Pleasing Blaise [AN] A special thanks to ManoBilli_98 for making the first cover of Lover of the Light Chapter Three: Pleasing Blaise å⁵ either of them knew exactly how long they sat in opposite sides of the room, just looking at each other, enduring a silence pregnant with tension and uneasiness. She could say it felt like it'd been an hour, but her sense of time had stopped working when she was thrust through the doors of the Zabini mansion. Her ability to do much anything but cry had gone faulty, too, so anything coherent or logical just wasn't working for her in that moment. She was never one for an awkward silence, but hell, nothing about the past few hours was đ The boy on the other side looked almost as uncomfortable as she did or perhaps more considering his situation. Apparently the loud bang she marched through had awoken him, for he was placed in the middle of a grand bed. He was intertwined into the silk sheets, black like thick and creamy paint, but he was sitting up and was exposed. His chest was bare, and in the light of the room, his dark skin was more overwhelming. It was a definite factor that made everything a⁴ Collecting herself, making sure that there were no more tears wetting $% \left(1\right) =\left(1\right) \left(1$ her cheeks, Hermione brushed her palms almost aggressively on her face before she stood up weakly from the velvety carpet beneath her And just as she was about to twist the golden handle of the door, she heard the sheets rule, the mattress creak, and several loud footsteps. " Wait' a Hermione didn't turn when she heard the voice. She kept her hand on the handle and her eyes on the black door of the bedroom she accidentally stumbled into. The boy behind her cleared his throat. "Wait, please." The polite word sounded foreign in the air, Hermione thought to herself. She wondered if she ever even heard a Slytherin or ignorant pureblood use that word if not to mock someone with their smarmy attitude. "I...Don't go, Hermione. At that, the brunette girl couldn't help herself—she turned around from her route of escape to find all of Blaise Zabini staring at her. She never really ever gave Zabini much attention or even a thought during her past six years in Hogwarts. He was a prejudice bastard like the rest of those purebloods he associate with, yes, and she overheard his rants a few times during the Slug Club, but other than that the boy knew how to keep to his own. But now he was standing in front of her, a few easily crossed yards from her, and she somehow was seeing two versions of the same boy. a He was tall, a few inches shorter than Ronald she concluded, but still surpassing her and most others. He was broad-shouldered, lean, he bore muscles from the year in the Slytherin Quidditch team, and his skin was the same chocolate-milk color as always. His hair was short, black and faded smoothly; even though he had just woken up it was still all in place. His eyes were emerald green, wide, and rimmed with thick lashes. She was certain he looked exactly like Deon Zabini ₫³ But even as she could see the Zabini patriarch resemblance in him, she couldn't help but also see the version of the boy she was also familiar with. She saw the arrogant, judging, haughty Slytherin who always had a 'Blood Traitor' to spit out at Ron or Ginny. She even remembered him in flashes during the war-obviously not fighting for So that's the problem, wasn't it? She didn't know what version of Blaise Zabini she was supposed to be looking at. Was she supposed to be seeing him as a Zabini, a boy that was somehow intertwined in her life now? Or was she supposed to be looking at a member of that notorious group of wizards and witches that wanted nothing more than to kill her and all those they deemed unworthy? "...I didn't honestly think they would convince you to come," he you to blow up half of London before they ever dragged you here." Unbeknown to her, Hermione's hands balled into fists. "I'm not here willingly," she answered roughly. "My mother forced me because she thinks she owes it to those people. I disagree. An indescribable smile tugged at the corner of the boy's mouth. "Of course," he breathed out to himself. "Well, I...erm...I'm glad you're a It almost sounded sincere to her ears that she couldn't contain the didn't have to be nice to him, did she? She still had that respect-youradults mentality her parents taught her, but Hermione had always been able to defend herself from those her age who were cruel to her She didn't have to sugar-coat anything for Zabini, especially when he never sugar-coated anything himself. a Blaise did not look insulted, however. "I don't expect you to be," he said instead of a retaliation. There was still that odd smile at the corner of his mouth, an almost awkward one that suggested that an insult was not about to come as he was trying to keep the situation light. "But like I said, I am glad you are. You don't realize that your parents have been waiting for this moment all your life." a She sco ed. "They're not my parents—Richard and Jennifer Granger "Stubborn," he said in a mu le. "See that trait of yours hasn't gone away in the past year I've known nothing about you. Hermione was feeling a bit sidetracked now. Why was he being so understanding? Why was he standing there with that passive look on his face; like he was actually trying to talkto her? And what was this business of not knowing anything about her? Had he seriously been keeping tabs on her before she went on the run with Harry and Ron? "Why?" She asked in a surprisingly low tone. She went ahead and asked what she really wanted to know; what she really wanted to hear in her favor. "Why did you come into my life now? I was doing perfectly fine—I was happy Why did they have to take that from me?" a Zabini scratched his head, looking away from her as he did so for a moment. The awkwardness shot around the room once again. He really couldn't give her the answers to the questions she had because she already made up her mind about what she wanted the truth to be. As such, he really didn't have any other option but to be blunt with her; because regardless of what he said, she was still not going to hear what she wanted. a "It's quite simple actually," began Blaise. "The war is over, and they saw that it was now safe to bring you back to them. I'm not going to pretend to know every single detail of what happened, Hermione; I didn't even know you existed until the summer a er our First Year. You can't imagine my shock: Potter's best friend, my half-sister under disguise. It was a lot to take in for a child.' The brunette crossed her arms over her chest, a frown still creasing her forehead. She was still not hearing anything she wanted, and she still didn't find anything worthy to comment ove "Look," the boy sighed, "there's a lot that I can't tell you because it's not my place to. But if there's one thing that I can say, it's that they never gave up hope. You can be pissed all you want to, Hermione you have the right to in the end-but you can't be completely hardheaded not to see their su ering. They gave you up not two hours a er you were born. Can you imagine the pain Allegra felt? Or the guilt that was killing our father when he realized what his mistakes cost him? Don't be so blinded by resentment to not see their hurt either. They weren't necessarily having a ball all these years. Again, Hermione remained silent. She felt a bit childish for being so stubborn, but she just couldn't feel the sympathy the Zabinis wanted from her. They were just strangers telling a story. And were they just strangers whom she happened to stumble across with their tale, she'd probably see reason and give them her sentiments, but they had dragged herinto this. She just couldn't comprehend why they would take the two people that were the most precious things that she had. Her parents made her up—they were all the good that lived inside of her and what shaped her to be just and fair. a Letting a few minutes pass in silence, the boy not removing his piercing stare from her, she decided to ask a new question that was suddenly pestering her. "It must've been horrible to know your sister was the famous Mudblood, wasn't it?' a Instantly, Blaise narrowed his eyes to a glare. "Don't pretend to know anything about me," he hissed at her. He was definitely not bothering to hide his sudden aggravation. "Don't pretend to know what I felt $\,$ when your parents told me who you were. You don't have a right to judge. "I do have a right," she hissed in return too. "You knew you were my brother and all your acquaintances were out to kill me. You were my brother and you knew what I was fighting for! You were my brother $\,$ and you were equally as prejudiced as all of them! I don't doubt for a second that you would've done away with all those you called Blood Traitors and Mudhloods!" eah, I would've! I thought they were all scum! But then peop my same beliefs killed my mother and then I knew what real scum ď A er Blaise's shout Hermione felt like she had been smacked across the face, but not a er she had punched the dark-skinned boy across his too. They both stared at one another, him with his foggy glare and she with her outraged, guilty eyes. а A knot formed in her throat, making it hard to swallow as it tightened with pain. Hadn't she always been the advocate of tolerance? Hadn't $\,$ she believed that every person had light in them too? Hadn't she tried to convince her friends that not everyone was as horrible as they seemed? Hadn't she believed that everyone had their own horrors that gave them the right for redemption? There he was, Blaise Zabini, and his mother had been ripped away by $% \left\{ \mathbf{r}^{\prime}\right\} =\left\{ \mathbf{r}^{$ people who cared not who they killed. He stood there, knowing that he was never going to get his mother back, that his choices had been all the wrong ones. How must he feel, knowing that everything he $\,$ thought was right had suddenly turned on him and taken the one thing that was vital? Every person needed their mother, even if they were seventeen and on the way to adulthood. There she was, Hermione Granger, and, yes, they'd stepped on her family-portrait, but they hadn't taken her mother from her. Jennifer Granger was still alive, she was still in the same house, and she would always be there no matter when Hermione went to go look for her. The woman might not be tied to her biologically, but she still was her $mum.\ Nothing\ would\ change\ that.$ a "...How did you really feel when you knew I was your sister?" She whispered to him, her eyes filled with remorseful tears. "Did you hate me? Blaise didn't answer immediately. He breathed in and out of his nose for several moments, his bare chest following along rhythmically. He looked flustered and uncomfortable, angry and yet saddened by what he'd been feeling since the end of his Sixth Year. He was filled with remorse and resentment, but he'd been doing fine hiding it from the world for more than a year. a He had wondered what it would be like the day that he finally had her in front of him, knowing the truth; knowing that they were halfsiblings. Obviously it wasn't like he thought it would be. He didn't think there would be grudges, yelling, reproaches of the past, pointed fingers about previous mistakes, or the hole in his chest that was le there a er the murder of his mother. Every year that passed since he knew about her, the scenario of there being reluctance was clearly present, but he just never thought it'd be this bad. Realistically, he $\,$ knew she wasn't going to be jumping for joy when she found out the truth, but he hadn't expected that she hated them this much. "How do you really feel to know that you are my sister?" He asked in return, holding o on her answer. "Do you hate me? She made him relive things he probably didn't want to, he was demanding her to give back before he even dared to respond to anything, and she honestly thought that was fair. $\hbox{\sc "I'm}$ confused," she said in a small voice. "I see two di erent versions of you, Zabini. But...I don't hate either of them." She played with her fingers for a moment, thinking about his first question. She had to be honest about it, didn't she? "I don't want to be your sister. I don't want to be in this family...I don't belong. But whenever...whenever my dad's family le $\,$ a er they visited, a er he was done pretending like his brother's remarks weren't annoying or ignorant, he would always look at me and say, 'You don't choose your family, sweetheart. But you gotta love them.''' She stopped her fidgeting and met the boy's $% \left\{ \left(1\right) \right\} =\left\{ \left(1\right) \right\} =$ eyes. "Maybe it can be like that for us, eventually. a Blaise almost smiled and snorted at that. He didn't expect anything but the truth from her, even in her curious way to smooth it over. He didn't expect her to be so accepting, and the fact that she hadn't disappeared in the night said a lot to him. "This family has a lot of faults, Hermione," he spoke, "just like all others. But one thing that's always been more important above all is family. I'd be lying if I said that I didn't loathe the fact that I wasn't Deon's only child when I first found out, but that resentment towards you ended the night the school found out you'd been petrified...You were my sister, and you were laying in the Hospital Wing immobile...And I guess Miste Granger is right: you don't choose your family, but you have to love them. In that second, the snotty Slytherin that she remembered from earlier Hogwarts days was gone. Standing in front of her was a boy who'd $made\ mistakes\ and\ was\ now\ suddenly\ a\ part\ of\ her\ new,\ twisted,\ and$ unwanted life. And it was because of that, because she decided to let the grudge go for him she walked towards him, closing distance, with an intent to shake hands "Give them a chance, will you?" He raised a palm in the air, halting the girl before she got closer. "You don't have to love them $% \left\{ 1,2,\ldots ,n\right\} =0$ Hermione, but just ease their pain. They've been waiting for this for She tried to swallow that knot of emotions stuck in her throat. "...I don't think I've ever pictured you as the caring type, Zabini. He smirked lightly, not full of arrogance but with a little triumph. He towards the door. He didn't have to give the details of it now, one day she'd put the pieces together with that brilliant mind of hers and she'd see that the reason why he cared was because of the loss of his mother. He loved the woman so dearly, more than his own life, but he had never showed it to her; never mentioned it once. He didn't want anything to happen to his father or Allegra without them getting to know their daughter, or for Hermione to regret not giving them \boldsymbol{a} chance. Life was tricky, and it had a way of snatching everything away from you—but it also had a way of giving something back He had lost his mother in bloodshed, but that same war had not taken his half-sister. Maybe there was something to that, and all he really wanted was for the Zabini family to be whole. He never allowed himself a friend in his previous years in Hogwarts, he just didn't trust people, but he knew that with family it was a little di erent. He wanted to start this new phase in life, post-war, with wholes and not fragments. ਕੰ Besides, hadn't there been a mass population that had hope in Hermione? She was a link to the greater good, how would this di er? A er climbing down two levels, Hermione felt her heart pound in her chest when she put two and two together of where Zabini had brought her. Knock. Knock. "You don't choose your family, remember?" The boy silenced her, both of them facing a grand door made of marble a Hermione felt nauseated, even before she heard a distinctive voice allowing them entrance to whatever was behind that door. She hadn't agreed to this, and she most definitely didn't want to do this. In a moment filled with guilt and sympathy she made the mistake of allowing herself to try and get to know Blaise Zabini, but she hadn't been willing to extend the courtesy to the other two members of his family. Yes, she was being di icult, but the wounds were still wide open for her to even consider allowing them to be a part of her She was about to rip her hand away from the boy's, about to run back to that room they've damned her with, and she was going to hide there until they allowed her to go back to the Grangers-except she saw honey-colored eyes dropping thick tears. Her conscience was suddenly screaming at her; hurling insults and submerging her with ਕੰ more guilt. Allegra Zabini was sitting on a black, little bench in front of a glorious vanity set-up, but she was definitely not touching herself up or staring at herself in the mirror. She had her shoulders slumped down, shaking with with mu led sobs, her palms covering her mouth, and $% \left(1\right) =\left(1\right) \left(1\right) \left($ her husband was kneeling at her side; staring at her with a broken a Yes, Hermione was definitely swimming in an ocean of guilt. She didn't want to hurt anyone's feelings, to make a grown woman cry, even if she felt like her actions were justified. She couldn't name how many times she said she wanted to be with her muggle-parents, and that wasn't going to change anytime soon, but she didfeel compassion. a The woman stopped completely, like she'd frozen at the sound of the girl's voice. Mister Zabini looked up also, no anger in his gaze but just deep rooted self-hatred in those green eyes of his. It was only but obvious that he blamed himself. Had he not made the mistakes of previous years and his wife could've kept their daughter, they could have raised her, given her and Blaise a proper life—but instead he had damned Allegra to an emptiness for years and the hatred of that "I...erm..." Blaise gave Hermione's hand a squeeze, his eyes directed on the floor with uncomfortableness. "I'm sorry," murmured the brunette with a bit of unwillingness. "I was harsh, and I should have never spoken to you the way I did. I'm...I'm aware that you want your daughter back, but...I'm not her." a Blaise winced along with his father, and the woman's eyes dropped "Honestly, I don't really know who I am anymore," the girl continued through their reactions, that everlasting knot in her throat making it hard to do so. "I feel like...like I'm not a Granger or a Zabini. I'm $\,$ nnothing" She stopped for a second a er her voice cracked. She didn't want to cry anymore. "I don't want to be here, but...but I'll give you $\,$ my word that I'll try to at least accept that you're my mother. That's all I can give you right now.' Mrs. Zabini said nothing for a while, no one did in fact. But before Hermione knew it, the woman stood up, making her husband do so too, and she walked steadily and carefully towards her. The closer she got, the more Hermione could see the true reflection of heartbreak and pain in the woman's honey eyes, and it truly did make her feel horrible. And when she finally reached the girl, just a few inches away, Hermione also saw the small flecks of hope glittering like gold in her eyes. "I'll take anything," Allegra breathed. "And I promise not to push you, Hermione...Just don't...don't..." "I won't leave," the brunette girl finished; though she felt a piece of her die for saying that she wouldn't. She'd been expecting this thing to blow over by some divine miracle and that she'd be back to Several things happened at once, however: Blaise let go of her hand $% \left(1\right) =\left(1\right) +\left(1\right)$ and stepped back, Mister Zabini let out a sigh of relief, and Mrs. Zabini pulled her into a hug. Something was going to make Hermione regret this in the end; she was sure of it.. å XXXXXXXXXXX It took her twenty-seven minutes to find the sitting room. a She'd been in the Zabini mansion for two days now and she still couldn't find her way around it. The day before she had, grudgingly and fakely, let the three members of this new family show her around. It had taken up more than five hours, and they were still on the upper levels of the home, but Mister Zabini had suggested to leave the rest of the tour for another day. That was the night they had their first 'family dinner'. There had been content smiles on the parents, even on Blaise, but Hermione had still been sulking; though she tried not to show it as much as courtesy for the strangers. The present day was an entirely new one, and when she woke up she still found herself there. With less tears than the ones she shed in the previous collection of hours she'd been there, she got up and had breakfast with Mrs. Zabini and Blaise. The patriarch of the family ha been o on a business meeting for his companies and wouldn't be back until dinner—where guests had been invited and expected as well. So a er a day of pretending to be interested in whatever it was that Mrs. Zabini had been going on about, she was dismissed and asked to head to her bedroom to start getting ready for the evening; with specific orders to meet up in the small sitting room of the mansion at seven o'clock sharp. A er leaving her bedroom half an hour earlier than planned, getting lost in the upper levels when she realized almost every one of them had a sitting room, she assumed she was in the right one and it was now 6:56 in the night. The other sitting rooms she stumbled into were far too extravagant and too ballroom-like to be the one that Mrs. Zabini and her step-son had been discussing. They mentioned that they wanted a carefree, almost light-feel surrounding to entertain their guests-and Hermione definitely felt undressed every time she opened the door to the others. This particular sitting room was just right, though she $\ didn't \ see \ anything \ small \ about \ it \ either. \ (Then \ again, there \ wasn't$ anything just plain about all the rooms she'd seen in the mansion, anyway.) á As she stood in the entrance of the grand doors to the living room, she got a good peripheral view of all of it. The room within itself was the only one she'd seen that was not made of marble. This one was completely covered in fine wood, all in the color of an antique maple The walls were smooth and shiny, all the wood dented and paneled into detailed and lengthy rectangles; the same pattern repeated on the frames of the open windows that were letting in a night breeze. The floor was made of wood as well, but what was not covered by a fine, beige-colored rug, was made of dark chestnut wood; alike the center tables and the tasteful bookcase pressed against one of the walls. There were three types of sitting furniture in the room: four dark chestnut-colored chairs with leafy-green cushions, two of which were facing each other, a small table containing a set-up of Wizards Chess in the middle, all next to a window; five light taupe-colored armchairs, one was at the corner of the bookcase, where a small table with bottles of drinks and glasses also nearby, another was by another window, and the other three were forming a half-circle in the center of the sitting room; and finally, there were two beige-colored couches, stripped in a leafy-green color, that were aligned in front of And though there were blooming roses and other flowers inside $% \left\{ 1,2,\ldots ,n\right\}$ curious vases with odd shapes or detailing, and though there were several painting on the walls, some lovely artworks and other portraits of people related to either Mister or Mrs. Zabini, what Hermione liked about the entire, spacious room were two things There was a fireplace in the furthest wall that was made up of stones, and it reached high to the ceiling and was arched like a tower. It reminded her of a fireplace that was once in a cabin in the mountains where her parents—the Grangers—had taken her when she was about seven. The other thing she truly liked was the grandfather clock resting on the le side of the stone-made fireplace. It was made of wood too, colored maple. And though there was nothing whimsical about it, it sort of reminded Hermione of Molly Weasley's eccentric a "Word round the paintings is that you got lost—" $\mbox{\it Jumping}$ up at the voice that startled her, Hermione scowled disapprovingly as Blaise Zabini appeared at her right side; grinning and with his hands in the pockets of his black trousers. "Yet you got here before Allegra and I. You're just determined to be the best as always, aren't you? ď Noticing the the dark-skinned boy was completely made-up, looking $% \left\{ 1,2,\ldots ,n\right\} =0$ refine like everything surrounding them, Hermione continued to scowl because he was teasing her and because she hated to dress-up "I like being punctual, actually," she told him blankly. "And because you were slightly scared to get lost, right?" The boy added, still grinning with great smug. It had been two days since Hermione was thrust into their lives, and though she was very much that righteous Gry indor, he liked to tease her. He found it incredibly amusing to watch her frown, sometimes sputter, but then refrain herself from not being too snappy at him. "I can draw you a map if you'd like. I'm sure you'll have it memorized in five minutes. The brunette crossed her arms over her chest. "Is it customary for your parents to have dinner with such high expectations? "Technically, they're your parents," he corrected her, his grin deflating how hard it was going to be to get to the point when she stopped speaking about her biological parents like they were a disea "Allegra is my step-mother, remember?" The girl said nothing. Uncrossing her arms, Hermione sighed loudly as she looked down at herself. Usually, in the Granger household, she was allowed to sit at $\ensuremath{\mathsf{a}}$ the dinner table with her pajamas and just lounge about. Dinner was always a time for distressing, catching up about what they'd done throughout the day and the like. But dinner at the Zabini mansion landed Hermione in a dress 30 $\boldsymbol{\mathsf{A}}\xspace$ er an hour of just sitting in the grand bed in her new room, allowing herself to read a book in the giant collection that they'd given her, Hermione went from being surprised, a little delighted, and then extremely annoyed when Button, her house-elf, appeared. Button had said that she'd been sent by the Mistress to make sure the young mistress took a bath and then Button was to help her get ready once she was out. So a er fi een minutes of muttering curses unde her breath, the house-elf's giant aqua-colored eyes watching her carefully, she went to the shower and started the horrible process. The house-elf had gotten her bony hands into Hermione's brown, curly mess of a hair and began to apply potions to relax the ringlets. Hermione was directed to the enormous walk-in closet; where Button showed her the evening dresses that the Mistress always found $% \left\{ \left(1\right) \right\} =\left\{ \left($ appropriate. A er another fi een minutes of arguing with the house elf, Hermione had reluctantly put on a navy-blue pleated dress that rested a little before the knee. It was sleeveless; the top half was plain; the bottom half was pleated with white polkadots; and there was a red, thin belt cinching the waist. ਕੰ "I managed to convince Button to forgo the heels," she muttered with another sigh as she clunk the ends of her red ballet flats together like Dorothy of Oz. She looked up at Blaise next, choosing to let go of that thought before she started thinking about the film her muggle mother took her to watch so many years ago. "I don't really think I'm cut out for this posh life, Zabini. I'm hardly a proper girl while we're at å "You're more than proper," her half-brother replied. "And you're charming when you're not all stubborn and busy learning about things. You'll do just fine. Besides, don't feel intimidated. Allegra has longed for her daughter all these years, she's just probably itching to get you shopping and doing all that feminine rubbish." ₫ The scowl that had previously been on her face went from being angry to slightly miserable. "I don't like shopping," she continued to mutter carefully; crossing her arms once more. The endless reasons of why this wasn't right just kept piling up."I like reading, going to the longing for. a He frowned at her too now. "Because you don't want to try," he snapped. He was a boy with a thin patience, Hermione was figuring that out the more she spent time with him. "You don't have to be what she wants you to be. She just wants a daughter.' a "Then she should've had another," was Hermione's immediate retort. The two half-siblings looked at one another, both clearly stubborr and upset. But before there could be hostility in the air, the girl sighed and decided to kill the tension before it got a lot worse. She $\,$ didn't know why, but she was finding that it was a little di $\,$ icult and draining to be fully upset with Blaise. "Anyway," she cleared her throat, stepping inside the sitting room now. "Who exactly is coming over for dinner? More Zabinis?" å⁰ Blaise followed pursuit, but just as he was heading to one of the armchairs to toss himself on, opening his mouth to answer her question along the way, Allegra and Deon Zabini marched through the grand doors too "Father," the dark-skinned boy greeted with a calmed smile, straightening himself out " Mio figlio" the man greeted back with his deep voice. He marched over to the boy, embracing him in a quick but tender hug. Their green help but to feel a little intrusive. Deon Zabini was Blaise's only parent now, and with such truth, she reckoned that the boy held on to the $\,$ man with much more fierceness and admiration. The same love that the man had for his son. " Spero che la giornata è andata benë. Blaise nodded. " E 'andato bene. Allegra e mia sorella hanno mi ha tenuto occupato'. ď With whatever it was that the boy had told his father, Hermione started feeling uncomfortable all over again when the man's bright and profound eyes found her. There was an immediate smile on his face, like the one he'd been giving Blaise, but this one also had a bit of relief mixed in it. It made her believe that he was worried that he was going to come back from his business meetings and not find her $\,$ here. "Hermione," he greeted, but he kept his distance. "I hope your day has been going well." a All three Zabinis were staring at her and she finally knew what peerpressure was all about. They were eager to hear a positive word come out of her mouth so she had no other option but to oblige to them. "It's been good," she said with a small smile. "I hope your meetings went well.' "Oh, they always go well for him," Mrs. Zabini was the one that responded, smiling beautifully. "He came through the Floo in our sitting room and he was raving about the construction of a new hotel he's working on with his friend." Blaise made a humming sound. "So that's who's coming to dinner, $% \left(1\right) =\left(1\right) \left(1\right) \left($ then? The plan to construct the hotel in the island of Hydra is already a certain thing. Surely there's no need to wine and dine your friend å Hermione, nor Mister Zabini apparently, missed the almost agitated glint to the boy's eyes. However, the boy's father kept his expression neutral, though his gaze was a little narrowed now. "It's not all business matters, Blaise," the man replied firmly. "My business partner and his family are also friends to us. a "But not friends to others," Blaise retorted. å "You doubt me?" a There was a hurt to the man's question, almost an outrage $underlining\ it\ too,\ that\ the\ boy\ felt\ almost\ guilty.\ He\ trusted\ his\ father$ and his judgement, and he knew that whatever it was that his father was trying to do, it was long overdue anyway. It was something that was going to happen regardless, whether it be that night or in a Curious as always, Hermione bothered not to feel ashamed of wanting to know what was going on between Blaise and his father. Whatever it was, it was clearly a sensitive issue because both Zabini men had looked defiant and the woman had let a glimpse of worry flicker across her face before she masked her beautiful features back to their neutral state. And like Fate has a way of being either cunning or giving, depending on which way people looked at it, that fireplace that Hermione had found a liking to roared and its flames began to burn green. đ Three seconds passed, and with every second an individual person came out of the glittering flames. Each one had come out dusting themselves from the soot of the fireplace automatically and casually, and each one had halted; looking frozen as they found their hosts staring at them. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. a Blonde hair—one golden and two almost white. ₫ Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. å Three pairs of eyes—one blue like cloudless, day-skies and the other two grey like molten metal. Tick, Tock, Tick, Tock, Three faces—two taken aback and confused, and the other hesitant. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock. Three people—all enemies. **a**° Once that grandfather clock beside the fireplace signaled 7:08 in the evening, Hermione turned to the Zabini patriarch without waiting for another minute to pass. "The Malfoy?!" She was taken aback and confused herself. "Are you insane?! You're expecting me to sit down and have dinner with the Malfovs!" Mister Zabini looked at his wife for a second, but the woman was not giving a sign of anything as she glanced at the floor; looking almost uncomfortable. "They're friends to us." The man blinked up at his long-lost daughter. "They've been our friends for years. "Well, your friends tried to kill me!" This was not happening, this was not happening. She was overall hesitant and against being around the Zabinis, and now they decided to bring the Malfoys into the equation as well? How the hellwere they expecting her to handle this? Clearly they had to have known about the bad blood between them—especially the one that they thought she had. "I just finished fighting a war against them!" ď³ "Hermione--" đ "I can't believe this!" The brunette hissed to no one in particular throwing her arms up in the air in aggravation; the way she'd seen $% \left\{ 1,2,\ldots ,n\right\}$ Harry do so many times when he was at the breaking-point. a "Hermione, listen-" "I want to go home." And there it was, the same chant that she'd been spewing since the moment they dragged her here. She looked at Mister and Mrs. Zabini determinedly, forgetting all about Blaise and his attempts to say something that she kept cutting across. "Take me back to my parents. This cannot work, I'm sorry. You may have your amicable history with these people, but I have another one far di erent. And it's not a pleasant one. ď All three Zabinis lost whatever flecks of contentment they had been feeling for the past two days. The woman looked broken and miserable again, the man self-loathing, guilty and frustrated, and the $\,$ boy looked annoyed and just as frustrated as his father. But none of their feelings really crossed her at that moment, however. She'd been unwillingly willing to get to know the Zabinis, but she drew a line at $% \left\{ 1,2,\ldots ,n\right\}$ the family that had looked at her as nothing but dirt underneath their shoes "Don't you start saying that again." Blaise marched up to her, $\,$ frowning. "You said you were going to give this a chance, remember? You cannot walk away every time there's something that you don't like. Because believe me, Hermione, this family is filled with things that you're not going to find enjoyable. You just have to give it a chance." "A chance?" She repeated with deep bewilderment. "They tried to kill me, Blaise!" å "They didn't know the truth, Hermione," Mister Zabini added. ď The brunette shot the man a deadly glare; silencing him with it. She turned back to her half-brother and kept her determination. "Look, Blaise, you just don't-"I know," the boy interrupted her. "I know they tried to kill you, but as rubbish as it sounds, they really didn't know. It doesn't justify anything, but do you really think Father would put you in harm purposely? This is a secret that's been hidden for almost eighteen years, Hermione. They know about you." å Hermione crossed her arms, her lips pressed into a tight line. She $\operatorname{didn't}$ know what to say at the given moment. And because she didn't, because of her long second of silence, Mister Zabini took his chance to speak again. "There's a lot that you don't know and that you may refuse to listen to," he began, marching deeper into the sitting room made of complete wood. "But in the end, I'm at fault and as guilty for letting the Malfoys persecute you when they did as they are. I didn't let Allegra or Blaise tell a soul about who you really were," he still kept his eyes on the brunette, "nor did I confess to my old friend about it either. You were at greater risk then, you had already defined yourself as Harry Potter's friend, Hermione. Can you imagine the price your head would've had if the world knew the truth? I couldn't risk it. And ultimately, I couldn't risk Allegra or Blaise if the truth got out either. The Dark Lord was never forgiving. Though they thought her hard-headed, Hermione had been indeed listening to Mister Zabini's words carefully to try and get some understanding from them. She didn't really know how to process them, though. How was she supposed to feel knowing that the man who was supposed to be her biological father allowed people to go a er her like she was the prey? And how was she even supposed to $% \left\{ 1,2,\ldots ,n\right\}$ react to the fact that he'd done it to protect her, in some odd way, and his wife and son from Voldemort's wrath? If he had tried to spare her, he would've sent his wife and son to execution. a No wonder the man lived with so much self-hate Hermione crossed her arms over her chest, still frowning as she turned to look at where Mister Zabini stood with the blonde family "Do they know who I am?" She asked with gritted teeth. а Mister Zabini placed a hand on Lucius Malfoy's shoulder. "Lucius has known since a er you fled Malfoy Manor during the war." The girl $\,$ sti ened in remembrance, as well as everyone else in the room. Every person was aware of what happened to her there; in front of the once prestigious family. "Like I said, there's things you don't know, Hermione, and I do hope you decide to listen to them. There's more than what you think happened. And Blaise is right, I would never put a "...And his family?" Hermione added, her back still tensed and her anger and disgust just building higher and higher $\label{eq:making movement for the first time, Allegra\ gracefully\ walked\ to$ Hermione's side. She placed a gentle hand at the small of her back, deciding to ignore that the latter froze even more at the gesture, and she directed a collected smile at the blonde woman in the room. "Narcissa, I'm sure you're wise enough to put two and two together. You knew our secret from the start, just like your husband. Mrs. Malfoy had no longer looked puzzled—she indeed placed everything together and figured out why Miss Granger had been in the Zabini mansion entirely. She nodded carefully back at her old end. "It explains a lot as well." And by that she meant the problems that had developed between the two families since the summer the Death Eaters appeared at the Qudditch World Cup. It explained so many things, but Narcissa Malfoy was also smart enough not to bring any of it up; they were barely getting back to their old friendships and connections in a slow pace. Hermione exhaled, still shaking her head at the entire situation. There was just too much to handle and too much that was still kept a secret. And honestly, it was all too tough to even try and comprehend. She couldn't find a sensible side to any of it. "How close of friends are they?" She asked another one of her questions, looking away from Mrs. Zabini to look back at her husband. a "Lucius was the friend that warned me the Dark Lord was coming a er me so many years ago," the man replied. And then, a er Hermione frowned deeper, he just let a dim, sheepish smile li the corners of his mouth. "And...Lucius and Narcissa were named vour $\label{lem:conditional} \mbox{Godparents before we gave you up to the Grangers."}$ æ For the first time in that entire interaction, Hermione and Draco Malfoy met eye to eye. He had been the only one in his family who still looked thoroughly confused, and like her, he appeared not to know what the hell was going on. But a er Mister Zabini had finished his comment, both looked completely appalled. đ With a loud groan and stomp, Hermione turned on her heels and $% \left\{ 1,2,\ldots ,n\right\}$ exited the sitting room. She'd told Blaise she wasn't a proper girl, anyway. xxxxxxxxxxx Dinner had happened as planned, and all because of Blaise. The boy was the one who decided to go fetch his sibling, promising that he would come back with her and that everyone should proceed to the dining room. Though the Malfoys were clearly skeptical that the girl would allow to be seated in the same table as them, Mister Zabini and his wife had a lot more faith in Blaise's capacity to get anyone to do anything he wanted. He was a very manipulative boy, and not in a direct way either; he made you do things for him without realizing it. Some people called it natural charm, but the Zabinis were well aware of the boy's cunning abilities. å As such, Hermione hadn't stood a chance when her half-brother found her lost in one of the five study rooms in the mansion. He found her sitting on a couch, tucked into a corner with her knees brought up to her chest and her forehead plastered on her kneecaps. To his relief, and slight surprise, he hadn't found her crying in deep rage or helplessness; she'd just appeared to be trying to process everything. He sat at the other end, silence ringing for a few minutes before he reminded her that she'd promised to give it a shot. He told $% \left\{ \left(1\right) \right\} =\left\{ \left(1\right) \right\}$ her he knew it wasn't easy, but there was so much to learn still. And that had seemed to smooth her over—of course, his almost puppydog eyes helped too. d⁴ Dinner had mostly been an awkward and silent a air, except for the few times the adults spoke to one another. And once the final course had been served and hurriedly finished, the two families looked almost pleased to be able to separate and find some sense of comfort away from all the tension. Hermione had assumed that had been the cue for the Malfoys to depart, but she was greatly mistaken when Blaise had suggested a game of Wizard's Chess against the only Malfoy heir, Hermione keeping score for them while the adults supposedly would talk business. ਕੱ So there she was, back in that wood-made sitting room, and sitting $% \left(1\right) =\left(1\right) \left(1\right)$ on one of the beige-colored couches. She was glaring at the two boys in the room with her, a quill and small notebook in her possession as she was supposed to be tracking their third game of the night. "Checkmate." Grinning wildly as his queen butchered his opponent's king, Blaise leaned back against the chestnut-colored chair he was $% \left\{ 1,2,\ldots ,n\right\}$ sitting on. "I believe you owe me two-hundred and ten galleons with three sickles now. You should really quit the game, Malfoy. I'll end up taking all of sock-drawer money at this rate." a Since he arrived by Floo to the Zabinis home, Draco Malfoy's pale complexion had only gone from confused to blank in the almost three hours he'd been there. That same expression of nothingness hadn't changed, not even as Blaise mocked him. "Maybe we can up the wages, that way if we play every day for a year, I can take all of your inheritance." Though Blaise continued to grin through the tension, Malfoy did not let up. He crossed his arms over his chest, wrinkling the fine material of his black blazer, and continued to not say anything. He also kept those cold grey eyes only focused on his fellow Slytherin. "Hermione," Blaise turned from the blonde to the girl a few feet from them, "how about I take score now? You can try and win me more of Malfoy's money. He's rubbish at Wizard's Chess so it'll be easy." ď The girl held on to the thin spine of the quill tightly, feeling it bend with the pressure of her fingers. She pressed the tip of it onto the notebook, making a piercing, little hole on the blank page as she scowled at Blaise. "I'm not playing games with Malfoy," she spat the surname like it was the foulest curse word in the planet, "And I'm done being in this confined space with him." å She was about to get up when Blaise stood quicker, startling her by his height and the deep look in his eyes. "Lighten up a tiny bit, will you? We're having a pleasant time. Hermione snorted loudly. "Please! I'm nauseated just knowing his near, and he doesn't look as charmed to be so close to me either You're the only one having a 'pleasant' time, Blaise, by taking his money. I personally would rather be playing dress-up with Button than to spend one more damn second in here. ď "Don't leave," Blaise said, no tone of an order or even a plead. He just looked at the brunette with determination and a small frown as he continued to stand with his booming height in front of her; almost caging her into the corner of the couch. "Look, I know it all seems mental to you, but I've told you that you simply can't quit every time something you don't like happens. You promised you'd give it a å "I actually don't remember promising anything," retorted Hermione. "And frankly, Zabini, anything else you have to say in their defense doesn't matter to me. If anything, I'd allow the chance for you and your parents, not for them. I know what they've done. That's not going to change. The dark-skinned boy crossed his arms. "Didn't you eat up all that $% \left(1\right) =\left(1\right) \left(1\right) =\left(1\right) \left(1\right)$ spewing Dumbledore did about unity and forgiveness? ď Hermione could taste frustration at the tip of her tongue. And $% \left(1\right) =\left(1\right) \left(1\right) =\left(1\right) \left(1\right) \left($ because she did, she didn't use her logical and just mind to ever double-check the next words that came out of her mouth that were more on the side of a lie than the truth. "Should it matter now? It clearly didn't when Malfoy disarmed Dumbledore and brought upon his death without thinking twice about it.' ď And just like that, like at the snap of the fingers, Draco Malfoy tore himself away from his seat and pushed Zabini several steps backward. He was so close to Hermione that she could see how exactly pale his skin was, the hushed whisper of stubble on his chin, and the deep-rooted fury in those silver eyes of his. "You don't know fucking anything, Granger!' å⁰ She knew she should've let it go, not have responded because she knew what she said was not entirely the truth. Harry had told $\mbox{\sc Ron}$ and her that Malfoy had lowered his wand, that Malfoy was shaking and looked thoroughly hesitant, that Malfoy had been threatened and forced, and Hermione remembered thinking at the time that $% \left(\mathbf{r}\right) =\mathbf{r}^{\prime }$ Draco Malfoy had just been a lost cause without a chance. But even remembering that, she couldn't help her defense-mechanism that ignited every time the blonde was around. "I know what everyone else knows!" She stood now too, not letting him think that because he was almost an entire foot taller than her that he intimidated her. "You're a coward! You're vile, pathetic, and a prejudiced git!" She shoved him back a step. "And I detest you!" d2 She had kept her finger almost drilling into his chest and he slapped "You don't scare me!" She retaliated. "This is my house, and I certainly don't listen to you! Get out! å "And I don't listen to insu erable witches like you!" Malfoy snapped back. "You don't know anything about me, so I suggest you watch your mouth before another word comes out of it about me! I won't hesitate to curse you! a She should've quit, but it wasn't like her to let a Slytherin get the best of her at that point. "Why do it yourself, Malfoy? Go fetch another relative and watch them torture me from a distance The tension multiplied by the hundreds and exploded all around the sitting room with intense heat. It felt like someone had started an uncontrolled fire, setting everything aflame, and feeling it melt and $% \left(1\right) =\left(1\right) \left(1$ burn millimeter by millimeter. It was excruciating. đ "Don't pretend to know-" Silencid" Deciding that it had been enough of getting-things-o their-chest time, Blaise stepped forward and made himself known as $% \left\{ 1,2,\ldots ,n\right\}$ the shout of his enchantment echoed around the room a er it interrupted whatever Malfoy had been about to say ď Blaise wedged his way in the middle of the Slytherin and the Gry indor, pushing them both towards di erent sides. He could see their fury, resentment, and flickers of hate for one another. And that honestly didn't surprise him, but he couldn't say enough that there was so much more to every story than what one person could guess. $\operatorname{\mathsf{Did}}$ they have a right to feel the way they did? Yes, absolutely. But Blaise had learned a tough lesson through the war—and not just the obvious ones that the Light Side had been trying to teach for ages Life was short and easily taken away without a second blink or thought. Grudges, wars, and hatred got in the way of living, got in the way of loving and enjoying most aspects of life, and Blaise was somewhat accepting that he'd learned that from such a young age. It encouraged him to live the life he'd always wanted—a tweaked, changed, and re-evaluated life than what he'd imagined for himself $\,$ since he was thirteen and high on Pureblood aspirations. And because he'd gotten the chance of an unwanted redemption, Blaise was selfish and self-centered enough to try and fit the remaining $% \left(\mathbf{r}\right) =\left(\mathbf{r}\right)$ pieces of his life together for his own accommodation. And he did not care who felt uncomfortable or who was hesitant along the way Still keeping his wand tightly in his hold, the enchantment still cast, Blaise turned his emerald eyes to the girl first. "You," he began with no trace of patience, "I understand that we're asking for too much from your part. You've been bombarded by one revelation a en another, and I'm being completely blunt when I say they won't stop coming. But this is your family, whether you like it or not." The girl opened her mouth, moved it, but nothing was heard so the boy continued. "I know what the Malfoys have done to you and your loved ones, Hermione, but don't be a hypocrite. You don't know their story, don't judge them without knowing absolutely everything. At least try to be the advocate of your voiced beliefs and just accept the fact that some stories are worth listening to for a re-evaluation of that Hermione's eyes grew outraged at his last sentence. "Once again," continued Blaise, not moved by his half-sibling's aghast and deeply o ended gaze, "you're a Zabini, Hermione. Our father would not allow the Malfoys anywhere near the wards of this house if he thought them a threat. She glared, her mouth back into a tight line as she watched the darkskinned boy turn to the blonde one "And you, Malfoy, what did you expect? You knowwhat you've done, what your family has done—how do you expect anyone you fought against to react?" Instantly, Blaise put up his free hand to halt his fellow Slytherin when the latter glared angrily. "You and I, we've been amending our friendship for almost a year now. Experiences of war and bloodshed tie us together, Malfoy. And because they do, we also know more than we would like about one another. You asked for something one day, do you remember? đ Malfoy squared o his jaw, still glaring. But there was a flicker of recognition and resentment in his silvery gaze that neither Hermione or Blaise missed. "And I told you I'd find a way to make it happen, did I not?" Zabini gave the smallest nod towards Hermione that she didn't know if it had happened at all or if it'd been a twitch. "Don't waste that chance because we both know it won't present itself again." **4**8 Concluding with their individual lectures, Blaise glanced between the two now. "All I'm asking from the pair of you is for some damn e ort. It's not like I'm asking for you two be best friends or to get married—' $\,$ Hermione let out a mute snort and Malfoy narrowed his eyes in distaste. "As a friend and as a brother, I'm asking for cooperation. Nothing more." **₫** Silence. Not a hint of a muted rant or would-be shouts of rebellion. a "Good, then." With a satisfied leered, Zabini waved his wand and ended the enchantment and gave them their voices back. "-Twitchy ferret. ď "-Bucktooth bookworm." đ⁴ Blaise sighed, shaking his head and sco ed. "...Children." ₫° Continue reading next part □