either," he joked.

Their father laughed his way up the stairs, and left Hermione and Tom alone together in the foyer. Tom's half-smirk fell from his face, and slipped into a mask of nothingness as he stared down at her from his spot on the second step of the stairs. It hurt her heart to look at him – to see him like this.

"Welcome back home," he said without emotion, which made her flinch. He'd speak with other people like that, but never with her – never with her. She hated it. She hated it, she hated it, she hated this.

"Thanks," she replied uneasily, and felt her face warm up underneath his stare. She hated the unease between them now.

How could he be standing so close to her, but it felt as if an ocean was between them now? The rift was unbearable. This storm made the waves crash ruthlessly against them, and made her feel as if she were the one helplessly drowning in the frigid waters.

Was he drowning like her, too?

He was the one who had lied to her. He was the one who had broken her trust. He was the one who had been entirely self-centered. He was the one who had used others for his own personal gain. He was the one who wasn't afraid to hurt people to get what he wanted. He was the one who had broken her heart so effortlessly.
Hermione stared at his beautiful, terrible face, and felt her gut twist unforgivably. Everything about this situation was his fault.

Then again, he was also the one who protected her every time, even if it was in his own sick, twisted way. He was also the one who helped her anytime she needed him – she never even had to ask him to. He was also the one who comforted her. He was also the one who understood her completely. He was also the one person she knew she could go to for anything – for everything, but that all felt changed now. He had changed it; he was a selfish person.

But...so was she.

That selfish part of her wished she'd never found out about Viktor at all. Part of her wished she'd remained ignorant to everything. Looking up at him now made part of her wish to just let herself drown, but she knew it wasn't right. She had to stay above the waves, no matter how hard they crashed down upon her.

It wasn't fair that he was close enough where she could reach out and touch him, but she couldn't have him like she was used to – not in that way – not anymore. She couldn't do that; it wasn't that easy. It wasn't black and white like he seemed to think it was; it was grey – all of it was grey now.

She wanted to touch him and she felt like she couldn't and it wasn't fair.

Life wasn't meant to be fair, though; was it? Life was selfish and cruel.

She couldn't take it anymore.

Acting on impulse, she reached out to grasp his hand from the banister, and pulled him down the last two steps to her. He hadn't even looked surprised when she pulled him down - he hadn't even resisted her. He stood there before her like an offering and she watched the way his Adam's apple bobbed as he looked down at her.

And then, she hugged him. She wrapped her arms around his middle and she hid her face in his shirt, and just hugged him. The sound of the steady beat, beat, beating of his heart against her ear, and the way he surrounded his arms around her was familiar. He smelled like him and he felt like him and he sounded like him and she loved it and she just wanted to forget everything he'd ever done.

She felt his warm breath sigh in her hair and she wondered again, for possibly the thousandth time in the past two weeks, if it was possible to forgive and forget. He buried his nose into her hair and she felt his hand splay across her shoulder blades, pressing her further, further, deeper into his waters. She wanted to be selfish, and believe that it was possible.

Hermione turned her face into his shirt, and frowned. Was it possible? To forgive and forget, possibly; but to trust him fully again?

"I missed you so much," he might have whispered into her hair, but it was so quiet that she wasn't sure she heard him right. Her bottom lip quivered and her nostrils stung. She tightened her hold on him, and closed her eyes. She was terrified of drowning.

Tom's other hand started to travel up her arm and his fingers slid onto the side of her neck, and into her hair. She knew the hug was turning into something more and it frightened her. Hermione heard their father close her door upstairs and she hastily blinked her tears away.

Hermione carefully removed herself from Tom's arms, and avoided looking at what expression might be on his face to look at their father coming back downstairs, instead. "So, any interesting
stories from the office, dad?" she asked with the fakest cheerfulness she could muster.

"Well, of course! I know there's the whole patient confidentiality thing, but the aftermath of pulling wisdom teeth is always my favorite. I already told them last week, but hearing it a second time is just as good!" he came to a stop at the bottom of the stairs, and smiled at them. "But let's talk about that over supper, yeah?"

"Yes, that sounds perfect! I can't wait."

Hugo went to head toward the dining room and Hermione went to hurry after him, not wanting to be left alone with Tom. She inhaled sharply when she felt his warm fingers curl around her wrist to stop her and he gently dragged her back to him. She swallowed, and turned her face to him. He didn't look angry, but he didn't look particularly thrilled, either.

"Yes?" she asked.

Tom tilted his head to the side, and examined her through narrowed eyes. Charcoal eyes catalogued her face; he was reading her like she would read him and she didn't want him to read her. He seemed to find something or nothing – she didn't know, and let go of her wrist. "We got our Hogwarts letters this morning."

Hermione straightened at the news. "Already?"

He nodded, and pulled her letter out of his back pocket to give to her. She opened the seal and something fell out of the envelope, and clattered to the floor. She frowned, and bent over to pick it up. Her eyes widened and a grin spread over her face when she realized what she was holding in her hand.

"Oh, my God! I've been chosen as a Prefect! I'm a Prefect, Tom!"

The first thing she did was look at Tom and she'd forgotten everything in her excitement. He was smiling at her. "Congratulations."

She beamed at him.

"What was that, dear?" Jean called from the other room.

"I'm a Prefect!" she yelled back in delight, and turned the small badge over in her hands.

"Two Prefects under one roof! I doubt any of us will get away with murder, now!" Hugo said from the doorway with a grin, and turned back into the dining room.

Hermione's head snapped back to Tom in surprise, her nose scrunched up in disbelief. "You're a Prefect?"

Tom let out an arrogant scoff. "What? Are you surprised?"

She frowned. Honestly, no, she wasn't surprised. To everyone else, he was a perfect candidate, but she knew better. A cruel reality washed over her, and left her bones feeling cold. "Well, no. I suppose not. You do have the best scores in Slytherin."

The corners of Tom's mouth curled up mischievously. "And because I'm a model student, of course."

Her nose scrunched up in distaste again at his words and she started reading her letter. "Yes, because I'm sure all model students have secret potion labs set up just to thwart others' lives," she
said shrewdly. She looked up from the letter she hadn't really been reading to give Tom an unkind smile.

His nostrils flared in agitation at the sudden change of tone in their conversation. "How many times do I must tell you I'm sorry before you forgive me, Hermione?" he whispered between clenched teeth.

Her unkind smile got tighter. "I don't know, Tom. How many times have you made me cry?"

Tom averted his eyes from hers and he said quietly, "I...don't know."

Hermione stuffed her Prefect pin back into the envelope, folded it, and slipped it into her back pocket. "Once you know the answer to that, then I will forgive you," she said, and walked away.

"How am I supposed to find that out?" he called after her.

She didn't answer him; this was something that he had to figure out for himself. It was a good way to force him to think about everything he'd ever done to her, if he truly wanted her to forgive him. She wasn't ready to forgive and forget just yet.

And she refused to let herself drown in his waves.

No matter how badly she wanted to lose herself under his blue.

As Tom stood next to Hermione in one of the larger compartments on the Hogwarts Express, surrounded by a vortex of teenage body odor, he briefly wondered if perhaps being a Prefect wasn't all it was cracked up to be. He knew it gave him a higher chance of being picked as Head Boy when he became a 7th year student, which was what one of his many goals were; he knew how good it looked on paper in the wizarding world. His academic achievements alone spoke for itself, but he wanted more.

And, what made matters worse, is that Rhexenor Lestrange was Head Boy this year; which, if he were being honest, angered him beyond belief. Tom hated Rhex Lestrange with a passion that went above and beyond his hatred of Harry Potter.

At least his hatred of Lestrange was warranted and rational. Tom had lost count of how many times the older boy would make snide remarks to him of his and Hermione's blood status.

Tom had never let Hermione know of the nasty things he said about them when they were younger. He remembered the revenge he'd been planning against the boy back in 3rd year, but he'd been caught by Professor Black. Oh, how he wished he'd never been caught. He knew that his favorite professor was related to Lestrange somehow – some form of cousins – but then again, half of the school was related to each other. It was a bit sickening to him that it was normal for cousins to marry cousins in Pureblood families.

Didn't they realize that inbreeding didn't help make their magic stronger? They were idiots.

And here, standing in front of him, giving directions to the other prefects, was the biggest idiot of them all. He was about Tom's height, maybe a bit taller. His skin was pale, but he always looked healthy. Most of the older girls in the school would swoon over the way his jet-black curls fell over his dull, boring brown eyes. Those same dull, boring brown eyes were now surveying all of them as he spoke in an air of bored indifference.

"It's your job to make sure students are following the rules. If a student isn't following a rule, you can dock house points; but only from students of your own house. Also, Aubrey Cattermole and I
will be making a patrolling schedule. Twice a week, you will be expected to patrol the corridors to make sure that students aren't out of bed, or causing trouble," Rhex spoke in a bored drawl.

Hermione's hand shot up and Tom nearly groaned. Rhex's eyes made contact with hers with a glare and he blatantly ignored her.

"Any questions?" he asked.

Hermione looked affronted when he had obviously ignored her. Nobody else was raising their hands to ask questions and it made Tom's blood boil to see her slighted like that. He was about to open his mouth, but she beat him to it.

"What do we do if we catch a student out of bed? Do we dock points, or do we give them detention?"

Lestrange's eyes snapped back to hers. He was doing a terrible job of keeping his irritation of having to speak to her off his face. "Being out after curfew warrants a detention," he snapped impatiently.

Tom noticed how Hermione openly glared at his rudeness. It didn't thrill him that she was being treated like that, but it thrilled him that she didn't like him, either.

"If no one has any other questions, then this meeting is over. Anyone?"

No one spoke.

Rhex gave a charming smile that seemed a bit too forced. "Perfect," he said, and left the cramped compartment first. He purposefully shoved his shoulder into Tom's as he passed, which caused Tom to nearly knock Hermione over. He quickly steadied her, and glared at the back of Lestrange's head as he left. It took everything in him to reel his magic back in, instead of lashing out like he wanted to. He wanted to hex his face off, but using just magic alone wouldn't be enough to quench his thirst for revenge. He wanted to haul Lestrange by the back of his fucking hair, and slam his fucking face repeatedly into the sliding door until the glass shattered into oblivion, and it sliced his neck into obscurity.

He couldn't prevent the crazed grin that overtook his features, but he let it fall once he noticed Hermione glancing at him oddly.

"Are you alright?" he asked her.

She stuck her lower lip out in a pout, nodded, and said nothing.

Tom sighed as they made their way out of the compartment. Things had been…more than tense between them since they'd kissed and he'd admitted how he felt about her. He was thankful that Hermione wasn't completely ignoring him, but she was more distant now. Their conversations were stilted; they didn't flow like they used to – she was guarded. And anytime they were alone together at home, she did her best to avoid him.

He'd been so good, and hadn't made any attempt to push her; he'd given her distance. He knew that it was time that she needed and he hated it and he didn't want to wait and give that to her, but he knew that he had to.

He always got what he wanted, though, in the end.

Tom watched her walk a few steps ahead of him. He noticed that she was passing by his compartment and said, "Hermione, don't forget that you left one of your bags with my things
before the meeting."

Hermione stopped, and spun around to walk back to him. "Oh. Right. I forgot."

Tom gave a small smile, and slid the door open to see Blaise, Theo, Draco, Daphne, and Pansy inside. He refrained from groaning out loud when he saw so many people in one space – he despised cramped train rides.

"Tom!" Daphne smiled, and rose from her seat when she saw Hermione next to him. "Oh, and Hermione! It's so great to see you again!"

Daphne gave Hermione air kisses, which Hermione fumbled with awkwardly; then the blonde girl enveloped her in a quick hug. "Did you get my letter? You never wrote me back. I was so looking forward to hearing from you."

Tom noticed the way Hermione's cheeks flushed. He narrowed his eyes at her.

"Oh, how rude of me! I got your letter, but it was while I was packing to go to Harry's and it must have slipped my mind. I am so sorry, Daphne."

Why was she lying?

Daphne smiled. "Accidents happen. Don't worry about it! I'm just glad it didn't get lost. How did you like your gift? I didn't know your favorite color, so I just went with the Gryffindor color-scheme."

"Oh, it's beautiful. I absolutely adore it. Thank you so much, Daphne. It's sweet of you – really," Hermione replied, shifting her weight from foot to foot.

"You never told me that Daphne sent you a gift. What was it?" Tom asked curiously. He knew that Hermione and Daphne weren't close friends, so he thought the whole situation was a bit… odd.

Hermione glanced at him, then at all the other people in the compartment. All eyes were on her and he knew that she hated the attention. She frowned, and walked into the compartment to start rifling through his things. She pulled out her knapsack, and held it out for him to see. There was a small, blood-red rose with golden leaves pinned to her knapsack. It looked expensive and he briefly wondered why she'd leave it pinned somewhere it could easily be snatched.

And then, he remembered that she didn't even like roses; she'd disliked them ever since she tripped, and fell into one of the rose bushes in their yard when they were thirteen. The thorns had torn the skin on her hands, the skin on her arms, and the skin on her face. He remembered how the sight of her blood and her tears had made him feel guilt for the first time in his entire life.

Tom had never told her it was him who'd tripped her with his magic after they argued about something he couldn't even remember now, but he was sure that she probably knew it had been him. He hadn't meant for her to fall into the stupid rose bush; he had just wanted her to fall in the grass.

As he stared at the rose pinned to her knapsack, his chest clenched when he realized it was a time he'd made her cry.

"Isn't it beautiful?" Daphne gushed "I begged for her to put it on her bag, because I want absolutely everyone to see it! It's just too bad that your bag is so plain, but I guess it just brings the beauty of the rose out a bit more – don't you think so, Hermione?"
He watched as Hermione forced a smile back onto her face, and agreed happily. "If you'll excuse me, though, I need to get back to my compartment. My friends are probably wondering where I am."

Daphne pouted. "I wish you'd been sorted into Slytherin, like your brother, Hermione. I feel like I never get to see you."

"Oh, for Merlin's sake, Daphne. She doesn't even want to be here. Just let her leave," Pansy muttered, and opened her magazine.

"I don't think I'm cunning enough to be in Slytherin, honestly," Hermione joked unenthusiastically, and looked into his eyes. His gaze leveled on hers. He felt the corners of his mouth turn up slowly. They both knew that to be a lie. The only thing that made her a Gryffindor were her righteous morals. Those qualities were the only traits of theirs that differed. She'd never confess it, but they were more alike than she'd ever care to admit.

"Oh, Hermione," Theo interjected. "I'd still like to go over notes together for Potions, when classes start. Well, as long as you're still interested, anyway."

Hermione's smile wasn't fake anymore. "Yes! I'd love that, actually," she said, and turned her eyes knowingly to Tom as she spoke to Theo, "I know firsthand how much of a prodigy you are with potioneering."

Theo's face paled and Tom ground his teeth until it hurt his jaw.

"Now, it's been lovely to see you all again, but I should get going. See you all at Hogwarts!" she said cheerfully, and slammed the door behind her.

Tom stalked over to his things that Hermione had haphazardly strewn across his seat, and shoved them angrily back into his bag. He snatched one of his text books out of the bag, and dropped down in his seat with a scowl. He was sure everyone knew he was in a foul mood now; so, no one dared to speak to him.

No one dared to, of course, aside from Blaise Zabini.

"So, Tom," Blaise began, an absolutely wicked grin unfurling on his face. "Have a good summer?"

Tom leveled a cold gaze on his friend, and drawled indifferently, "Shut up, Blaise."

Blaise's knowing grin widened. Tom rolled his eyes, shook his head, and looked back at the words on the pages that he couldn't focus on.

He couldn't see the black ink; all he could see was the fire dancing in her eyes.

The first few weeks at Hogwarts had been a great distraction from Hermione's hostility toward him, at first; but now that Tom was slipping into a comfortable routine again, he found it more difficult to keep himself distracted from her cutting remarks. Not that they happened constantly, or even every day, but it still grated on his nerves. Keeping his mouth shut and his temper in check should have earned him an award, honestly. She was punishing him in the only way she knew how. Hermione could be absolutely infuriating sometimes.

He just wanted all this nonsense to stop; so, whenever he had a moment, he would go through his memory, and count all the time he'd made her cry. He couldn't think of many times where it'd been entirely his fault; and, even when it was, she hardly ever truly cried. It was annoying that she
was making him do this.

They were both in the Restricted Section together, along with Theo, after being granted access by Professor Slughorn for an advanced assignment they were given to work on together. He'd pulled them aside after class the first week, and told them that they were far too advanced to be working on something as simple as a Draught of Peace potion. He'd said he didn't want his favorite students to get bored. He'd also invited them to be members of his notorious Slug Club. They'd graciously agreed; although, he didn't really want to go, but he knew it would be a great opportunity to network.

Riddle wasn't a name that was well-known outside of Hogwarts, but he was going to make it well-known in the wizarding world; whether the wizarding world was ready for it, or not.

Tom was brought from his thoughts when he heard Hermione laugh. His eyes traveled from the book spines he'd been browsing, to where Hermione and Theo were sat at a small table a short distance away. Theo was going off on an excited tangent about their project. Apparently, his enthusiasm was contagious, because she was grinning at him from her spot in her chair. Tom frowned, and turned his attention back to the titles he was reading.

He felt jealous, but this jealousy was different than the other times he'd felt it. It was subdued, and not directed at Theo. He knew Theo was far too wrapped up in his work – in his own little world – to pay girls any attention, so he knew he had nothing to worry about, in that respect.

The jealousy he felt now had nothing to do with romantic interest, and everything to do with her smiles and laughter: they weren't directed toward him lately.

Tom exhaled slowly, and loosened his jaw by swinging it side to side. He snatched a decrepit-looking book off the shelf, and sat down in an armchair.

_Moste Potente Potions._

He raised his eyebrows approvingly at the title, and began flipping through the pages. It only took minutes before he discovered that many of the potions in the book were…darker. A slow smile spread across his face the more he read.

"Theo," he interrupted, and walked over to them. He set the open book down on the table in front of them, and pushed it toward Theo. "Have you read this book before?"

Theo stuck his bottom lip out, and peered at the pages curiously. "No, I don't think so. Wait," he said. His eyes got wide and he hastily grabbed the book away from Tom, and began reading greedily.

Tom glanced at Hermione, and watched the way she shifted uneasily in her chair under his gaze. She knew Theo made the potion for Krum, but she'd told Tom that she thought he'd tricked Theo into making the potion. It made him laugh, honestly, at how she thought his friend was some innocent child. Theo was a nice boy, but he was probably the most immoral of them all.

"Merlin, the things I could – oh, my," Theo said to himself.

"Find something interesting?" Hermione's tone cracked when she asked.

Theo's eyes shot up from the book to look at her – to look at them. He grinned. "Oh, this entire book is a bloody gold mine. I wonder if I can check this out. Did we get permission to check anything out, Tom?"

"Three books – one for each of us."
Theo shut the book closed, and stood. "This one is mine. Sorry, Tom. I'll let you look at it later, yeah? I've gotta go."

"Wait – what? We’ve only just arrived," she asked, but he was already gone. Her nose scrunched up in the way he liked and he felt like someone punched him in the gut.

"We can still work on it together, if you'd like," he offered.

Why was his heart pounding so hard after asking such a simple damn question? Ah, that was right; because she might refuse, and leave.

She surprised him by saying, "Fine.", pushed a book his way, and began taking notes in silence.

He smirked triumphantly, and was glad that she wasn't watching him to witness it. They sat in silence together for some time, before his mind started to wander. He observed her as she read for several minutes before she finally said, "Shouldn't you be working, Tom? You're distracting me with your staring."

"Seven."

Hermione lifted her eyes to meet his and stared at him like he was mental. "What?"

"I've made you cry seven times."

Her face fell into one of indifference and she went back to reading. "No."

"Eight?" he asked hopefully.

"No."

"Nine?"

"Oh, my God, Tom. No. Stop trying to guess."

He slammed his book closed. "Well, how the hell else am I supposed to figure it out?" he snapped furiously at her.

Hermione's nostrils flared as she glared at him. She stood up, started gathering her things together, and angrily shoved them into her knapsack. He scowled at her as she did so.

She pushed the wild beast that was her hair away from her face, and slung her bag over her shoulder. "You'll just have to figure that out for yourself now, won't you? Have a lovely day, Tom," she spat back, and left him there. He hated it when she just left him there, like he was nothing.

Tom's breaths became shallow and his body shook as he fought against his temper.

Surrender, surrender, surrender. Remember.

As each day passed, though, he was parched of her more and more. He was dying of thirst.

He wanted to jump in head-first, and drown in her.

He wanted to sink down, down, down into her abyss, and never leave her depths.
A/N: HEY GUYS GUESS WHAT YOU JUST MET BELLATRIX AND RODOLPHUS' SON. Because, you know, in a world with no Voldemort, Bella actually pays attention to her husband. Hah. Rhex is a total dick and I'm sure you've probably guessed he'll be playing a big part for their 5th year. Special thanks to LastBornSlytherin for helping me pick out his name. I'm low-key excited for all the things to come that I have planned for their next three years. So...much...fucking...drama. I love it. ANYWAY. Special thanks to my fishes Radiant Innocence, VinoAmore, and Chaco for always putting up with my bullshit.

And can I just say again, how much I fucking love you guys? I do...like, a LOT.
July 1990

When Tom finally came home using the key to the flat that he wore around his neck, the first thing he saw was darkness. He quietly closed the door behind him, and locked the deadbolt. He had to shuffle his feet along the floor, and feel his way against the peeling wallpaper to find his way to the living room. His upper lip curled in disgust when he saw what awaited him.

She was sloshed again.

Tom could tell, because the baby was screaming her bloody head off in the playpen in the living room and the tele was on some trashy game show. The most telling sign, however, was the fact that their pathetic excuse for a foster mother was currently passed out cold in the recliner.

Once the baby, Lucy, spotted Tom standing in the doorway, she started screaming even louder, and tried pulling herself up from her position in the playpen. She was so upset that she plopped down on her bum twice before managing to succeed. He frowned when he noticed that she was still only in a nappy, and a saggy one, at that.

His gaze traveled back to the woman snoring loudly in the recliner. She was absolutely disgusting and he hated her. She was possibly his least favorite person he’d ever been forced to stay with. The only reason why he lingered is because she didn't care what he did, or where he went. He was free to come and go as he pleased. The freedom was exhilarating, but at what price?

Tom shook himself out of his thoughts. He started walking down the hallway, and into his room. He didn't think it was possible, but Lucy screamed even louder when he left. He slammed the door behind him, plopped down on his bed, and shoved his face underneath his pillow to muffle out her cries. He'd been gone all day, so he wasn't sure how long their foster mum had been asleep. Sometimes, she'd sleep most of the day away, depending on how much she drank.

Tom groaned. Lucy probably hadn't had a bottle or a change all day long. His own stomach
growled then, as if to tell him something important.

Lucy let out a particularly high-pitched screech that made her have a coughing fit and it sounded to Tom like she might have vomited.

"Damn it," he muttered. He threw the pillow off his head, and stormed out of his room.

When he found her, she was covered in watery formula puke, drool, tears, and clear snot. She reached her arms up to him frantically and he picked her up. He held her out at arm's-length, and was careful not to press her leaking nappy onto his clothes.

"You smell awful," he muttered to himself. Lucy just hiccupped in response, but stopped crying. Tom glanced at their foster mum in the chair again, who was still snoring loudly, before bringing the baby to her room to clean her up.

After he was done with cleaning her up, and put fresh clothes on her, he carried her back out into the kitchen to prepare a bottle. He couldn't make it while holding her, so he gave her a plastic spatula to play with, and set her on the kitchen floor. He sighed in mild irritation when she started smacking it off the cheap linoleum, but was glad she wasn't screaming anymore. At least she couldn't walk yet, so he didn't have to worry about her taking off while his back was turned.

Once he was done making her bottle, he picked her back up, sat down in a chair with her in his lap, and started feeding her. She started sucking it down so quickly that she choked on the formula, and spat a mouthful on the front of Tom's shirt.

"Bloody Hell, Lucy," he griped as he sat her up, and patted her back until she was ready to eat again. As she greedily gulped down her bottle, Tom stared at the woman who was supposed to be taking care of them with hate in his eyes. How were people like her allowed to take care of children? She got paid every month to help take care of them, but she used to money to fuel her own addictions, instead. He was honestly surprised he managed to find a can of formula in the cabinet. He was also certain that if he weren't here, Lucy would probably have died of neglect. The woman was utterly useless. A waste of space. An abscess on the arse of humanity.

God, did he hate her.

Once the baby was done drinking, he brought her back to her playpen, and dropped a few of her toys in with her. She was much happier now. At least one of them was.

Tom picked up the remote, and turned the tele off. He heard the recliner groan and a slew of garbled curse words fell out of their foster mum's drunken mouth.

"I was watchin' that, boy."

"No, you weren't. You were asleep," he replied coldly.

"No, I wasn't," she slurred, and tried to stand up, but fell back into her chair. She knocked her ash tray onto the floor; the butts and ash went flying everywhere. "Gah! Look at what you made me do now. Go get me another drink, and then clean up this mess."

Tom stood his ground a short distance in front of her, and clenched his fists. "No. You're drunk. You left Lucy screaming again. You don't need another drink."

The older woman flung the back of her hand across Tom's cheek, and sent him sprawling onto the floor. Lucy started screaming again and Tom glared at the burn marks from dropped cigarettes on the carpet. The rage he usually kept contained was building up in him again.
"Don't talk back to me like that! Stop screechin' like that, Lucy! My head is poundin'!" she yelled.

Tom glared up at her from his spot on the floor. He ground his teeth together and spat out, "Well, yelling at her isn't exactly going to calm her down now, is it?"

She couldn't reach him to swing at him again; so, she grabbed an empty glass bottle from the table, and flung it across the room. He ducked back down and it missed his head by mere centimeters. It smashed up against the wall, and shards went flying everywhere. Lucy let out a terrified cry. She hadn't been crying this badly earlier.

"Shut up, Lucy! I said, shut up!"

When Tom looked back up, he saw that their foster mum had Lucy by the shoulders, and was shaking her roughly. He panicked; then, he focused all the rage he felt for the woman, and turned it on her.

She abruptly let go of Lucy, and clutched at her chest with wide eyes. Tom glared at her with his lips curling over his teeth, and pushed all of his hate and all of his rage and all of his disgust for the woman at her.

A few more seconds of that was all it took for her to fall to the floor with a loud thud, her eyes still wide.

Tom slowly pulled himself up, walked over to Lucy, and picked her up. She was still crying, but calmed down quickly when he smoothed down her hair, and bounced her in his arms. Soon, she started falling asleep against him. He carefully walked around the shattered glass on the floor, and picked up the telephone. He turned the dials to the only number he knew by heart.

"Hello? Could you send an ambulance, please?" Tom asked calmly and his eyes shifted to the body lying still on the floor in front of him. He alternated the weight on his feet to lull a stirring Lucy back to sleep on his chest. The corners of his mouth twitched up in a small smile before he said, "I think my foster mum just died."

They had made him stay on the phone with them until they arrived. Fifteen minutes later, Tom watched on in a detached sort of fascination at the way the medics pushed on her chest over, and over, and over again. They hooked up a little machine with wires taped to her chest, and kept saying 'Clear!'

Cardiac arrest, he'd heard them say – a heart attack. Tom knew otherwise.

The words from the medics kept replaying over in his head as the social worker who'd arrived at the police station took him and Lucy with her in her car. Tom watched the scenery slow down as they came to a stop outside an apartment building.

"Alright, this is our first stop," said the woman.

Tom's eyes left the building outside to look at her sitting in the front seat. Lucy was babbling next to him in the car seat, and kept trying to reach for Tom's sleeve.

"Am I going here, too; or is it just her?"

"Lucy is staying with this family. They don't feel comfortable taking in an older child yet, but I've found the perfect family for you to stay with, Tom."

Unlikely. He looked down at Lucy, who was smiling up at him, then he looked back out the window. No one ever wanted him.
"Alright, go ahead and say your goodbyes, Tom."

He didn't want to. The woman opened the back door on the other side of him, and started unbuckling Lucy.

"Go on, Tom. I know she's going to miss you. She's known you since she was a newborn. You've helped take care of her her entire life."

"She's just a baby. She'll forget about me by next week," he said indifferently.

"Of course, she'll remember you. Don't be silly."

Tom brought his attention back to the drooling mess that was Lucy. He glanced at her, and shifted uncomfortably in his seat. "Bye."

Lucy smiled. Tom frowned, and turned his attention back out the window.

"Alright, come on now, Lucy. Time to meet your new family."

Tom waited in the car, and watched the young couple open their front door with smiles on their stupid faces. They looked normal. They looked nice. They didn't look like they would shake her. He shifted in his seat, and straightened out his old Manchester United t-shirt. Then, he kicked the black garbage bag filled with his belongings underneath the seat in front of him. He knew he probably wouldn't be so lucky; he never was.

Tom stared out the window at the passing scenery again after Lucy was dropped off at her new home. He hardly paid any attention to the social worker prattle on and on about the new family he was to stay with. They would be the same as all the others; he was sure of it.

One thing was for certain, though; he would never let himself get that close to anyone else ever again. If nobody needed him, he didn't need anyone else, either.

They came to a stop in front of a nice house in a nice neighborhood. It had a nice yard and a nice garage and a nice garden of flowers in the front. Tom frowned in confusion, and looked at the woman's eyes in the rearview mirror.

"We're here?" he asked skeptically.

She smiled, and turned off the ignition. "We're here. Get your things, Tom."

He said nothing, and grabbed his black bag filled with things that weren't nice enough to be brought into a house like that. He felt like he wasn't nice enough to be brought into a house like that. Was this some sort of cruel joke? What was the catch here?

"Now, this family has never fostered before, but they do have a daughter the same age as you. From what they told me on the phone this morning, she is very excited to meet you. Wouldn't it be great to make a new friend, Tom?"

He slung the garbage bag over his shoulder, and shrugged. "Not really. It's not like I'm staying here forever; you and I both know that."

Her smile faltered, but she recovered quickly. "I don't know. I have a good feeling about this one, Tom. Plus, you don't have many options left. I'm running out of homes to place you in. Don't be so pessimistic about it. And please, try to be good," she told him, then rang the doorbell.

"Maybe I don't want to be good," he muttered sardonically underneath his breath.
The front door opened; and then, he saw her.

The library was unusually busy for a Saturday, but Hermione had managed to find an empty table for them to work at. Tom had been assigned Prefect duties that morning, so Hermione had dragged Harry with her after asking Theo if he minded; which, he didn't. She had to admit: she liked Theodore Nott very much.

Granted, he got distracted easily, and was a bit of a mess, but he was probably one of the most pleasant people she'd ever had the pleasure of being around. She had to convince Harry of this most of the morning, because he didn't believe her. He had it in his head that every student in Slytherin was bad news. And, well, she couldn't really blame him – especially being on the receiving end of Tom's wrath on more than one occasion over the years.

Hermione wasn't sure how she did it, but she managed to convince him to come along. Probably the letter he got from his mum the other day about his slipping grades was the motivation he needed.

They spent two hours going over notes and homework together and Hermione was ecstatic that Harry was warming up to Theo. She smiled to herself when she heard Harry ask a question about Potions and Theo helped him before she had the chance to open her mouth.

She'd never been a fan of the house rivalries between Slytherin and Gryffindor, mostly because Tom was in Slytherin and she was in Gryffindor. Even though she was still upset with him, she'd always felt like it was a personal insult whenever her housemates said something negative about students in Slytherin.

Now that she thought more on it, she couldn't recall a time when anyone had said anything negative about Tom. Well, aside from the few times Harry, Ginny, or Ron would say something to her about his protective behavior, which she could easily label as jealousy now. She shivered at the thought; it bothered her that it wasn't the unpleasant kind. She shifted uncomfortably in her chair.

"Hey. I think we should call it a day, don't you? We've been here for nearly three hours now," she said.

Theo looked up from his notebook in mild surprise. "Really? We should probably pack up, and head to the Great Hall for lunch, then."

Harry was the first one to start shoving his things into his bag. "I'm starving, so that sounds perfect to me."

Hermione rolled her eyes, and packed her things. Once all three of them were done, they headed toward the exit.

Harry pushed the library door open, and held it for them. Hermione and Theo smiled in thanks, and walked out. Right as she was walking out, someone shoved past her to walk in, and knocked her to the stone floor – hard. She cried out in pain when her elbows and knees took the brunt of the fall. The books and parchment she'd been holding flew from her hands, and sprawled to the floor in a mess. She heard a cold laugh and her head shot up in surprise.

Rhexenor Lestrange was smiling coldly down at her. "Right on the floor where you belong, Mudblood," he sneered quietly, but loud enough for the three of them to hear.

Hermione glared up at him. Her blood was boiling with rage so much that she'd nearly forgotten
about the pain searing through her skin from her fall. It was then that she felt Theo and Harry each grab one of her upper arms, and helped pull her up. She was so angry that she'd ripped her arms impatiently from the boys' grip.

"You're a disgrace, Lestrange," she spat contemptuously. "You're the Head Boy – so, start acting like it."

The smile fell from Rhex's face and he towered over her menacingly. Hermione put her hands on her hips, and stood her ground. "I'm not the disgrace here, Granger; you and your brother are – always walking around like you own the damn school just because you get good grades. But when you take that away, neither of you are anything special."

Hermione couldn't stop the nasty grin that spread across her face. "At least we have our good grades, Lestrange – you don't even have that. So, who's really the special one here?"

His wand was out and pointed at her in an instant, but so was Harry's and Theo's.

"What is going on here?"

All heads turned to stare at a very cross Madam Pince standing in the doorway. The boys pocketed their wands quickly; Harry and Theo looked around awkwardly. Rhex and Hermione continued to openly glare at each other. The older woman put her fists on her hips and asked, "Anyone care to explain?"

"Lestrange told Hermione that-" Harry started, but Hermione interrupted him. She had a better idea, as petty as it was. Hermione didn't want him to just get a slap on the wrist with a detention; she wanted him to be humiliated.

"That he was just about to apologize for accidentally bumping into me, ma'am," she told the woman, then smiled kindly at Rhex. "Wasn't that what you were just saying, Rhex?"

If looks could kill, she would be dead twice over – wait, no, probably thrice. This wasn't like her; she was being reckless. What was she thinking?

"Mr. Lestrange, do you always apologize with your wand drawn?" Madam Pince asked skeptically.

Lestrange's jaw ticked. "No, ma'am," he replied between his teeth, his eyes still leveled on Hermione's. "Her friends thought I did it on purpose. It was just a…misunderstanding."

Madam Pince sighed, and dropped her fists from her hips. "Right, well, get on with it."

Rhex's eyes snapped to Madam Pince. "What?"

The older woman motioned with her hands dramatically, which caused the glass beads on her eyeglass chain to clink together. "If it was a misunderstanding, like you said, then apologize, Mr. Lestrange."

Hermione found Rhexenor's dull, brown eyes back on hers. She could hear Harry and Theo shifting their weight behind her. He looked less angry now, which frightened her more than when he displayed his obvious disgust for her. "I apologize for knocking you over, Granger. My mistake."

"I accept your apology," she replied smoothly, but her heart started hammering away in her chest when he picked up her things with a flick of his wand. His fingers brushed against hers when he handed the books back to her and she nearly dropped them in surprise. She hadn't been expecting
this when she started this game; he was turning it around on her. The look he gave her was meant to tell her something, she knew. Her mind was screaming danger, danger, danger.

Hermione looked at him apprehensively. "Thank you."

The corners of his mouth twitched into a barely-there smile. "You're welcome, Hermione."

Hermione stared at him in shock. No, this was not what she had been expecting at all. This worried her much more.

"Alright, well, on your way – all of you. Shoo," Madam Pince said with a flick of her wrists, then went back to her desk in the library.

"Come on, Hermione. Let's go eat lunch," she heard Harry say, and felt his hand wrap around her upper arm to gently pull her away.

"R-right," she stuttered, and turned around to walk to the Great Hall with Harry and Theo. She didn't miss the way Theo glanced back behind them again with speculating eyes. There was no doubt in her mind that Tom would hear about it now and she knew there was absolutely nothing she could do to stop it.

For once in her life, she wanted Tom to keep out of her business. Hermione straightened her spine, and rolled her shoulders back. She could deal with Rhexenor Lestrange by herself.

To distract himself, Tom threw himself into helping Theo in his lab in his free time, since Hermione went out of her way to ignore him now. He may or may not have been a little bitter about it, but he knew he just needed to be patient.

The book they'd found harbored so many possibilities – so many new things that they weren't being taught in class. Then again, there was probably a reason why they weren't taught some of these recipes in class. Most of the potions weren't meant to be brewed by fifth years. It was a challenge and Tom thrived off of being challenged. He was always ahead in his work, and taking on extra assignments that he didn't need to take in order to 'stay out of trouble', as Hermione liked to say. He rolled his eyes.

They were working together in Theo's lab again. Tom found a potion in the book that, when administered, would strengthen shield charms considerably when used. He had got an idea in his head that wouldn't leave him alone: what if they found a way to enhance the potion so it could block unforgivable, too?

Tom mentioned it offhandedly to Theo one day, and then let Theo's inspiration do the rest. They'd been working on it for two months, and had gone through many botched batches, but they were finally beginning to get somewhere.

"It seems kind of pointless to make, if you ask me," said Blaise, who was playing a game of exploding snap with Draco off to the side of the room. "Your turn, Draco."

Tom raised an eyebrow, pushed his sleeves over his elbows, and did his best to ignore the intrusive thought of throwing a glass beaker up against Blaise's head. "And why do you think it's pointless, Blaise?"

"Because who would have time to down an entire potion before having a Crucio or Avada sent their way? Not to mention, who would think to carry the potion around with them in the first place?" Blaise asked.
"Well, what Theo and I are doing sure beats sitting on your lazy arses, and playing exploding snap," Tom said coldly.

Blaise turned his head to look at Tom, and the corner of his mouth turned up. "Touché."

Tom went back to focusing on stirring the potion counter-clockwise at the exact pace needed before he heard Draco speak up moments later.

"What are you guys doing for the holidays? I was kind of hoping I might be able to stay with one of you for a few days while my Aunt Bella and cousin are over. They drive me mad."

Tom continued stirring. "Don't push your problems onto us, Draco. It's not our fault your family is nuts."

Draco groaned, and leaned back dramatically in his chair. "You don't even know the half of it. Uncle Rodolphus isn't too bad, but you wouldn't even know that my mother and Aunt Bella were sisters – they're nothing alike," he complained, then sat up straighter in his seat. "But it's Rhex who's the real pain. When he's at Hogwarts, he's not so bad, but outside of school? He's a right terror to be around."

"Your cousin is all bark and no bite, Draco," Tom muttered, and poured a measured spoonful of ground Moly seeds into the cauldron.

Draco flipped one of his cards over and it exploded. He fanned the smoke away with his hand and said, "I wouldn't be so sure about that, Tom."

"Oh!"

The three of them turned to look at Theo, who was frozen to the spot. His eyes went wide when he looked at Tom. Tom frowned; he didn't like it when Theo looked surprised.

"Tom! I almost forgot! It was Hermione," Theo spoke quickly.

His heart clenched. "What are you talking about Theo?" he asked calmly, but did not feel at all calm.

Theo pushed his goggles on top of his head. "When I was with Hermione the other day at the library, Lestrange shoved into her, and knocked her to the floor. No, no! She's fine, she's fine, Tom," Theo side-glanced the rattling potion bottles uneasily as he tried to talk him down from his fit. "I walked with her back to the Great Hall for lunch, but it was…weird."

Tom clenched his teeth and his upper lip curled. "What was weird, exactly? That you didn't tell me sooner?"

Theo slapped his forehead, and groaned. "No. Lestrange was weird. First, he called her a Mudblood, but by the end of the conversation, he'd apologized, and used her first name. He'd even picked her books up for her. It was just…weird."

He narrowed his eyes at Theo and said, "You're right. That is weird. Draco?"

"Yeah?"

"Who is a worst sort of terror: your cousin?" Tom asked a concerned-looking Draco and a cold smile spread across his face. "Or me?"

Draco's eyes widened and his Adam's apple bobbed nervously.
"Oh, no! Hermione! Where'd your pin go?"

Tom turned around to see Daphne fussing over Hermione again. A small group of Slytherin and Gryffindor fifth years were starting to congregate outside of the greenhouses to wait for Professor Sprout to open her classroom. Professor Black had dismissed their Defence class a few minutes early that day, so they had to wait. He watched Hermione absently touch the empty place on her knapsack.

"Oh, uh…I took it off. It's just so nice, Daphne. I didn't want to lose it. I wanted to keep it in a safer place," she replied hesitantly.

She was a terrible liar, but Daphne believed her.

"Oh," the blonde girl pouted dejectedly. "I understand. It actually means so much to me that you're going through the trouble to keep it safe, but why don't you just use a permanent sticking charm, if you're afraid of losing it?"

Hermione looked away from Daphne, and suddenly found one of the shrubberies much more fascinating. "Because then it would be stuck on my old knapsack forever. What if I wanted to put it on something else?"

"Oh, blast. You're right. Why didn't I think of that?"

Hermione gave her a small smile, but it fell away quickly once Daphne latched onto Tom's arm. There was something new in her eyes.

"You should have gotten your sister a new bag for her birthday, Tom! What kind of brother are you?" she joked.

Tom's eyes darted to Hermione's and she looked away from him. Tom looked back down at Daphne, and deadpanned. "Oh, I'm a terrible brother. Besides, Hermione doesn't like superficial gifts like that. She likes things that are more…useful."

Daphne's smile faltered slightly at his implication. He probably hurt her feelings a tad. Oh, well. He didn't care.

"Oh. Well, there's always Christmas!" she said with fake enthusiasm.

Tom almost snorted. Yeah, there was always Christmas. Daphne still latched onto his arm and that's when he saw it. That's when he saw that second flash in her eyes - that's when he knew what it was; she was jealous. Oh, dear God. She was jealous of Daphne Greengrass and it was absolutely glorious. The giddy feeling that coursed through his body like a victory made him feel high. Now, jealousy – jealousy was familiar to him. He could work with jealousy.

"Say, isn't Slughorn's party next week, Theo?" he asked casually.

"Yeah, I think so. I forgot about it, actually. I'm glad you reminded me."

"You forgot about it? Let me guess; you forgot to get yourself a date, as well, didn't you?" he asked.

Theo's eyes widened. "Date? I-I didn't know we were supposed to bring a date. Is it a requirement?"
"I think so, but don't worry. You still have plenty of time," Tom replied.

He could see Hermione shift out of the corner of his eye. "Did you find one already, Tom?" she asked.

Tom glanced down at her, and smiled. "No, but now that you mention it…Daphne?"

Daphne's head snapped to his and her eyes looked full of hope. "Yes?"

"Would you like to accompany me to Slughorn's party next week?"

"Yes! Of course! I'd love to go with you, Tom," she squealed. It took everything in him to not cringe at her voice, or the way she hugged his arm, but when he saw the way Hermione stormed past Professor Sprout once the greenhouse doors were finally opened, it made everything so worth it.

Now he knew why Hermione was lying about the pin.

Tom smiled.

The lesson Professor Black had planned for the next Defence Against the Dark Arts class four days later couldn't have come at a worse time.

Dueling practice.

And do you know what else couldn't have been worse?

Being paired with Tom – again.

Honestly, she shouldn't have been surprised. They were paired for nearly everything. She used to love it, because they worked together so well when it came to assignments. They always divvied up the work, and pulled their own weight. There was zero chance of her being forced to help him do his share, unlike when she was paired with her friends in other classes she didn't share with Tom.

Normally, she wouldn't care about being paired with him, but she couldn't even stand the sight of him right now. Each time she caught him looking at her, he had this smug look on his face.

Like right now. Hermione glanced over at Tom from across the cleared classroom and he looked entirely smug with himself. That stupid, idiotic, arrogant –

Hermione wanted to knock him upside the head. She crossed her arms, let out an irritated huff, and looked back at their professor at the front of the classroom. She wasn't sure if she'd be able to control her temper. This probably wasn't a good idea.

"What's got your knickers in a twist?" Ron whispered to her. Her head snapped to turn her glare on him. Harry's eyes went wide and he nudged him with his elbow.

She dropped her arms, and sighed. It wasn't Ron's fault. "Nothing, Ron. Just a stressful week, is all. Don't worry about it."

Ron seemed to accept her answer, and shrugged. "Alright. No worries."

Hermione glanced back at Tom again, and found that he was still looking at her with a lopsided smirk on his face. She rocked on the balls of her feet, and turned her attention back to her friends.
"Hey, do either of you feel like being paired up with me today?"

"Are you mental?" Ron looked her up and down, scandalized. "No, I like being alive, thank you very much."

"Oh, my God. I'm not going to kill you, Ronald."

"Yeah? Well, I'm still not taking my chances. No, bloody thank you," he muttered.

Hermione rolled her eyes, and whispered to Harry. "Will you? Please, Harry?"

She could see the way his eyes softened as he considered it, but she knew that he didn't really want to. Harry knew that she was upset with Tom right now, but she still wouldn't tell him why. He didn't understand why she wouldn't tell him – she'd never tell him, but he respected her wishes, and didn't pry. They'd seen how her and Tom had dueled before. No one ever wanted to duel them now. Right when it looked like Harry was going to tell her 'yes' out of pity, Tom's voice cut in.

"Not trying to steal my dueling partner away, are you, Potter?"

"Bloody Hell," she muttered under her breath. There was no way she was getting out of this today and she wasn't about to bring Harry into it. She turned around to face him, and didn't even bother trying to plaster on a fake smile for him. "Hello, Tom. Let's get on with it, shall we?"

Tom showed her his pretty teeth with one of his charming smiles. God, she wanted to hit him. He always brought out this violent side of her. "Sure. Our usual spot?"

Hermione nodded and they walked to the side of the classroom closest to the windows.

"I'll take the offensive first, while you take the defensive? Then, we can switch," he told her. She just nodded once, and took her stance. That arrogant look on his face meant he'd learned something new. She wasn't sure if she was ready for whatever it was, but she was going to do her best to guard herself from it.

Right as her thought finished, Tom threw a half-hearted leg-locking curse at her and she easily deflected it. Then, he threw a jelly-brain jinx and a Petrificus Totalus at her and she threw up a simple shield to absorb them. Hermione lowered her wand, and furrowed her brows. "What in the world are you doing?"

Tom shrugged with a half-smirk, and motioned with his hands around them. "Dueling?" he offered.

Hermione shook her head slowly at him, but said nothing. It was just better if she kept her mouth shut.

"Alright. Ready to switch?" he asked.

"Already?" she asked suspiciously.

"Yeah. I'm bored."

"And how, exactly, will putting up shields alleviate your boredom?"

"I dunno," he smiled slowly. "I just have a hunch."

Hermione shook her head, and rolled her eyes. "Whatever. Let's just get on with this."
Tom grinned roguishly. "I'm sorry. I didn't realize you had better things to do."

She leveled her scowl on him. So, he wanted to play their little game? Hermione realized then that they hadn't played it in so, so long. "Maybe I do have better things to do, Tom," she stated evenly, and took on her offensive dueling stance.

"Like what?" he asked and his roguish grin turned unpleasant. "Finding a date to Slughorn's party? Sorry, Hermione. Hogwarts is fresh out of Bulgarians this year."

Hermione's jaw went slack and the air was knocked out of her lungs like she'd just been punched in the gut. His words transfixed her heart, but Hermione had to remind herself that this was just how Tom was – this was his defense mechanism. Not that it was an excuse, but whenever he got hurt, he hurt the ones who hurt him in return; it was what he knew and it was what he did best.

The only problem was, she knew that he was trying to hurt her on purpose, and that hurt her even more. Hermione took a steadying breath, and ignored his taunt. "Ready?" she asked calmly.

Tom's smile slowly fell when she didn't react the way he wanted her to. She didn't wait for him to reply. She aimed her wand at his head, and flung a Conjunctivitis curse at him.

He threw up a shield, but she quickly followed her previous curse with an Incarcerous. Jets of rope shot out of her wand, and wrapped around his ankles as soon as his shield fell. Right as Hermione went to pull him down, Tom shouted, "Emancipare!" and the bindings fell limp to the floor.

"So close, sis," he mocked. Her grip tightened on her wand at what he'd called her. Oh, God, he was such an arsehole.

"Relashio!" she yelled and the purple light was easily deflected by him. He was smirking at her again and she felt her chest get tight with a special kind of rage that was reserved solely for him. Before she knew what she was doing, she was throwing the Relashio curse at him again and again and again.

But none of them were hitting him. None of them were – not a single damn one. He was deflecting them or throwing a shield up just in time. Hermione ground her teeth together in frustration. She just wanted to hit him; she just wanted to hurt him; she just wanted him to feel what she was feeling, too. Hot tears were pricking at the corners of her eyes now, but she blinked them away. She lowered her wand arm slightly, and left it trembling at her side.

"Really, Hermione, you shouldn't take your anger out on me. It's not my fault I found a date and you couldn't. Is that why you're so angry with me right now?" he asked and a cold, calculating smile spread across his face. Then, quietly enough for only her to hear, he asked, "Did Daphne tell you about the dress she wants to wear yet? She told me that she couldn't wait for me to see her in it; but, lately, I've been more curious to see what she'd look like out of it."

"Confringo!" she cried out as loud as she could, and could barely make out the orange burst of flames that erupted from the tip of her wand past her tears. She didn't brace herself properly for the spell, and fell backward. She cried out when her elbow hit the stone floor. When she lifted it up to check, her white shirt was torn, and there was blood.

"Hermione! Are you alright?"

Hermione lifted her eyes back up to see a much different expression on Tom's face now – concern. He was on his knees before her, his hands hovering, wanting to touch her, but too afraid to. There wasn't a single mark on him, though - not a single damn one. Not a single cut, not
a single scratch, not even the smell of charred clothing.

Tears were streaming down her face now. It wasn't fair. He'd left his mark on her. He'd scarred her mind; he'd scarred her palm; and now, he'd scarred her heart - again.

She pulled her uninjured arm back, and slapped him across the face as hard as she could. The sound of the slap and shocked gasps echoed throughout the classroom.

"Ms. Granger!" she heard Professor Black yell in astonishment, but she didn't give him any her attention. All of her attention was on Tom.

He slowly turned his face back to stare at her and his expression gave away nothing. He didn't look angry, he didn't look upset, he didn't look like anything. He said nothing and she didn't say anything, either. She didn't have to - she didn't need to. He already knew why she'd done it.

"Ms. Granger and Mr. Riddle – in my office. Now."

Hermione didn't break eye contact with Tom when she replied coldly through her tears, "Yes, sir."

She pushed herself away from Tom, and stood up. She brushed past Professor Black, and walked into his office. Tom still sat crouched on the floor, unmoving.

"Mr. Riddle!" Sirius repeated impatiently.

Tom lifted himself up from his spot, and made his way to his office. Hermione winced in pain when she crossed her arms over her chest, and was glad that she'd been hurt; it meant that she could easily push the cause of her tears off onto something else entirely.

Professor Black stuck his head out the door and said, "No more dueling while I'm gone! I swear to Merlin, if any of you acts up while I'm in here, the entire class will get detention for a week. Are we clear?"

The class murmured their understanding.

"Good. Go…read a book or something. We'll be back out in a few moments," he said, and closed the door. He whirled on them and asked, "Alright, what in the world is going on with you two?"

Hermione went to open her mouth, but Tom spoke up first. "It was my fault, sir."

She narrowed her eyes at the wall in front of her, and remained silent. Professor Black leaned against desk, and motioned with his hands for Tom to continue.

"I was…provoking Hermione during our duel, sir," Tom said, and frowned at the floor.

"So, she slapped you? I'm sorry, Tom, but I've known you two since you were eleven – you two provoke each other all the time. I don't mean to talk about you as if you weren't here, Hermione, but I know you wouldn't do something like that by being provoked during a dueling lesson."

Tom's eyes flicked up to meet their teacher's gaze. "I said something…personal that I shouldn't have."

An understanding smile lit up the older man's face and he pushed himself off his desk. Hermione felt her heart race. She didn't want him to know what Tom had said. She didn't want him to know any of it. "Ahh, there we go. Oh, don't look so worried, Ms. Granger. I'm not going to stick my nose where it doesn't belong, but I'm going to offer some advice: you two are stuck together for the rest of your lives, whether you like it or not. My little brother Regulus and I, well – we'd get into it all the time. Still do sometimes, to be honest. But we were born into the same family,
while you two have chosen to be family," he said, and rested a hand on each of their shoulder's. "Don't you two realize how extraordinary that is?"

Hermione licked her lips, and swallowed nervously. She nodded, while Tom said, "Yes, sir."

Sirius grinned, and winked. "Excellent. Now, can I trust you two to get along? While you're in my class, at least. I won't mind at all if you shake things up in Professor Binns' class – we all know how dull his lessons can get."

She appreciated that he was trying to make things better, but it wasn't making her feel any better.

"Oh, you may leave class early, Hermione. Go to the infirmary, and make sure nothing is broken."

"Of course. Thank you, Professor."

"Would you like me to send Tom with you?" he asked.

Tom finally looked at her and she saw the handprint that glared bright red against his pale skin. The corner of her mouth twitched and she looked back at Professor Black. "No, thank you."

Sirius blinked. "Right, well…meeting adjourned, I guess."

Hermione whirled around, and left as quickly as possible. Before she was out of earshot, she heard their teacher say, "You might want to heal that before going back out, Tom. She got you good."

It wasn't fair that he could heal the marks she gave him; but, judging by his behavior after she'd slapped him, she was certain she'd left her mark on him in an astronomical way. He looked ashamed of himself and she could only hope that maybe, just maybe, he actually was.

Hermione also hoped his face stung as much as her hand did, and as much as her heart did.

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Why had he said that to her? She hadn't been retaliating in the way he'd wanted her to, so he just wanted to give her a little push in the right direction, but –

He hadn't been expecting her to react so strongly. Thinking back on it now, if she'd said something like that to him, he would have gone mad in a raging fit of jealousy. He would find the person – he would hunt them down. He would – well, honestly, he would probably slaughter them. He knew that he probably would.

God, he was fucked up. This wasn't normal. He wasn't normal. He was mental. He was touched in the head. He sometimes wished that he wasn't – wished that he could be more normal for her, but –

If he were more normal like everyone else was, he would never have her, because he would never have wanted her. Because any normal brother wouldn't feel how he felt for his sister.

Lord, he was fucked up. He knew that he was.

And there was nothing that he could do about it now; there was nothing that he wanted to do about it now. He knew that he could suffocate his fucked-up feelings for her – smother them until they screamed for air, screamed for life, screamed for her until its throat was raw from all the begging and the pleading. He knew that he could, but –

He didn't want to. She was his. His, his, only his.
And after today, he now knew, with every fiber of his being, with every rush of adrenaline traveling through his veins whenever he touched her, with every hair that raised up on end whenever she brushed up against him, with every breath that he spent willingly on her as currency for her time, that she was trying to suffocate her fucked-up feelings for him, as well.

Tom touched the mark she'd left on him, the mark he'd refused to heal, and now knew that he was hers, too.

Asking Harry to go to Slughorn's party with her as a friend was probably the stupidest, most selfish thing she could have possibly done. She asked him on a whim, because she knew it would piss Tom off. After she'd left class, Harry and Ron had showed up to check on her as she was walking out of the infirmary. Nothing was broken, thankfully – just a nasty scrape that was healed up in no time at all. She'd still been angry, and sort of just…blurted it out. She was surprised that he'd agreed to go with her. He was probably just too scared he'd hurt her feelings if he refused, honestly.

And so, here they were, dressed up in some of their nicest clothes, attending Slughorn's annual Christmas party together.

As much as she didn't want to, she found her eyes automatically scanning the crowd for Tom and Daphne. All of Tom's words from the other day screamed cruelly in her ears, in her brain, when she finally found them arm-in-arm together by the refreshment table.

Hermione clenched her jaw tightly to keep her bottom lip from quivering. They looked stunning together; and it really was a lovely dress.

This hurt far too much. This made her feel far too irrational – far too crazy. She was picturing all the ways she could get back at Daphne Greengrass for all the things she had never even done. This was a sickness. This was a disease. This was eating away at her and she didn't know if there was a cure for it.

Their eyes met from across the room. His charcoal eyes flicked from her, to Harry. His expression didn't change. No irrational anger. No reaction. Nothing. Absolutely nothing.

She felt like she was going to be sick.

She couldn't do this.

"Harry, I think I'm going to go use the restroom first. I'll be back in a few minutes, okay?"

"O-oh, yeah, sure. Are you alright?" he asked in concern.

Hermione forced a smile. "Yes, I'm fine, thanks. Maybe you could get us some drinks while I'm gone? I have no preference. I'll be right back."

Harry grinned at her, and nodded. "Sure. I'll get us some food, too."

"Thanks, Harry," she replied quickly, then hurried out of the room, and down the corridor.

Seriously, what had she been thinking in deciding to come to the party? She didn't even want to come - even before all this drama. Was she a masochist? Did she like hurting herself? Is that what it was?

Hermione locked herself in a stall, and sat on top of the toilet lid while she tried to calm herself. Maybe she could fake an illness to get out of the party. She knew that Harry hadn't really wanted
to come, either; so, she was sure that he'd be alright with ditching the party. She knew that he would be. But…

It might look bad if Tom saw them leaving early together. He'd surely think the worst and probably – no. No. She didn't care what he thought. He could shove what he thought right up his arse. Besides, judging from the look on his face, he didn't even seem to care anymore. Maybe he didn't feel the same way he did in the summer. Maybe he was over everything – over her.

That was good, right? Of course, it was a good thing.

Then why was she crying now? It was getting ridiculous. She'd lost count of all the times she'd cried because of him.

Hermione wiped her tears away, and supposed she'd been gone long enough. She'd decided that she'd go back to the party, and tell Harry that she'd been sick in the loo. He'd understand. She pushed her way out of the stall, and turned on the tap.

"Oh, God," she whispered to herself when she saw her reflection. Her make-up was a disaster. She didn't understand how Lavender and Parvati bothered themselves with wearing this garbage every single day.

Hermione wet her hands, and wiped away the trails of mascara from her cheeks. At least her eyes weren't too red. It didn't look like she'd been crying. She sighed, and started washing her hands.

"You seriously brought Potter with you?"

Hermione flinched, and turned her head to the side to face an enraged Tom. It was a stark difference from how he'd been only minutes ago. So, bringing Harry with her had worked. Excellent. She rolled her eyes, and chose to ignore him so she could finish washing her hands. That, apparently, was the wrong thing to do. The tap suddenly turned off and there were still suds on her fingers. She ground her teeth together, and turned the tap back on. It was promptly shut off again.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you, Hermione," she heard him command nearby to her left.

"You're not even supposed to be in here, Tom. And you can't tell me what to do," she replied evenly, and still refused to look at him. She turned the tap back on to finish washing her hands. She felt oddly satisfied when she heard him push a shaky exhale out his nose. She wanted to egg him on; she wanted to piss him off. She knew it was immature, but she didn't care.

"I said look at me!" he screamed.

Hermione jumped at the intensity of his voice, and stared at him. She'd never heard him scream like that before. He was breathing heavily and his shoulders were hunched forward. He twisted his face in a way that made him look as if he was in pain.

"Just…look at me, Hermione," he whispered this time.

Her eyebrows furrowed together in confusion. "I am looking at you, Tom."

"No," he scoffed. "No, you aren't, because you don't see me, Hermione. You've never seen me."

She stared at him, not sure of what she should say; or, if she should say anything at all. Not once, in the entire time she'd known him, had he ever sound so hurt before. It was something she'd never thought was possible, because he was always the one doing the hurting.
She still felt so angry with him and she didn't know why. It had never lasted this long before. Why did she feel the desire to hurt him back? She received no joy from doing it. Was it because he'd hurt her? Was she unconsciously retaliating against him? Punishing him?

Perhaps she was. Perhaps they were punishing each other.

Even though she was now armed with this new knowledge, her emotions still got the better of her. She stared at a dark stone in the floor when she spoke – she couldn't even look him in the face when she said in a cruel tone, "I don't know what you want me to tell you, Tom."

Tom moved forward then, and towered over her. "Oh, I want you to tell me *many* things, Hermione," his face turned red when he hissed his bitter words at her. Oh, he was pissed, but he wasn't the only one. She clenched her teeth, and crossed her arms over her chest.

Then, his eyes softened faintly, and settled on the curls that had fallen out of their pins. He slowly reached up to tuck them behind her ear. His voice was quieter this time when he spoke, "But you're too damn *stubborn* to tell me anything anymore."

"Maybe I don't *want* to tell you anything anymore, Tom. Have you ever thought about that?"

His eyes snapped back to hers and his fingers stayed on the shell of her ear. She stared up into his charcoal eyes, and immediately regretted it. He was sucking her in again – sucking her back into that whirlpool that she'd been desperately trying to avoid. She knew she wasn't strong enough to swim against the current forever.

Her bottom lip quivered then. All of this made her want to *scream* and it made her want to *cry* and it made her want to push him away again and again and again and it made her want to hold onto him for dear life, and never let go of him ever again. This was tearing her apart and the only consolation was the fact that it was tearing *him* apart, too.

He didn't answer her quickly enough, so she continued spitefully, "No, you didn't, did you? You only ever think about *yourself*, Tom. You're selfish."

Hermione watched as his eyebrows creased together and he nodded his head in slow realization. "Yeah. Yeah, you know what? You're right. I *am* selfish. I've always been selfish and I'll always *be* selfish. But you know what?" he said, and curled his fingers into her hair behind her ear, and shook his head. "I don't only ever think about myself, Hermione; I think of you - constantly. I always do."

Her nostrils stung as she fought back her tears. She couldn't handle the intensity of *him* anymore, and turned her head to the side. She wanted to hate him for making her feel this way. "You do a really terrific job of showing it, you know," she whispered.

"What is it going to take, Hermione? What is it going to take for you to forgive me?"

Hermione's head snapped back to look at him staring down at her and the feeling of his fingertips rubbing against her scalp held a reminder. She pulled away from him forcefully, and shoved her palms against his chest over and over and over again. The angry tears were flowing down her face freely now. "You already *know* what it's going to take, Tom! You already *know*! I've already *told* you."

She didn't manage to push him very far before he grabbed hold of her upper arms to stop her assault on him, and pinned them to her sides. Hermione had some of her hair stuck to her cheeks because of her tears now, but she couldn't push them out of the way. She briefly considered how much of a mess she probably looked right now, but she didn't care. She didn't care, she didn't
care, she didn't care. Honestly, he didn't look any better than her right now, either. His hair was a bit longer than usual, so it was just beginning to curl at the ends. Normally, he didn't have a single hair out of place, but now?

Now, he looked as much of a mess as her. Now, he looked like the scared foster boy standing on her front porch. Now, he looked like the protective and somewhat feral foster boy who would hurt anyone who hurt her. Now, he looked like the somewhat sweet foster boy who would read books to her until she fell asleep. Hermione let out a sob. Now, she saw him how he'd wanted her to see him the entire time – as Tom, not as her brother. He'd always been Tom and she'd always been Hermione and they'd always been them.

"Yeah, you've told me to tell you how many times I've made you cry! And I've thought about it, okay? I've thought about it every fucking day since then and you know what?" he asked furiously, and shook her upper arms in frustration. Her face crumpled and she let out another cruel sob at his words. "I'll always make you cry, Hermione. There are no definite numbers of the times that I've done it, there is no answer, because it'll keep happening. It will always keep happening, because you love me."

And he was right. She knew that he was right. Hermione knew that he was right and she couldn't control her tears anymore. She couldn't control her feelings anymore. She couldn't control her actions anymore.

Hermione ripped her arms away from him violently and his eyes widened at her reaction in hurt disbelief. What made his eyes widen even more, though, was when she reached up with her hands, grasped him by the front of his dress robes, and pulled him down to her.

Then, when their lips met for the second time, it felt as if she were drowning in him again. He kissed her as if he were drinking her – consuming her – as if he'd been deprived of water his entire life and he was finally permitted to take a single drop, but when he was finally allowed to take that single drop, he took the entire lake, instead.

And maybe he had been deprived. Maybe she had been, too, without even realizing it. Maybe they both were. They were deprived and they were depraved and they were willingly sinking down, down, down together into whatever abyss this was.

Before she knew what was happening, her lower back was shoved up against a sink and his hands were pulling the pins out of her hair. She reached up, ran her fingers through his hair, and tugged on his curls hard. He pulled his face away from hers, and inhaled sharply.

Hermione glared at him and he glared back. Then, one of his hands that was in her curls turned into a fist and he pulled, too. She let out a sharp cry that turned into a moan when he brought his lips down to her now-angled neck. Her hands desperately grasped onto the back of his robes as he bent her further and further back into the sink. Their height difference was painful.

"Tom," she breathed out, and was surprised by how desperate her own voice sounded. He hummed against her neck, and bit down lightly. "No, Tom. My back."

She let out a yelp when he picked her up by her waist, and plopped her down on the sink. His eyes were leveled with hers now and he pressed their foreheads together. "Better?"

There was cold water seeping through her dress, through her knickers, and onto her bum.

She stared into his dark eyes, and nodded once. He used his thumbs to wipe her tears away, and smiled. "Perfect," he said, and quickly dipped his head down to devour her again. She felt his tongue slide against hers and she felt his hands slide up her thighs to push her dress up higher and
higher and she knew she should probably care. She knew that she should, but she didn’t. She
didn’t care, because her hands were touching him, too. Hermione liked the way he shivered
whenever she ran her hands across his skin underneath his dress robes. She liked the way he
would moan into her mouth when she ran her hands up his sides, and the way he would kiss her
harder whenever she touched him.

Hermione gasped, and pulled her lips away from his when he slid his palms over her breasts. They
froze, and stared at each other. A knock sounded on the door.

"Hermione?"

They quickly broke apart when they heard the muffled voice on the other side of the door.
Hermione panicked. It was Harry. She slid off the sink, and started to frantically push her dress
back down. "Yes, Harry?" she called back. She noticed that Tom had already pulled out his
wand, but she set a hand on his arm and he reluctantly lowered it.

"You've been gone for a while and I just wanted to make sure you're alright. Do you need
anything?" he asked from the other side of the door.

"Oh, no. Thank you, though! I'm just feeling a bit nauseous. I think I might be coming down with
something. I'll be out in a few minutes."

"Oh. Did you want to leave early, then?"

"I'm not sure yet. I'll let you know when I get out, okay?"

"Alright. I'll wait for you back at the party."

"Thank you, Harry!"

"No problem, 'Mione."

"You are not going back to that party with him," Tom snarled once Harry had left.

Hermione pulled her wand out of the pocket she'd altered in the front of her dress. She scowled at
him. "Yes, I am."

"I don't want you to."

"Well, I don't want you going with Daphne, but I have little choice in the matter. Besides, Harry
and I came as friends. You just brought Daphne to make me jealous."

"I'll drop her, if you want me to."

She scoffed. "And then what, Tom? We'll just show up to Slughorn's party together? Yeah, let's
just see how well that is received," she said cynically.

"That's not what I meant."

Hermione waved her wand and her pins that had been thrown to the floor now sat in her palm.
She started tucking them back haphazardly into her hair. "Then what did you mean? What did you
expect would happen, Tom? That everything would be easy? Simple?"

She watched him as he glared at the sink and his jaw moved side to side. "No."

She slid the last pin into place, placed her hands on her hips, and angrily hissed, "Then what did
you expect? What did you expect out of this, Tom? That everything would just be normal? This
isn't normal."

His head snapped back to hers. "I know it's not normal! Okay? I fucking know. Do you think I didn't try to ignore this? To fight it? I wasn't planning on saying a damn thing, but then when you started dating that bloody idiot, I just couldn't —" he paused his rant to collect himself. "I just couldn't control myself."

"Obviously," she muttered to herself, but he still heard her, and gave her a dark look.

"When were you going to tell me about Lestrange?"

Hermione frowned. "Why are you bringing him up right now?"

"Because I can."

She sighed. He was trying to change to subject. "I don't need you watching out for me. I can take care of myself," she whispered, then waved her wand over her body once more to fix herself. She stowed her wand back in the makeshift pocket between her breasts, and turned to leave the girls' restroom.

"I know you can, but," Tom started and his hand shot out. He grasped her wrist, and pulled her back up against him. He brought his face down again and his lips barely moved against hers as he quietly said, "I've always watched you, Hermione; and you've always been mine."

"Tom," she begged quietly.

"Say it, Hermione. Please," his voice trembled as he whispered against her lips. He ran his hands down her bare arms until he reached her right hand. Tom brought her hand up with his, pushed their palms together, and laced his fingers with hers.

Hermione sucked in a breath when she realized their scars were pressed together. She stared at their hands, and felt her gut clench. She shivered, and looked up into his eyes again. He was right and she hated that he was; she loved him.

"I forgive you, Tom."

He kissed her again, and pulled away from her.

And then…she saw him.

_A/N_: Did you guys raise up your arms during that roller coaster ride? ffs. It was tough for me to write. I cried quite a few times. I almost thought about breaking this chapter into two, but I wanted to give you guys a gift for Tomione Day. Which, btw, HAPPY TOMIONE DAY! I swear to God, I've been more excited about Tomione Day than Christmas. That might make me a bit pathetic, but idgaf. Anyway, thanks to Radiant Innocence, VinoAmore, and Chaco for looking through this beast for me. ily you guys

Thanks for reading my bullshit again. I hope you loved it just as much as I diiid.
Tom loved being back home for the holidays. The reason why he loved being back home was because Hermione didn't push him away as much as she did when they were at Hogwarts. Less prying eyes, he supposed.

But, he also supposed that she should push him away more often, shouldn't she? He knew, deep down, that they shouldn't be doing this at all. He knew, deep down, that this almost-relationship wouldn't work flawlessly. He knew, deep down, that he didn't really care what other people would think.

Although, while he knew that he wouldn't care, he knew that she would. He remembered when he physically cringed the first time he realized that their parents wouldn't take kindly to their beloved children being so...well, depraved.

But he couldn't help it; he just couldn't stop, and –

She was like a drug he couldn't stop abusing. She was an addiction. Whenever he kissed her in the hidden, it was like taking a hit and he was getting high off her every time.

Or, maybe, he was just choking, because every time she would exhale into his mouth, he would gulp her air down greedily - selfishly. He would lose his oxygen to her warm carbon dioxide, and choke on her poisonous fumes.
And he did so, happily, _every single time_. Again, and again, and again. He would gladly die; whether it was from an overdose or asphyxiation – he didn't care – as long as he was resuscitated, so he would get to do it all over again. He would suffer the consequences of his actions at a more opportune time.

Though, it was never _really_ an opportune time, was it? He thought of that fact as he had her pushed back up against the bathroom wall. He ran his hands up the inside of her arms he had pinned above her head, ran his tongue over her pulse on her neck, ran his cool breath over her skin to bring it to life.

They had to hide. They _always_ had to hide. He didn't enjoy hiding.

Tom knew they wouldn't get to do this once they went back to Hogwarts after the holidays were over. She'd told him that whatever... _this_ was between them, she didn't want anyone knowing; so, he had to make a deal: he had to keep his hands to himself.

He didn't want to keep his hands to himself.

He knew it would only be a matter of time before he was starved of her again. He knew it would only be a matter of time before he was craving her again.

She broke away from his lips, and whispered, "We're going to be late, you know."

Tom swallowed. "No, we're not."

They heard their father call for them from downstairs.

She rolled her wrists in his grip and he dropped them. There was a sudden shift; he knew it. She averted her eyes from him. "Let's go."

He watched Hermione smooth down her hair as they walked down the stairs. Hugo and Jean were waiting for them.

"Oh, Hermione, dear! I _love_ the shade of that lip gloss on you. Is that from the set I bought you for your birthday?" Jean asked.

He watched as Hermione's smile fell and she brought her fingers to touch her lips. Her eyes were lost for only a moment before she blinked herself awake again. She dropped her hand, and smiled again. "Yes. Thank you, Mum."

Jean smiled as she put her earrings on. "You two should go get your coats on. We'll be leaving in just a few moments – don't want to be late," she told them, and started rifling through her purse. "I swear, if we're stuck sitting next to the Whittington's _again_ this year, I'll go mad."

Hugo walked up behind her, and placed a kiss on her cheek. "Oh, come on, Jean. They aren't _that_ bad."

The corner of Tom's mouth twitched and he took a few steps into the foyer to grab his and Hermione's coats hanging on the hooks, and walked back to them. He held Hermione's coat open for her to slip her arms into and she looked up at him, her expression unreadable.

Jean continued after she scoffed. " _Please!_ You only say that, because Roger talks to you about football the entire time! I'd much rather listen to that than _edible arrangements._ Who cares? They're just chocolate covered fruits on sticks. I don't understand what all the fuss is about."
Tom let out a snort. Jean grinned. "See? Even Tom agrees with me. She's insufferable."

"Maybe you should just start bringing up procedures you've performed in the office. That'll shut her right up," Tom offered as Hermione slid her arms into her coat. Tom put his coat on next.

Their mum grinned slyly. "Oh, don't you dare tempt me, Tom. I just might. I should bring up all the horror stories involving calculus bridge removals. Lord, the look on her face would be entirely worth it, though."

"Yeah, but I bet she'd never bring up edible arrangements ever again," Tom said as he slid his fingers underneath Hermione's hair, and gently pulled her curls out of her coat. He could feel the way she tensed at his touch in front of them. He knew he shouldn't do it, but he didn't care. Instant gratification.

"We're supposed to be going to Christmas Eve mass, and yet, here we are, talking about all the ways we can exact subtle revenge on our irritating neighbors. What would Jesus say?" Hugo asked humorously.

"He would forgive us, I think," Hermione said quietly, her eyes focused on the front door. "He would forgive us for our sins, as long as we show remorse – repentance. But we must forgive, too. If we are incapable of forgiveness to others, He will never forgive us for the wrongs that we have done."

Tom could hear the implications in the tone of her voice as clear as day – she felt guilty. She felt humiliation. She felt shame.

She felt like a sinner.

"Jesus never forgave Judas," he replied and Hermione's eyes snapped to his.

"That's not true. Up on the cross, He said: Father, forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing," she recited with a slight frown.

Tom shook his head. "I believe you're romanticizing, Hermione."

"I am not romanticizing. I'm simple stating what is in the Bible," she replied irritably.

"Alright, if we're going to start using just books to state opinions on the matter, then that means Judas is currently being eaten alive for all of eternity by Satan."

The garage door finished opening and they squeezed into the backseat of the car together.

Hermione rolled her eyes and said, "Seriously, Tom? Dante's Inferno?"

Tom raised an eyebrow, and leveled a pointed look on her. Hermione shifted in her seat, and clenched her jaw.
Hugo turned his body toward them, so he could back out of the driveway. "You two aren't going to do this the entire night, are you? It is Christmas, you know. Well, it almost is, technically."

"Well, if you want to get technical, Jesus wasn't even born on Christmas. So, it makes this entire night seem a bit pointless, doesn't it?" Tom asked, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Jean huffed out a short laugh that bordered on a scoff. "Glad to know all of those years of Sunday School are finally paying off."

Tom gave a charming smile. "Oh, but Mum; those classes were free."

Jean laughed for real this time. "You're terrible."

Hermione scoffed next to him and he turned his head to look at her again. She had her arms crossed over her chest, and was looking out the window at the Christmas lights passing them by.

Tom nudged her with his elbow playfully, and leaned in close. "If you think I'm so terrible, maybe you should pray for me, Hermione."

She didn't look at him when she whispered loud enough for only him to hear, "Yes, perhaps I should, because even Lucifer is a sinner in need of prayer."

Tom glared at her, and then moved away from her to press his back into the expensive leather of their father's car.

She was still angry with him. Why was she still angry with him?

Repentance, apparently, wasn't all that was needed for her to truly forgive him. She'd told him she'd forgiven him, but that wasn't true. Did that make her a liar, as well?

He supposed, then, that they must both be sinners.

"Come on, Tom," Theo whined. "We can get so much more work done in my lab than the shoddy community one Slughorn lets us use. They're not even properly cared for. I found rust in one of the cauldrons – rust, Tom! Who would let rust sit in the bottom of a cauldron, when it can be magicked away? It's appalling, the conditions there."

Tom sighed, and let his head fall back against the cushion on the armchair he was sitting in. The common room was busy and he didn't particularly feel like having this discussion right now. He was exhausted and his head was starting to throb. "Theodore, we've already had this discussion…"

Tom's face scrunched up when Pansy let out a shrill laugh at something that Daphne must have said from their spot at one of the windows that showcased the murky waters of the Black Lake. He brought his attention back to Theo, who was leaning forward in hopeful excitement.

"Yeah, I know we have, but think of the possibilities, Tom. Sure, we get a lot of work done together, but imagine how much more we could do if Hermione worked with us. We'd be invincible, Tom – invincible."

Blaise let out a snort, and stopped working on his essay long enough to say, "Invincible is a bit of a stretch, Theo. No one is invincible."

Tom stared at the fireplace. His brain started ticking. He had kept Hermione away from his work, because, while she was brilliant, she tended to let her morals take precedence. Her morals would
hold them back, but...well, she was brilliant. She was logical. Three brilliant minds working together toward a common goal? A shudder ran through him.

Well, what she didn't know, wouldn't hurt anything, right?

"Fine," he grumbled.

A slow smile formed on Theo's face. Tom shook his head and said, "Don't expect things to go the way you want, though. You don't know Hermione like I do. She's going to disagree with –"

Tom was interrupted by a commotion from behind them.

"She told you 'no' twice already, but that word isn't in your damn vocabulary, is it?" Pansy screeched. She was standing with her chest puffed out, and toe-to-toe with Rhexenor Lestrange. Daphne was still sitting on the windowsill, on the verge of tears.

"Oh, shit," Draco muttered, and was the first to jump from his seat to help the girls. Tom slowly brought himself up, but lingered to the side to quietly observe.

"I was just talking to her, Parkinson. No need to jump down my throat," Rhex said impatiently.

Pansy put her hands on her hips, and threw her head back. "Hah! Is that what you call groping now, Lestrange? 'Talking'? I call bullshit. You grabbed her arse!"

"Watch your mouth, Parkinson, or I might be forced to give you detention."

"Oh, yeah? Watch your hands near my best friend, or I might be forced to break your damn fingers. I don't give two shits if you're Head Boy," she spat back.

Rhex licked the inside of his cheek, then said condescendingly as he got closer to her, "Oh? Is that so?"

Draco stepped between them, and faced his cousin warily. "Hey, Rhex. Let's just take it easy, yeah? I'm sure it's just a mistake."

Pansy rocked forward on her toes to peer over Draco's shoulder to spit venomously, "Yeah, and the biggest fuckin' mistake in this room is standing right in front of you!"

Rhex shoved Draco aside and he tumbled to the floor. Tom slowly drew out his wand as he watched Rhex move toward Pansy. "You bitch -"

Tom started to wave his wand to subdue Rhex from harming Pansy, but paused when she backhanded him across the face as hard as she could, and sent the older boy sprawling to the floor. Gasps echoed throughout the common room.

Blaise whistled. "Damn."

"Say that again, Lestrange. I fucking dare you. I dare you," Pansy had her wand drawn, and was struggling against Draco's grip to get to Rhex, who was still laying on the floor. Rhex took the distraction as his chance to pull his wand out, but Tom had him beat.

"Expelliarmus," Tom said calmly, and caught Lestrange's wand in his left hand. "I think that's quite enough for today, don't you?"

Rhex pushed himself up from the floor, and glared. "Who do you think you are, Riddle? I'm not taking orders from someone like you."
The room went deathly quiet.

Tom raised his eyebrows curiously, and pursed his lips. "Someone like me?" he asked politely, and walked around the older boy. Tom could see he was shaking with anger. He cherished every moment of it.

"Hmm, someone like me, someone like me," he repeated, then came to a halt in front of Rhex. He tilted his head to the side. "Did you mean someone who is more intelligent than you? Someone with better grades? Or, did you mean someone who can get a girl to go on a date with them without having to resort to molestation?"

Rhrex let out an angry exhale that shook his entire body.

Tom smiled coldly. "Ah, perhaps you meant someone who doesn't need his mummy and daddy to line the board of Governor's pockets with galleons to secure a job at the Ministry after graduation?"

"Oh, you know what I meant, Riddle. And it's quite alright," Rhrex said with a bitter smile. "Greengrass is a little too prissy for me, anyway. I prefer my women to be a bit more—oh, how do we say, uh—" he paused, and ran his tongue over the front of his top teeth, "obstinate."

It took everything in Tom to not backhand him again at the implication of his words, but his thoughts were interrupted.

"You're a fuckin' sick bastard, you know that, right?" snapped a disheveled Pansy, who was still barely being held back by Draco.

Right after Pansy said that, the sound of the bricks grinding together made the entire common room go back to what they were doing. Professor Slughorn walked in, looking his typical cheerful self. "Ah, Mr. Lestrange, there you are! Say, why are you sitting there on the floor? It's nearly February! Yes, much too cold down here to be sitting on the floor like that."

"We were just having a little dueling match, sir. You walked in right at the end of it, I'm afraid," Tom answered quickly, then held Rhexenor's wand down to him and the older boy glared up at him. He didn't take it, at first. An entire conversation passed between them without a single syllable being uttered.

"Oh, I missed it? That's a shame, that's a shame. But, you two should be setting a good example as Head Boy and a Prefect! Even a friendly dueling match should be reserved for the dueling club!" the professor said.

Tom watched as Rhex's fingers curled around his wand to take it back and he finally stood up. Rhex brushed his uniform off and said charmingly, "You're absolutely right, sir. It doesn't really set a good example for the younger students, does it?"

Tom saw Pansy move forward out of the corner of his eye, but he held up a hand to stop her while Slughorn was busy talking to Rhex. He heard her let out a scoff, but she remained silent.

"Right, you are. Say, if you're done, I was wondering if I might have a word with you? Head Boy business, of course!"

"Of course, Professor," Rhex replied and Slughorn bid them all farewell before leaving.

"Why didn't you tell Slughorn about what really happened, Tom?" Draco asked quietly after they were out of earshot.
Tom watched the retreating forms of Slughorn and Lestrange leaving the common room. Right before the stones slid back into place after they walked out, Rhex turned around, and looked straight at him. The look in his eyes held hatred; he was familiar with *that* emotion. The only thing that concerned him about the look was the fact that there was something else in there – another emotion that he *wasn't* familiar with.

"Because humiliation is the cruelest form of punishment," came a voice next to them. Tom looked over to see Daphne looking at the exit, and was rubbing her arm uneasily. She glanced up at him, and smiled weakly. "Thank you, Tom."

He nodded once, then ran his hand through his hair, and sighed. "Alright, I'm turning in early. Try not to burn the castle down while I'm asleep."

"No promises there," Blaise said with a smirk.

Tom rolled his eyes, and sighed, "Of course not."

Quite possibly Hermione's least favorite thing about the winter were the shorter days. She preferred walking through the corridors when sunlight was streaming through the stained-glass windows. It was always so beautiful.

Unfortunately, she was forced to walk through the empty hallways for her Prefect rounds with only the sconces on the walls to light her way. Oh, well. Better than nothing, she supposed.

Right when she was about to turn a corner, she heard the sound of hurried footsteps echoing off the walls. It filled her with dread. Honestly, she hated docking points and giving detention, but duty was duty…

She turned the corner, and almost ran headfirst into the student. Her eyes widened in surprise. *Bloody marvelous.*

"Oh, Lestrange. It's you. I thought there was a student out of bed," she said, and wished she hadn't been thinking how much she didn't like giving out detentions just a moment ago. She really didn't feel like dealing with Lestrange.

Rhex shook his head and his dark curls swayed. "No, I'm running errands. Which reminds me – here," he pulled out a small scroll of parchment out of his robes, and handed it to her.

Hermione looked at the scroll skeptically. Why was he acting so…well, *civil*? She thought that maybe he'd learned his lesson after their little altercation a few months ago, so she decided to try and do her best to be civil, too. "What is it?"

Rhex rolled his eyes, and sighed. "It's the new patrolling timetable for the term. I meant to get it out sooner, but things have been…chaotic."

"Oh," she said, and took the parchment from him. She looked it over for a few seconds. "This is very…efficient. It looks like you put a lot of work into it. Thank you."

Rhex frowned slightly at her response, and stared at her. "Yeah, I guess I did. You're…welcome, Granger."

Hermione gave a small nod. "Alright, better finish my rounds."

"Right."
Rhex left first, and rounded the corner to walk down the corridor Hermione had come from. She shook her head, and continued walking.

What was that all about?

Hermione had known that Theo had his own potion lab set up somewhere in Hogwarts, but she'd never guessed it was in an abandoned and forgotten bathroom. She looked around in awe at how large it was, compared to the others. The first thing she noticed was the small sitting area they'd set up off to the side, and then she noticed the circular set of sinks sitting in the center of the room. In each sink sat a cauldron; all of them had some sort of potion bubbling in them and each flame underneath was set at a different level.

"So, what do you think?" asked Theo apprehensively.

She walked around the column of sinks, and let her fingers run along the porcelain. "It's impressive. When you told me you wanted to show me your potions lab, I wasn't expecting this. It's amazing, Theo, really."

Theo let out heavy sigh, and smiled. "You really think so?"

"Are you kidding? Your set-up is far superior than even Professor Slughorn's. Granted, the cauldrons are in sinks, but--"

"They retain the heat better, which--"


"Well, you and Tom are the only other ones who even thought of that. Blaise looked at me like I was mad when I said I didn't want to put the cauldrons on a table," Theo joked.

"If you two are quite done stroking each other's egos, we have work to do for our project," interrupted Tom. He pushed up his sleeves, and started rummaging through what must have been their supply closet.

Hermione had nearly forgotten he was there. She walked over to where he was hunched over, collecting various bottles and phials. Her eyes scanned the upper shelves. "Have you brewed all of these, Theo?"

"Hmm? Oh, most of them, yeah. Tom and Draco brewed some of them."

"Blaise hates potioneering," Tom added, still crouched on the floor. "He's one of the fussiest people I've ever met when it comes to getting dirty."

Hermione let out a snort, and continued reading labels on the assorted bottles. They were all different colors, different shapes, different smells. A small, plain glass phial with a white label caught her eye. She reached for it, and replied, "Probably doesn't want to get his cuticles dirty."

She vaguely heard Tom laugh, and say something else, but it was white noise. All she could focus on was the label on the phial: Unattraction Potion.

Everything from last year came flooding back to her. All of the lies, all of the tears, all of the hurt. Her eyes left the phial to gaze down at Tom.

All of the guilt, all of the shame, all of the heartache.
She noticed too late that Tom had been saying her name and she hadn't replied, so he looked up at her. His face went blank when he saw what she was holding. She hastily set it back on the shelf, and wiped away her tears with the heels of her palms. She wouldn't cry. She wouldn't -

"I shouldn't have come here."

"Hermione, just forget about it, alright?" he whispered, and held onto her wrist to lead her back to the workstation. "Come on, that project is due in a few weeks. We should get started on-

Her chest felt tight with indignation and she ripped her arm out of his grasp. "Forget about it? You expect me to just forget about it?"

"Seriously? I thought we were over this already. I told you the truth, we discussed it, I apologized. What more do you want?" he snapped back.

Hermione faltered. "I...I don't know."

"You said you'd forgiven me, but you're still angry, aren't you? You're still angry with me over Krum."

"I...don't know if I am. I thought I wasn't, but I don't know."

Tom let his head fall back with a sigh and he stared at the ceiling for a moment before looking at her again. She could tell he was getting angry. "Well, what do you know, Hermione?"

She didn't say anything, and glared at him.

"Tell me," Tom said.

She pressed her lips together tighter.

"Tell me, Hermione! What do you know!?"

"I know that I'm leaving!" she replied hotly, and stormed past a bewildered Theo.

"But...but our potion," he whined weakly.

"I'm sorry, Theo. It'll have to be another time. I'm not in the right frame of mind right now," she told him as she waited for the painting to open. Theo just nodded, and glanced uncertainly between her and Tom.

"Get back in here. Don't you dare leave, Hermione," Tom commanded through clenched teeth.

She turned her head to look at him once more before yelling, "Piss off!"

The moment before she heard the painting slam behind her, she also heard the sound of glass shattering against a wall.

How dare he? She probably would have stayed, and continued to work on their project if he weren't such an insensitive prick. Of course — oh, of fucking bloody course he wanted her to forget everything that he did. That would make it easy on him, wouldn't it?

"Sure, I'll just completely disregard everything, just because it suits you. What a fu—ugh!" she muttered agitatedly to herself as she stormed down the corridor.

Hermione was so busy lost in her own angry thoughts that she didn't notice the hand that shot out
to grab her wrist until she was pressed against a cold wall and a warm body. She felt his nose press against her temple, and heard an unsteady inhale breathing in her scent.

She was about to yell at Tom for following her after she specifically told him not to, but she realized the smell was wrong. The hands were wrong. The height was wrong. Everything was wrong, wrong, wrong.

"Hello, Hermione," Rhex breathed against the shell of her ear. She could feel him smiling against her cheekbone. "I want to tell you a secret."

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**A/N:** *hides* Please, don't murder me. Cos I love you. Oh, God. There are probably typos in this chapter. I proofread it at 1 am, in between yawns and watering eyes and it wasn't really beta'd. Cos I know they're probably not awake right now and I'm far too impulsive to wait.

I don't know when it'll be until my next update! My life is crazy right now and tbh, I'm shocked I was able to write this. I just kept reading through all your reviews, and pushed myself. I love you guys. Ugh. So muuuch.

If you want some more Tomione to read after this, I just added a new story last week called 'Influenced at Ilvermorny'. It was my entry in the Tomione Fest! It won Overall Fave and a bunch of other categories! [insert bragging rights here, cos I'm not usually a bragger] I dunno, I'm really excited for what I have planned for that one, too. Anyone love teacher!Tom/student!Hermione? Cos I sure af do. I love all things forbidden, apparently.
Purple pillars of fumes were weaving their way toward the ceiling from the concoction dripping from the wall, and shards of broken glass were scattered across the floor.

Tom's chest heaved as he tried to calm his temper. For the first time, in a very long time, he felt livid with her. At first, it was just frustration - annoyance, really. It didn't make any sense. He didn't understand. He'd done everything that she'd asked of him, hadn't he? And she was still acting like this.

Tom thought that she was acting how she used to act when they were only ten; she was acting like a *brat.*
"Well, I'm glad that one wasn't anything important...or lethal," Theo said from the other side of the room.

He stared at the mess he'd made for a few more seconds while he calmed himself down. He pulled out his wand, and gave it a wave to clean up the mess. He turned to Theo and said, "My apologies."

Theo rubbed the bottom of his nose with his knuckle a few times, then shrugged. "Don't worry about it. You should, uh, probably go check on her, yeah?"

Tom slowly shook his head, and leaned against one of the sinks. "No...not this time. She needs some time to figure things out on her own."

"What kind of things?"

Tom sighed, and stared at the door. He could still see her in his mind, walking away from him. "Her conscience."

Calm. She needed to remain calm. She couldn't think if she didn't remain calm.

Hermione swallowed, and slowly reached for her wand in her robe pocket as she carefully asked, "What secret, Lestrange?"

She felt his grin fall away against her cheek. His breath shook nervously when he inhaled. "My secret, of course."

"I...I don't understand. What is your-"

"Shh, not here," he panicked, and pulled away from her, but kept his hands firmly on her upper arms. His dark curls fell over his eyes and he looked absolutely mad. "They probably have their eyes and ears everywhere at Hogwarts."

Her nose scrunched up in bewilderment and she stopped reaching for her wand. She knew Rhexenor Lestrange had always had a few screws loose, but this was something else entirely. "What? Who does?"

Rhex swallowed, then licked his lips. His eyes darted around their surroundings, before landing back on her. He looked conflicted and it made her uneasy. "I have to know I can trust you first."

"You have me cornered up against a wall in an empty corridor and I haven't hexed your bits off yet, if that's any indication of whether you can trust me or not," she snapped impatiently, and pulled her arms out of his grasp.

He considered her suspiciously for a few moments, then straightened up to his full height. "I suppose you have a point there. I didn't exactly go about this the right way."

Hermione folded her arms over her chest. "You don't say? Besides, how do I know you're not pulling some joke right now? Why should I believe or trust anything you have to say? You've only ever ignored me or called me names whenever we passed each other in the halls."

Rhex tilted his head, and narrowed his eyes at her. "The very fact that I approached you at all to talk to you about this should be enough."

She threw her arms up in the air. "To talk about what? You haven't even told me anything! You're mad, aren't you?"
He scowled, and said nothing.

"I've heard people talk, you know. They say that you're mad. They say that they have no idea how you became Head Boy. They say that the only reason you did, was because of who your parents are," she goaded.

Rhex rolled his eyes, and sighed. He muttered underneath his breath, "Well, you're not wrong, but you're not right, either."

Her mouth fell open. "Wait-what? About which part?"

"Pretty much all of it," he scoffed. "Except for the mad part - I'm not mad."

Hermione paused. She didn't want to believe anything that came out of his mouth, but a part of her - a minuscule part of her, did. Alright, maybe she didn't necessarily believe him; maybe she was just...intrigued.

"Alright, then. Tell me your secret," she said.

"I already said - not here."

"But-"

"Just..." he paused to think. "Just meet me by the mossy boulder by the Whomping Willow in thirty minutes and I'll explain everything."

"What? It's nearly curfew. I'm not meeting you anywhere outsi-"

"Bloody Hell, Granger. I'm not going to murder you-"

"Says you. I've heard you're just as mad as your mother-"

Hermione let out a sharp yelp when Rhex grabbed her by her robes, and slammed her back against the wall. He brought his twisted face close to hers and spat pure venom, "Do not...ever...compare me...to that woman."

They scowled at each other for several moments, their eyes searching the other. Hermione was trying to understand what was going on - trying to understand Rhexenor Lestrange. She'd obviously hit a spastic nerve by mentioning his mother. She'd heard stories from the other students about the Lestrange family before - about how Rodolphus and Bellatrix Lestrange were a bit...backwards. She'd also heard that his mother was more than just backwards - that she was utterly brilliant, but utterly bonkers. Hermione never really bought into the rumors, though; because that's all they were - just rumors. Something wasn't right about this situation and she wanted to find out what it was. It was then that she realized that the only way she was going to understand him would be by playing this little game by his terms.

"You're right. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have compared the two of you."

The scowl on his face fell away to nothing and he released his grip on her robes. He looked her up and down once, then said, "Thirty minutes."

"Thirty minutes," she repeated.

"And come alone. Tell no one."

Hermione went to open her mouth, but he spoke first, "Not even your fucking miserable excuse of
her a brother."

Her mouth clamped shut and she scowled. Rhex smiled coldly, and pinched her cheek in mock affection. "Aww, has anyone ever told you how adorable you look when you're pissed? You're as terrifying as a cauldron cake."

She slapped his hand away and his smile widened. "Twenty-eight minutes now - better get a move-on, Granger."

As Hermione stormed away, she didn't feel as pissed off at Tom anymore. Now, she couldn't figure out whether she was more annoyed by Rhex, or intrigued by his secret.

Twenty-eight minutes later, Hermione found herself rocking anxiously on the balls of her feet in front of the mossy boulder by the Whomping Willow. She nervously watched the branches rock back and forth in the wind - only there was no wind. Hermione had always appreciated the beauty of the Whomping Willow, but its unpredictability left much to be desired. Hermione didn't like unpredictable behaviors.

She shivered at the thought of being clubbed to death by one of its massive branches, but she blamed it on the cold. Attempting to keep herself warm in the freezing night temperatures of late February had proved to be impossible, so she resorted to using a warming spell to keep herself from dying of the cold. After she cast the spell, Hermione heard snow crunch underneath a boot and she gripped her wand as her head snapped to the side. She relaxed when she saw it was just Lestrange. "Jumpy much?" he joked as he approached her.

"No," she lied. "Alright, we're here. So, tell me your secret."

"Shh!" he said, and held up a hand to silence her. He looked around nervously and Hermione rolled her eyes at him. "Do you have to be so loud?"

"Who's gonna hear us? We're the only ones here. Everyone is headed to their dorms now. Curfew starts in five minutes. So, either we hurry up and get this over with, or I'm leaving."

Rhex's gaze hardened and he said sarcastically, "Fine. Let's get this over with then, shall we?"

"Yes, that's what I've been saying the entire - ahh!"

Everything happened so quickly, she wasn't even sure what did happen. She remembered Rhex grabbing her by the back of her jacket, and throwing her down violently into the snow. She remembered looking up, and seeing one of the large branches of the Whomping Willow barreling toward her with the finality of Thor's hammer. She remembered sucking in air to scream, but then the air was knocked back out of her when she was picked up and thrown down again.

When she landed, it was dark. Her palms stung when she pushed herself up from her belly, but she was knocked down again when something rammed into her, and toppled over her legs. "Fuck...there needs to be an easier way to get in here," she heard Rhex mumble.

"Get off my bloody legs, you arse!"

He pushed himself off her, and helped haul her up by her sleeve. She shoved his arms away, pulled out her wand, and aimed it at his face. It was dark, but there was enough light coming in to see she was pointing her wand in the right direction. "Give me one damn reason why I shouldn't
hex you into next week, Lestrange."

He hummed, then shrugged his shoulders. "Eh, I really can't think of a single one, to be fair," he replied. He turned from the wand pointed in his face like it wasn't even there, and started walking up a narrow path. She gaped after him. He turned his head back to look at her. "Are you coming, or not?"

"I am not going up there with you; not until you tell me what in the Hell is going on."

"No. We're not far enough away yet. I can't take any chances. You've already come this far, so you might as well come the rest of the way. We're almost there."

"Damn it!" she stomped her foot. "No! Tell me what's going on right now!"

Rhexit looked taken aback, and looked her up and down in mild disgust. "Merlin, I've overheard your brother calling you a brat before, but I didn't think it was actually true."

Hermione's jaw dropped. "Tom really said that?"

Rhexit rolled his eyes, and started walking up the path again.

"Wait!" she called out, but he was already gone. She looked behind her, and could see the light from the moon shining through what she assumed was some sort of hole at the base of the tree. She could also hear the branches swaying violently. Hermione swallowed, and quickly followed Rhexit.

When she reached the top of the path after walking for what felt like forever, she found a half-open wooden door gently swinging on its hinges. Her blood rushed to her ears and all she could hear for a second was her pulse. This was so stupid; she was so stupid. Why did she follow him here? He was obviously a nutter, even though he kept telling her that he wasn't. All she could think about is how pissed Tom was going to be with her if he found out. The only comfort she could find in this situation is that if Rhexit did end up killing her, Tom would find out and probably murder him. Probably.

"Because crazy people don't think they're crazy, Hermione. He's going to kill you, and stuff you underneath the floorboards. Stupid, stupid, stupid," she whispered to herself.

There was a loud pop.

"Fucking Hell, how many times do I have to tell you that I'm not going to kill you?"

Hermione screamed.

Rhexit cackled. "Like I said - jumpy."

"Let me apparate right in front of you, in the dark, in the middle of an old house and see if you don't jump!" she snapped irritably, cast a nonverbal Lumos, and peered around curiously. "Where are we, anyway?"

Rhexit stretched his arms out wide with his palms open, and grinned at her. "Welcome...to the Shrieking Shack."

"...we're inside the Shrieking Shack?"

"Yep."
"You've got to be kidding me. Isn't his place infested with boggarts and ghouls?" she asked as she took a few steps forward.

He scoffed. "The only thing this place is infested with is dust. Come on, the cleanest room is upstairs."

Hermione followed him up the stairs. She lost her balance when the whole house shifted to the right and she caught herself on the bannister. Right. If Rhex didn't end up killing her, then the house would. Perfect.

Rhex walked through a door at the end of the hall, and used his wand to summon a small flame that hovered in the middle of the room. The one window in the room was completely boarded up and the entire place smelled of rotted wood and mothballs. There were also only four sad pieces of furniture - a splintered dresser with missing drawers, an armchair draped in a filthy sheet, a leather footlocker, and the remains of a mangled bed. Hermione scrunched up her nose. "This is the best room?"

He stuffed his wand back into his robe pocket, and plopped down in the armchair. Dust particles exploded into the air. "I didn't say it was the best room; I said it was the cleanest room."

Hermione rolled her eyes, and transfigured the footlocker into a clean, leather armchair, and sat down across from him. "Alright. You've got my attention. You dragged me all the way out here. Now, tell me."

Rhex shifted in his seat, and looked unsure. "I...I need your help."

She stared at him. "You need my help? Is that your secret? I swear to God, if you risked my life just to drag me out here to ask for help on your damn homework, I'll-"

"I wish it was something as simple as homework!" he snapped as he lurched forward at her, then sulked back in his chair.

"Then just tell me!"

"I'm trying, alright? I'm just trying to figure out where to start."

Hermione let her head fall back against the chair and she groaned; she lifted it back up to look at him. "I know. How about you start out with, 'Hello. My name is Rhexenor Lestrange and the secret I wanted to tell Hermione Granger is...'?"

"You're fucking annoying, you know that, right?"

"Not half as annoying as you. I'm giving you five seconds. After that, I'm leaving. One," she started counting.

"It's not that simple. You don't understand-"

"Two."

"I needed help and I didn't know who else to turn to-"

"Three."

"-and I thought you were the only person who'd believe me-"

"Four," she said as she stood up, and headed for the door.
"My parents run a radical underground organization and they are planning their first large-scale attack on Hogwarts...and I want to stop them," he rushed out in one breath.

Hermione froze in the doorway, and slowly turned back around. Her eyes narrowed at him. "You're lying."

He jumped to his feet, and shook with rage. "I am not lying! I may be a bit of an arse sometimes, but I am no liar."

She shifted through the possibilities that he might be lying to her. After she was done, she knew that there was a chance that he was lying, but logic overruled. Why would he drag her all the way out here? Why would he go through all these lengths to maintain privacy? Why would he drag his parents' names through the mud?

Hermione could think of not one plausible reason for him to lie to her.

"What kind of group is it?" she asked hesitantly as she sat back down.

Rhex's shoulders relaxed and he replied, "A blood supremacy one, of course. What else would it be?"

She felt her blood boil at his nonchalance. "What else? What else!? You're telling me, a Muggleborn, that your parents run an organization that hates me for who I was born as? And you're acting like it's no big deal. What else? Hah! Oh, I don't know. Maybe they run an organization about political reform or...or knitting, or something."

He snorted. "Knitting? Hah. That's funny. Imagine my mum - knitting. The only thing she'd know what to do with a pair of knitting needles is stabbing someone in the eye with 'em."

Hermione ignored his comment. "Wait. You said they're planning an attack on Hogwarts? On the students?"

"Besides me? I've no idea, but I wouldn't put it past them. They don't trust me enough to do this job all on my own, so I'm sure there's someone lurking about to make sure I don't fuck it all up."

Hermione shook her head in disbelief. "If you're part of the organization, then why would you tell me about it? It doesn't make any sense."

He seemed to struggle with his words. "Did you not hear me the first time? I want to stop them. I have my personal reasons why. And because...because you're the only person who made sense. You're a Mudblood and you're smart."

She glared at him.

"Old habits die hard, alright? But you're one of the people they'd be targeting. Your arsehole brother would be one of the people they'd be targeting, too. I mean, I wouldn't mind if something nasty happened to him - oh, don't look at me like that - but wouldn't you want to protect him? To protect the other students? That's how you Gryffindors are, aren't you? A bunch of self-sacrificing shits."

Hermione continued glaring at him, but stayed quiet to consider his words. She was starting to
believe him, but part of her didn't want to. It was just so farfetched. It was filled with holes.

"Why haven't you told Dumbledore? He's the headmaster."

"No."

"But Dumbledore is one of the most powerful wizards around. I'm sure if we both go tell him together, then-"

"Merlin, Granger! I said no! I already told you - I don't trust anyone. No Purebloods. No Halfbloods."

"Then why me? I don't understand. I'm not the only Muggleborn at Hogwarts," she argued.

"Because I thought you would listen. In case you haven't noticed, I'm not exactly the most popular guy around here. Everyone either hates my guts, is terrified of me, or sucks up to me because of my last name. You are the only one who didn't fall into one of those categories," he said with a shrug.

"Who says I don't hate your guts?" she challenged with a raised brow.

"Your actions spoke louder than your words and let's just say that I am better at listening to actions."

Hermione frowned, and tried to understand. "What do you mean by that?"

Rhex chuckled at his private joke, and shook his head. "You really wouldn't care to know."

"Fine, but I don't understand why you're telling me all this. They're your parents. Why are you trying to sabotage their plans? It doesn't make any sense."

His face twisted into something dark and feral. Rhexenor Lestrange had made her uneasy in the past, but tonight, other than his chaotic unpredictability and mood swings, he'd been somewhat tolerable to be around. But now, he was making her feel uneasy again. "You said you'd heard stories - so, tell me, Granger: what kind of stories have you heard about my parents?"

Hermione squirmed uncomfortably in her seat, and had a difficult time maintaining the intense stare he was giving her. "I...I haven't heard much, really. I'm not one for gossip, but...but I've heard they're a bit...backwards."

A cold smile spread across his face. "Yeah...you could say they're a bit backwards. Especially my mum. She hides it, though. She hides it so well. You should see her - you should see how she is when she's behind closed doors. And she has the entire Ministry fooled, you know. She just wears one of her corsets, bats her eyelashes, keeps some beds warm on the side behind my dad's back, and she has them all eating out of the palm of her hand. She has them trained - like dogs."

"That...that sounds awful, but I think that's rather common in the political world-"

"Is it common to torture people or commit murder?" he snapped.

"Torture? Murder? She's murdered someone?" she gaped.

He picked at some pilled fabric on the sheet, and tossed it into the flames. "Plural. And if she gets away with what she plans to do, there will be more."

Hermione felt like she was being strangled. She was losing oxygen and her world was slowly
spiraling out of control. "What is it that she plans to do?"

Rhex lifted his eyes from the fire, and leveled his gaze on her. "She plans to find the Chamber of Secrets, open it, and let loose Salazar Slytherin's monster to rid Hogwarts of dirty blood - as a statement."

"The Chamber of Secrets!? But that's just a myth! It doesn't even exist! How does she plan on finding it?"

The corners of his mouth lifted in a rueful smile. "By using her most beloved son, as always."

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A/N: Sleight of hand, motherfuckers. Imaooo SHAME ON ANYONE WHO THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO WRITE SOMETHING AS BASIC AS RHEX SEXUALLY ASSAULTING HERMIONE. SHAME. hahaha Just kidding, I love you bitches. I totally used a common fanfic trope as a manipulation tactic and I'm not sorry in the slightest.

Oh, I just wanted to add that a lot of you know that I've been going through some life stuff, and have been suuuper stressed out and busy and I just wanted to say a huge THANK YOU to everyone who has been so supportive and trying to cheer me up! There were so many days where I was having a rough day and I'd get a random message, tag, or ask on Tumblr that made me grin like an idiot. Thank you so much for that. Seriously.
Most of Hermione's free time over the two weeks after Rhexenor first told her his secret was spent learning all she could about Salazar Slytherin, the Chamber of Secrets, and this organization he said his parents ran.

Unfortunately, she didn't get much information from him about the organization yet, but it was only because he didn't know very much. He said his parents didn't trust him as much since the Christmas hols. When she asked why, he snapped at her, and told her to mind her own damn business. She tried to remain patient with him – she really did, but her patience was wearing terribly thin.
So, they spent most of their time at the Shrieking Shack, narrowing down the possible locations of where the entrance to the Chamber could be. Tom had asked her a few times why she couldn't study with him, so she made up a lie that she was helping Ginny study for Potions. She'd told Ginny that her and Tom had gotten into a huge fight and she didn't feel like dealing with him for now. Since Ginny had seven older brother, she understood, and covered her without question. She felt horrible for lying to people she cared about, but it was for a good reason.

The truth was, Hermione and Tom had made up – well, several times since their fight. Usually they'd sneak a few kisses in while retrieving Potions ingredients in Slughorn's supply closet, or they'd take advantage of one of the secret passageways on the way to classes. She'd laid down rules that they wouldn't act this way at Hogwarts if they were going to do this and it just wasn't working. Teenage hormones, and all that. She supposed it was easier to forgive and forget when his life was in danger.

Hermione sighed, and ran her fingers across the yellowed map of Hogwarts laid out on the table in front of her. Rhex was leaning his chair back on the back legs. He was chewing on his thumbnail as he watched her read the map.

"So, how are you supposed to open it?"

"Beats me. They didn't exactly give me instructions on how to open it. I don't even know where it is. I've been searching for it during my patrols," Rhex replied with a shrug.

Hermione gave him a withered look. "You haven't been doing your patrols? You really are the worst Head Boy ever, you know."

He rolled his eyes dramatically. "As you've made me aware - at least seventeen times now."

"I can make it eighteen, if you'd like."

"Merlin, don't you ever shut up? We're supposed to be figuring out how to save lives here and you're more worried about what I was doing instead of doing my damn rounds," he snapped.

Hermione's nostrils flared and she angrily flipped a book open. "Well, you're supposed to be setting a good example-"

Rhex reached across the space between them, and shoved her book off the table. A small explosion of dust appeared when it landed on the floor. Hermione's eyes slowly traveled from the book sitting innocently on the floor, to the furious, twisted face of Rhexenor Lestrange hovering in front of her own. His teeth were bared when he spoke, "I am setting a good example, Granger. It's not my fault people can't see that. The real question here is: are you?"

Hermione blinked, and stared at him in disbelief. "Of course, I am."

His eyes lingered over her face for a moment. He scoffed, and plopped back down in his chair. Hermione leaned over to pick the book back up. When she straightened again, he was looking out the cracks of the boarded-up window, lost in thought.

Hermione took a few moments to look at him. She'd only been around him on a somewhat regular basis for the last two weeks, but he'd never stayed still enough like this for her to really observe him. Hermione might even consider him handsome, if it weren't for the fact that he was absolutely vile and unpredictable.

She thought that if there were ever a walking definition of chaos, Rhexenor Lestrange would be it. One moment, they could be having a conversation that could be construed as being pleasant. The next, they would argue badly enough where she'd want to drive stinging nettles straight into his
cornea. She was surprised that they hadn't killed each other yet, honestly; but they had to push their differences aside. They just had to. It wasn't an option and they both knew it.

"But is it going to matter, in the end?" he asked quietly.

Hermione opened and closed her mouth; her words were stolen from her.

The corner of his mouth lifted in what could have been a rueful smile. "I just want it to matter, you know? I don't - " his voice cracked and he swallowed. "I don't want it to be a waste."

"Don't want what to be a waste, Rhex?" she asked cautiously.

He blinked rapidly, as if he just woke up from a dream. His eyes snapped to hers and it felt like he wasn't looking at her at all - it felt like he wasn't seeing her. "Everything that matters to me."

Air found its way to her lungs again. Hermione's brows furrowed slightly. Something wasn't right. She was missing something - something important. Sure, she believed him about the plot with his parents, but he was hiding something. What it was, Hermione didn't know, but she was going to find out as soon as possible. To do that, they needed to get back to the task at hand. She needed to be clever. She needed to use tactics that she'd learned from growing up with a manipulative brother.

"You're absolutely right, Rhex."

He eyed her suspiciously. "About what?"

"About setting a good example," she said with a small smile. "You are. Even if I'm the only person who sees that you're doing it at the moment. There are more important things to worry about right now. I didn't have my priorities straight, but I'm fixing that now. I was wrong and I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?"

His mouth went slack and he stared at her. "Are you shittin' me right now?"

Hermione crinkled up her nose at his language. "Are you going to accept my apology, or not? We have work to do."

"Sure. Fine. Whatever. Let's just figure out where the Hell this bloody Chamber is."

Hermione smiled, and took her quill to the map. "Perfect. So, you said you've already checked the dungeons?"

He leaned back in his chair again, and sighed. "Yes. I've even checked all the secret passageways that I know about."

"Hmm...the entrance probably has to be open with a spell. Have you tried using Revelio?"

"I'm not some second-year, Granger."

"I was just asking. Hmm...honestly, a simple Revelio charm probably isn't going to do the trick," she muttered to herself, and started walking around the room. "Maybe there's some sort of lever, or incantation. It might not even be in the dungeons at all."

"Where else would it be? I can't imagine a chamber housing Slytherin's pet monster would be in the seventh-floor corridor."

Hermione stopped pacing, and looked at the map again. "I didn't say the chamber wouldn't be
underneath the dungeons, but...but maybe the entrance is elsewhere? There are so many secret passages and staircases in Hogwarts, so who knows? Maybe the entrance is in the seventh-floor corridor, and a secret spiral staircase leads all the way down underneath the castle."

They both tilted their heads as they looked at the map sprawled out on the table. "You know...that surprisingly makes a bit of sense. But...it would take us months to search every floor, and every corridor. There has to be an easier way."

"Oh! The ghosts?" she asked hopefully.

Rhex shook his head. "Already asked, without full-out asking them if they knew where the Chamber of Secrets was. They don't know about any secret rooms that no one has visited in a few hundred years."

Hermione gnawed on her bottom lip, and thought. They were getting nowhere, fast. There had to be something - some sort of hint to steer them in the right direction. "Your parents didn't give you any information to help you?"

"No," he scoffed.

"Well, how did they expect you to do this all on your own?"

"To be fair, I don't think they did. The only information I was given was what I've already told you - that there is a chamber and there's some sort of monster that only answers to the heir of Slytherin."

"The heir of Slytherin? You didn't mention that before. Wait...are you...?" she asked tentatively.

Rhex's eyes widened. "What? Me? The heir of Slytherin?" he laughed. "No. Merlin, my mum would be practically wanking herself with that ego boost. No, I'm not."

"Ugh, you're disgusting."

He grinned, and said nothing.

"Then how in the Hell are you supposed to control it? Ugh, we don't even know what it is! This is such a waste of time!" Hermione huffed irritably, and plopped down in her chair with her head in her hands.

"Well...I do have a theory, if you're interested."

She lifted her head from her hands to scowl at him. "Go...on."

His grin widened. He stood from his seat, and started circling the table. "It all starts at the beginning, doesn't it?"

She sighed, and watched him circle the table. "What does?"

"My theory. Honestly, Hermione, please don't interrupt. It's quite rude," he chided from behind her. "Anyway, as I was saying: it all starts at the beginning. What is Salazar Slytherin best known for?"

Hermione waited for him to continue, and felt a sharp tug on one of her curls. "Ow!" she screeched, and whirled her head around to look at him. "What was that for?"

"For ignoring me. I asked you a question," he replied, and continued walking again.
"You told me to not interrupt you!"

Rhex blinked. "Yes. Yes, I did. Are you going to answer the question?"

"You bloody wan - ugh! He's one of the founders of Hogwarts," she ground out between clenched teeth.

"Correct! What else?"

"He...uh...didn't like Muggles or Muggleborns."

He continued circling her like a hawk. "Also correct. More."

"He was an accomplished Leglimens."

"Yes. Slytherin's bloodline was known for being naturally gifted Leglimens. What else were they usually gifted with?"

Hermione paused. She hadn't read the book on the founders in so long...

Rhexenor slammed his palms flat on the table, and leaned forward toward her. "Are you seriously this dense, Granger? I thought you were supposed to be smart."

She glared at him, and desperately wished a pair of stinging nettles would magically fall into her hands right about now. "Why are you such an arse?"

He gave her a sly grin, and tapped his house emblem on his robes. She frowned, and stared at the embroidered silver snake. Her eyes widened. "He was a Parselmouth! He could speak to snakes!"

Rhex straightened, and looked almost...proud. "Exactly. Only descendants of Salazar Slytherin can speak Parselmouth."

He started going on and on about something else, but Hermione wasn't listening.

**Tom.**

How had she not realized sooner? No. Scratch that. How had _neither_ of them realized this sooner? There was no way; was there? Tom couldn't possibly be the - _no_. No, because he was Muggleborn, like her. Tom's parents were Muggles. _Wait, weren't they_? Actually, now that she thought about it, she didn't _know_. He never spoke about his real parents to her before. She'd always wanted to ask while they were growing up, but mum and dad said it would be insensitive. They said if he wanted to talk about it, he should be able to do it on his terms. They said she had to wait until he was ready. They'd told her that she had to wait.

And she did. She'd waited. She waited for him to say something when they were ten; he didn't. She waited for him to say something when they were eleven; he didn't. Twelve; he didn't. Thirteen; he didn't. Fourteen; he didn't. Fifteen; he didn't. Now, they were sixteen and not once, in the past six years, had he brought up his real parents once.

What if...what if he...?

"He can speak to snakes," she whispered to herself.

"Uh, yes. We've established that already. Slytherin could speak to snakes. Have you been listening to anything I've just said?"

Rhex groaned, and rolled his eyes. "Gold. The first time I said it was pure gold and you weren't even listening to me. You're getting the watered-down version now, Granger: Slytherin was a prideful wizard. It was evident in everything he did - everything he stood for. It would only make sense if his monster had something to do with snakes."

"So...what? You think he has a pit of snakes in the Chamber? That's not exactly monstrous."

"A pit of snakes? Wha-? No. I mean - I don't know what's down there, but I'm assuming it has something to do with snakes. Have you ever seen the Slytherin common room? It's covered in snakes. Snakes on the paintings. Snakes on the furniture. Snakes on the bloody candelabra. I wouldn't be surprised if he had a fucking magical snake tattooed across his arse - "

"Oh, my God. Could you please stop that? Okay, so...something to do with snakes. I highly doubt it, unless they're magical snakes..."

"Listen, I just said it was a theory - something that could be researched, you know?"

"No, you do have a point. It's something worth looking into," Hermione glanced at her watch. "We should head back, though. Supper starts soon."

Rhexenor waved his wand and his things floated back into his bag. Hermione was doing the same with her things when she had a thought. "Rhex...you said that only the heir of Slytherin is able to control the monster, right?"

He adjusted the strap on his shoulder, and nodded. "Yeah. Why?"

"No reason. Just making sure I understood correctly."

As they walked back through the dark tunnels from the Shrieking Shack, Hermione thought of the sole reason why only the heir of Slytherin could control the monster: only the heir of Slytherin could speak Parselmouth.

She'd have to do some research first, but maybe Rhex was on the right track.

"Are you having any luck with Ginny?"

Hermione nearly jumped out of her skin when Tom started walking up next to her. He said it more in a joking manner than accusatory, but it still put her on edge. He was always good at telling if she was lying, so she had to avoid doing that at all costs. She wanted to keep him safe.

"It's slow-going, but she's doing better. She went up a whole grade on one of her essays this week. And before you ask, no, I didn't write it for her. Also, our rounds started fifteen minutes ago. I didn't know where you were."

"I was reading, and lost track of time," he replied.

They turned a corner, and continued walking down the quiet corridor together.

"Liar. You never lose track of time," Hermione said half-heartedly. His fingers grazed hers and her heart fluttered. She ignored it. Then, she felt his fingers circle around her wrist and her gut clenched. She shook his hand away and whispered, "Don't. Not here."
"Then where?"

She stopped walking, and stared at him. "What?"

"If not here, then where?"

Hermione shook her head, and started walking away. "I'm not doing this right now, Tom."

"When are you going to stop pushing me away, Hermione?" he asked. She didn't want to answer, because she didn't know it. She wasn't even sure why she was pushing him away. Maybe it was guilt? Maybe she was angry with him? With herself? Maybe she was just remembering all the bad things he'd done to her over the years and it was manifesting itself now? She didn't know.

Tom brushed his fingers over the top of her hand. She shoved them in her robe pockets, and looked around nervously. The corridor they were walking down was lined with suits of armor and it was dimly lit, since half of the torches were put out for the night. It was two hours past curfew, so it was unlikely anyone was wandering the halls, but she didn't want to take any chances.

"I'm...not pushing you away, Tom," she snapped, then quietly said, "I'm just...differentiating the public us and the private us. I don't want anyone to get the wrong idea."

Tom scoffed. "And what wrong idea would that be? That I touched my sister's hand?"

Hermione's face twisted. She felt a simmering rage spread through her chest and she wasn't sure why. "Don't...don't call me that."

She heard a smile in his voice when he spoke. "Don't call you what? Sister?"

"Yes," she hissed.

Tom stopped walking, and looked down at her condescendingly. Hermione stopped a few feet away, and frowned at him. He was always doing that. He'd always been bigger than her; it wasn't fair that she couldn't do the same back to him.

"Well, that's what you are, aren't you? You've made it perfectly clear with your differentiation, sis," he spat the last word out like it was bitter venom.

The venom stung her heart, and made her temper flare. She closed the distance between them, and gave him a shove on his chest. "Why are you acting like this, Tom? You're being an immature prat."

"I have no idea what you're talking about, sis."

She shoved him again, but he went nowhere. "I told you to stop!"

He grinned evilly at her. "Sis."

"Knock it off!"

"Sis."

"I said to knock it off, Tom!"

"Why? Does it bother you?"

"Yes!"
"Oh. Well, in that case, I guess I should stop...sis."

Hermione lunged at him. It was like they were children again. They were a tangle of limbs as Hermione hit, kicked, pulled, and scratched at Tom. It didn't last for long, though, because Tom slammed her up against the wall between two suits of armor. She wasn't hurt, but the shock of bumping her shoulder blades against the wall jolted her from her fit.

Tom pressed himself against her, and whispered against the curve of her jaw as his hands traveled down her sides underneath her robes, "Do you know what the problem with you is, big sister?"

Hermione pressed herself into him, and was annoyed with herself that her body was doing things against her will at his words and his touch. She wanted more. More, more, more, more - no. She brought her hands up to his chest to push him away, but he dipped his face against her neck, and started kissing her there. "Tom, stop. Someone is going to see us."

He smiled against her skin and his hands wandered lower. "That's the problem now, isn't it? We have to hide this. We wouldn't have to hide this if we weren't siblings."

Hermione gasped when one of his hands started slowly gliding up her leg, and underneath her skirt. Her belly tightened. She whispered, "And what are we supposed to do about that?"

Tom pulled away from her neck, and looked down at her. He cocked his head to the side in consideration and his fingers crept up the inside of her thigh. He was so close to right there and - was he going to...?

"Absolutely nothing," he answered, and descended on her. He swallowed her cry with his lips when his fingers started rubbing against her cotton knickers. It felt good. It felt too good. Hermione desperately grasped at his uniform to hold on - she was falling into him, spiraling out of control. She was no expert on sex, but she knew enough about male anatomy to know what the hard part of him that he was pressing against her lower belly meant. It was equal parts frightening and exhilarating and shameful and she was curious.

Hermione really was curious by nature, so she reached one of her hands down, and timidly pressed her palm against the hard part of his trousers. Tom sucked in air loudly through his nostrils, and pressed himself into her hand. He started kissing her harder. The reaction she got from him thrilled her, so she pressed again.

He broke away from her, and pressed his forehead to hers. "Stop that," he whispered against her lips as he continued rubbing his fingers against her knickers.

She lifted her eyes to his, determined. "No," she said, and gripped him through the fabric.

"Fuck," he closed his eyes, and shuddered. "I said stop it, Hermione."

She ran her fingers down his length, and whispered harshly, "And I told you to stop, Tom. You started this. You have no one to blame but yourself."

Tom's eyes snapped back open and he glared at her. "You know what? You're absolutely right."

Hermione went to go say something smart, but her words left her when he pushed the fabric of her knickers to the side, and plunged two fingers inside her. "Tom," she hissed. She tried her best to stay quiet, but it was so hard when he was moving his fingers in and out of her like that and when he was pressing his thumb against whatever that was and when he was massaging her breast like that and when he was grinding his hardness against her hip. It was impossible to focus. She had to stay quiet.
She squeezed her fingers around him and Tom moaned into her mouth. Her ears were straining to hear if anyone was coming. They couldn't get caught - they couldn't - they would be kicked out, they would lose their friends, they would lose their parents. No. No. Their parents would send Tom away. It would break their hearts, but they would probably do it. They would be so ashamed of them – they would be so —

She didn't want Tom to be sent away. She wanted him to stay with her. She couldn't lose him. She had to protect him, she had to —

Tom broke away from her mouth, and pulled out his wand. Hermione's eyes widened.

"Tom? What are you doing?"

He didn't reply. He just waved his wand while his fingers still worked inside of her and the buttons of her shirt came undone. He put his wand away in his robe pocket, and said, "I'm putting the blame on myself, like you said."

"What? What are you talking about - oh," she slapped a hand over her mouth to smother her moan when Tom pulled down the front of her bra, and pulled one of her nipples into his mouth. His tongue swirled and his teeth grazed and she was feeling too many things at once, building, building, climbing. She'd never – she's never —

"Oh, my God. Tom. Tom, stop. We need to stop. Someone is going to hear us," she pleaded, but he didn't listen and she was secretly glad for it. It felt too good and she didn't want it to stop – she never wanted him to stop. She – she just couldn't reach him like he could reach her and it wasn't fair. He wasn't fair. None of this was fair.

He released her nipple, and said with a smirk, "You mean someone might hear you? You keep saying we need to stop, but we both know you don't really want that to --"

Hermione cut him off when she quickly unbuttoned his trousers, and shoved her hand down the front. She gripped him, skin on skin, and his smirk fell clean off his face. He stilled his movements, and stared down at her, his chest heaving.

"I thought you said you wanted to stop," he said quietly.

Hermione looked down, and watched with a detached sort of fascination at how her hand looked wrapped around him. It was dark in the corridor, but she could see well enough. She looked back up at him through her lashes, and pushed her hips into his stilled hand. "Maybe I want to put the blame on myself, too."

The corners of his mouth slowly lifted into a mischievous smile and he started moving his fingers again. His free hand found her breasts again and he whispered against her lips, "If you really put the blame on yourself, too, then touch me, Hermione."

And she did. It was slowly, at first. She wasn't sure what to do and she was nervous, but she quickly learned what movements got the most reactions out of him. It was so hard to focus, though – to pay attention. There was too much going on for her to pay attention to everything or anything. Tom was kissing her harder than he'd ever kissed her before and they were snapping their hips into each other's hands and he was pinching and pulling her nipples and something - it was building up - it was close, close, so close.

Tom's mouth fell open against her lips and he breathed loudly with each exhale. "Hermione," he moaned loudly and it made her feel...well, it made her feel good. His movements slowed and shuddered and that's when she noticed something warm and wet spilling onto her hand. Oh,
She paused and he quickly told her, "No. Don't stop. Don't stop. Keep going. Keep - oh, my God. Please, don't stop, Hermione."

Hermione started moving her hand again over his length and his cum went with it. All she heard was the words spilling from his lips onto hers; it was oh my God and Hermione Hermione Hermione and fuck you're so – you're so – oh, god, I'm – fuck and you're mine mine mine and I'll keep you I'll always keep you with each thrust of his hips. She threaded her free hand into his hair, and watched him fall apart before her. He was looking at her in a way he'd never looked at her before and she wasn't sure how it made her feel. It reminded her of when he'd dropped to his knees before her during the Triwizard tournament last year: hopeless reverence. She'd done this to him - her.

Tom sighed into her mouth, and slowly kissed her. He broke away from the kiss, pulled his fingers out of her, and wiped them on the inside of his robes. Hermione frowned in confusion as he buttoned up his pants, and started fixing her bra and shirt for her. She stared at him. He stared back. This...was this supposed to happen? Did he seriously just use her?

He raised his eyebrows, and scoffed. "Oh, don't worry. I'm not done with you quite yet."

"It certainly doesn't seem that way to me."

Tom took out his wand, and started casting non-verbal wards around them. Then, he grinned, and dropped to his knees in front of her. He ran his hands back up her legs and it made her shiver.

"Tom? What are you doing?"

He pulled her knickers down around her ankles, and bunched her skirt up around her waist. Her face flushed red when she saw how he stared at her there. No one had ever looked at her there before and she felt beyond embarrassed. She pulled her skirt back down, but he pushed it back up and slammed her hips into the stone wall behind her. He bare arse rubbed up against the cold stone and it made her gasp.

"Be a good girl, Hermione. I want to finish what I started," he said, and leaned forward. Hermione grasped his hair, and cried out when his tongue found that sensitive spot again. It felt - this felt completely different. It was so much better – so much more intense. She couldn't control herself, and desperately tried pushing her hips into his face, but he had a death-grip on her hips that had her pressed into the wall.

His teeth grazed her clit too hard and she yelped in pain. She smacked the top of his head.

"That hurt, you arsehole."

"Then stay still and it won't happen again," he replied, and started running his tongue over her clit again. He circled around it and he flicked it and oh, my God it felt so good. She didn't know how she was going to stay still. She couldn't. She couldn't, she couldn't, she couldn't –

"Tom. Tom, I can't – oh, my God. Please," she sobbed. One of his hands gripped her arse, while he shoved two fingers from the other one into her again and he was pumping them in and out of her and he was swirling his tongue over and over and over again and her fingers pulled at his hair and she just wanted him closer closer closer, she was closer it was coming she was coming she was –

Hermione's head fell against the wall behind her and she cried out as the powerful waves pulsed through her. Tom finally allowed her to rock her hips into his face and she shook. She would have dropped if he wasn't holding her up.
After it was over, Tom pulled away again and she slid down the wall, and slumped to the floor. While she was trying to catch her breath, Tom pulled her knickers back up for her. The reality of what they'd just done was dawning on her and she couldn't bring herself to look at him; not even when she lifted her bum so he could pull them up the rest of the way for her; not even when he helped her to her feet; not even when he pushed the curls from her face; not even when he kissed her forehead, and wrapped his arms around her.

Hermione hid her face into his chest, and let him hold her.

He made her feel safe. He felt like home. She didn't care who he might really be. She didn't want to lose him - she'd do whatever she had to do to protect him. He'd kill for her and she knew that she'd kill for him. And she knew - she knew now that she would follow him wherever he went.

Because she loved him and she knew that he loved her.

And she also knew, deep down, that this kind of love probably wasn't healthy.

This kind of love was too strong.

This kind of love was too sick.

This kind of love was the kind that infected the pages of every tragic romance novel ever written down in history.

**A/N:** This chapter is a special surprise gift for Vino Amore, who is due to have her baby any time now. I'm super excited about it, so what better way to celebrate than by writing some semi-unrealistic virginal foreplay? Ahuhuhuhuhu. I love you, Vino and congratulations again and I can't wait to see him! AHHHHH! God, I just adore babies so much.

This chapter was unbeta'd, since it was a surprise for my...beta. haha I LOVE YOU, BITCHES!
What was this feeling?

Tom felt like his entire body was relaxed, but this feeling that settled comfortably in his chest was dense. Something wasn't right – he could just sense it, but he had no idea what it was.

What they had just done – well, it was reckless of them. In the middle of the corridor? It was his fault and he knew it, but… it was just so hard to control himself around her. He used to think his dorm mates were just a bunch of hormonal idiots, but now he understood them a little bit better.

He absently ran the tip of his tongue over his upper lip to taste her again and thought about how –

"Tom?"

His heart stammered and he closed his mouth. "Yes?"

Hermione looked to be struggling with her words. Tom assumed she was still flustered from earlier.

"What happened to your real parents?" She grimaced as soon as the question left her. "Wait, I mean -"

Tom froze. Well, that hadn't been what he was expecting.

His real parents? Why in the world would she be asking about them?

His eyes focused on her suspiciously, then he started walking again. She jogged to catch up to him.

"Why do you want to know?" he asked coldly. He didn't want to talk about this - anything else but this. He'd rather talk about his feelings than do this right now.

"I'm curious, that's all. You've never mentioned them."

"Because they aren't worth mentioning," he replied sharply, knowing that she wasn't about to drop it. Of course, she wouldn't, because that's just how she was.

"Sure, they are. If it weren't for them, you wouldn't be standing here right now," she rationalized.

Tom felt the rage begin to bubble up in his chest. "I just don't understand why you've decided to ask me right now. Why not ask me when we were ten?"

"Well, we didn't particularly like each other back then and -"

"Fine," he snapped, picking up his pace. "What about when we were eleven?"

"I-I don't kno-"

"Twelve?" he pushed on, his voice sounding angrier with each number. "Thirteen? Fourteen? Fifteen?"
Hermione scowled and struggled to keep up with him. "I don't bloody know! Why does that matter. It seems to me that you're avoiding the topic."

Tom whirled on her, causing her to come up short in surprise. He brought his face down to hers and hissed, "Maybe because I am avoiding it, Hermione. It's not my fault that you have a delayed reaction to reading normal social cues."

Her face flushed. She muttered, "I do not."

Tom smiled condescendingly, then he quickly dropped it.

"You lie to yourself far too often, Hermione," he said, then turned away from her.

"Not as often as you lie to me!" she yelled.

Tom winced, but fixed his face before he turned around. Hermione was still rooted to her spot and her temper was apparent. She was angry, but it wasn't the regular anger he was so used to dealing with…but the disappointed kind of angry. It was his least favorite kind of angry, because it made him feel guilty.

*God, damn it.* He refused to feel guilty. He did nothing wrong here, but it didn't stop him from stalking back over to her.

"You really want to know?" he asked impatiently.

Her scowl was still in place and she nodded once.

Tom ran a hand agitatedly through his hair and his eyes scanned the area, but there was no one in sight. He tried getting his racing heart under control. He felt so jittery and he wasn't sure why until he looked at her: for the first time in his entire life, he was absolutely terrified.

The topic of his real parents had never come up before and he found he rarely thought about them since moving in with the Grangers. Why would he? Sure, he thought about them a lot when he was younger – almost obsessively, really – to the point of where he probably hated them. But now?

Now, they were simply unimportant. Why should he waste his time thinking about them? They were nobody. He would never become them. He would never become them, because he was somebody. He was finally somebody to someone and he would kill whoever tried to take that away from him.

And he knew that if he told her the truth, told her his shame, she would probably hate him. He would probably lose her. She was going to be appalled – or, *Lord*…she might even *pity* him. That thought alone disgusted him.

But…if he lied to her again and she found out, it would be over – she would never trust him again. He was already treading on thin ice when it came to earning her trust and –

"Fine. I'll tell you, but you have to swear to me – no, listen. I mean it, Hermione. You need to swear to me that you tell no one."

"You know I would never," she replied softly.

Tom pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes and sighed. How was he going to do this? He had no fucking clue where to even begin. He started by casting a silencing charm around them, just in case, then he looked back down at her. "I only know what I've been told by my social
worker, so I'm not sure how reliable it is."

"What did she tell you?"

"That I was born in one of the hospitals in London," he stated unemotionally, then remained quiet. He really didn't want to do this.

"And? What else? What about your mum?" she pressed gently.

Tom grit his teeth. "She died giving birth to me."

Her hand flew to her mouth and he swore, *he swore* she was going to tell him *oh, my God, Tom. I'm so sorry*, but it never came. It surprised him, but he didn't let it show.

"What about your father?"

"I don't know," he replied testily, shifting his eyes to a portrait of a dozing wizard.

"You don't know?" she asked skeptically.

"That's right. I don't know. All I was told was that I was named after him, but the authorities never found him, because..." he paused, feeling the same insecurities from before – the insecurities of abandonment, of the hatred of his parents, of the self-hatred for what he was, of the shame he carried his entire life – all come to the surface. He swallowed. "They couldn't find him, because whoever my father is, he was probably one of my mother's clients."

Hermione frowned. "Clients? Was she a lawyer?"

Tom sighed impatiently at her naivety. "She was a bloody *prostitute*, Hermione. My *mother* was a common *whore* who picked up whatever clients she could get at Kings Cross. I'm the dirty offspring of a back-alley London business deal."

She stared at him.

This was it. He watched her reaction carefully. Fear was his adrenaline. It was ironic, though, that he should be so afraid of what Hermione thought of him. He hated this – hated feeling so insecure. It was a weakness, but it was too late now. It was already done.

That possessive part of him thought: what could she do about it, really? She was stuck with him – in the legal sense, at the very least. What would she do? Ignore him? Separate herself from him? Move far away after graduation?

He wouldn't allow it and she would *know* that he wouldn't allow it, because he would follow her wherever she went, because he would *never* let her leave, because she...was...hi--

Tom felt her arms wrap around his middle and her cheek pressed against his chest.

"I know what you're thinking, you know," she told him in an amused tone.

*Shit.*

"You do?" he asked, his arms hanging uselessly at his sides.

Hermione nodded against his chest. "You aren't them, Tom."

*What is this feeling?*
Tom slowly wrapped his arms around her. That was the only thing she said to him and it was the only thing he needed to hear. He didn't even know that he needed to hear it, and coming from anyone else, it would have been hollow.

*I'm not them.*

He felt like he should have known better.

Hermione would never leave him.

"I really think we should be doing this during the day, instead of abusing our positions of power," Hermione said, then yawned. "I'm losing so much sleep between this and studying for my O.W.L.s."

"Oh, I apologize for this being such a huge inconvenience to you," Rhex replied sarcastically, using his wand to tap on different stones and objects.

Hermione chose to ignore his attitude. "We should split up. Cover more ground."

Rhex didn't reply. Instead, he perked up when he found a painting with golden snakes carved onto the frame. He excitedly cast a spell to try and open it, but nothing happened. He tried a few more spells, but it still didn't budge.

"Bollocks," he muttered to himself, then turned his attention back to her. "While I agree with you, we're scheduled to do patrols together tonight, Granger. It would look a little suspicious if we split up."

Hermione crossed her arms and raised a brow. "I don't think it would look any less suspicious than trying to open paintings at one o'clock in the morning, well after our patrols ended. We're going to get detention if we're caught."

Rhex considered this. "Touché. Is it really already one?"

She nodded and was about to open her mouth to reply when they heard the long, unmistakable meow of Mrs. Norris echoing down the corridor. They looked at each other in horror.

"Fuck," he whispered. "Quick, let's get out of here before that old grease bag catches us."

They hurried down the corridor and got on the moving staircase right as it was about to switch. Hermione grasped onto the bannister and saw the swaying light of a lantern shining off the wall from where they'd just come.

Rhex must have noticed it, too, because he rushed down the stairs as they were still moving. Was he about to…? No. There's no way he would dare to jump, but then she saw him crouch and –

"What are you doing?" she asked, but he ignored her.

As soon as the stairs shifted toward the second-floor corridor landing, he leapt. He landed on his side and quickly got up. He motioned for her to jump. "Come on!"

"Are you mad!?" she hissed, having to turn her head to look at him as the staircase shifted back again.

"Yes. I thought we've already established this, Granger. Now, come on! Or do you want to get caught?" he snapped impatiently.
Hermione looked back up at the corridor they'd run from and her eyes widened when she saw Mrs. Norris looking down at her from the top of the same staircase she was on. Her fluffy tail twitched back and forth while she patiently waited for her master.

The staircase started shifting back toward Rhex right as she heard Filch's voice echo off the walls, "Is there something there, my sweet?"

_Shit._

She looked back down at Rhex with fearful eyes. There was no way she could do this. She was _terrified _of heights.

"I'll catch you!" he said. "Just jump!"

Hermione would probably never know why, but she believed him. So, she shakily brought herself down the last few steps to the bottom, and right as the stairs shifted toward Rhex, she closed her eyes and jumped.

She felt his hands catch her by her waist and she latched onto his robes for dear life. Her heart was racing, but she felt better when she felt stone underneath her feet.

When she opened her eyes, Rhex was grinning down at her. "Told you I'd catch you."

All she could do was stare at him.

Mrs. Norris meowed again and their eyes snapped up.

"Shit. Come on." He grabbed her hand and they ran down the darkened corridor.

"Where are we going? We can't get to our common rooms this way!" Hermione snapped. "We should have just stayed on the stairs and waited for it to -"

"If we waited, we would have been caught. He may be a squib, but he's a quick one. He'd be useless if it weren't for his bloody _furball_ -"

"Hey! I know you're there! Stop!" they heard Filch yell behind them.

Rhex stopped running and swore. Hermione went to yank her hand out of his, but his grip tightened. She glared at him.

"Just follow my lead, alright?"

Hermione's scowl turned into bewilderment. "Excuse me?"

It all happened so quickly. Rhexenor pulled out his wand, pointed it at a door behind her, and slammed it open. Then, he shoved her full force into the dark room. She landed, _hard_, flat on her arse and elbows.

Hermione stared at him in shock. He grinned, winked at her, then magically closed the door, trapping her in the...girls' lavatory? He'd thrown her in the bloody _bathroom._

Oh, she was going to _kill_ him.

She reached for the sink to pull herself up, but froze in a crouched position when she heard a commotion right outside the door.

"What did you do to Mrs. Norris!?" Filch hollered.
"I didn't mean to -"

"You killed my cat!"

"Oh, don't be daft, Mr. Filch. I didn't kill her. I just stunned her. There is a difference, you know," Rhex replied carelessly.

"I'll have you kicked out for this, Mr. Lestrange."

"I told you, it was an accident. I thought she was a boggart."

"A boggart!? Mrs. Norris – a boggart!?" the older man screeched indignantly.

"What? I'm afraid of cats."

Hermione face-palmed and shook her head. She could imagine him nonchalantly shrugging his shoulders right now. He was saving her arse. He sacrificed himself to get her out of trouble. Every time Hermione thought she had Rhex figured out, he'd do something like this to prove she didn't really know him at all.

"Likely story, Mr. Lestrange. Come on, to the Headmaster's office with you."

Hermione refused to get up from her crouched position until she couldn't hear their retreating footsteps anymore, and then she waited a little longer. Once her legs began to get a little too tingly, she started to haul herself up on one of sinks, but slipped. She reached out instinctively and caught herself on one of the faucets.

She was thinking about how useless her legs were, when she noticed the moonlight streaming through the window was hitting the faucet a peculiar way that made it look like there was a –

"Snake," Hermione gasped, running her thumb over the engraving in awe.

She scrambled up and frantically started turning the handles, even though she already knew they wouldn't work – they'd never worked.

Hermione pulled her wand out, stepped back, and cast every spell she could think of that would reveal an entrance, but nothing worked. She pulled at her hair in frustration and circled the sinks once, twice, three times.

This was the entrance – it just had to be. It was obvious and she was rather annoyed that it had been in plain sight the entire time. The sink must open somehow, but nothing she tried worked. She tapped her wand against her thigh impatiently and imagined Salazar Slytherin standing in her exact spot, and wondered what kind of spell he used to open it.

Maybe he didn't use revealing charms? Or opening charms? Maybe it was something more complex, like transfiguring it into something, or runes, or maybe – wait.

Hermione plopped down on the floor, cross-legged, and stared hard at the sink. She tilted her head to the side.

"Only the heir of Slytherin is supposed to be able to open it…" she thought out loud.

And if Tom really was the heir of Slytherin, how would he know where to find it or even what he was supposed to do to open it? Was it something that got passed down in his family? It would make sense that he had no idea how to, since his mother was dead and he had no idea who his
father was.

It was a little terrifying, knowing that her br – she shook her head – that Tom possibly held the power to open something so dangerous, to *control* something that was supposed to be lethal, to *kill* people like her and –

Hermione's eyes slowly widened when she finally realized how to open the entrance. She jumped back up and touched the faucet again.

*Only the heir of Slytherin can open it.*

*Something that is passed down.*

*He could talk to snakes.*

God, she was *such* an idiot. Parselmouth. All he had to do was speak the language, to say some sort of command, and it would open. It was so simple.

Well, now that she had that figured out, it was time for her to get back to the Gryffindor common room before she got caught. Rhex sacrificed himself to save her arse, so it wouldn't be kind to repay him by getting caught.

Hermione managed to make her way back to the common room and she thought of so many things she'd discovered along the way.

*What is down there?*

*When should I tell Rhex?*

*Should I tell him anything at all?*

*What if Tom isn't the heir of Slytherin?*

*Oh, God. What if he is?*

*How would I tell him?*

*What would he do?*

*How would he take it?*

*Would he be pleased with his heritage? He doesn't care for Purebloods very much.*

*Would he change?*

*Would he end up using the monster for himself…?*

Hermione didn't want to think anymore. She awoke a very displeased Fat Lady and slinked through the entrance. Hermione was so mentally drained that she almost didn't notice Harry slumped over on the side of the sofa. His glasses were almost falling off his nose and he had homework strewn everywhere around him.

She felt her heart swell at the sight of her best friend and walked over to him. She gently shook his shoulder. "Harry. Harry, wake up."

Harry's eyes popped open and they were red-rimmed from exhaustion. He looked around, confused. "Mione? 'Severything alright?" he slurred.
Hermione snorted and started stacking his things. "Yes. You fell asleep."

"Oh," he stated. He sat up and rubbed his shoulder. "Mum's been breathing down my neck about passing my O.W.L.s."

"Good. Saves me the trouble from having to," she joked.

Harry glared at her, but then his face softened. "Why are you still up?"

"Oh, I couldn't sleep," she evaded.

"Is everything alright?"

Hermione nodded. "Yeah, I've just been thinking a lot."

"Do you want to talk about it?" he offered.

At first, she almost said 'no', but she realized that she did want to talk about it, but she was trying to figure out how to go about doing that without giving anything away.

"Well, sometimes…I wonder about things," Hermione trailed off.

Harry hummed for her to continue.

"Do you ever wonder if some people are just…born evil?" she asked quietly, unsure of who exactly she was asking about: Tom, Rhex, Bellatrix, or maybe even herself.

Harry tilted his head to the side and his glasses slid a fraction down his nose, suddenly very much awake. His eyebrows furrowed together and he pushed his glasses back up as he replied, "I think that some people are more vulnerable to...uh...making bad decisions, I suppose; but being born evil? No, I don't think so. I believe that is a learned behavior," he chuckled, then continued, "Now I'm imagining a baby wearing a nappy and plotting world domination."

Hermione rolled her eyes. There he went, being deep for two whole seconds before making a joke. He was his father's son.

"What brought this on, Hermione?" Harry pressed, concerned. "Is everything alright?"

"Oh, everything is fine. You know me: full of philosophy. Don't mind me, Harry," she replied with more enthusiasm than she felt. She stood. "Now, off to bed with you. I'm off to do the same."

He rolled his eyes and smiled. "Alright, mum."

"I'll tell Lily you said that," she joked.

After they said their good-nights and went their separate ways, Hermione couldn't sleep. She tossed and she turned and she thought of what her future – their future – held.

It was a Hogsmeade weekend, and Hermione and Tom had picked up some of their parent's favorite wizarding snacks together earlier that day. They were on their way to the owlery to ship them off when Tom flung an arm out to stop her. Hermione nearly dropped the parcels and was about to shout at him about it, but he held a finger up to his lips.

She strained her ears to listen and heard hushed voices on the other side of the outer castle walls, only a few meters away. Tom inched forward through the archway to get a better look. Hermione
carefully followed him, clutching the parcels tighter to her chest. Who in the world was he trying to eavesdrop on now?

As they got closer, the voices became clearer.

"-at in the world were you thinking?" hissed a woman's voice Hermione didn't recognize. "Hexing the squib's pet like that? You fool! You could have lost your Head Boy title. You could have been expelled and where would I be then?"

"Oh, I dunno. Probably not in your own bed, if I were to take a wild guess."

"Why, you little, disrespectful shit."

*Oh, my God.* It was Rhex and his *mother.* Bellatrix Lestrange was here - at *Hogwarts.* This was not good.

Hermione panicked. What if she did something to hurt Rhex? What if she found them? If his mother caught them eavesdropping – if Tom overheard the wrong thing – oh, shit. Oh, shit, shit, shit.

Without thinking, Hermione passed Tom around the corner and walked purposefully toward Rhex and his mother. Tom reached out to grab her by the elbow, but she slipped out of his grasp. Rhex's eyes darted to her over his mother's shoulder, which caused Bellatrix to quickly turn around. It took everything in Hermione to not run screaming in the other direction. She just kept reminding herself that this woman knew absolutely *nothing* about her, so there was no reason to be afraid.

The first thing that she noticed about the older woman was that she was *beautiful.* Everything about her was pristine, yet chaotic at the same time. She reminded Hermione of one of those wild, dark faeries she read about in tales; the ones who would kiss you sweetly right before tearing your throat out.

Hermione ignored the way Bellatrix eyed her curiously. It sent shivers down her spine.

"*There* you are, Lestrange. Aubrey has been look *every*where for you," Hermione stated, pretending to be out-of-breath and irritated with him.

Rhex's eyes narrowed at her and he quickly caught on. "Aubrey Cattermole? What does she want?"

"How should I know?" she snapped back. "Probably something about graduation. She wanted me to tell you that she needs your help in the Heads' common room right away."

"Tell her that I'll come along when I'm good and ready," he said sarcastically.

Hermione scoffed. *You* can go and tell her that. I've got better things to do than be your messenger."

"Like what? Rearranging that rat's nest on your head?" he grinned maliciously.

Hermione's jaw dropped. Okay, that was taking it a step to far. She was about to tell him how she could do him the favor of *rearranging his face* for him when she felt Tom's presence behind her.

"Everything alright, sis?"

She noticed that Bellatrix was glancing back and forth from her and Rhex in amusement. A coy smile slowly spread across her face and it made Hermione uncomfortable.
"Oh, don't worry, love," she answered Tom, then pinched Rhex's cheek. "They were just having a little spat. You were just having a little spat, weren't you, Rhexie-poo?"

Rhex batted her hand away and glared darkly at her. "I told you to stop calling me that."

"Oh, whoops! Did I embarrass you, sweetie? Oh, my goodness. I'm so sorry. You know how mummy always forgets," she batted her eyes and pouted. She turned her attention back to Hermione. "But...I can't help but to think that I know you from somewhere. Do I know you, darling?"

Hermione felt like her heart fell straight to her gut. "N-no, I'm sorry. I don't believe we've ever met before."

Bellatrix's eyes scanned Hermione's face longer than she felt was necessary. "Hmm, perhaps you just remind me of someone," she said, then she turned to Rhex with a sweet smile and asked, "Doesn't she remind you of someone, sweetheart?"

Rhex's jaw was clenched tight and it looked like he was shaking with barely suppressed rage. "No. She doesn't."

The older woman pouted and gave Hermione one last look over. "Hmm. Perhaps I was mistaken."

"Yes, perhaps," Tom interrupted, turning his attention to Hermione. "We should head to the owlery now."

Hermione nodded and glanced at Rhexenor.

Bellatrix Lestrange pulled a dainty pocket watch out of her robe and clicked her tongue. "It's time for me to go. Remember what I told you, sweetheart."

His mother blew him a kiss and he scowled at her back as she walked away. Tom, Hermione, and Rhex stood there awkwardly in her wake.

"Your mother is charming, Lestrange. I can see where you get it from," Tom deadpanned.

"Oh, fuck off, Riddle," Rhex snapped, then he stormed past them. As he did, his eyes lifted to Hermione's for the briefest of moments, then he was gone.

Hermione winced and made to follow him, but remembered where she was and froze. Tom looked at her suspiciously, and she silently prayed that he wouldn't read too deeply into it.

"Hermione," he started slowly. "Care to tell me what that was all about?"

She shifted the parcels in her arms and stuck her nose up in the air indignantly. "It's rude to eavesdrop, Tom."

"And lying to him about Cattermole isn't?"

"Nope," she replied, then started walking to the owlery, effectively dropping the conversation. "Come on, let's go send these off to mum and dad."

Tom jogged to catch up to her and he remained quiet to rest of the day.

It made her anxious.
There were millions of questions left unanswered in this world, but the one that currently came to Tom's mind as he was making rounds after curfew was this one: why in the bloody world did he accept the Prefect position?

Honestly, he could be spending his free time doing far more important things than catching students out of bed and listening to Daphne Greengrass blather on about gossip and fashion trends. She was a nice girl – a smart girl, but she was still a girl.

"Milli said the colors for Spring are utter garbage, but I have to disagree with her. Just because we are in Slytherin doesn't mean we shouldn't wear red, especially nice shades of red. It's not like we're supporting Gryffindor or anything, you know?" she asked conversationally.

Tom hummed and gave a slight nod to show that he was listening, but he had nothing to add. *Merlin, just end my suffering.*

Daphne changed from the latest fashion, to gossip. Tom had almost completely tuned her out by the time they started their climb up the Astronomy Tower. He glanced out the window and almost missed the blur of movement that darted across the lawn. He slowed his steps to focus on the dark mass and realized it was a student. He paused and was about to open his mouth to tell Daphne, when he recognized the wild beast that was Hermione's hair. His eyes narrowed suspiciously.

*Where are you going off to, Hermione?*

"Tom? What's the matter?" Daphne asked curiously from her spot on the stairs above him.

His brain worked quickly to make an excuse to leave and go follow Hermione, but he never got the chance.

"Think fast!" someone screeched, then ice-cold water was dumped over their heads.

Daphne let out an indignant shriek and Tom pulled out his wand.

"Peeves," he growled and pointed his wand at the resident menace.

Peeves floated on his side, with his head resting in his hand, looking completely relaxed. He grinned. "Oh, no, kiddies. Whatever happened to you? Why are you all wet?"

"You horrid…thing!" Daphne cried.

Tom flung a relatively harmless curse at Peeves' shaking backside, which sent him careening away from them out of the tower.

"This was our last patrol. Do you think you can finish it, Daphne? I'm going to go teach Peeves a lesson about *manners.*"

Daphne nodded resolutely. "Please, do."
Tom nodded and ran out of the Astronomy Tower at full speed, with absolutely no intention of teaching anyone a lesson in manners. He stopped long enough to peer out of windows to see where she was headed and it looked like she was going toward… the Whomping Willow? But… why?

He ran down the next hallway and checked to see where she was now and she was indeed stopped right out of deadly reach of the willow tree. What in the world was she doing? And why was –

"No," he said to himself. His fingers gripped the stone ledge of the window when he spotted Rhexenor Lestrange. Tom tore off as quickly as he could and it still wasn't quick enough. Water was flying off him, as he hadn't spared a moment to cast a drying charm. He hadn't felt panic like this since… since…

Since around this time last year, he thought bitterly to himself, and images of a wet and shivering Hermione gasping for air filtered through his mind.

By the time he reached the tree, Hermione and Rhex were gone. The willow swayed lazily back and forth, almost as if it had just woken up from a nap; or maybe it was just taunting him. Tom's eyes darted around frantically, wondering which direction they could have gone. The snow was fully melted now, so there were no tracks to follow. Damn it. Damn it, damn it, damn –

He heard a muffled scream that he instantly recognized as Hermione's, but it sounded like it was coming from…

Tom tilted his head to the side and asked himself incredulously, "The Whomping Willow?"

He shook his head. That was impossible. He paused in his denial when he spotted what looked to be a narrow hole in the base of the tree. Maybe…? No. No. She couldn't possibly be inside a tree –

Then, he heard Lestrange curse and he knew he wasn't imagining things. How did they get inside of the tree without getting clubbed to death and why? Where was Lestrange taking her? Tom started shaking uncontrollably, but he wasn't sure if it was because of the pure rage he felt, or if it was the fact that it was a cold night and he was currently drenched in ice water. Honestly, it was probably a combination of both.

Tom took a few cautious steps forward to test the reaction of the willow, and it was just as he was expecting – one of the willow's large limbs came barreling toward him, and slammed onto the ground of where he'd just been standing.

He'd jumped out of range just in time and thought of how he was going to get into that opening without being killed. A clever idea came to his mind when he spotted a piece of wood that the Whomping Willow had left behind on the ground. Tom pointed his wand at it and chanted, "Avifors."

The piece of wood was supposed to transfigure into a flock of birds, but he was mildly surprised when it had turned into a large flock of bats instead. Wasting no time, Tom controlled the bats and sent them to distract the willow long enough for him to launch himself through the dark hole.

"Fuck", he cursed when he landed on his elbow. He quickly tested it to make sure he was fine, then lit his wand. Where are they?

He saw a narrow passageway leading upward, and seeing as it was the only way to go besides back out, he quickly followed it. It didn't take long for him to find an old, rickety wooden door. His heart was hammering away as he slowly pushed it open and he walked through.
Tom's senses were heightened as he listened for anything – everything as he slowly walked through the old house – if it could be called a house, that is. He walked into an empty room on his left – what appeared to be the kitchen – and caught sight of the twinkling lights of the Hogsmeade shops. Tom picked up a broken tea cup to examine it.

*This is the Shrieking Shack. Why did he bring her here?*

And all he could think of was nothing good. Lestrange hated Muggleborns – he was a racist. There could be no possible good reason to bring her here. He had to find her.

Footsteps sounded above him and he looked up. Dust spiraled down from between the cracks of the floorboards and he heard their muffled voices, but couldn't hear their words. Tom set the tea cup back down and went to find the stairs.

Once he found the stairs, he went as quickly as he dared to go. He needed to have the element of surprise against Lestrange, to save Hermione. He knew he could beat Lestrange in a *friendly* duel at school, but they weren't at school right now. Tom knew that Lestrange wasn't the type of person to fight fair *or* honorably; and to be fair, neither was he. *Anything* could happen.

As he got closer, their words became clearer.

" – shouldn't have done that, Granger. Now she *suspects* something," snapped Lestrange.

Tom's hand paused over the doorknob and he trained his ears. *Who suspects what?*

"Oh, pardon me for trying to save your arse," she replied.

"No need to worry about saving *mine.*" Lestrange let out a short laugh, then added menacingly, "You should be more worried about who is going to save *yours* now."

Tom had heard enough. He slammed the door open to see Lestrange casually leaning against an old table and Hermione sitting in a chair across from him, looking perfectly…*safe*. Hermione jumped from her seat so fast that her chair knocked back to the floor and Lestrange looked unconcerned at Tom's presence.

"T-Tom," she stammered, wide-eyed.

"Oh, how *wonderful*. Look at what the kneazle dragged in," Lestrange drawled.

A different kind of wave of rage washed over Tom and he didn't hesitate in sending a Flipendo at Lestrange, sending him crashing into a broken dresser. Rhex pulled his wand out, but not quickly enough. Tom disarmed him within a heartbeat, grabbed him by the neck, and slammed him up against the wall.

"What kind of stunt are you pulling here, Lestrange?" Tom asked calmly, but felt anything but calm. His blood was pumping and his mind was racing.

Rhexenor's dark curls fell over his eyes, but Tom could still see his vicious glare. "I have no idea what you're talking about, Riddle."

Tom's fingers curled tighter around his neck and he slammed Rhex against the wall again.

"What…were you doing…with Hermione?"

A lazy, malicious grin overtook Lestrange's face. "Oh, wouldn't you like to know what I was doing with your sister?"
"Rhex, you idiot!" Hermione shouted.

Tom felt that part of him – that crueler part of him he usually kept hidden – break the surface. He realized, in that very moment, that he had become soft. He'd been good, so that he might be good enough for her.

A cold smile spread across Tom's face when he realized something: he already had her.

What was stopping him now?

Nothing, he thought right before his hand darted into his pocket for his pocket knife, flipped it open, and sank it directly into Lestrange's open palm, effectively pinning it to the wall.

Rhexenor screamed and it was a melody to Tom's ears.

"Oh, my God, Tom! What in the bloody Hell are you doing!?!?" Hermione shrieked, frantically pulling at his arm.

Tom spared a side-glance toward her, but brought his attention back to Lestrange when he started giving him Hell, too.

"You're fucking mad! You stabbed me! You fucking stabbed me, you daft cunt!" Lestrange panicked. Fresh, pain-filled tears streamed down his cheeks as he struggled to pray his bloody hand out of the knife's steel grip. Tom gripped Lestrange by the front of his robes with his free hand and slammed him against the wall again.

"He needs to be punished, Hermione," Tom replied through clenched teeth, completely ignoring the older boy's agony-filled scream when Tom inched the knife in just a bit further…

"Punished!??" she shrieked again and momentarily ceased her frantic pulling on Tom's arm. Her face twisted into one of indignation and she began crying. "You can't just go stabbing people or… or stealing candy when you think someone's slighted you, Tom!"

Tom stared at her in bewilderment. "Candy?"

"Caleb Hinckley!"

"Who?"

Her jaw dropped. "The boy you essentially Crucioed on Halloween!"

Tom's eyes lit up in recognition. "Him? You're bringing up something that happened nearly six years ago?"

Rhexenor gave a pained laugh and added, "What do you expect? She's a woman – urgh!"

Tom gave the knife handle a little jerk. "What are you doing with Hermione?"

"Wouldn't you like to know?" he spat again. Tom didn't hesitate and plunged the knife into his hand all the way to the hilt.

The piercing shriek that tore through the little shack made it live up to its name.

"You were saying?" Tom inquired mockingly.

Lestrange managed to give a crazed smile through all the pain. He pointed toward Hermione with his chin. "Why don't you…ask…her?"
Hermione froze up when Tom's cold, expectant gaze landed on her.

"What is he talking about, Hermione?"

He watched her open and close her mouth like a fish out of water and it made his heart feel like it was simultaneously racing and stopping. Were they...? No. There was no way. She wouldn't – she couldn't. No.

"Damn it, Tom. Let him go! You're going to get sent to Azkaban!" she cried out.

"I don't care!" he yelled back angrily. He tore the knife from Rhex's hand and threw the older boy to the floor. Rhex cried out when he landed, and shakily grasped his bleeding hand. Hermione went to go help him, but Tom stopped her. "No! You tell me what is going on right now."

"He's bleeding, Tom. He needs help," she replied and went to side-step Tom, but he stopped her again.

"Then you better start talking."

Hermione straightened. "It would...it would take too long to explain," she replied, then peered over his shoulder to look at Rhex. The concern on her face for fucking Lestrange nearly tore him apart.

*Look at me. Not him. Me.*

"Tom, please. There's so much blood. Look," she sobbed.

"Hermione," Tom warned.

Her eyes darted from Tom to Rhex in a panic, trying to come to a decision. Tom watched and waited as she seemed to finally come to one once Rhex let out a particularly excruciating sob.

Hermione looked him determinedly in the eyes and rushed, "Rhex's parents are trying to unlock the Chamber of Secrets and we're trying to stop them. They want to kill Muggleborn students using Slytherin's monster."

"That's a myth, Hermione. You really let this arse fool you into thinking his story is true? Come on! You're smarter than this! He just wanted to take advantage of you!"

"If I wanted to take advantage of her, I would have done it weeks ago," Lestrange moaned from his place on the floor.

Tom's head snapped in his direction. He let out an incredulous laugh. "...Weeks?"

Rhex just laughed. "You know, you take the over-protective brother role a little too seriously."

Tom pressed his shoe on Rhex's injured hand and Rhex cried out. Hermione grabbed Tom's arm and hauled him away. She had tears in her eyes and he hated her for crying over this. He hated her for making him feel this way. He hated her for doing this to him. He hated how he wanted to hate her, but he couldn't.

"Tom! Stop it! I'm telling you the truth! Why would I lie to you about this?"

"Oh, I don't fucking know? Why would you be meeting this piece of shit for weeks and not breathe a word of it to me!?" he yelled.
Hermione shoved his chest and yelled back, "I was trying to protect you, you arsehole!"

"Protecting me? Protecting me!? How is this," he motioned with his hand, getting right in her face, "protecting me, Hermione!"

"Because I didn't want you to find out that you're the heir of Slytherin!" she screamed. Her eyes widened in horror and she slapped a hand over her mouth.

Tom stared at her. His mind went blank.

"What did you just say?" he whispered.

"You've got to be fucking kidding me," Rhex groaned.

Tom watched Hermione start pacing around the room, hysterically pulling at her curls.

"Hermione…what did you mean I'm the heir of Slytherin?"

She stopped pacing, but refused to look at him. She stared at the floor and shrugged. "I mean, it's always been obvious, hasn't it?"

Tom shook his head. "I'm not the heir of Slytherin, Hermione. I told you about my parents already."

"Knowing what happened to them and knowing who they were are two totally different things, Tom," she stated rationally. "Just think about it. You're different, Tom – you're special. You always have been. Haven't you ever wondered why you were the first known Muggleborn to ever be sorted into Slytherin? Haven't you ever wondered why you're the only person we know of who can speak to snakes? We're idiots for not figuring this out sooner."

Tom's heart was racing. There was no way he could be the heir of Slytherin. His parents were Muggles.

But what if they weren't?

Tom's gaze snapped back to hers and he saw the truth hiding in her eyes.

He was the heir of Slytherin.

A/N: I apologize for the long wait, but I just felt like writing other shit. ^__^ HAPPY TOMIONE DAY!!!

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