

Control, Her Control

Lover of the Light

Chapter Six: Control, Her Control

"You're doing it again."

Blinking away from a fixed point a few feet away from her library table, Hermione found a pair of almost black eyes staring at her with a hint of amusement, but also a lot of surprising sympathy.

"Doing what?" She replied, clearing her throat casually as she began to stack the various sheets of parchment that she had scattered around her into a neat pile.

Parvati Patil raised a dark eyebrow at her fellow Gry Indor. "You know, you might not be the typical girl, Hermione, but you still act exactly like any other heartbroken girl would." She was looking right at the brunette's face and she nodded back to the direction the latter had been gawking at with no discretion at all. "Why don't you just talk to him? It's been a week, I doubt that whatever it is that happened between you two caused a ri in your friendship that you can't even go over and scold him about his studying habits."

"I don't know what you're on about," whispered Hermione, her chin raised high and her shoulders squared o as she continued to stack her notes that were already perfectly gathered, all while dodging the girl's eyes.

"So you've not been crying for the past few days in the middle of the night for him, then? So you haven't been wandering around by yourself, hiding out in the dormitory for the past week?" Parvati snorted. "Alright, we can pretend all you want to, then."

Looking up from her schoolwork, Hermione met her roommate's eyes for the first time since the other girl sat down, invading her much needed solitary moment. She didn't really know what was up with Parvati, her being surprisingly attentive and friendly since the school year started. Though they had shared a dormitory since First Year, they've never been what someone would call friends; especially because Parvati was everything Hermione found annoying in typical girls their age. Lately, however, the other girl had simmered down with her gossiping and superficial ways, focusing on her schoolwork and staying close to her Ravenclaw sister Padma and some Gry Indors.

And maybe it was because Parvati was a girl, because she was changing and being a decent human-being, that the brunette let out a breath that suggested her surrender to the other girl's attempt of a friendship. "I'm giving him his space," she said in a low voice. "I thought that...During the war we...we kissed and I just...We can't be together. I thought we would, eventually, you know, but he's lost himself a er the war that there's not a hope that we will ever be able to pick up where we le o." She paused for a bit, her chest aching, and very broken-heartedly she said, "there's not a chance he'll love me still."

At the clear hurt in her fellow Gry Indor's face, Parvati reached over and placed her hand over the one Hermione hid on the tabletop.

"Everybody handles their grieving in different ways, Hermione."

"And Ron's loss of Fred turned to anger." The brunette nodded, showing that she agreed with the girl's statement. "I understand that, Parvati, I really do, but..."

"But he's not going to fight for you," the dark-skinned girl finished. "He has to deal with his grieving, and he's letting you go while he does so. That's why you're heartbroken, then? Because what you've been waiting for for years, what you felt, wasn't worth the fight for him?"

Hermione breathed in, her eyes stinging with tears all of a sudden. That sounded selfish, didn't it? Ron was grieving for his dead brother, and there she was, crying because their meant-to-be fairytale ending was easily shattered and it easily became a thing of the past. It was a selfish thing to feel, but she couldn't help it; their love was not supposed to be so easily brushed aside like it hadn't been building up and waiting for the perfect moment to explode and wrap them in golden lights. But the perfect moment never arrived, nor was it going to.

"I'm a horrible person," she muttered, a tear slipping out. "I know that."

"No," Parvati responded, squeezing her hand. "You're grieving too. You're grieving your lost love, Hermione, and that's okay. But I also know that you, Ron and Harry have an unbreakable friendship. Things will get better soon. Don't grieve your friendship because that hasn't ended."

Hermione smiled a very dim smile at Parvati. She had forgotten that bit for the past week—she and Ron did have an unbreakable friendship. The same war that had crushed their love and would-be relationship was also the very same war that had strengthened the friendship between her and her two best friends.

"Thanks, Parvati," she said kindly.

The Gry Indor witch smiled too, a glimmer in her dark eyes. "Of course." She patted Hermione's head feelingly before she pulled away. "But, listen, I'll see you later, okay? I forgot that I was supposed to meet Seamus for our Herbology project down in the greenhouses." The two girls said their exchanges, and Hermione was sure she had agreed to meet Parvati and Seamus later at the greenhouses, but she really couldn't be sure because from the distance, in that fixed point that she had been concentrated on previously, blue eyes flickered to her for the first time in what seemed like ages.

He had been sharing the table with Zacharias Smith, the two boys bent over at the shoulders, working surprisingly hard on the assignment Slughorn had given them a week ago and that was due at the end of the day. He hadn't even made any action that he saw her, sensed her, or that she was drilling holes at the top of his head for more than an hour. But as soon as he had looked up, locked eyes with her, she saw the struggle in his eyes.

There was a fighting twinkle in them, like the glitter of a memory that had been freshly repressed. It was the hint at something innocent and lovely that they had once shared—but it was pushed back and clouded by the grief that was his constant shadow these days.

The tiniest smile—which was more of a twitch at the corner of his lip—was given to her. She was about to return it, despite the twinge that told her that it was a pity action, but someone blocked Ron from her view. Instead of her redheaded best friend and his blue eyes,

Hermione's line of vision was filled with a boy with dark hair that waved around below his chin perfectly, and almond-shaped, dark eyes with thick lashes arching around them.

It was a stranger; it was an enemy.

"Mind if I sit?"

She didn't answer him. Hermione tensed up, her jaw shutting tight, her reflexes and senses of defense coming alive, the wheels of her brilliant mind churning, trying to figure out why he was there.

Taking the fact that she hadn't, the boy sat down anyway. He pulled o his schoolbag from his shoulder, placing it carefully on the tabletop, and then proceeded to open the latch. "Studying for your N.E.W.T.s, are you?" His dark eyes glanced at the N.E.W.T. preparation guide the school had sent over the summer that she had opened before her. "Seems like you and I are the only ones. None of the other Seventh Years will get around to it until the exams are a month away."

He took out his own study guide, followed by his quill and ink-pot, and he flashed a satisfied smile at her. And it was because of that, because of the glint like he was accomplishing something, that Hermione grew more suspicious and yet nervous.

"Why are you here?" She asked directly, her politeness on pause as she narrowed her brown eyes at the dark-haired boy.

"I thought it was alright to sit?"

"It wasn't," she replied immediately, "yet you took the liberty to do so."

Theodore Nott smiled again, a little larger. There wasn't any hint that he was o ended or annoyed by the brunette's straightforward discomfort of him being there; he instead found it quite amusing and endearing. "My apologies," he said casually. "I didn't mean any trouble, Miss Granger. Just wanted to take a seat, study for a bit."

She didn't let up with her frown. Nott was a Slytherin, and not only did she have a bad history with Slytherins, but what she remembered from her previous years of school, the dark-haired boy had also been friends with Malfoy and Blaise. What if Nott had found out that Hermione Granger was actually a Zabini and he was there to use the information for his own needs? It had to be but obvious that if the truth got out she'd be devastated. And it was always in the nature of a Slytherin to kick a Gry Indor down.

Because of her determination to stay behind her boundary line, the Slytherin proceeded to chip the ice separating the two. "I'm taking the plunge to try and make something good here," he said to her quietly. "Much happened a er the war, Miss Granger, and even during it, I just simply want to make amends."

"Why?" Hermione snapped with attitude.

Nott tried to hide his amused grin, and he achieved just so when the girl before him tensed and scowled at the tabletop when he slid his hands a few centimeters closer to hers. "I would really like to have a new start," his voice was still low. "You don't really know me, nor do I know you, and I can't have a new beginning with preconceived ideas about me looming over my new pathway."

Hermione's frown cooled a few degrees. "And this new beginning starts with befriending me?" Her suspicion was still in her brown eyes, but scepticism was also starting to make an appearance.

The boy had not mentioned anything about Blaise, nor had he made any direct or indirect comment about knowing anything about the truth she was hiding. He hadn't sat down to try and pester her either—he had good intentions it seemed. She didn't know much about Theodore Nott; just that his father was a Death Eater. He had never made any cruel comment towards her, had never participated in the hazing other Slytherins would do to other students, and she hadn't spotted him on either sides of the war.

She didn't have any clue who he was, yet she did hold those preconceived ideas that he must mean harm because of what house he belongs to and who his father is.

"You have a lot of qualities that I admire, Miss Granger," spoke the Slytherin once more. "And frankly, I've always wondered what it would be like to be friends with the Brightest Witch of our Age. Not to mention that I can really use some help with my Charms work, I'm absolutely rubbish at it."

Hermione couldn't help it, she let out a small laugh.

Taking that as a good sign, Theodore extended a hand towards her. "Acquaintances then?"

"You really aim low, don't you?" Hermione replied, inspecting his hand with a raised eyebrow. "You could try to be friends with me."

"Baby steps with you, Miss Granger. I just can't assume you're going to leap out of your chair, hug me in that way you do Potter and Weasley, and tell me your hopes and wishes. I'm sure I would've been hexed right out of the library if I had attempted to do so."

Sadness, mixed with a strange dose of gratitude, crossed Hermione's face when she met the dark eyes of the Slytherin. She had been bombarded with forced bonds with people the last couple of weeks that she actually found Nott's gesture, his request to leave the past behind, sad and accepting. She had the choice here. It was all up to her and Nott gave her that, without expecting a yes. Granted, she didn't owe him anything and she wasn't tied to him in the ways she was to the Zabinis, but it made her feel like she gained some bit of control back in her life.

"Just don't call me Miss Granger." She reached over and took his hand, shaking it with greeting; granting him his fresh start.

"Hermione is fine."

"Call me Theo, then."

As the Slytherin flashed a handsome smile at the girl, and both shook hands willingly once more, some of the previous bad blood among whom he was and who she was disappearing, there were several pairs of eyes witnessing the moment.

From that point a few feet away that Hermione had forgotten about the second Theodore moved his chair and dragged it closer to her, making her attention go to the Charms work he pulled out of his schoolbag, Ron Weasley and Zacharias Smith stared at them with approving and careful expressions. The redheaded looked a bit more cautious, and the other boy looked somewhat at edge.

And further down, further away from the tables, right at the end of a stack of books, Blaise Zabini stood with a younger Hu lepu student. The little boy hadn't a clue what they were looking at, but his arms were growing weak, and were aching by holding several of the Slytherin's books as the latter looked ready to start blowing things to smithereens.

Blaise had been angry on many occasions, it had been a primary feeling while grieving his mother when Death Eaters had killed her two years ago, but it was a new wave of fury. It wasn't painful or scarring like he'd felt it before, it was much more domineering and possessive. It was the type of anger that one would feel if someone stole something from you that you've been guarding; something that was one-of-a-kind and unattainable by others.

Nott had crossed a line today. And one simply did not cross lines that a Zabini marked or prohibited access to.

"Hanson."

"Yes, Mister Zabini?"

"You've got a five-second head start before I string you up on a goalpost by your knickers."

The little boy dropped the books he'd been ordered to carry by voice-command by the older boy and took o immediately. One thing he'd known from the previous kid that had been the Slytherin's personal assistant was that once a Zabini was infuriated, nothing was safe. Not even little Hu lepu's who happened to be at the wrong place, at the wrong time.

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Someway, somehow, at some point, the world had definitely lost its balance and tipped over common sense. There was no chance, in the reality that she'd known and was perfectly content with, that this would be happening. No, in the real world, where everything was normal, everything was joyful and blissful, she would never be up at the Astronomy Tower, her Prefect badge thrown across the floor with complete disrespect, and caught in an attack of peer pressure. Things like that did not happen to Hermione Granger.

"Brilliant warming charm."

"Thank you. Daddy always said my warming charms were like a proper cup of Dirigible Plum tea."

"I don't even know what that is, but sure. Lovely."

"My compliments on your decor. You really did perfectly capture the essence of feng shui with the bits you brought up. And do I smell a hint of Citronella and Bergamot?"

"Cheers; you only missed the grapefruit scent."

"Any particular reason why you mixed these aromas?"

"Of course! Well, my curious friend, the Vietnamese believe that Citronella helps clear the mind, refresh the soul, and reduce stress. Bergamot, straight from the motherland of Italy, helps with emotional imbalance, anxiety, and helps with motivation. And I added the grapefruit because I always felt it was a refreshing scent, almost liberating. They're all perfect for our little get-together."

"Ingenious, really. You're targeting all our concerns you have."

"I brushed up on some aromatherapy during the summer. Mum thought it was complete rubbish, especially since Fleur was the one to recommend it to me, but I think it's wonderful. It really does help to distress."

"Aromatherapy is a muggle technique, isn't it?"

"Yes. Brilliant if you ask me."

"Daddy used to get our tea supplied in Liverpool, you know. The woman, lovely with her eeyepatch, purple hair, and wooden leg, once recommended to take the intestines of a frog and smear—"

"Are you two out of your minds?!"

Turning away from each other, Ginny Weasley and Luna Lovegood stared at the brunette sitting at the end of the furry and velvety rug that was laying on the pavement below them. It was the first time the girl had spoken in over an hour that the two girls had almost forgotten that she was there.

Hermione had hardly been listening to whatever it was the two younger girls were talking about because she had been gaping at them with outraged eyes throughout the whole time. She had been exiting the Great Hall a er dinner, about to head to the library for her fourth and final visit of the day, when she'd been kidnapped by the eccentric Ravenclaw and the fiery Gry Indor without a warning. She had protested the entire way, but she had been quickly placed under the Silencing Charm by Ginny. (The rudeness.)

It wasn't until they had reached the top of the tower that she had been released and confined onto the wide balcony with the two girls and their ridiculous get-up. She had proceeded to rant and scold through the charm over her, but Ginny had simply rolled her eyes, ripped the Prefect's badge o her robes, and tossed it carelessly aside; nothing but a 'loosen up, Mione' to justify the action.

"You simply cannot do this! There are rules to be followed!"

Ginny snorted at the brunette's shout, slightly annoyed that the charm had worn o so soon. "We're having some frie-bonding time. I doubt there's a rule against that at Hogwarts."

"It is when you're breaking curfew! Not to mention we aren't allowed up on the Astronomy Tower anymore a er dark! The Headmistress said so the first day back!"

"Oh, come o it. No one really follows the rules—other than you, that is. And, really, Hermione, just shut it and relax. Have a cup of tea with Luna and I."

The brunette could not have looked more outraged than she had in that moment. "There's no tea, Ginevra! You've got bottles of Firewhisky!"

"Same thing, really," Ginny said nonchalantly, refilling the Ravenclaw's glass with the golden-like liquid that was their drink for the night. "Don't be so righteous, Hermione. It's not like you've never had a bit of alcohol before. Besides, you're being incredibly rude right now. Luna and I went out of our way to do this for you."

"I didn't ask you to." Though she wasn't yelling anymore, Hermione was still speaking with her frustration.

Ginny had opened her mouth to speak again but Luna had cut across first. "Oh, can I answer this?" The redhead pressed her lips into a tight line and nodded once; granting permission for the blonde to take over. "Well, as Ginny had explained to me before we all came up here, sometimes in life you see a friend in need and you attempt to ease them of their burden, even if for the littlest while. It's a selfless and kind way of helping the person relax, accept things that need to be accepted, and to give them a chance to laugh it out and have a good time with their friends."

Luna's naive-ness of how the world works was almost too ridiculously tender that Hermione was almost tempted to just move next to the odd girl and hug her tightly. Unfortunately, she was quite upset with the fact that several rules were being broken, that Ginny refused to acknowledge the fact that Hermione took her Prefect title seriously, and that her chance to brush up on some variables and symbols for her next Ancient Runes class had been torn from her.

"I'm fine," Hermione said stily to the two girls.

"No, you're da," added Ginny instantly, a frown creasing her forehead now. "You're da because you think you can fool any of us into thinking that you're put together. But you're not, Hermione. You're all over the place that you can't even see it."

The older Gry Indor crossed her arms over her chest. "I'm fine," she repeated. "I'm just completely focused on doing my schoolwork and studying for N.E.W.T.s. Unlike some people, school is still my priority. And just because I'm not out and about in the grounds, or having a laugh with our friends, doesn't mean I'm not okay."

"You're not okay! You're hiding!" Ginny had reached her snapping point. That was obvious to Hermione and Luna the moment her ears and cheeks flushed red like the color of hair tied up in a loose bun. "I'm tired of people hiding their emotions and putting on fake smiles! And I'm not going to let you be one of those people, Hermione! You're hurt, confused, and afraid! Admit it!"

But the brunette didn't. She just watched Ginny with her true feelings tucked safely behind closed doors; and there was no way they were coming out. Ginny was her best girl friend, the one girl she could have an open conversation about anything, the one girl who was like a sister, who she admired and adored, but she couldn't. She couldn't talk to Ginny, she couldn't open and bare her soul to her because it was going to strip Hermione away from the last precious thing she had.

By admitting that she was hurting, that she was terrified, she'd be renouncing to her old shreds of control she had le. She couldn't do that to herself. Hermione Granger was a girl that thrived in that; in accurate facts, in the truth, and the control over her own life. But people just kept taking and taking it, they kept destroying the essence of Hermione Granger when she was desperately trying to hold on to it. They robbed her of her own identity, and they had le her with nothing. If it was the least she could do, she was going to hold on to what was le of her control.

Who really gave you my undying support and understanding about who you really are, Hermione. That's what real friends do. The least you could do for me is not lie to me." Ginny was not done. Like her father, Ginny was going to continue to fix the a ermath she had le. She was not going to sit back and watch people wither away within themselves. That's not what life was about. It was about moving on, growing up, and changing. She was not going to let her loved ones drown in their shades of murky grey.

"I need you to be in the same boat as me," the redhead went on. "I need you to be okay too, Hermione. And I'm not going to sit back while you torture yourself over something you can't control."

Inhaling deeply through her nostrils, the brunette le ed her chin up high. "I'm fine," she repeated for the third time. "I've got everything under control."

Ginny let out a glint, sarcastic laugh. "That's rich." The scents of calming aromas lingering in the air weren't helping to defuse the tension. "You've been hiding behind a book so you won't face Ron. You wait until the last minute to eat, avoiding Harry. And you haven't stepped a foot outside because you're dodging your own brother! You have no control over anything because you're trying to make life what it was. Well, face it, Hermione, nothing is the same! Accept that and then you'll be in control again!"

It was a slap. It was a slap right across the face, and the redhead did not look like she was going to feel any remorse over it. Ginny had thrown everything back at Hermione, reminding her that she had open scars that she'd been pretending were closed and healed for more than a month.

Hermione rose up from the rug Ginny and Luna had brought up to the top of the Astronomy Tower. And without a look at either girl, she stormed out of the little get-up they had created to help her calm herself.

Why was it so hard? Why was it so difficult for those around her to understand that not everything was easy? Why couldn't they people see that she felt, that she hurt, and that she was insecure? Why couldn't they just let her hold on to what kept her sane? She didn't want to be a Zabini, she didn't want to have to give up on Ron, and she didn't want to transform her life. She just wanted to go back on the track where her happiness was, where everything made sense.

Why was Fate doing this to her? Why had it wiped clean the story she had already been working on to replace it with a new book with completely white pages? Did Hermione Granger not matter? Hadn't she proved to be kind and fair that they decided it was time to replace her with an unused Zabini girl?

"Aria"

Wiping away a tear that had fallen down her cheek as she walked hurriedly down a corridor, Hermione spun around on her heels when she heard that dreaded name.

There was no one there. The shadows of the fire-posts reflected o the marble walls, her own shadow against the marble floor, and the corridor was silent. Curfew had been called more than half an hour ago, no one was to be out at this time. No one had been around as she had made her way down the tower, not even a ghost.

"Aria"

She spun around again, her skin crawling with goosebumps. She pulled out her wand from the pocket of her robe, raising it high and in the perfect angle to curse anyone that dared to appear. This wasn't a game, she could feel that. She could sense the danger impregnating the air, making it thick and cold.

"Aria"

With fast reflexes, she turned to the le and held her wand tighter between her fingers. "Who's there?" She called out.

But instead of an answer, not like she expected one, there was a haunting laugh echoing o the walls of the corridor. It was screeching, mocking, and amused. It reminded her of Bellatrix LeStrange's laugh, and she would've thought that the woman had risen from the dead to kill her once and for all if the laughter had been completely deranged.

"Aria"

She had turned again towards the direction of the voice that called out for the given name the Zabini had given her. But before she let out the spell she was thinking of, just as it was about to pass her lips and light up her wand, a flash of purple enveloped her completely. Her wand slipped from her fingers and her back had collided with the marble floor.

That's when Hermione Granger had been stripped away from her wicked battle defenses. That's when Aria Zabini felt her real sense of life. And that's when the screaming and pain began.