Solider On **Lover of the Light** Chapter Eleven: Solider On He'd been in that room several times before. He had sat in the same seat, on a corner of a black couch pressed against the back of a white wall, many times. He'd even been in the room through its many phases of reconstruction. He'd seen it be an all-around sky-blue and littered with toys, he'd seen it transform to a prodigy of emerald and silver to represent Slytherin House, Quidditch and PlayWizard posters hung here and there, he'd seen it destroyed and partially burned down once, and he'd seen the current phase of renovation for a few months now. It was currently all white, from walls, ceiling, and to the reflective marble flooring; even a few artifacts such as lamps, vases, and three pillows on the black couch. The only pop of color to the sitting room was the wall where the eccentric fireplace was built into. It was a deep emerald green, the wall, and it was decorated with a giant portrait while the wall beside it held a white bookcase. The many times he'd find himself in the sitting room, Draco had always wanted to leave. He hadn't liked it when he was a child because the room was littered like a child's playroom, and he'd been jealous that he seemed to be the only boy that was expected to be neat and read, paint, or play an instrument for fun. As a younger adolescent, he hadn't enjoyed sitting in the same room with a boy who got quieter and stonier as the years went by. (Though, he did have to admit that there were the rare occasions at the ages of thirteen to fi een when sneaking glasses of liquor with the companion was the only acceptable time.) The one time he saw the sitting room destroyed was the moment that he realized that the war had escalated too far, and that there really wasn't a side that was safe during the Dark Lord's terror. And the current times that he'd been in the sitting room, he had to deal with an awkwardness in trying to rebuild a comradeship with the companion that'd changed from the serious boy to an outspoken one. a Adding to those current times of wanting to flee was the present moment. He sat at the edge of the black couch and watched a figure stand before the fireplace, a pregnant silence ringing throughout the white room. a He decided to break that silence. "That's Silvana Rosso." He stood up from his seat, walking almost silently towards the fireplace and person there. "His mother." She felt him before he had arrived beside her. She had felt him the moment he walked into the room over an hour ago, silently and supposedly undetected by her as she stared at the wall in front of her. She didn't know why that was, why she could sense his aura and smell the mint that radiated o his skin. "I know," she responded quietly. She forced herself not to turn her head to the le of her and stare at him. She resisted that urge because she knew that the moment her eyes met his she was going to take him all in; studying him to find another answer that she was missing. She didn't know how it was that he, Draco Malfoyhad an e ect over her and they'd never spoken civilly to one another. He didn't have anything pure about him, yet her body seemed to cling onto any particle of his from the get-go of a truce. Li ing her chin a little higher, finding resolve not to turn, she instead studied the portrait before her. It was a painting, but the colors and details of it were so real, so intense, that she could've sworn it was a muggle photograph. A woman was painted from the waist up, nothing behind her but white as she smiled. She had a black, lace bodice that fell o her shoulders; exposing her rich and creamy tanned skin. She had dark hair that fell down into curls, parted at the middle, and that framed her face perfectly. She had wide-set eyes, cutting and black like rare gems. The woman was beautiful, refined looking, and she looked so much like Blaise. "Why didn't he tell me?" Hermione lost her concentration over the painting and turned to Malfoy. Though she could still feel his warm hands on her, sending calming vibrations into her skin like he'd wrapped her up in a nonverbal spell, she pushed that aside to stare at him sadly. "Why didn't Blaise tell me the truth?" a Malfoy stared back intently for a moment before he released it and looked back at the portrait. "I don't know," he said unfeeling. "But what's surprising is that your brother can keep a secret." There it went again, an indirect mention of a secret that Blaise and Malfoy shared. She would've been annoyed by it, but she had other pressing matters. "He should've," her throat tightened. "He betrayed me." "Or maybe there's more to it," Draco said in a low voice that, if he hadn't continued speaking, she wouldn't have known he said anything at all. "Zabini always seems to have a reason for everything he does. Even if the rest of us can't understand it at first." Hermione glanced at the blonde boy with calculating eyes. "Do you believe that, Malfoy? Because I don't even know why he does the things that he does. He's shi y, my brother." "The portrait of his mother is a still; it'll never move and it'll never talk to him like the portraits of ancestors we wizards have in our home." He blinked from the wall and looked back at the brunette steadily. "What motive could Zabini have to do something like that?" "...I don't know," muttered the girl, obliged to answer with sincerity. Malfoy gave her a nod. "I didn't either the first time I came back here," he began to explain, "but then it was clear. The painting doesn't move because Zabini doesn't want to interact with his mother through a frame. It's a punishment too, I suppose. He didn't spend much time with her, he harbored resentment towards her for marrying so frequently, and a er her murder he had nothing but that guilt. The painting doesn't move because he wants to remember her smiling, not of what she became." Hermione swallowed roughly, a knot of emotions for Blaise added onto those she felt for herself. "You figured that out?" 'We were drunk one night and he spilled his guts," Malfoy said sounding slightly casual for a single second. "The point is, Granger, that he's a massive git, but he usually has a motive—and they're not always entirely bad. Don't blame him for this." а They locked eyes again, strong and beholding, and for the smallest fragment of time she swore she was seeing a di erent version of Malfoy. A part of her, maybe as tiny as that second when she thought that the Prince of Prats was gone, was about to ponder that possibility, but the doors to the sitting room opened and in walked the owner and an unwanted guest. a Hermione tensed immediately: anger, resentment and hopelessness crept up her back with a chilly e ect while Nott smiled gently at her. "That's not going to work." Elbowing the dark-haired boy next to him, Blaise made his fellow Slytherin stop smiling. "Give my sister credit, you wanker." Theo rolled his black eyes at Zabini, but said nothing for the moment. "Hermione—" "No," she cut across her half-brother as soon as he directed his words to her. "I don't want to hear it." Blaise sighed with exasperation. "I know" it was a groan of defeat, "but the git isn't leaving until you talk to him. I o ered to send a good aim at his bollocks and then feed him to the dogs I have somewhere in the gardens, and who are possible dying of hunger, but Father and Allegra said no." He truly looked saddened about his request being denied. ₫¹ "Cheers, mate," Theo grunted, another eye-roll. "The sooner you get this conversation over, the sooner he'll leave and you can go to your bedroom and blow things up," her brother added in her direction. "Or him, if you prefer. Personally, I wouldn't want to ruin your bedroom; it's freshly decorated and you haven't enjoyed its wonders. No one would miss Nott." ď Knowing from experience that protesting was futile, Hermione simply nodded once and said nothing more. She supposed the Zabinis were right: she needed to talk to Nott, even if she wanted nothing more than for him to get lost in the depths of the Arctic ocean. ď Without meaning to, Blaise almost made his eyes look in regret at his sister, but he was fast to not show it when he masked his face into an expression full of disdain for the unwanted guest. "You've only an hour," he warned. a "Always a great host, Zabini," Nott retorted back. a Glancing away from the two always-feuding boys, Hermione noticed that Malfoy had already le his spot next to her and was heading towards the doors of Blaise's sitting room. He put a strong hold on his friend's shoulder, steering him along. And before the two could be out of the room, both Slytherins turned at the same time. Blaise gave Nott the finger, and Malfoy's uncaring stare seemed more forced than usual—walls of steel, of defense were up as he gave the witch a final look before closing the doors behind them with a nonverbal. ď Clearing her throat uneasily, because she was certain her mind was playing tricks on her, Hermione tried to shake o the thought that there could be more to Draco Malfoy than the tormenting boy she'd known since First Year. "Hermione--" "You lied to me." Nott had spoken immediately, and she was thankful for the distraction of her thoughts about the absentee blonde Slytherin. She crossed her arms over her chest, frowning at him as he approached. Theo stopped a few feet from her, close enough to see clearly into her brown gaze, but far enough that he had a chance to duck behind the center table if she decided to aim a hex at him. "It seems that way, I know," he replied with a smooth voice, "but I had my reasons." ď "Your talk about making amends was just rubbish," she accused. "You really didn't want to befriend me." "It seemsthat way," he repeated, "but I wasn't lying to you—not fully at least." He dared to take a step closer, stretching a hand out. "Can we please sit and talk this through?" Her answer was no. What she wanted was to hex him with the most painful spell she knew and then step over his body and hide in her bedroom until someone told her that the secret she'd been given two hours ago was nothing but a joke. But seeing as Nott wasn't going anywhere, Hermione scowled at him and rejected his hand as she practically stomped her way towards her brother's black couch. Hiding a grin, Nott turned on his heels and followed pursuit. He was keen to sit with enough space between them. "First o, I want to make it clear that my befriending you wasn't entirely because of—" " Don't say it' "—our betrothal." He heard her mutter something incoherent to his previous comment. "I genuinely wanted to make amends, Hermione. Not just with you, but with the world. The war changed me completely, like it's done to many others, and I found something that made me want to start fresh. All of that was before I knew about you," he explained. "And when I did, I had a month to think things through; about how I was going to proceed. Befriending you was, in a sense, killing two birds with one stone." a "You could've told me, Nott." "Would that have changed anything?" He snorted with amusement. "Hermione, you're not even over the fact that you're truly a Zabini, you weren't ready to hear about this." Hermione balled her hands into fists over her lap. She hated when people assumed what was best for her. It was like she was being underestimated, and Hermione Granger was never to be underestimated. "I still don't understand how this happened. How did you know who I was? Whyare we betrothed, Nott? I don't want to marry you!" "It's pureblood tradition," he began to explain again. "Families draw contracts to twine two powerful families together, to secure the purity of blood and a true heir, or because there's a mean of protection for one of the betrothed. Your family did it for the latter, while I'm sure mine was all for the power, money, and purity. "Anyway, that contract was made before we were born. The moment your parents passed Aria Zabini as dead, the contract automatically cancelled itself and became a useless scrap of parchment. Being the horder that she is, my mother kept the contract in our archives and forgot about it for almost eighteen years. It wasn't until a er the war, a er she had to sort through my father's financial files due to his imprisonment, that she came across the contract again. Being the smartest witch, Hermione, you know that every contract in the Wizardying World is more than a signed sheet—it's sealed and honored by magic and essence. By the point the contract had been found again, your parents must've acknowledged to someone outside your family that you were alive, and that's why the contract resurrected itself." Hermione pressed her fingertips of both hands on her temples, rubbing them to soothe the headache that'd been throbbing for a while now. She didn't have to ask how he came to find out her true identity, or better said, who Aria Zabini had been posing as all these years. His impatient, and clearly mad mother must've stormed straight to the Zabini Estate and demanded answers. And ifthe Zabinis had no intention in marrying her o to Theodore Nott Jr. to honor bigoted, pureblood traditions, they had to let it happen because of the bind the contract has. And somehow Hermione doubted that Mrs. Nott had any intention of forgiving the betrothal. Unless there was another way... a At the way her brown eyes lit up, her posture straightened out, Nott recognized that her mind was churning its wheels with ideas. "It can't be undone, Hermione." He smashed her hope before it inflated completely. "I researched it the day I was told. The contract is binding." "There has to be a way!" She shouted, standing from her seat and frowning at him. "There's loopholes to every damn contract, Nott! There hasto be a way out of this, I know it!" He looked up at her with momentarily blank eyes. "There is a loophole," she sparked with hope again, he could see it, "and that's death," and he destroyed it all over again. "Unless you plan on dying sometime this week, Hermione, this arranged marriage is going to be proceeded until the end." ď Without helping it, Hermione's eyes filled with instant tears. She tried her hardest for a few moments to control herself, to make the tears vanish, but they fell. A knot formed in her throat, and she felt her heart fall down to an unknown depth inside her chest. á Slightly uncomfortable, Nott made a decision to put that feeling aside so he could stand up and put his hands at her sides. He looked her full-on, his fingers circling around her arms as gently as he could. "I know you don't want this, Hermione," he murmured, "and you've every right to cry or to be enraged, but the reality is that this is going to happen." á "I don't want to marry you," she sni led out through her tears. "They can't take my...They can't take my right to choose who I'll share my life with, Theo. They can't take my chance to fall in I-love with someone." a The uneasiness he'd felt turned into sympathy and sadness. She was right. "Believe me, I know," he released his hold on her. With a sigh he said, "I don't want this either, Hermione, but as long as we have to, I rather do it with a friend than with an enemy." a Tears still fell past her eyelashes to splash against her pink cheeks. And surprisingly, for him, she didn't say anything. She just cried with devastating resignation, putting her palms over her eyes and blocking him out of her vision like she hoped it'd be from her life. If only things were that simple. With a shake of his head, damning his mother, Theo closed the space between him and the brunette as he wrapped his arms around her and pressed her against his chest. She cried harder, trembled at the same time that she sti ened in rejection, and all he had to say was, "we can mourn our freedom together." ₫³ XXXXXXXXX She thought she was going to spend the entire run of the holidays stuck in that large house of hers, enduring the ringing silence and looming memories of terrible mistakes that had cost her family so much. She thought she was going to roam those bare and destroyed halls, walking down levels and levels of nothing to find no one at the dining room when she was ready to eat. She thought she was going to spend the holidays secluded in her room, a heavy locking charm on her bedroom door to keep away the horrifying flashbacks that lived outside her own sanctuary when it was time for her to sleep. She thought she was going to spend the holidays alone, without a single word from another human being until the return to Hogwarts. a She'd been slightly mistaken. It was to her surprise the previous night when her owl Lyla flew into her bedroom window with a letter rather than a new edition of Witch Weeklyand the constant Daily Prophetnewspaper. A small part of her had a twinge of hope, that strange feeling she always felt when mail arrives, that it was from someone she'd been longing to hear from, but instead it was from someone she least expected to write to her. If you have plans tomorrow, cancel them. I need you to arrive at my gates at 12 pm. Don't be late. a B. Z. It had been an invitation, and a rather vague one at that. But that's how she found herself around people, even for a day, when all she'd been expecting was for no social interaction in the weeks without school. She was in the middle of a prestigious shop, standing in front of a large, glass table that was filled in every inch with glittering jewelry. She was fingering an Onyx and Pearl necklace, partially admiring the detailing, but she was mostly aware of the two other people viewing the jewelry with her. The girl right next to her that was pretending to check the price on a horrid and tacky Coral necklace that no one should be caught wearing, was eyeing the person in front of them; looking more intrigued than she should have. Pansy Parkinson knew she was about to witness something amusing when the girl next to her cleared her throat. "Granger, can I ask you something?" Blinking away from the earrings she was too focused on, the brunette ahead of Pansy looked momentarily confused a er Daphne called out for her. Lowering the objects she reached for to pass the time when she was shamelessly le in an awkward situation with two Slytherin girls that she knew nothing about and that hated her very essence just a year ago, Hermione nodded her head slowly. "What is it with you and Blaise?" Daphne Greengrass asked straightforwardly. "What'd you mean?" Hermione redirected with a question of her own. Daphne rolled her eyes. "I mean, what's really going on with you and him? Don't take this the wrong way, Granger, but I'm not buying the story the two of you are selling." Pansy watched as the Gry indor Princess looked thoroughly disgusted at what the blonde witch was suggesting. "Blaise and I are friends," she said sternly. "Actually, we're a little closer than that, but no way are we...Just no, Greengrass." Daphne leaned a little closer to the table, as if she was getting close to the brunette across from her. "I just don't understand this sudden relationship between you two. How do two opposite people go from resenting each others' existence to taking leisurely trips to another country together?" She shook her head, still not convinced with the simple explanation the brunette stranger had given her. "I've never seen him care for anyone else." "Leave it alone, Daphne," Pansy told the girl beside her as she carefully set the Onyx and Pearl necklace back onto its cushion. "Stop meddling." "I'm not meddling," retorted the blonde instantly. "I'm just honestly curious. I mean, I dated the bloody git for a year before he decided to take me out to Paris one holiday rather than spending that day shacking up in his bedroom." Greengrass turned back to the brunette, narrowing her dark, curious gaze at her. "We were together for two years and I've never seen him that caring for anything else that wasn't his moisturizing routine, body, and hair. But then you befriend him, Granger, and he's suddenly capable of loving someone." đ Moving down a few steps to her le around the table, Pansy picked up a thick, silver ring with a square-cut Fire Opal gem. "Why are you so interested in Zabini's capacity of love, Daphne? Jealous, are we?" She looked up for a brief moment at her fellow Slytherin, a smirk on her lips. "I thought you were dating that Ravenclaw now?" "I'm not jealous, Parkinson." Greengrass frowned. "And, yes, I'm dating Michael. And just because I'm a bit curious to why Blaise is suddenly Mister Joyful, that doesn't undermine my relationship." "Maybe you still—" "I don't love Blaise!" "—fancy him." Finishing her intended comment, Pansy's smirk grew wider. At the intense glare that the blonde witch was throwing at the darkhaired one, Hermione cleared her throat to push away the awkward tension that she felt at the very moment. As if being in silence with the two girls before wasn't bad enough, she didn't want to be caught in the middle of their row. She knew Slytherins fought dirty. "You're dating Michael? Michael Corne?" That caught Greengrass' attention, pulling it away from Parkinson. "Last I heard he was dating Cho Chang not just a few months ago." đ The girl lowered the tasteless Coral necklace she hadn't even noticed she'd been holding. "Chang has a way of scaring blokes away, Granger," she said nonchalantly. "I'm sure she's a lovely girl and whatnot, but Michael just couldn't put up with the constant competition with someone else. Especially if that person's been dead for four years." å The Gry indor Princess cringed and Pansy was the only one to notice it. Fortunately, before the amusing situation could rapidly progress to a resentful one filled with past terrors, the girls gained company when three boys approached them. Swaggering his way to them, like he owned the room, Blaise glided along the clean tiles of the famous, New York store with three black shopping bags that matched his attire. He had a large smirk that, if one were to tilt their head to the side, was masking a true smile as he stared at his sister and his housemates interacting. Following pursuit, with his hands at his sides, equally filled with a swag that was more natural and didn't make a fuss about itself, was Draco Malfoy. He was serious as ever, lips in a thin line, but his silver eyes were a little preoccupied showing that he was thinking about something quite fervently. And finally, behind the two friends, was Theodore Nott; and he was looking deeply upset as he stu ed his hands in his pockets. "Look at this, Hermione." Not caring about those behind or around him, Blaise went directly to his sister as he spotted a certain piece of jewelry next to her. "It's beautiful, don't you think?" Hermione looked at the opened velvet box that Blaise was now showing her. Inside the black cushion was a long, pearly chain that had white flowers hanging on both sides. And every flower had a center gem that gleamed blue, intensely and vibrant. She hadn't

noticed it before, but it gave her a sense of familiarity, of comfort now She cleared her throat and decided to speak. "It is," she replied, "but I don't think it suits you, Blaise. It's a hairpin." a The dark-skinned boy elbowed her. "You see the blue stones at the center," he proceeded, ignoring her jab, "well, that's a Zircon gemstone. It's the Zabini family stone." For a moment, it was like no one was around, like he'd no appearances to keep up, or secrets to hush—Blaise smiled at his sister with glittering a ection in his emerald eyes. "It's said that the Zircon was mixed into the blood of the first ever generation of Zabinis. It's also said that the essence of the stone, which holds powerful roots of wisdom, luck of prosperity and honor, lingers in every Zabinis core. And when we touch it..." He fingered a little flower on the chain. "It feels like a part of us." ď While the brunette looked up at Blaise, an odd— a sweet–smile passing among them, Daphne Greengrass rolled her eyes. She still didn't buy the story of Granger being just friends with Blaise. Granger didn't befriend people like Blaise. Hell, people like Blaise didn't befriend people like Blaise. Granted, she really didn't think the Gry indor was dating him, but something was definitely up and she wanted to know what it was. Something revolutionary had to have happened for Blaise to look like he was in complete bliss. No one could be that happy a er the war, she knew that; everyone did. a "Where's Goyle?" Speaking, Daphne squashed Zabini's little moment with the Gry indor. "I thought out of all people he'd be the first one that you'd choose to come on this shopping spree rather than..."She trailed o, nodding her head over towards Nott and the way he was absentmindedly appraising a watch. Zabini frowned at his ex-girlfriend. "He's in Azkaban," he snapped. "It's Visiting Day and he wanted to see his father. And you would think that Nott would go have family day in Azkaban, but the git decided that his time was spent better being with us. He must feel enough shame on a daily basis being a Nott that visiting Daddy in prison just doesn't help the ego." Clunk! Tossing the watch he'd been holding, Theo finally showed some angered emotion to all of Blaise's remarks when he tossed the item roughly against the table. He turned from the group of familiars and heatedly walked back in the direction where he came from with the other boys. "There he is." Looking away from the retreating Slytherin, Daphne stared at Blaise with mocking, dark eyes. "That's the git I used to date. I was starting to think that Granger so ened you up, but no. You're still the foul tosser you've always been." "Piss o, Greengrass." Somehow that erased the girl's amusement. "You piss o!" Blaise, ever the charming and polite boy, turned on his heels and headed to another end of the shop, muttering about bitchy and bitter exes; which Daphne heard perfectly well. She stormed a er him, ranting loudly about how she wasn't bitter, and if she hated him, it was because of the way he's always treated her. Le behind, Pansy felt like she was intruding when Draco met her eyes with his sharp ones. They were narrowed, ordering, reminding her of that boy in the early years at Hogwarts that was always demanding things from people because he was the Slytherin Prince. She wanted to laugh at how dierent that boy was to the one now, but she refrained herself from doing so. Instead, she nodded her head; signaling that she understood what he wanted. Lowering another necklace she was looking at back onto its place, Pansy casually walked away and le Draco alone with Granger. She may have looked like she hadn't noticed Parkinson leave, but Hermione was well aware of the fact that Malfoy lingered behind with her. She could feel him—if that even made sense at all. She could feel the tension, the echoes of secrets, of things le unspoken, frustrating things. She could even smell him. Honestly, that was starting to bother her. She didn't know why or how she became acutely aware of Malfoy and his presence, she just knew that she didn't like it. a "Purebloods have their own family gemstones?" Ending the awkward silence, killing that frustration she felt whenever he was around, that bounced o his body, Hermione picked up the velvet box that contained the hairpin with the Zircon stones. "Actually, that really doesn't surprise me. Purebloods try to be that distinctive, don't they?" "Muggles have them too, don't they?" She looked up at him. "Sort of," she responded carefully. "Muggles tend to have traditional birthstones. According to the month the person is born into, that's the gemstone that represents you." She looked away from him, looking back at the table. And as quickly as she spotted a specific stone in a jewelry item, she glanced back up at him. "It's a girl's ring, but this would be your birthstone. Alexandrite for those born in the month of June." **å** Malfoy looked down at the ring balancing in Hermione's open palm. Without really inspecting the purplish gemstone, he took the opportunity to hide his surprise that she knew his birth month. How she managed to know that bit of information, he'll never know, but it somehow gave him some relief. Relief that she was capable of so much more than he was. a Before he could say anything, before he could say something he'd been trying to say for a while, her voice dug into his eardrums; deeming his words unheard. "I think I may have made a mistake in inviting Nott today." She didn't know why she said it, but she needed to. It had been two days since she found out about the contract the Zabini and the Nott families created to marry her and Theo o and she had yet to really speak of it. She wanted to, she needed to speak of it, but she was having trouble finding someone that'd listen. Blaise hated Theo, and all her half-brother was capable of doing for the past two days was trying to come up with ploys to murder Nott without anyone catching him. She'd been a coward and had decided not to tell Ron or Harry yet; she couldn't face them with such news. So, why not Malfoy? Even if he didn't care, he still could pretend to listen and that was alright with her. a Malfoy stayed silent; expressionless. "Mister Zabini showed me the contract yesterday," she continued, not minding his silence, "and...there really isn't a fineprint that can get me out of it. Not unless I die, that is." She sighed, putting the Alexandrite ring back on the table. "I feel hopeless, especially since I haven't been able to research anything about that stupid contract. It's not like me to give up, but right now...It could be worse, right? He could be you." đ "What?" At the low and harsh reply from Malfoy, Hermione was quick to snap her chin up to look at him. "Well, he doesn't hate me, does he? He had the intention to befriend me, for what reasons, I'm not clear on anymore, but he didn't make a trucewith me because he was going to be seeing a lot of me. That's what you did. You still dislike me, don't you? I may be related to Blaise, but we have years of bigoted hatred among us that's never going to—" "Fuck o, Granger," Malfoy hissed. His pale face ignited with a deeprooted fury; eyes glaring and lips in a snarl. ď She frowned at his reaction, though slightly puzzled. "We're not friends, Malfoy; you're putting up with me. But we both know if things didn't happen the way they did you would've continued looking down at me and I would've continued defending myself from you." "Go to hell, Granger." Things changed quickly in the second he said that, the second later that she looked thoroughly confused, the second a er that he started walking away from her in a furious fashion, and in the next second when a resounding BANGechoed around the shop. The windows of the shop shattered along with the loud, booming sound that shook the entire place. As the crystal of the windows fell, people started running, screaming, and wands were whipped out from their secure locations. Flashes of spells penetrated the walls of the shop from the outside, and from the small crowd that had been inside of the store, it was impossible to tell who was creating the attack. a Turning from his spot, Draco's wide eyes caught two things within a fragment of a millisecond: Zabini clutching a screaming Daphne, and Granger dodging several jets of lights. a " Impedimenta" Shooting her own curse, Hermione crawled underneath a table of expensive scarves and silk gloves, diverging a hex that had been headed right for her. Her heart had already been beating fast with angry defense over her discussion with Malfoy, but now it was pumping with adrenaline from the surprise attack. Crawling on the now littered floor of the posh New Yorker shop, Hermione had her ears perked and eyes alert at all the commotion that was happening. So as things exploded, as things flew, as people ran, and as she crawled her way on the floor to avoid the curses flying, she didn't count on anyone coming up from behind her. That was her terrible mistake, and it had been exploited. Feeling nails seep into her scalp, Hermione was dragged backwards by her curls. She gripped her wand tightly in one hand before it slipped from her fingers, and her other hand was digging its own nails at the hand pulling her hair. She was hissing colorful curses that would never come out of her proper and polite mouth on a daily basis; all the while trying to free herself. "Draco!" Shrieking at the top of her lungs, Pansy appeared once more as she tried dodging spells still blowing things around the store. She fell to the ground as the table of jewelry she'd been admiring earlier was flung up by a jet of light, her hands covering her head and her eyes squeezing tightly shut. Close to the dark-haired girl, Draco sneered as he roughly grabbed Pansy by one of the arms shielding her and pulled her back up to her feet. "Get yourself out of the shop, Parkinson!" He ordered. "Send a Patronus to the Ministry!" a The giant chandelier that hung from the center of the ceiling, that no one had apparently noticed, crashed to the floor, sending shards of diamonds, glass, and metal flying everywhere; catching the two Slytherins and others in the area. Malfoy managed to conjure a Shielding Charm right before their faces were pierced by the broken "Hermione!" Turning for a second, charm still up, the blonde Slytherin saw Zabini shouting for the brunette that had managed to fight o her attacker for a single moment before a famous jet of green light missed her by a centimeter. a Heaving, her chest pumping with strangled air, Hermione rolled from her back onto her stomach; crawling for a few quick seconds before she bolt back onto her feet. She had lost her wand somewhere, it had slipped from her fingers when she managed to scrape by the Killing Curse. She had lost her weapon and now she had to count on her knowledge of nonverbals until she found it again. å One curse a er another shot towards her direction, but Hermione had the experience of war to help her dodge most of them. She was agile, bending down when she needed to, launching herself to a corner so the spell heading for her would hit the wall in front of her, and she was strong enough to aim a few good punches and kicks when someone had gripped her shoulder and turned her around. In the second that Granger started throwing punches at the hooded figure that was attempting to bring her down, Draco and Blaise started running to her. Pansy dove in to their direction too, but she was headed for Daphne; pulling her away from Zabini before she got caught in the midst of a curse for being shell-shocked. Though he found Daphne a nuisance, he was thrilled for a swi second that Parkinson managed to free her from him and that both scurried o; trying to find an escape and hopefully get some help. And as his eyes were set on Hermione Granger—the war heroine battling out with fists and kicks, he and Malfoy got caught in the pathway of a flying table. He felt it before it even came hurling their way. The table hit him and Blaise from mid-back to the crown of their heads. It knocked them down instantly. The impact of the table and objects on it dug into their bodies; causing damage. He felt shards of glass rip through his clothes, piercing his back and through the first couple of layers of his skin. And as they fell to the ground, a clutter of demolished walls and

other things inside of the shop fell on him and Zabini; burying them "Blaise!" Hermione shouted for her brother, eyes appalled as he disappeared in the mess of things. She saw dust of the plaster create a fog around the section where the two Slytherins fell and she felt panic seep through her. "Malfoy!" a Hissing with pain, Hermione felt a ball of fire settle on her right shoulder before she maneuvered away from her attacker's way; thinking of a powerful nonverbal to end the fiery curse sizzling her She froze for a tiny moment—of course they were a er her. How da could she have been in thinking that all these attacks were just going to disappear; like they were just a coincidence and they were never going to come and haunt her again. Shaking the voice out of her head, Hermione didn't let the chill of her mind being invaded distract her from dodging another spell heading The problem was not in getting distracting, in cowering with fear that there was a maniac on the loose who knew her secret, who wanted her crumbled and possible dead—the problematic matter was that she had lost her wand. She was a powerful witch, capable of so much more than any witch or wizard twice her age and with more experience, but there was only so much her strength and capacity with nonverbals was going to take her. a " Deprimo" Having not lost his wand when he was buried underneath so much rubbish, Draco managed to cast a powerful wind from his wand-tip to relieve himself and Zabini from the clutter on them. And as soon as he did so, Zabini li his head from the floor, slapping his hands on the crumbled floor, and sprung onto his feet; determined to And he would've—they both would have—if it hadn't been for several consecutive things that forbid them to. A giant piece of wall was hurled at their direction again, but Malfoy was the only one to dodge it. Blaise fell to the floor once more, this time his head colliding with it in a resounding crack that echoed through the commotion. As as Zabini fell unconscious, as Malfoy briefly debated who to assist, a herd of wizards with Auror badges invaded the shop; Shielding Charms flying all around. a But the most obscure occurrence of them all was when Draco relived something straight from his guilty nightmares—Granger's torturous scream of pain. Her brown eyes were wide when a jet of light wrapped around her. She was confused for the tiniest fragment of time, but Draco knew what the curse was before its a ects started happening. Her mouth opened and a strangled, silent sob passed her lips before she fell onto her back. Spots of blood started appearing on her chest, soaking her clothing and pooling around her like she was submerged in a small portion of water. å Once again, Draco Malfoy found himself not doing anything as Hermione Granger su ered. ď Continue reading next part □

until they saw black.

" Confringo"

Aria.

Aria.

straight to her.

find the brunette.