## **Open Secrets**

Lover of the Light

Chapter Twenty-One: Open Secrets The room was cold. It was the type of cold one knows will forever be. The kind that has been there for as long as it can be remembered, the type that numbs the skin and makes you immune to it. It was the sort of cold that frosted the windows, that came out of your mouth in a visible fog, the kind that built itself into blocks beside the door and the furniture: the kind that became ice picks hanging from the chandelier and the ceiling. It was the kind of cold that is always ignored because that's how the climate's always been. It's never going to change. It's the cold that becomes accepted. The cold that's the norm For a moment, however...Green eyes looked up from a list containing hundreds of names to glance around the room. Almost thirty years of life, so used to ignoring those icebergs filling the open spaces of her home, and, from time to time, she would stop for a moment to notice it. Sometimes, when she gave in to the fact that they lived in an icy cave like those in Antarctica, when she noticed the blue of her numbing fingertips, the icy breath filling the atmosphere, panic would rise in her chest. She felt the coldness seep in, freezing her blood. The oxygen in her lungs was not circling, her brain cells were halting, her heart was slowing down... a "Bianca, are you done?' With a deep gasp, the ice su ocating her, killing her, vanished. The ice went from closing in on her to rushing back to be the invisible decor of the room " Qual è il tuo problema, mia sorella? Feeling her blood run smoothly again, Bianca smiled reassuringly at Jenoah. " Sto beng" she said calmly, like she's mastered in her twenty-nine years of life. "I was just wondering why the guest list was smaller than last year's.' "The guest list might be smaller, but the budget for the benefit is larger than ever," Jenoah joked with his sibling, an underline of annoyance barely noticeable. "We always know how to outshine people, don't we?" Bianca kept her smile on her burly brother. It was still based on phoniness, but she was somewhat amused by him. "Well, the charity ball the Fontanas hosted for the orphans last month was quite the talk. It was called the event of the year. I suppose nostro padrewants to regain his status of the illustrious host." Jenoah snorted as he flipped through another page of the budget report he'd been given to look over. "Of course, the Fontanas being a muggle-born family has nothing to do with this giant spectacle he's making out of my hospital's annual benefit." "Obviously not, mio fratelloMaking this event exclusive to the crème de la crèmeof Italy is just a coincidence.' a As Bianca and Jenoah's green eyes connected, smirks wanting to tug at the edges of their mouths, a throat cleared throughout the cold room " Su iciente." From her chair behind an antique desk, the matriarch of the Zabini clan looked up at her youngest children from her own share of paperwork. Twenty-nine and thirty-two year-old adults looked away from each other and back to their work at the sound of their mother's voice. " Siamo una famiglia prestigiosa e siamo obbligati a mostraț<sup>1</sup>o reprimanded the woman, her bright, emerald eyes narrowed and creasing her forehead. "Instead of judging your father, Jenoah, you should focus on what he does for your hospital. These events bring more than generous donations so your patients can have the best of the best. You're a skilled Healer, mio figlio but that doesn't entirely save lives." đ The man's kind face abandoned its sweetness and went with a glower. There was anger on his face, every line marking the dark-skin of his complexion to show his true emotions. Ones that he could not show freely. Those emotions that he had to stomp down on time a er time. A er all, he was not allowed to show anything but content and acceptance for what the family was. Not even if he wanted to shout, rip all the documents, and forbid the Zabinis from getting involved with his work. He just wanted to be. He just wanted his career, his love for medicine and curing people, to be separate from familial obligations But that was never going to happen. Every year, benefit a er benefit, Jenoah was trapped further into the abyss his surname created. Every year he just re-established that his father owned him. " Bianca, you should be taking this as practice. One day soon you'll be in charge of these events," Mrs. Zabini continued. "You have responsibilities as my only daughter to fulfill. Not to mention that when you and Santiago marry-"Santiago and I aren't getting married," interrupted Bianca before she could stop herself. She knew she should have not, she never had before, but it just slipped. "We've discussed this before. It's too soon." The matriarch frowned. "You've been dating for three years now, Bianca. That's time enough." And she meant it. "Your father and I never exposed you to a traditional marriage with a respectable Italian wizard due to your pleas, Bianca. We allowed that Spaniard to court you because there was a promise of marriage. We gave you your happiness, now fulfill your duty." Bianca sunk her top teeth into her bottom lip. She was looking at her mother in the eye, but desperately trying to hold her guard. Tears wanted to come out of their hiding and slide down her face. She wanted to express how cheated she felt. Her parents acted as if letting her find love on her own, letting her choose the man she wanted to spend the rest of her life with, was a kindness from their part that she needed to repay. " Tuo padre non è un uomo paziente Make him wait another year, Bianca, and he'll do away with Santiago." đ Inhaling the icy air of the room, Bianca nodded. " Naturalmente' Swallowing a knot of her emotions, those that weren't dignified for a Zabini heir, the young woman looked back down at the guest list. "I noticed that—" a The walls of the o ice started shaking, cutting o whatever Bianca was going to diverge the subject with. It wasn't a tremor of the earth; the strong vibrations came from within the walls and it was felt in the magic running through their veins. It was the signal that someone unknown, someone uninvited, had trespassed through the Zabini gates and set o the strong wards of the mansion. Jenoah was the first one on his feet. Bianca rose up a er, grateful to be able to throw the guest list like yesterday's newspaper, and followed a er her brother. Their wands were out. Jenoah didn't have to say anything, didn't have to indicate where he was going, because Bianca knew. That was a modern tactic of the new security system wrapped around their home. When someone uninvited, someone without Zabini blood, entered through, regardless of what level or point in the grounds they were, a member of the ancient family would be able to sense the location of intrusion. Though the spell led them several flights upwards, there was deep confusion on both siblings' faces when they noticed exactly where they were taken Fi h floor of the mansion, the abandoned level. The floor that has been ignored and undisturbed since its inhabitant le eighteen years ago. The only door in that level was slightly open, exposing light from inside that was man-made. Fluidly, Jenoah raised his wand high and kicked the door fully open. Bianca was right behind him, her wand pointing over his shoulder, ready to fight and protect. "Stefano?" Jenoah's wand lowered when he recognized the muscular figure inside the dusty bedroom. " Che cosa sta succedendo? đ Slowly, steadily, the oldest of the Zabini siblings turned; moving one step to the right. And as he did, as he moved his colossal body, he was showing his brother and sister what his eyes had been focused Bianca let out a giant gasp. There were two bodies on the ground, right in front of the room's fireplace. From head to toe, hey were covered in powder. But it hadn't been the mess of soot that made Bianca gasp and grow panicked-it was the blood. There was so much blood. There was so much red, soaking into the rug of the bedroom, infecting the icy and dusty air with the smell of iron. a Two mangled and bruised bodies, but only one that was growing transparent right before their eyes "He set o the wards," Stefano spoke cryptically as he sti ly looked down at the two bodies, "the boy. He isn't of Zabini blood. " Oh mio dio! Bianca was becoming unstable with all the blood. "Jenoah, help me a Before the medical expert in the family could move, Stefano whipped out his wand and held his brother in place. "Don't." a "What are you doing?!" Screamed Jenoah. "They need my help! Unbind me!" Bianca was sobbing over the two bodies, hands shaking, no coherence at all coming out to help assist. The last two Zabinis, the heads of the family, came through the door; wands at the ready. Both had looked conflicted, confused of why they were in the level of their disowned son. Mrs. Zabini was the only one to close to losing composure when her emerald eyes landed on the location by the fireplace. "They came through the Floo," spoke Stefano once more. "Whoever had them in captivity is on the other side. If...If we hurry, Jenoah, we can apprehend them. We can find out who did this.' Most of the fury on Jenoah's face wiped away. He nodded. "For Deon," he said. "For our niece. ď Stefano did not reply. He released the magical mind on his brother, and without looking back down at the figures, he grabbed a handful of Floo Powder and threw it into the flames. Jenoah quickly followed. " Cosa devo fare? Cried Bianca as she looked up at her parents. đ Domenico Zabini, in all his cool exterior and person, turned to look at his wife with no expression at all. "Take them to a hospital. I'll contact the British Ministry." Following orders as she was used to, Roma Zabini approached the bloody scene before her as her husband departed the room. Once she arrived, crinkling her nose at the intensity of the smell, at the gruesome sight, she bent slowly. With a soul filled with sorrow and outrage, Mrs. Zabini put a hand on the wounded girl's chest. Three seconds and all the composure, all the training could've gone straight to hell, but she managed. She managed to swallow guilt and grief to say, "Deon's daughter is dead." 👌 Bianca exploded into a crying frenzy, the sensitive soul. She clutched onto the lifeless body of her long-lost niece and cradled her. The head of the body lolled to the side, face turned towards Mrs. Zabini. And then-brown eyes found green. "You're dead, Hermione," whispered the older woman to her granddaughter. "You're dead." ď The eyes of the brunette shut again; the scene inside the cold, dusty bedroom vanishing away. Screams started echoing all around, filling up everything. The world was made out of shouts of pain, shrieks of anguish, and no one could claim otherwise. Everything had disappeared into booming waves of cries. XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX "Shh, it's okay. Shh. Shh." She was thrashing about, trapped into confinement by white sheets. Her legs were kicking wildly, trying to free her, trying to push away the person that was holding her down as she yelled. "Shh. it's okay. It's okay.' The screams escaping her mouth weren't stopping. The intense fear, the havwire fight-or-flight reflexes were telling her to keep thrashing about. They filled her body with the sense of danger; mixing with the pain shooting up across every inch of her. She yelled, yelled, yelled. "It's me, shh. It's me. It's Draco. Stop." å And she did. With her eyes finally focused, her eyes finally stopped seeing the flashes of spells, the familiar pairs of green eyes, and she found

something entirely di erent. She found white-blonde hair, pointed features, and silver eyes. She found heaven, comfort–Draco Malfoy. "It hurts," she sobbed past trembling lips. For a moment, the quickest that she's ever experienced, her vision glazed over from her tears, but comfort was brought to her again when she shed them and Malfoy's silvery gaze was sharp and clear once more. "He lied."

metallic eyes.

His gaze was cloudy. It wasn't his typical, brooding and stormy kind, however. It was fogged with something more complex than anger and frustration. It was stormy like a rainy day. There were tears in his đ The hands that'd been clutching her shoulders slackened and traced

down her arms. Gently, the white skin of his palms le beautiful trails of tingles on her flesh as they went for her hands. He looked down at them, and for a second, hate did fill him up; then it was gone. She didn't see the scars he was seeing on her fragile hands, but she did feel him squeeze. "Who lied?" He asked a er a moment, voice stoic and contradicting the current vulnerability he was displaying. "Harry," she said to him. "He said it didn't hurt to die. But it does, Malfoy. It really hurts." ď⁵ His fingers gripped too tightly. "You're not dead, Hermione," he said through clenched teeth. "We're in St. Mungo's." "I think I'd know if I was alive, Malfoy." đ "You weredead," he replied, wanting to roll his eyes at her need to always be right. It just wasn't the time. He was too... somethingto be aggravated by her."You were gone for ten minutes, but they revived The surroundings of the room-the white bedsheets, the white medical gown on her body, the appliances throughout the room, the cabinet of potions reading St. Mungo's the furthest corner-told her exactly where she was, but how could she believe that? How could she be alive? It didn't make sense. "But...Mrs. Zabini told me I was dead," she whispered, looking thoroughly confused. "Deon's sister was holding me...she was crying when her mother said I was dead." Malfoy raised a brow, looking briefly confused himself. "They're the ones that brought you here," he told her. "You were barely hanging on when they did. It wasn't until you were being treated by the Healers that you actually ... "That was real?" She cut across what he didn't want to say, what he didn't want to remember. "I...What...Sectumsempra again, right? It felt the same as the first time.' đ "One of your heart's artery was punctured," Malfoy spoke again, equally as flat as before. "That, along with the Sectumsempra, contributed to your heavy blood loss. You were practically drained when they brought you in." đ She didn't say anything for a moment. Every part of her hurt, and she knew that the damage extended beyond blood loss. She could see it in his eyes, too. There was something she quite couldn't identify, but she saw him looking her over like she was a mangled ragdoll. And she felt like one. She felt her chest stitched together, the bones of her le arm were sensitive, indicating repair, and everything else was sore and rigid. She didn't know what specific parts hurt because it all blended together and spread through her skin. "Where's Benjamin?" Then she remembered the boy. She remembered him falling from that nasty, torturous hex and then that was it. Malfoy raised his brow again. "Is he still in the hospital?" The blonde didn't blink. "Malfoy?" Her heart picked up in rhythm, fueled by worry. "Malfoy, where is he? Where's Benjamin? He was alive, Malfoy. He was-"Are you seriously worried about some child right now, Hermione?" His hiss echoed around the hospital room. She stopped. "You were dead" he almost shouted at her, his hands letting go of hers. He put some distance between them, too; backing away and frowning at her through now venomous eyes. "And before that...You were gone. I keep losing you, Granger, and it's driving me insane! And you're just going to lie there and ask about Benjamin Nott?!" đ "...You said you wouldn't call me Granger anymore. Draco's frown intensified. "This is it, isn't it?" His exterior wasn't matching his voice once more. He was angry, his hands balled into fists, his gaze hating her, but his tone was defeated and deflated. "This is our fate, right? I'm always going to end up losing you." ď Despite her overall aching body, Hermione found strength to pull herself into a half sitting position. Her mind was disoriented, fragments of what had occurred missing from her memory, replaced with things she thinks were real, yet not at the same time; but she remembered him clearly. She remembered the bliss she had with him before she was taken. She remembered sleeping in his arms a en weeks of avoiding him. She remembered kissing him on New Years, and the sky exploding in fireworks because of it. She remembered the beautiful, icy smell of him; even his vivid silver eyes up close and personal She even remembered crying during captivity because there'd been a strong possibility that she would never see him again "Life seems to be signaling that we are doomed," murmured Hermione, looking up at him through her lashes and tears. "Our intertwined lives are either based on hate or misery, but...Someone once told me that love can be true even when it seems hopeless and out of our control." đ Still a good distance away from her, the blonde Slytherin continued to glare. There was a struggle inside of him, as per usual. As always when he thought of her, when he felt for her. She was everything that infuriated him-yet everything that he needed. How that could be, he'll never know. He just knew that she was poison; his addiction. Every single thing about her-right down to the feel of her lips to her annoyingly righteous attitude—did he need. She was his addiction; something too powerful to kick or rehabilitate from. She was in him now. His entire heart and soul. ď "I hate you," he said from his stance. A dim smile tugged the corner of Hermione's mouth. "'I had wrought hard to extirpate from my soul the germs of love there detected; and now,'" she began, so ly as she'd been speaking before, but with a ss that made Malfoy paler. "at the first re they spontaneously revived, great and strong...He made me-" "Shut up, Hermione." Halting her Jane Eyre monologue, not bearing to hear it, Malfoy made his way steadily to her. He was still glaring at the weak brunette, but he went for her hands again. He gripped them as tightly as he had before, but his thumbs caressed her scabbing knuckles tender like the touch of a feather The simple act, combined by the penetrating silver of his gaze, sent automatic flashes of happiness through her veins. "Kiss me, Draco.' The frown on his face was replaced with an expression that only Hermione ever saw. There was a smile of his own on his lips, making his features glow heavenly. It was sincere and only for her. "Always the martyr. Her brows knitted. "How am I a martyr? I just want you to kiss me." He rolled his eyes at her this time. "Haven't you gone through enough physical pain to add the e ects of a binding marriage contract?" ď She snorted. "That's exactly my point. I've been through enough torture, I think I can handle a shock or two." She pulled her hands, reeling him in the process. His legs hit the edge of her hospital bed making him hunch down; his body acting like a cage, covering almost all of her. "Besides," she whispered, "it'll be worth it." đ Keeping his weight o of her, his body barely hovering over her, Draco shook his head. He did the only thing he could do: he kissed the end of her nose. She frowned up at him. "Like a man, Malfoy, please." ď Laughter was running up his throat, ready to come out past his lips. but the door of the hospital room opened and he tore away from her like he was pulled backwards. ð "HERMIONE!" ď And then it was Blaise that was hovering over her, other people soon invading the room and ending the little knit of heaven that Hermione had with Malfoy đ For the first time in a week, Draco willingly walked out of the brunette's hospital room. He shut the door behind him, catching the crying of Allegra, and he leaned his back against it. 'He made me love him without looking at meThat's what he didn't let her say. That's what he hadn't been strong enough to hear. ď She was in love with him, but their fate was still damned. đ XXXXXXXXXXXX He was sitting on the chair of the accused. They had a bulb of light hanging directly above him, highlighting him and making him the focal point of the room. It was a dirty, grimy place; one obviously set out for those not worth putting on trial in front of the respectable Wizengamot. He was trash. He was nothing. And the people sitting before him, glaring him down like they were ready to launch themselves across the small table that separated them and beat him until his skin was just as dark and bruised like the walls surrounding them. They would resort to physical violence for satisfaction, even if their wands had not been taken from them upon their entrance into the interrogation room reserved for lowlives He didn't blame them, really. If he was sitting across from himself he'd give himself the same exact looks of disgust, mistrust, and hatred. "I knew you were in this," and the seething had begun. It had only taken twenty minutes of thick silence and bubbling fury for the show to get started. The first one up was Zabini: abhorrence in his green eyes, in his voice, in the air he was exhaling out. "I smelled guilt on you the moment you stepped into my house and o ered your help to find my sister. I knew it.You didn't fool me one bit, you fucker." a Theodore had a quick, witty and sarcastic retort to Zabini's insult, but he swallowed it down. He knew that if he egged Zabini on the flying of fists would only take about a second to commence. Not like he doubted he could take Zabini on during a full-scale fight, he didn't expect the dark-skinned wizard to break a manicured nail on him; it was just that his wrists were tied together and he knew no guard waited outside the door of the interrogation room. It seemed the Ministry O icials assumed that all threat on his life was gone simply by forbidding wands inside. Or maybe they just assured themselves that his murder wouldn't be based on magic and every other method was free reign. They'd find a way to cover it up, he was sure. No one would care. đ Again, he was nothing. He knew it; everyone did. đ When he first spoke. Blaise had risen up from his seat and was now acting his part of a hot-headed, unstable Auror on a frustrating case. He had his hands on the surface of the metallic table, leaning down on them as he glared at the dark-haired boy across from him. However, his expected, furious and insulting monologue didn't continue. Instead, it was the blonde sitting next to him that spoke. "Shacklebolt and his men have done conclusive investigations on this case," Malfoy began, cold and detached like it was in his nature. Anyone who didn't know him, anyone that's never bought his emotionless exterior and masks, would've believed that he truly felt nothing. But, sitting across from him, eyes daggered into each others, Theodore saw the perfect fury in the silver orbs of the Slytherin Prince. "They charge you as an unwilling accomplice and a victim of threat. You were under the Imperius Curse when they had you attack Hermione that night inside the castle.' ď⁵ Theodore willed himself to keep the eye-contact with Malfoy. He did not blink. Not even when he began to remember meeting Abri Vivaldi before returning to Hogwarts for the new term. His mother had introduced her as a business partner over tea and pastries, someone who was going to get the Notts out of their debt, and that's all the interaction he remembers having with her. Before she bewitched him, that is. He wasn't trained in Occlumency to fight the intrusion and captivity of his mind: his orders had been to negotiate a blind spot within the centaurs so she could arrive on the place where the outskirts of the forest and the edges of the grounds of Hogwarts met. He did so the first day, as commanded, and he waited for her like an obedient puppy when everyone else was at the welcome feast. The instructions that night had been simple: return in a few week's time. When the Imperius Curse was li ed, he found himself alone and sitting underneath a tree; assuming that he'd fallen asleep. He le the grounds and went back into the castle, but with a curious inkling that he had a very important appointment to prepare for. He'd known about Hermione Granger's true identity and their betrothal towards the end of the summer holidays, before meeting Abri Vivaldi. There was an immediate protest from his part; an angry one at that. He'd spent the last few months of the war changing, developing, getting to see things in a wider perspective. Someone had changed him. And in the summer, in the midst of that budding connection that had him transforming into a happy tosser, he found that he needed to give it up. He didn't want to. He damned his mother, fought with her, but in the end she'd won. She'd won the battle by bringing Benjamin into the room and forcing Theodore to tell him that he was going to let his future sink before it could sail simply because he was refusing his place in tradition. đ It was all about family duty in the end. He'd been raised and fed the ideas that a pureblood, above all, needed to keep his legacy running and that the financial stability of the family relied upon the man of the household. His father was in prison, Theodore was just seventeen, but he now had the pressure of li ing the Notts from the hole of poverty Theodore Sr. trapped them in. Theodore's happiness had to be forgotten. That someonehad to be forgotten. Everything he'd gained had to be sent away. That was his fate from there on out. đ He knew that it wasn't her fault, Hermione's, and that if he was going to go along with it, if he was going to be marrying her, he was going to take his new development and make a friendship out of the situation He knew he was never going to be in love with her, but there was no reason why he couldn't grow to care for her. So he went ahead; he befriended her and indeed found that she was something breathtaking that everyone needed to have in their lives. She was true and unadulterated friendship, what he'd been missing all his life. a The night of her attack inside the walls of the castle only brought the realization of his participation when he found himself chanting a spell over and over in his head. He didn't recognize it, hadn't used it in his life before, and he was coherent enough to know that it wasn't in any of the textbooks assigned in all his years at Hogwarts. His curiosity got the best of him and he pointed his wand towards an unsuspecting Fourth Year. He watched a purple light escape his wand and make the boy scream like he was being ripped apart. Horrified, Theodore ran away a er using Obliviate on the student and rushed to the Slytherin Common Room. Two days a er, he'd overheard Ginny Weasley and Harry Potter talking about Hermione's attack and Theodore put two and two together He spent an entire day locked up in his dormitory, too shocked to attend lessons and have people look at him. He wasn't evil. He'd established that during the Dark Lord's reign of terror. Yes, he'd been a supremacist, but ridiculing and prejudice had been his only sins. He never bore the Dark Mark and participated in murders or tortures. He wasn't evil— he wasn't ď Fear and panic drove him to write to his mother, out of all people. He didn't know why he'd done so, he didn't expect comfort or reassurance from a woman who looked at her children like they'd stolen everything good she'd ever possessed, but he definitely didn't expect what did arrive. She replied within the hour, simply telling him to Floo Call her a er curfew. That night, he headed out; sneaking away from Filch's patrol and into Trelawney's o ice where the Floo Network was unattended since the demented hag never locked her o ice. As soon as he saw his mother's expressionless face emerge from the flames, Theodore gave in to his guilt and started babbling with incoherent dread. He didn't know how he could've done it, how he could've hurt Hermione Granger and not remember it. He'd askec desperately if she knew of any sleeping-walking symptoms caused by  $depression \ or \ subconscious \ resentment-anything \ that \ could \ justify$ what had occurred-but the woman had ordered him to shut up ' You're obviously useless for this, Theodoreshe had said to him with a coolness. 'But not to worry, I've assured that you're never used for physical attacks anymore. He had gaped at the flames. He remained silent for what seemed like hours. Mrs. Nott had taken that silence to continue explaining; adding more horror onto what her son was already feeling. ' You'll have to keep a close eye on her, scare her when you're told. She must never forget what happened. She mustn't feel safe, Theodore; that's of importance.' ' Are you insane?He had hissed. 'What are you doing, Mother? What did Granger ever-' ' It's not what she did, the woman had interrupted with a scolding look that the flames captured perfectly, 'it's what she can bring. All we have to do is make sure she serves her purpose. Nothing more, Theodore. ' You're terrorizing a girl! How can I find any sense in that tid you make me do?! I will not go along with this, Mother! ' You have no choice!Mrs. Nott had shouted, losing all the patience she was capable of containing. 'We are to help Abri Vivaldi in her plans or su er the consequences. Don't you see, Theodore? By doing this we insure the girl's survival-your access to her fortune once you get married. I rather torture the girl for a while than have the betrothal be cancelled out by her sudden death. I'm doing this for you.' đ His mother would justify her means for cruelty as an act of kindness for him, but Theodore knew it'd been a lie. She was doing it for her own use: she needed the betrothal between he and Hermione to be fulfilled so gold could start pouring back into the family vaults. She wanted to regain her status: she wanted her refined possessions back and the power she once had And she'd done beautifully in making Theodore into her and Abri's accomplice "When Shacklebolt told us who was behind this, when your name escaped him, it took me a moment to actually believe it," continue Draco, like he hadn't seen his fellow Slytherin's silent musings. "But then...You're the only one who knew about Sectumsempra. You overheard my discussion with Snape about it a night in Sixth Year when I was still in the Hospital Wing. It all made sense then. Guilty as charged. Theodore remained silent because, yes, he'd been the source of Abri's knowledge of the Sectumsempra curse. She'd taken it from his mind, a er all. Everything that Theodore held most dear, all the fears and joys, that woman knew. Everything Even the one secret that was only reserved for him. đ "Did you give that information up unwillingly, too?" "Nothing could kill her," Blaise interjected a er Malfoy's rhetorical, sarcastic question. "Not Sectumsempra, not your fucking attacks. So here's what I think: you used your brother in all of this to trap her. You knew she would never leave the kid behind, you knew she'd give up her life because that's exactly the type of stupid person she is—so you used your eight year-old rother. What kind of fucking monster are you, Nott?" ď BANG. It surprised Blaise more than it surprised Draco when Nott bolted upright from his seat; sending the metallic chair flying backwards and into the wall. His tied fists collided with the table, making Blaise flinch and pull himself away from the quick, hectic moment due to the reflexes that sensed unsuspected danger. There was something absolutely darker than night in Theodore's already indigo eyes. It was as if all the light, as if everything close to composure and sanity was wiped away. Hell burned in the center of his pupils. He was ready for an attack. "My brother is everything to me, you fucking imbecile!" He roared. "I would never put him in harm's way! I would've never let them take him—I would've died first! But they did, they took him and I couldn't do anything about it!" đ Blaise composed himself from his previous little scare and was back into his full-fury spree. "You should've, you worthless twat! You should've died! Look at everything you've caused! My sister's in a hospital barely holding on to her life! You never cared about her, all you wanted was the money!" a "I love Hermione!" Theodore's voice cracked through his shout. He felt an unbelievable weight crushing down on his shoulders, trying to sink him into the floor and straight into the muggle's belief of where hell was. Zabini's words cut him-he shouldbe dead. All this time he'd been right: if Theodore disappeared everything would've be better. None of this would've happened. No one would have su ered. Not Hermione, not himself, not Benjamin, not the Zabinis, not... a There was no more fight in him. No more will to keep silent, no more will to be collected and poised, no more fucking will to breathe. Every card that he'd been dealing since the beginning of the school year, every card that he was stacking into an elaborate lie, had been knocked and scattered all around him. a He was done. "Hermione willingly agreed to marry me," he whispered so defeated. Theodore sunk back onto his chair. He didn't look his fellow classmates in the eye. He couldn't; speaking was shame enough. All he did was stare at his tied hands on the surface of the table. Oh, the irony of it almost killed him The door of the investigation room opened, and it was only Blaise that turned around to see his father march in. Confidence raised his head higher, like he gained strength to be able to brutally murder the cause of Hermione's su ering because his father would support it. Deon, however, gave no indication of anger or hatred. He ignored his son's fury and focused on the prisoner "I didn't want to get married," Theodore continued muttering, "but I had no choice. There was no way out. It didn't matter that...I was with someone. I hadsomeone. I thought that...I thought that I could start all over. I just... I wanted to have my own life. I thought that I could leave my father's mistakes in the past and do something new for me, for the new life I wanted to start with...My mother wanted the betrothal to go through and I needed to oblige. For Benjamin." His throat tightened as he trailed o for a second. "For Benjamin I did it. I witnessed firsthand how far my mother was willing to go to secure herself a fortune and I was afraid for my brother's safety. I knew the only way that I was going to give him a better life was when I did what she wanted and then I could get him far away from her "Hermione knew that. I begged her to oblige to the marriage for Benjamin's sake. And...Yes, I used her good heart to convince her. But it wasn't all a trick. She's someone important to me. I love her. And...I put her in danger, but I was trying to help her, too. I gave up just as much as she did." a Blaise glared at the dark-haired wizard. "You had nothing to lose from this, Nott." đ Deon watched with calculated eyes as the young, accused man's shoulders shook with a delicate, humorless chuckle "Alike her, I gave up my hope," Theodore responded. "I gave up my freedom. And I gave up the person that I'm in love with." When he finally looked up, Malfoy was the one graced with Nott's broken and intense black gaze. "Our o icial engagement was the pact we both willingly made to live through broken hearts together, as friends. She took my ring and made a vow to me.' "You lied to her!" Shouted Blaise. He was tired of Nott's so spoken words. He was tired of the pathetic emotion that was radiating out of him. He was the one sat on the chair of the accused, he was the one that was guilty. He'd done wrong. And Blaise wanted to make sure he'd pay for it. "That's the only way she would've agreed! Hermione would have never given up her freedom for a fucking kid!" ď⁵ Theodore ignored that last bit with some e ort. He knew that as much as he'd defend Benjamin from the world, Hermione would do so as well for Blaise. The Slytherin was the world's greatest twat, but he loved his sister and she loved him. He loved her so much he'd kill Theodore in order to have her. That's why he hated him, Theo knew that perfectly well. They both did. Hermione hadn't even been told about her tie to the Zabinis and discussions of her ending up with the Notts had already begun. Blaise hated Theodore because he believed he was stealing her before his plans of making lovely, family memories could commence. đ "Who is she?" Malfoy spoke again, cutting across Blaise's howls. Draco could easily blind himself with his self-centered anger, alike Zabini, but he knew perfectly well that Hermione would indeed give her life for anyone. Especially a child. Potter had been right when he'd said it, even if Draco hadn't wanted to listen to it at the time. He had not wanted to believeit. A child's life worth more than the attempt to fight for what he and Hermione had? That was just a blow đ to his ego. Nott raised a brow. "Who's the girl you were so in love with and gave up? Did she know? Did Granger know that she was stealing your chance of romance someone else's, for that matter?" a The young prisoner looked conflicted and sidetracked. He blinked several times at Draco, looking as if he suddenly realized he made a mistake by mentioning his previous romance. It was a fragile matter and Mister Zabini didn't want it to be played with. đ "That's enough," the man said as he stepped closer to the table. "Theodore, I've arranged for your release. The Head Auror should arrive shortly with your belongings and I'll take you to see your brother a er In unison, Draco and Blaise turned to Mister Zabini. Their eyes were wide and narrowed; appalled and angry. 'hat do you mean you've arranged for his re ase?" But it was only Blaise who dared raise his voice at his father. "Are you out of your mind?! He's the reason Hermione almost died!" "He was under the Imperius Curse, Blaise. He's innocent," the man replied to his son in an indi erent tone. "He is not innocent! He tried to kill my sister! He could not believe this. "And you're just going to let him out and expose her to him?! We should be arranging for the death penalty!' a Deon narrowed his own green eyes at Blaise. "It wouldn't be the first time we expose Hermione to someone who previously tried to kill her." Everyone witnessed Malfoy tense, jaw squaring o and looking at Mister Zabini with a lethal, metallic gaze. "And that never was Theodore's intention. He's a lost boy with family duty weighing on his shoulders. How many of us have not done horrible things because of it?" a Mister Zabini sounded calm and reasonable, but only Theodore knew how furious he'd been about the entire situation. He had been the first one Theo had seen a er his arrest nine nights ago. The Auror hadn't even placed him on his chair before Mister Zabini had glided across the investigation room and slammed him against the wall. Bloody murder had been staring Nott in the eyes; he'd known Mister Zabini was capable of snapping his neck if he'd liked. But, as his hands squeezed the boy's throat, stopping the oxygen, he must've seen something in Theodore's gaze that made him let go With tension thick in the air, the Aurors had le the room and it'd just been the man and the boy. It took as long as it had with Blaise and Malfoy when Mister Zabini demanded for answers. And Theodore had given them all to him. He had tried his hardest to remain proud, to hold his strength, but he had collapsed the same way he almost had with his Slytherin classmates. It was so shameful the way he sobbed, but the man had listened intently. A er what seemed like an ocean later, Mister Zabini hac simply said to him, 'I'm going to help you'The man knew, Theodore guessed, what it was like to have a tyrant as a parent and family obligation on your shoulders. And...Resentfully, when Theodore had given him the secret that Abri stole from him, that he gave to Hermione as a bargain plea for their engagement, it all tied together. The way red flushed beneath Blaise's dark skin, one could tell he was about ready to release a surge of uncontrolled magic like a child throwing a tantrum. His jaw was shut tight, something more than fury in his eyes, more than hate making his fists tremble, but he remained silent. He thrived on being a hypocrite, but how could he argue that? The Zabinis hadlet the Malfoys into Hermione life, pardoning them from all their years of hatred towards her; all in the claim that they were reforming. Nott had been under the Imperius the bastard. "I will not forgive you for this," hissed Blaise at his father and the prisoner. He had turned, signaling that he was now ready to leave the investigation room in a furious, classy manner, and Malfoy had risen from his chair to follow. The blonde was not going to sit through this, not without wanting punishment and knowing that the only way Nott was going to get it was if he and his family received it too. It was all fucked up. He thought he was going to feel satisfied in seeing his classmate in binds, surely heading to prison, but instead he got a slap of reality once more. It pissed him o to the highest degree that he kept losing to Nott. đ "Malfoy," called Theodore before he could exit out and follow the steps of the already gone Zabini. With his infamous sneer, the blonde turned to the prisoner. "She does know who I love." "Theodore." Mister Zabini shook his head, scolding him as he took a seat across from him. "You don't have to. a But he did, really. Theodore really needed to. He didn't owe anyone an explanation, didn't have to say it, but he figured Malfoy was losing something in all of this, too. And maybe it would bring the Slytherin Prince some reassurance—as useless as it would be, that is. But he deserved it, in a way. Malfoy deserved to know what had made Hermione agree, what was keeping them apart besides the binding marriage contract. Even if that meant Nott exposing his vulnerable side. a "Zacharias Smith," said Theodore with a glint of heartbreak in his dark eyes. "Zacharias Smith was the one that changed my life. I'm in love with him " 185 xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx There was a humorous smirk on Abri Vivaldi's face as she looked at her surroundings She was a woman of a little over five feet tall, skinny and with no physical endurance-she hated exercising, but she had to say she was blessed with a great metabolism-and yet she was chained up like she was a three-hundred pound, monstrous man. Her hands were tied to the armrests of her metallic chair, along with her legs. Her back was glued to the back of her seat, forbidding her from any movement that didn't come from her wiggling fingers or her head Ridiculous, really, that they had to go to such lengths. They had taken her wand and they fed her a potion that slowed her use of nonverbals. What harm was she, honestly? The companion next to her, however, looked far less amused by the situation. Her head was held high, nose wrinkled like she sm something bad. Her pale eyes were aggravated, like someone had done her o ense. Regina Nott sunk her nails into the cushion of the armrests of the chair she was imprisoned to; a look on her face that suggested like she was ready to complain about the horrible hospitality. đ " Perché l'hai fatto? There was a third woman in the empty hearing room. She was standing before them, a few feet away, and only staring at the woman on the le . "Why did you target my daughter?" đ Abri raised her right index finger, leaning her head down, trying to scratch an itch on her nose. Useless. " Ci sono molte ragioni per cui ho fatto" she responded, attempting once more to see how far down her head would go. "Just don't take them personal, Ally." đ "Don't take them personally?" repeated Allegra Zabini. Her tone was borderline shrill, echoing harshly throughout the empty, tiled room. Her hands shook because of her anger, because of the fire that was turning her composure to ashes. "You almost killed my daughter, Abri." "And you almost took my money." Abri gave up on scratching her nose and returned the standing woman's gaze. "How was it fair that bisnonnowas going to leave you whatever was le of the Vivaldi fortune if you're a disgrace to the name? If I worked my entire life to build it?" She smiled again, this time condescending rather than selfamused. "I wanted you to feel the same injustice I felt. Illogical, right; but it happens.' Allegra's red lips pressed into a tight line for a second. Her fingertips tingled: it was her magic vibrating in every inch of her that demanded to be exposed. She wanted to whip out her wand and curse her cousin into an unrecognizable state, to killher. The Aurors had taken her wand, however, and she was le trying to withhold the urge to launch forward and just choke her with her bare hands until she trembled, gasped, and all the oxygen le her body. But she wasn't a killer. Despite her raging maternal instincts that wanted nothing more than to kill the poisonous snake that had bitten her daughter, Allegra had to remind herself who she was. She had to remind herself who her daughter was-Hermione would not condone murder; regardless of who it was "It all works out for you, doesn't it?" Abri still looked casually at her cousin. "You inherit my money, your daughter recovers her strength in a few weeks time, and you learn that Stefano Zabini, along with your deceased sister, was the source of Aria's freedom. My, the joy you must be feeling in that ridiculous heart of yours that there's a chance of mending Deon's family tree. His brother, the one that apparently hated Deon with every fiber of his being, illegally connected the Floo of your old bedroom to Deon's to save his niece. Beautiful Assolutamente bellissimd a "That's human nature," replied Allegra, with no indication that she was a ticking time bomb. "It's family. You wouldn't understand that, Abri. You were always corrupt, like your parents and our ancestors You never knew what it was like to love your siblings. That's why you le Cristiano in his enslavement, why you manipulated Giancarlo in believing your brother was dead. It's what made you kill our bisnonnoand kidnap my daughter." đ Abri rolled the signature golden eyes that belonged to the Vivaldis. "Family gets in the way of greater things, Allegra. They're just baggage. You knew that; that's why you ran far with Deon the chance you could. You would've ended up just like me, and you know it. Just how Sienna was becoming before she was killed." There went her maddening smirk again. "She would have killed him too. Sienna confessed of wanting to when she found out I did it. There's plenty of deranged in our family. And, really, you shouldn't concern yourself about the old man's fate, Allegra. You know he deserved it; he sacrificed your sister, a er all." a "You're mental, Abri. You really are," sighed Allegra as she crossed her arms over her chest, looking unimpressed at the insanity lacing her cousin's explanations. "The Wizengamot should've made the verdict eighty-five years in an asylum, but I suppose all that time in Azkaban is just the same." a The wicked gleam in the imprisoned Vivaldi grew wilder, along with her smirk. Her teeth sparkled in the light of the hearing room, exposing themselves as fangs rather than a straight set of denture. She tilted her head to the le and said, "I'll take that time to go over the ways I should've killed your daughter. I had the pleasure of slicing her chest open with a letter opener your father kept in the guest room of the fi  $\,$  h floor, you know. It slid right in, ripping through her flesh and past her bones. It nearly got her heart, but that was my mistake. I shouldn't have missed. "Can you guess how much she screamed? Can you hear it, Ally? Can you begin to imagine the sobs that shook your daughter's body as I inflicted my own, torture spell on her time and time again? It's like being in hell; like being burnt from the inside out, millimeter by excruciating millimeter. Or what of when Giancarlo took her? The way she came to me with shards of glass deep in her spine, piercing and đ WHAM. ď With Abri's mocking smirk now gone, head tilted from the le to hanging to the right, Allegra retracted the fist she had used to punch her cousin with as she looked down at her. She had crossed the distance between them in a glide, putting her so close to Abri that she could see the scar just above her eyebrow she received when they were children đ "Dementors are no longer used in the Azkaban prison system," muttered Mrs. Zabini with a coldness to her voice that was usually retained by her desire to always be the better person, "but they say you can still feel them in the cells. They say you can feel their coldness, their darkness...That you can feel your brain turn into mush and your soul wrinkle inside of you. Imagine that, Abri...Imagine the freezing, lonely air...The screaming of other prisoners, the greyness When's the last time you saw the sun, Abri? Remember it, because that was the last time you were ever going feel its warmth. You're going to die in Azkaban." ď Allegra pulled away from her cousin, rising to all her height. Abri sealed her lips into a line, something flashing in her golden eyes that she hardly noticed Allegra's own satisfied leer It was one that lasted less than a minute, however; ending so soon. Allegra turned to the woman on Abri's right, quiet but not forgotten. The woman's pale blue eyes met Allegra's honey-colored ones; cold and detached. But there was a glimmer of fear in them 'You bewitched your son for money, Regina," it was a statement rather than an incredulous question. "You turned your son into an accomplice of horrible crimes for a bit more of gold. You gave up your eight year-oldson as collateral damage." Allegra was appalled, and she was sure her expression was no longer a beautiful mask. "You made your sons into victims of your greed—how can you live with yourself?" a Mrs. Nott said nothing in return. Once more, her head raised higher; signaling that she was keeping her dignity and pride. Whatever she assumed she had, that is. "Theodore was placed under arrest the same night you were. And as soon as Benjamin was cleared from St. Mungo's, he was placed into an orphanage. That is what's become of your children, Regina. You doomed them to prison and isolation." ಗೆ Appearing una ected, Regina remained silent; but there was a knot in her throat that was seemingly visible as she blinked away from the woman in front of her. The nails that had been stabbing the cushioned armrests slackened, her hands gripping them instead as if she was being inflicted with pain. "Deon bargained for Theodore's release," Allegra told the woman, noticing the behavior. "He'll go back to Hogwarts to finish what's le of his Seventh Year. That's a little over two months that Benjamin is going to remain in an orphanage until his brother is released and custody is handed to him. Two months of loneliness for your eight year-old son, Regina. Can you ever begin to comprehend what awaits them? A mountain of debt and a home in shambles." "Theodore has the betrothal," snapped the woman, finally looking up again. "I'm not going to mutually disband the contract between our children, Allegra. I will not let Theodore and Benjamin rot in poverty." 者 "Money isn't everything!" Allegra had lost her cool once more. "Do you honestly believe that your sons would rather be drowning in gold than to know that both their parents are in Azkaban? That they're practically orphans?' "They are not fond of me, nor were they of Theo." 'You are a horrid mother, Regina Nott," Allegra proclaimed, "but those boys don't hate you. You abandoned them. Because of that, they don't know how to fully love you, but they care. Whatever small desire they have to, that is.' a Stepping back another inch from the chairs of imprisonment, Allegra sighed as she kept her eyes on Regina. "You have ten years in Azkaban. I suggest you use the time to reflect on what you did and how to ask for your sons' forgiveness. If you do not repent, you'll have nothing to come back to when you're free.

"I'll come back to Aria Zabini as my daughter-in-law," said Regina. "If I don't get my freedom, Allegra, neither does your daughter."

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