Chapter Twenty-Two: The Good and the Almost Good going throughout life the past couple of months looking at things exciting about the purple walls and their leafy prints; it made her

blues on the walls of her muggle home. Upon discovering her true identity as Aria Zabini, Hermione also discovered that she was far more than just that righteous and goody-too-shoes witch she and everyone saw her as. There were subdued parts of her that were

selfish and stubborn judgment and the actuality of reality in those imprisoning, but there was something very eccentric and beautiful

happy. The walls from her bedroom in the Granger household were

past months. But now, now she'd lost the lenses, blinked, and really It wasn't just that the walls around her stopped seeming so dark and was confined and proper, calm like the washes of pastel purples and selfish, cruel, wrong, passionate, and tragic. And, honestly, she loved

The Good and the Almost Good

Lover of the Light Her eyes were seeing things dierently now. It was as if she'd been through cheap contact lenses. There was a layer of fog between her She started seeing everything with a dierent light, with brand new about the room she now called her bedroom. There was something that. She loved that she was flawed, that she was consumed by unsteady fire. Life had a way of twisting things and showing truths that people try to hide or ignore. At the beginning of Life's tricky game, Hermione born bookworm everyone knew and was comfortable with. She

things was letting her accept the fact that maybe, a er all the passing time, there was a greater lesson in all of it. That maybe she did gain something. "Why do you think you fell in love?" Sitting in an armchair that had been configured from one of the many books in a massive bookshelf against the furthest wall of the young mistress' bedroom, Deon Zabini halted the command he was about to give his bishop in the game of Wizard's Chess against his son. The man's emerald eyes appeared confused, contradicting the seriousness that he'd been giving to the game. 'What do you mean?" he asked. His wife smiled. Allegra was sitting on the le side of their daughter's

started seeing everything around her for the first time in a long time. would have given up her soul in order to stay a Granger; the mugglewould've fought with anyone in order to cut the tie that linked her to the Zabinis. Of course, Life decided that things were not that simple, that there was something waiting for her beside the Zabinis that she needed to discover. Though she su ered greatly, her new view on

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plain and simple—just like Hermione Granger was. Hermione Granger

father. Allegra was snuggled closely to Hermione's side, clutching her hand, running caressing fingertips over her knuckles. There was something territorial about the way she held on, pressed tightly to her daughter's side, but she didn't seem to notice it. She just enjoyed the smile that was highlighting her beautiful face, the happiness in her honey-colored eyes, and the bliss inside the bedroom. It had been two days since Hermione was discharged from the hospital, ordered to stay in bed for a few days before returning to Hogwarts. The brunette protested, proclaiming loudly that she was perfectly fine to return to school and catch up on her studies, but she'd found that Mister and Mrs. Zabini could be more strict than she anticipated. She knew they would give her anything if she asked for it, but almost losing her, because of her dance with death, her biological parents did not give in. It was only two days, she was on her last, and she found that she wasn't as annoyed as she was letting "Why did you fall in love with me?" Allegra clarified. "Do you ever think about that? How is it that you and I ended up so madly in love with one another that we ran away from duties and our families? It doesn't make sense."

massive bed; the latter on the right, between her mother and her

"Of course it doesn't make sense," Deon responded, "I found you

incredibly annoying." Allegra rolled her eyes, remaining quiet, but Blaise was the one that added noise to the room as his mocking laughter echoed around them. He was sitting on an armchair opposite of his father, enjoying the same bliss that his stepmother was thriving on. Just as Hermione had protested upon being able to return to Hogwarts, Blaise did so as well—of course, he did it against not returning. He was not going to return without his sister, rules and Headmistress be damned. And to

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say that Hermione was aggravated that Blaise was obliged on his request was an understatement, especially since McGonagall approved it in person when she visited Hermione at the hospital a few days back. Blaise had a motive, of course, but there wasn't any need for anyone to know how sentimental it was. "You were everywhere," Deon continued, "always participating and helping. There was never a time your hand didn't shoot up in the air when a professor asked a question, damning all of us to hear what you had to say when no one wanted to hear it. You challenged everything around you, never just following the norm we were taught

as children. You thought you were better than all of us." knew I was." it?" Blaise laughed again, more connivingly as he looked at the

Allegra smirked. "I didn't think I was better than all of you, Deon; I "The branch doesn't swing far from the Whomping Willow tree, does direction of his sister and stepmother with a taunting leer. "Now you know where your ego comes from, Hermione."

The brunette frowned, but ignored Blaise as she noticed that Deon took his turn to roll his eyes at his wife now. "Yes, well, that's exactly why our marriage still puzzles many. I ignored you, taunted you on occasions, but you were always ready to fight back. When we avoided each other, we did so brilliantly; but when we fought, nothing nor anyone was safe." bewitched me."

"That doesn't answer the question of why you fell in love with me." "Who says I did? Youfell in love with me, remember? I still say you Hermione smiled as she studied Deon. The man was the essence of seriousness. She didn't think he joked, smiled, or laughed. Of course, she knew she was wrong now, and she enjoyed discovering that. There was light in his eyes as he spoke to his wife, and Hermione had never really noticed how smooth and free he was when he did so. He was a contradiction to what he displayed to the public; he was human. He was warm. He was a man in love with his family. "Oh, please. I didn't even want to sit next to you in our mutual classes, what makes you think I wanted to bewitch you? I was dating

Giorgio Fontana, if you recall. He was handsome, sweet, and a muggle-born. You were the complete opposite, amore" "Are you saying I'm not attractive?" Deon frowned. "And why you dated Fontana will always be a mystery to me. He's as bland as Jovi's oatmeal and a total tosser." "He was compassionate," Allegra defended, "and sensitive. In fact, I hear he's quite the catch still." Deon pointed his finger at his wife, "You see? That's exactly why I found you so incredibly frustrating. You always find a way to challenge everything. You're never content with leaving things as they are. You make me want to rip my hair out, woman."

"I intrigued you, then?" Allegra was still smirking playfully. "That's why you cornered me and kissed me, isn't it?" "Did he?" Hermione questioned, speaking for the first time as she was fully entertained about the little history of Deon and Allegra's romance. "What did you do?" Mrs. Zabini squeezed her daughter's hand. A bolt of happiness kickstarted her heart; she adored her daughter's voice and the way her tone held simply curiosity and comfort. "I believe I sent him to the infirmary." Hermione's eyes were wide with surprise, though she looked very understanding of the action Allegra had chosen to take. Blaise, on the other hand, laughed once more. The idea of Allegra owning his father

was too precious; it was a side of them that he never really got to see. He knew that his father was beyond in love with his wife, but the

naked eye hardly ever witnessed just how much he did love her and the extent he'd go for her. Or how, above all, her word was law. "I fell in love with you because you were the breath of fresh air that I needed," Deon spoke, bringing his family away from the image of Allegra cursing him in the hall of their old boarding school in Italy. "I fought against it, of course. I didn't want to be into someone who made me uncomfortable with what I already knew, with someone who was di erent than I was, but I lost that battle. I fell in love with you because you were something new, and I wanted a new beginning. Everyday, as I'm sure the future will be too, is an adventure with you." Allegra smiled lovingly at her husband, but their children stopped

looking at them and dri ed o to somewhere else inside their heads.

The words of their father repeated in their minds, pulling on memories and thoughts that were personal and complicated for them. They processed the words as true, as a longing that they hadn't

been able to identify before. It was as if they were getting a lesson about love they'd been missing all this time. "Shit," mumbled Blaise as a blue-eyed blonde flashed in his mind for a moment. "I'm in love.' The adoring and intimate eye-contact between Mister and Mrs. Zabini ended as they both looked over at their eighteen year-old son. "Blaise, sweetheart, you don't love Daphne Greengrass. I know we've never discussed this before, but that relationship was completely reckless and—" "Not Greengrass," snapped Blaise as he interrupted Allegra. "It's worse than Greengrass. It's...It's—Salazar, I can't even say it." He shook his head at himself, slowly standing up from his seat. "How did this even happen?" He proceeded to leave, mind churning and trying

to push out that blonde witch. The thoughts that had been unleashed were going to make the current night into the longest one since

Patting Hermione's hand once, Allegra released the hold she had on the brunette as she rose up from the bed. "Deon, you know he's going to drink one of those imported bottles of Whiskey we received last week. He can't get drunk, they're going back to Hogwarts tomorrow."

Hermione's kidnap.

Deon nodded. "We should talk to him," he o ered, the idea sounding strange amongst a full-blooded reserved man and his heir. The idea of conversation, of feelings, amongst a pureblood family was still foreign to anyone who knew that they were all coded to feel and show nothing emotional. As Mister Zabini pulled out his wand to configure the armchairs back and arrange the mess he and Blaise made earlier, Allegra decided to help Hermione settle in more comfortably on her bed. The woman flu ed her pillows, pulled the sheets up to her chest, tucked her in properly, and handed her the Jane Eyre book that was on the nightstand beside her bed. "Good night, darling," whispered the woman as she bent down with a

Pocketing his wand, Deon approached the bed and copied the kiss onto the girl's forehead Allegra had given her. "If you need anything,

Hermione nodded passively, clutching onto her book as she watched

smile to press a kiss on the girl's forehead.

don't hesitate on sending Button to us."

Mister and Mrs. Zabini head to the door of her bedroom. Deon had turned the handle of the door, opening it and waiting for his wife to head out first, when suddenly she called, "Mum, Dad—" the two adults halted their movements, frozen to the core for a long second. 49 They turned around to her, a set of green and a set of gold eyes brimming with surprise, tears, and total overjoy. It was happening; the moment they had been waiting for for eighteen years. A moment they had been wishing for when they brought her back into their lives. "Thank you," Hermione added with the same joy her parents were reflecting. "Thank you for giving me a new family." XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

It was the ending of May and the pressure to get in as much studying as possible before final exams commenced was chaotic. Students rose from bed before the sun even came out, rushing to the empty classrooms, the Great Hall, or anywhere they could sit, open their books, and hunch over all of their notes to cram in as much

information as possible. At the signal that June was around the corner, hardly anyone ate. The house tables were scattered with textbooks and parchments, food nibbled on or hardly touched. Ties hung loosely around the neck, white button-ups were untucked, school-robes wrinkled and sometimes not even washed. Selfgrooming was not an important matter in the last weeks of school; nor was socializing with friends. Students were only in packs at the ending of May when the overcrowded library was out of tables and personal desks, or when a tutor was teaching a group all at once. Hogwarts was too hectic at that point in the term to even acknowledge the fact that Hermione Granger was now roaming the corridors; perfectly alive and safe from the kidnap that had occurred in Hogsmeade almost a month prior. Any other day of the school year,

students would be huddled together, muttering and staring, curious and eager for the gossip of what really happened. Hermione was

thankful for the first time in her school-life that students procrastinated in their studies to pay her any mind...

wee.

Of course, she'd be completely content with the peace and the forgetting of her latest drama episode, but then there was a few people who did anything but ignore her. And two in that small circle of people was Harry Potter and Ron Weasley, her best friends. The boys had taken it upon themselves since her return earlier that week to be her shadow. They walked her to the Great Hall for meals, to her classes—even ones they didn't share—to the library, to Gry indor Tower, and even waited outside the girls lavatory when she needed to

"Where are you going?" inquired Ron as he looked up from his incomprehensible Herbology notes. The sudden noise in their small knit not only made Harry look up from his work, but it also caused a

Hermione sighed, visibly, and quickly, irritated. "I'm going back to the

few Ravenclaws around them to shush them rudely.

Common Room, I le my Charm notes there." "Here," Ron said, handing her a stack of wrinkled parchment that he pulled out from his schoolbag, "use mine." The brunette looked at his o ering with judgment. "Thank you for the o er, but I prefer my own." Before she could even rise up from her seat, Harry reached over and took Hermione's arm in his grasp. "Where did you leave them, 'Mione? I'll go get them." "Are you serious?" She loved them, of course she did, she cried and embraced them just as tightly when she first saw them, but they were taking things to the extreme. "I am not a child, Harry Potter, nor am I inept. I can go to the Common Room and retrieve the notes on my own!"

The Ravenclaws turned around once more, shushing them more

Hermione rolled her eyes at them, Harry ignored them, and Ron stuck

"We are aware you're perfectly capable to handle yourself, Hermione, but you're still recovering from your attack. We want to make life a

"That's a first," hu ed the girl, interrupting Harry with a profound glare. "I was at war with you two and not once did you go treating me like the damsel in distress. Even a er Bellatrix tortured me, we went directly into working on our next idiotically dangerous plan. I'll

The Chosen One returned the glare his best friend was giving him. He was not happy to be reminded of the fact that she took a torture

harshly and with deadly expressions.

survive walking to Gry indor Tower."

his middle finger out at them.

little easier on you-"

however, ignored it when he said, "You were attacked inside the castle once, Hermione. I know they've apprehended Abri Vivaldi, but perhaps her accomplice is still roaming the corridors. We're not going to take the chance." Rubbish. Hermione knew perfectly well who had attacked her so long ago and she knew he wouldn't do it again. Theodore Nott had been under the Imperius Curse when he struck her with the ghastly hex, a er all. However, Harry nor Ron needed to know about that matter; they'd blow it out of proportion and kill Nott next time they saw him. That little fact remained amongst the Zabinis, Malfoy, and her. "Fine," Hermione gave in with a grunt, crossing her arms over her chest. "The notes should be on the table against the wall with the window."

Harry smiled despite knowing that he annoyed the witch. "I'll be about half an hour, though. I've got to speak to Ginny about the final

"Take your time, Harry. I know you haven't seen Ginny in about four hours and that there's going to be some snogging involved. Besides,

The brunette watched with a contempt smile pulling the corners of her lips as Harry rose from his seat and made his way to the exit of the library. Counting that he would get distracted with his redheaded girlfriend for a while, Hermione waited three minutes, just to be safe, before she reached for her schoolbag in order to disappear from the

"Don't you dare say anything," she warned Ron as he was about to protest. She started shoving her belongings inside of her bag with

"I need my space, Ronald," snapped Hermione. "I'm grateful for your concern, but its driving me mad. I just want to step outside for a moment, take a breath of fresh air, and not be surrounded by people. If its not you or Harry, it's Blaise following a er me. I'm lucky he's stuck in detention with McGonagall for starting a fight with Neville

With a controlled, freckled expression, Ron handed Hermione her Herbology book. "You're su ocated by us, but you welcome his

Quidditch game of the year. I'll hurry, I promise."

I'll just go over my present notes."

library and their presence.

haste.

today."

"Hermione--"

company wholeheartedly." That made Hermione halt her hurried movements to flee. Her brown eyes met Ron's blue and there was something in the latter's gaze that made her slowly lower herself onto her seat again. He stared at her with deep concentration, like he was afraid if he blinked she would be gone; along with the courage that was di icult to muster and bring out of hiding. He looked at her like it was now or never, like the moment had finally arrived in which he was allowed to speak truthfully and without setbacks. It was finally the moment, a er months of restoration from the war, that Hermione was looking at the real Ron. And he felt just that, he felt like his former self—except, nothing was like their mutual and connected past. To the core, in that moment, they wereHermione and Ron, the truest of friends, but they didn't

hold what they once used to. Each was composed of something di erent now. They were made of di erent variables, but the answer

'I have to apologize," Ron finally spoke. "I was horrible to you.'

"You were grieving," Hermione said what one was supposed to by default, but she'd known that his previous behavior was not excused

He looked somewhat amused. She was sparing him from a welldeserved lecture and telling-o, he knew it. But her priorities had shi ed now; her mind was long gone from him. "It wasn't okay, 'Mione. I let my brother's death become my excuse for lashing out, for giving up on life and myself. I used it as an excuse to be destructive. I don't know how to handle myself most of the time, and you know it. I've never been in control of my emotions and my actions because I let my anger and jealousy guide me... That's who I was, wasn't it? Just a jealous git. I always wanted what others had, I was never satisfied

"The war le me with far less than what I already possessed. I didn't realize...I didn't wantto realize that others had lost just as much or far more than I did. That's one of my many flaws, isn't it, Hermione? The point is, I was enraged and I let it consume me. Instead of fixing it, instead of trying to heal, I became a self-centered prat and thought only of myself. I didn't think about George, Mum, Ginny...I didn't think

Ron swallowed a knot of sentiments, of regrets and the shells of his locked secrets. He scooted his chair closer to the table, hunched his

to the equation was only the same once it was simplified.

because of Fred's passing. "I understand."

with what I was given...

of you"

shoulders as he made sure the nearby Ravenclaws were still occupied by their work. He reached for the brunette's hands when he felt secure, less vulnerable. "We were in love." The redhead might've been wary about others overhearing him, but Hermione was thoroughly surprised to hear him speak. She and Ron had been friends for seven years, she came to know everything about him, but she'd never heard him be honest. She'd never heard him say exactly what his actions were exhibiting. "We had all the potential to be something great, but I ruined it. I crushed it all." He squeezed her hands, feeling their warmth and so ness like he had in the past; when they fell asleep with their fingers intertwined or when she searched for comfort. When she

searched for their skinny love. "I broke your heart, Hermione, and I'm sorry. I threw our love away because I was too selfish and damaged to

"Ever think that perhaps we just weren't meant to be?" She copied his earlier action and squeezed her fingers, attempting to distract him

di erences. Opposites can attract, definitely, but...Sometimes things

from his guilt. "We have similarities, but we have far more

"You're my first love, Ron. That, I'm completely sure about. Regardless of a true romance never budding between us, does not deteriorate from the fact that you hold a special place in my heart. I

want the best for you, you know. You're my best friend."

A dotty smile pulled on his lips. "Yeah. You're my best friend, too."

care. I'm a bastard, aren't I? Because I loved you, just..."

His blue eyes saddened with remorse.

just happen. And it didn't happen for us.

"Just not enough," she completed for him. "Thank you for apologizing, Ronald. Some part of me is at ease that you did, but another part of me didn't require it. I'd come to this conclusion long

As an air of neutrality, of forgiveness, and of friendship wrapped them, they were unaware of the pair of Slytherins that appeared behind them. The dark-haired Slytherin raised a brow while the blond one frowned in distaste at the clasped hands on the surface of the table. There was just something about Gry indor touchy-touchy conversations that either Slytherin will never understand. "I've seen a mandrake with a more attractive smile than that," Malfoy said fluidly, intent on killing the moment between Weasley and Hermione. "Best put it away, Weasel, before someone gets petrified from it." The brunette looked up, as did the redhead, and there was something close to fate hovering over them. Hermione's co ee-colored eyes started sparkling, overjoyed yet scolding when they found Malfoy's silvery gaze. As for Ron, his blue eyes came to life when he found a matching pair in Pansy Parkinson. And that's when Hermione

understood: Ronald had found someone just as broken, with just as

"Well, I'll see you later, 'Mione." Ron rose up from his seat; like he'd been the one previously needing to flee. "Parkinson is going to to

The Slytherin witch threw Hermione a mocking grin, one that wasn't

much need of fixing, that gave him energy to move forward.

help me with my History of Magic."

this world needed."

treacherous storm.

certainty.

filled with as much venom as it would've been years ago. Pansy waited almost patiently until the redheaded Gry indor gathered his belongings and said another goodbye. In sync, they turned and headed towards the doors of the library. Draco frowned at his retreating classmates. Weasley took Pansy's books from her hands and she migrated a few inches closer to him, appearing as if they were about to walk out with their arms wrapped around one another. With a laugh, Hermione blinked away from the scene Malfoy was still glaring at to face him. "Ron didn't take History of Magic this year." "Brilliant," hu ed Malfoy as he grabbed a chair and dragged it right beside Hermione's. "A Slytherin/Gry indor relationship. Just what

Hermione rolled her eyes at him half-playfully. With her le hand, she mindlessly opened her notes for show, while her right hand went under the table to enlace her fingers with his. She squeezed tightly, smiled at him like she was seeing the sun for the first time a er a

"Maybe it won't be the only one," she muttered with a beautiful

Draco watched her as she turned to her notes, that gorgeous smile lighting her up. He was so enchanted by it, so bewitched, like her very essence was calling him with a hypnotic melody he couldn't help but to listen to. He wanted to get lost in that light and sound forever—but there was still the matter that, hidden beneath her tie and blouse, her neck was adorned with Nott's engagement ring. Continue reading next part \Box