Truce **Lover of the Light** Chapter Nine: Truce If there was something she'd say that she disliked about herself, it'd be the fact that she's stubborn. Most people would think that it's because she likes to be right a hundred percent of the time, but that's not entirely true. Though she didn't like to be challenged when someone wanted to change the accurateness of a solid fact she really did appreciate a person's eagerness to get her to see things from a di erent angle. She was stubborn because she believed irrevocably in the things she was passionate about—and that within itself was a flaw. She had spent almost two months sulking—going as far as doing something ridiculousas wishing upon a star every night in hopes that she'd wake up Hermione Granger again. But that wasn't her reality in those two months, not even now. She was Aria Zabini, no matter what her stubborn mind told her. And though she didn't want to be, her stubbornness to resume her old life had just hurt in the process. She'd hurt herself by tormenting herself, by distancing herself from certain friends, by crying every day and night, hiding from watchful eyes, and straining relationships by trying to be Hermione Granger, the Muggle-born with Dentists as parents. And as if that wasn't painfully exhausting enough, she'd hurt others by that hardheadedness—and there was nothing worse for someone with a heart and soul like hers than to cause someone else pain. He was a true Slytherin at heart, but she'd stomped on her half-brother's heart without remorse or a second thought in those weeks of seclusion and rejection of the reality she'd been handed. One of the greatest challenges is to try and change a stubborn person's mind, but Hermione was pushing herself to do so. It was hard, given her raging love for her previous life and history, but she was trying. If she couldn't do it for herself then she tried for others, and that somehow bullied her stubbornness to melt away millimeter by millimeter on a good day. That e ort had started because of Blaise. A er that very awkward meeting with his Slytherin acquaintances, a er seeing the lengths the boy was going to so she'd so much as give him a square-inch inside her heart that he could call his own, Hermione knew that she had to start trying to live with what she had now. And that was him, a brother. So a er the most uncomfortable hour of her life, a er Hermione and the Slytherins had bid each other a farewell—Goyle going as far as bowing—and Blaise had walked her back to the Gry indor tower, she had decided to spend a day with him every week. He'd been insulted that she was making him a schedule, but he'd been quick to let it go when he told her that if that was her form of working on their relationship then he'd take it. As such, she'd stopped hiding in classrooms, her common room, or in other locations in the castle. She took walks with him, studied with him in the library, paired up in classes they had together on occasions, and sometimes they'd hang out by the Black Lake on the weekend when she wasn't stressing over school. And those were the moments when they really started getting to know each other and she found that though he was too arrogant and demanding, he was also full of charm, unsettled grief, roaring laughter, and a cunning intelligence. He was also the intermediate between Hermione Granger and Aria Zabini; giving her a background of their family. "Did she get along with Deon?" She remembered a conversation she had with him once, when they sat beside the lake together with bottles of Butterbeer and sandwiches he'd sworn he did not have the elves make. "Your mum?' She noticed that about Blaise, that he tensed up, squaring his shoulders, whenever someone mentioned his deceased mother. It always took him a few seconds to let his bones loosen. "Yeah, why wouldn't she have? They shared a handsome son, you know. Look at my face and tell me I don't cause serenity." "I just meant that...Well, we're about the same age, but Deon was with Allegra before I was...conceived," she explained herself a er rolling her eyes at his cockiness. "Most women don't tend to get along with men that do that to them." Blaise had just laughed loudly at her phrasing as he put his hands behind his head, lying himself down on the grass. "I see Father nor Allegra gave you the details about that bit," he replied with his amused tone. A minute died in their silence. "Well, aren't you going to tell me?" He had sco ed. "No." "Oh, come on, Blaise! I'm not about to go asking them to tell me. It's clear he's embarrassed by it; doesn't want to give me the bad idea or something." "That or he doesn't want his daughter to know he had sex with two women about the same time. Real class act, our dad." She had reached over and smacked him hard on the chest for his crudeness. " OI" She had given him one more smack when he'd muttered a curse word. "Just tell me." Blaise had pu ed out air through his mouth, making it sound like he'd grown annoyed in the tiny second a er she'd completed her sentence. His emerald eyes had narrowed, forehead creased with a frown, but he'd continued to stare at the gloomy sky above them. "Fanatic Pureblood families are the same in every country, Hermione; there are certain rules, beliefs, and duties installed in the younger generations. One of those being arranged marriages—a duty for women and a contract for the men. Women brought respect and insured that the blood remained pure, and the men were responsible to expand their family's fortune and produce a pureblood heir. It was the norm, and our father and my mother weren't the exception to that." She had been about to go in a rampage about that horrid tradition when the boy continued on. "Silvana Rosso, that was my mother's maiden name. The Rosso and the Zabini family were great family friends, mainly because the two men in charge of those families four centuries ago were business partners. In what, I couldn't tell you. Nothing legal that's for sure. Anyway' he cleared his throat, like if he was trying to push the fact that both sides of his family were corrupt from the start of the ages. "When my mother was born her family drew up a contract that gave her to the first male heir born to the Zabinis, to bind the two families and so the Zabini heir could take control of the Rosso family's fortune since my grandparents had not produced a male heir. "Time passed and all that rubbish, and my parents grew up together; knowing that when Father turned seventeen they were getting married. The child's crush they had on one another remained so, and when they became teenagers they knew for a fact that there was never going to be an attraction or intense love for one another, but they still had to keep to the contract... "I won't tell you how Father and Allegra came to be an item, but to make the story short, Mother knew that they were meant to be. She loved Father purely and wanted the best for him so she helped him escape with Allegra to Britain—not without assuring that she got herself an heir and that she ended up as a victim and a devoted pureblood that was just disgraced by a Blood Traitor." "Charming," Hermione had interrupted with a sco, but Blaise had not taken o ense by it. Letting his slight amusement falter his irate expression for a moment, Blaise said, "Mum and Dad loved each other like childhood friends and they were there for one another throughout everything. He never le her alone, not even when she married and remarried the men that she did. Allegra and her never argued either—Mother always appreciated the fact that Allegra saw me as her son and that she took care of me. Can I say that I liked your mother? No, I can't. I was a bratty child that wanted his parents together, but..." He had trailed o a er that, lost in some thought as he closed his eyes for a moment. Hermione had just watched him in that fragment of silent time; understanding him a little more. He didn't say it at all, not even a er, but she knew that what he'd wanted to say was that he appreciated that his mother, Deon and Allegra tried to give him a proper family. Though she couldn't really see how, with his mother remarrying every few years and Deon caught in the Death Eater business, but they'd loved him entirely in the end. With another escaped sigh that held a secret resignation, Blaise had opened those emerald eyes of his and he flashed them to his sister. She remembered feeling confused by the look in his gaze, like he didn't like how the story ended. "Marriage contracts are just a mess, Hermione," was all he had said before he had proceeded to ask her—for the thousandth time—why she was friends with Harry and Ron. While she had been working on letting someone in, Hermione had also been learning to let someone go. A relationship she had strained—adding to its already coarse deflect was the one in regards with Ronald. She had tried to hold on to him since summer, but she hadn't noticed that she had lost him romantically then. She had to be true to herself in the past weeks; accepting the fact that he didn't define her as Hermione Granger, and that it was perfectly alright to mourn the love she'd felt for him for years. And because she'd decided to acknowledge the fact that their could've-been love had ceased to have potential because he was su ering in his own share of grief, she knew that she couldn't keep adding distance to the friendship that had brought them together in the first place. It had taken her a week a er her acceptance to embrace what she had now, but Hermione had taken the giant step forward and had actually taken a seat with Harry and Ron in the library one night instead of secluding herself to a corner. Harry had been the first one to look up from his work, grinning at her with pride and relief. And once Ron had looked up as well, their eyes had met—blue and brown —Hermione had seen their history flash back and forth between them. Love connected them still, she'd seen that—it just was a di erent one now. With a smile of understanding from both parties, the Golden Trio had silently and magically become a whole again. The only thing she'd been having trouble with was letting Deon and Allegra Zabini in. Her stubborn side always put up one hell of a fight when it came to them, refusing to see them as parents rather than the ones responsible for the facts of her life changing. She wanted to hate them, she really did, but she just found an ill-eased resentment against them. Blaise had continued to scold her, becoming the mature sibling in those occasions, and he continued to shove the fact that they were blood-tied to her into her brain. She had never opened the letters the Zabinis sent her when the new term had began, but one night, a er managing to sedate her stubborn mind, she'd sat in an empty common room and opened all of them. If it was from an outside perspective, Hermione would've felt sympathy for the parents—especially the mother—and the heartache every other letter contained when they wrote knowing she wouldn't answer back. It was by far the worst thing she'd done to another person, but she that stubborn side had reassured her that their pain mattered not. Eventually, she wrote back. It had been the middle of October when she had, but it suddenly seemed like the time she'd spent ignoring them wasn't a factor at all when Mrs. Zabini replied within the following hour. The conversations in those letters weren't worth anything of value, but Hermione knew the woman enjoyed them nonetheless. They didn't talk about anything specific, nothing detailed that would scare Hermione o for the first couple of times, but then Mrs. Zabini had began talking about a party in the Zabini Estate. Hermione's first reaction was to stop writing entirely once more, to push the woman away the centimeter she'd allowed her to approach, but Ginny had given her a smack beside the head and a frown that rivaled that of Molly Weasley's. The redhead had gone into a loud explanation how taking steps towards accepting the Zabini title started by actually putting it on. And accepting that detail had been the greatest fight against stubborn and logical, but she'd gotten there with a massive headache. And that's exactly how Hermione ended up agreeing to spend her current Saturday morning looking for a dress in Hogsmeade with Ginny and Luna; followed by lunch with her halfbrother in the Three Broomsticks to talk pureblood party etiquette. "Embrace the title," she murmured to herself in a chant-like tone. "Embrace the title." With her arms tightly crossed around her chest as she walked her way to Hogsmeade through the chilly, mid November weather, Hermione had to keep motivating herself so her feet would continue marching her forward. It was blatantly obvious that she in no way wanted to participate in the party the Zabinis were planning to host—in which she hadn't been given much detail of whyit was being held in the first place—but it was a great feat when she got out of bed to look for a bloody dress for it. "Stupid Blaise," she sco ed to herself. "Stupid Ginny." It went without saying that she was terrified that Deon and Allegra Zabini were going to introduce her to their pureblood society, but she held childish hopes that it'd turn out to be a charity event in which the Brightest Witch of the Age happened to be 'casually' invited. Regardless of her fears, of course, she was going and holding her head up high. She wasn't a coward, now, was she? "You are for this," she replied to her silent question. "You're terrified. Absolutely pathetic—" She stopped insulting herself when a shiver ran down her spine. It wasn't the shiver that was caused by frosty wind, that she was sure of. No, it was a reflex, a sensegiven to her by war, by being a warrior and knowing when she was in danger. The wind had picked up, swooshing by her and freezing her face. She'd been certain that she'd been following a pack of Third Years, but she had found herself alone now. The pathway that was always littered with Hogwarts students was bare; feeling isolated and grand. There were no voices, just the rattling of the leaves and the buzzing of the wind. " Aria" Tidal waves of adrenaline flooded her internal system when deja vu hit her. " Aria" With her heart thumping at the cryptic voice that was echoing in her eardrums, trespassing into her head, Hermione managed to summon the war heroine in her, and like a general waiting for the first strike, her fighting tactics rose up from her memories. She turned in an angle, refusing to turn in circles in whatever direction the voice was coming from. No, she wasn't going to make that mistake again. She wasn't going to let her guard down. " Aria" Her wand slipped out from inside her right sleeve and her fingers were quick and ready to hold on to her weapon steadily. She narrowed her eyes, perked her ears, settled her mind, ignored her pounding heart, and rose her wand into the air. This was not happening to her again—they were not going to get the best of her. Whoever it was that knew her secret, whatever it was that was out to torture her, to hurt her, Hermione was going to get them. " Homenum Rev-" The incantation that was slipping from her mouth to find whoever was hiding in the field was rendered useless when a purple flash was sent her way. If deja vu was anything to go by, Hermione knew that the hex that'd been thrown at her the first time was the one that been thrown at her now. As such, she knew the pain—remembered it setting her bones on fire, so she was quick in launching herself away from it. From the ground, Hermione kicked herself back up and raised her wand at the figure in black that was now present. She couldn't see their face, but by the broad shoulders and built, she knew it was a man. He wore an oversized black sweatshirt, its hood covering most of his face and making it a shadow, but she could see the outline of a snarl. She was about to wipe it o. " Confringd" Like she had, the man launched himself to the side; dodging her spell as he rose his wand and the same purple flash shot out of it. With a nonverbal, Hermione deflected the curse and shot one out of her own. It hit the man on the shoulder, making him stumble on his step, but it had not distracted him at all. He must've cast a Shield Charm a second too late, where the hex had just graced him, but it'd still gone up and killed her hex. With the outline of the snarl still the only expression visible from her attacker, Hermione didn't hear the spell that was cast by him, but she sure as hell barely skimmed it. She had crouched, bending at the knees, and the hex had blown bricks away from the wall behind her. She had gone back to her full height the millisecond a er, but she'd been too late then. That purple flash that she'd been dodging hit her; making her fly backwards and land on the shards of bricks, all while screaming at the internal pain the spell caused her. She withered and groaned, shutting her eyes tight as she felt like she was being set on fire from her cells to the topmost layer of skin on her body. Too overwhelmed by the pain, she barely heard when the heavy panting of her attacker approached her. She hadn't even registered when he knelt beside her, gripping her by her curls with one hand because the next second the purple light had flashed against her closed eyelids and the pain was new once more. It felt like a lifetime, feeling every atom explode into its very own raging, melting fire, but her eyes had shot open when it ended and she heard an echo of, "Expelliarmus" Her attacker flew away from her, and she didn't bother to register exactly where he'd landed or who had appeared. She could hear curses being shot out, but her mind didn't scan and identify anything else going on in the background when the cold wind started hitting her. Though the fire felt like it was coming from inside her, the wind

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gracing her skin felt like a bucket of cold water putting out those flames. She gasped for air, shivered and withered on the ground; her back digging into sharp fragments of the bricks that'd been blown up

In what felt like an eternal minute, she heard the distinctive sound of apparition. While still in pain, Hermione managed to lithe hand that was still clutching her wand and point it to the person that was now

"For fuck sakes." No curse however came from her part. Instead her wand was removed from her fingers, her hand carefully lowered, and a dierent wand had been pointed at her. "Hold still, Granger."

Draco Malfoy had made the pain go away with skill and concentrated

Her fingers shook as she clutched onto a teacup; the heat radiating out from it stung the thin skin of her fingertips, but she still held on. The steam of her chamomile tea rose and got lost towards the ceiling and even headed away behind her. There was people everywhere, she knew that, but everything else away from the table that she was sitting at didn't exist for her. She was only aware of the person before her, and she desperately wanted him to evaporate like the steam of

There was about a foot of distance between them, each seated at the furthest ends of the table they were sitting in, but she didn't think that was far enough. She knew he was looking at her, even as she looked down at the liquid in her teacup. She could feel his piercing

gaze carve holes into her skin, making her grow rigid and

uncomfortable when she pondered what he was thinking about.

A er several floating minutes, they arrived at Hogsmeade and she then had been directed inside a dark shop and then sat on a table. He had let go of her then, turning around on his heels and leaving her there. She hadn't known if that'd been it, if she was now alone and able to review what'd happened within the last half hour, but she had

been joined at the table again; a teacup placed in front of her.

They hadn't spoken and it was driving her mad. He had appeared out of the blue, saving her lifeand when he assured himself silently that she was better, he helped her up and dragged her by the arm towards the direction of Hogsmeade. She hadn't protested or asked where he was taking her—she'd been too occupied feeling his warm hand

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Her body had relaxed from the a er-e ects of the curse she'd taken, and that brilliant mind of hers was now churning the wheels; processing the attack. She looked up at that point, meeting those silver eyes that hadn't stopped watching her. "—You need to head back." "—Don't tell Blaise." Both had spoken at the same time, but they had both caught what the other had said. Malfoy's blank, pale expression had somewhat gained an inch of a frown. "Don't tell Blaise?" He repeated. "You were attackedGranger. Now is not the time to play the war hero. It's clear someone is out to get you." "It was nothing," she muttered with an exasperated sigh. She knew there was an obvious true in his words, this was no longer a coincidence, but she didn't want to have anyone act as her shadow; monitoring her every move. She was going to take care of this on her own. She wasn't afraid. "I was just getting mugged. It happens." The blonde boy now looked annoyed. He didn't find the fact that she took him as an idiot amusing. "As much as I doubt you have anything valuable to be stolen, Zabini still needs to be told. If you don't want to tell him, then at least go to your precious Potter and inform him that you're getting blasted everywhere you go on your own." "Shut up," she hissed at him as she leaned forward, as if by doing so she was assuring herself that the people in other tables wouldn't hear. "Just keep your mouth zipped, Malfoy. You owe me as much." "I owe you?" He was glaring now, throwing daggers dipped in venom in her direction. "I just savedyour bloody life, Granger. And if something else happens to you, I'm not going to fall as an accomplice because you're deciding to be a martyr when something could've been done." A deeper frown creased his forehead now, his hands coming up to rest on the tabletop; then balling into fists. "I don't owe you, I owe Zabini the truth." She squeezed the teacup with her weak fingers, frowning too as she leaned closer in. "We both know that's not true, Malfoy. I do thank you for helping me today, but you'll always owe me something. Don't forget that." She couldn't believe that had le her mouth—she didn't want anything from Malfoy, ever She knew they had a terrible history, she knew what he'd done in the war, what he'd seen, but she had never once thought about collecting the debt he owed her. She had planned to forget about Draco Malfoy forever a er she had testified in court for him, but obviously Fate had decided to switch things around on her. He was now twisted in the threads of her life. "Why do you even care?" She breathed out, throwing her back against her chair as she watched his fists clench more, knuckles popping out because of her previous comment. A tensed moment passed before he answered; one where he gritted his teeth and dislike flashed in his orbs. "Zabini and I are friends and you're his sister. That's pretty self-explanatory, Granger." She raised a brow at him. "I don't get friendship from you two. It's more like he has something over you and that's why you follow a er him despite your nature of being the one that leads." She expected him to retaliate, to snarl his usual hurl of insults, but they never came. His knuckles just popped out even more in a tight fist and his shoulders squared o . "You're not wrong," was what he said in a harsh tone. And like it was causing him the greatest discomfort ever, like he was pushing himself away from his safe line, he said, "Look, Granger, I know that you don't want any of this, but seeing as you're not getting out of it, I think that we should attempt to get along." Both her eyebrows furrowed. "Get along?" "Like it or not we have the Zabinis in common," he explained stilly. "Your brother is a poor excuse of my friend, your parents friends of my family for years, and my parents are your...Godparents. Our presence is going to be forced on one another for years to come, I just don't want to spend it listening to Zabini repermind us when I can casually ignore you." She rolled her eyes, but she saw the flicker of defense in his eyes; like he was putting up walls of steel to keep something completely to himself. She knew enough of Malfoy to know that he was never phased by Blaise's rants of civility, that he tuned anything that didn't suit him out, and that he'd ignore her regardless of her being in the same room with him; civility or no civility pact. But she also knew that Blaise had something over him, a secret that somehow involved a truce between Malfoy and her existing. She picked that up when in the past couple of weeks Blaise insisted on talking about Malfoy or bringing him to some of their hangouts by the lake. It always started with Blaise trying to get the two to talk, something neutral like school or the weather, but of course with Hermione and Malfoy being who they were, those days always ended with Blaise growing angered and stalking o with Malfoy; ranting about wasting his time. Whatever it was that Malfoy wanted, Hermione figured that it was important to her brother too. "Fine," she replied in a mumble, looking up and locking eyes with him. "We'll call a truce, Malfoy, but you can't say anything to Blaise." The blonde boy in front of her continued to frown, but his eyes had flashed with surprise at how easy she'd caved to his request. "Promise me." To her surprise, he actually seemed to be thinking it over. His light brows furrowed in deep thought, his silver gaze frowned in disapproval in her direction for a few seconds before it turned to a complete mess, like he was fighting with an idea at the same time he was trying to come up with an answer. A er a minute or two, his pale expression went back to nothing. "Fine."

She extended his hand towards him and he looked at it like she had just o ered him the head of a troll. "This is where we shake on it," she told him. Leaning closer towards him again, her hand still stretched out, she whispered in a condescending tone, "Don't worry about the Muggle-born germs, I'm technically a Pureblood. You're safe."

Hermione couldn't say she was surprised that he sneered at her in his usual infuriated manner, or that he had extended his hand and gripped hers tightly with o ense glittering across his face, but what neither of them had expected was the tingling sensation their palms

It wasn't a sensation that Hermione could say she'd read about in some novels or seen in films, but it was something It was strong, pulling, binding—like a barrier had been breached by the enemy. It was dangerous, but the question was if that was good or bad. It just tingled and made them both look deeply at each other; their bodies

They had tuned everything out, all those voices and passing people in the background as they held onto each others hands—until someone walked directly to their table. They dropped their hands automatically, looking away from each other, and the noise boomed

"If what you're wearing now is any indication on what you might choose for the party, then we have a serious problem." The fact that Blaise had appeared in front of her, holding a goblet of liquor that he was now legal to grab, Hermione realized that Malfoy had dragged her into the Three Broomsticks. "You mind as well pass as one of the

Hermione rolled her eyes at her brother as he grabbed a chair from another table and dropped it in the middle of the table Malfoy had selected for them earlier. "I can always show up in my school robes,

"Piss o," he snapped at her with a frown. "In the centuries that the Zabini family has been around, we've been respected within the socialites because of our excellent parties and charity events. We have a duty to our ancestors to be the best looking people. Naturally we already are, mind you, but there arepoor sods like the Goyle and Flint families that look like they were inbred with Trolls. I'm serious too, Hermione. I can show you a picture of Goyle's mother, and let me

tell you, that woman looks like she was conceived by..."

somehow was important to her in that very moment.

Blaise was taken out from Hermione's focus as she glanced down at the hand that Malfoy had taken into his. The skin on it was pink and warm still, and she wondered what it all had meant. And why it

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erupted into as their skin met.

becoming rigid at the unfamiliar feeling.

back into their eardrums.

caterers."

Blaise."