

In the Snake Pit

Lover of the Light

Chapter Eight: In the Snake Pit

There was chatter everywhere, but that's exactly what she expected from the students of Hogwarts: sitting, eating, laughing, arguing, studying aloud, exiting and entering the Great Hall. For the most part, she could see and even feel the calmness, the happiness in the air. It was another week, new and safe, and everyone was content with the way things were progressing. That much had been evident from the very start of term. And she would've followed the crowd too—if she was not looking at every face around her and trying to decipher who cursed her; who knew her secret.

It took three days before she was discharged from the Hospital Wing and she was pleasantly surprised that it had been kept hushed up and no one was coming up to her and asking her what it happened. She figured that they didn't want to cause a commotion. Brightest Witch of the Age attacked inside the walls of Hogwarts. The scandal was within that sentence alone; there was no way they were going to risk an outbreak of worry and question amongst students or parents over the protection inside the castle.

The only ones who knew about her being in the Hospital Wing were her two best friends, Blaise, Ginny, Luna and Parvati. It was very surprising to know that her roommate had not babbled about it the second she was told where she was—which apparently she'd bombarded Ginny for an explanation when Hermione didn't show up to sleep—but it was also very warming to know that the girl was genuinely concerned and thinking of others. On the other hand, she was told that Ginny had gone completely frozen from the moment Harry had told her and Luna where she was. She had gone to the Hospital Wing and begged for forgiveness more than three times. It wasn't her fault, Hermione knew that much, and she reassured the redhead of that every time she apologized.

Though one would assume that it was Hermione's reassurance to make Ginny feel better, it was actually Harry's understanding that smoothed the redhead over. Harry had to sit her down and tell her that he knew how it felt, to bring Hermione around and then have her be attacked; he knew how painfully guilty it was to know she'd been hurt. But admirably enough, Harry had explained to Ginny that some things are just out of your control and you're not held responsible for those.

It had made her smile that day, watching them melt into each other, another experience tying them together. Even one as upsetting as her attack. It reassured Hermione of the fact that Harry and Ginny were meant to be. If only those two—mainly Harry—would speed along the process to get to their fairytale ending. But the stupid boy in Harry's was wasting time in trying to win her over; likes if he'd lost her in the first place.

"I just want to give it time," Harry had said when he sat with her in an empty common room the previous night. "I want to give you time, to let her know that she has options. I want her to see if she still wants me."

Hermione had just shaken her head in that I-pity-you-gender way and continued to check his Charms homework.

Another upsetting issue that was also currently resting on her shoulders was Dean Zabini's fight with McGonagall to interfere with the security in the castle. Though Hermione could say she understood, in a very reluctant way, why the man was so insistent that Hogwarts gain more security, to even go as far as to have a private Auror investigate the matter of who attacked her, Hermione didn't want the man involved with anything. This wasn't his problem—he was just the cause of it.

Though she had been thoroughly annoyed with the Headmistress for contacting the Zabinis about her attack, Hermione had also been very grateful that the woman hadn't let it slip to the Grangers about what'd happened to her. She knew that the primary reason for that was that the Grangers had no legal rights over her anymore and that the Zabini—as alleged parents—were the ones with priority, but nonetheless she was glad they were kept in the dark.

It made it easier to lie to them.

Dearest Hermione,

I'm very happy to hear that the new term is going smoothly for you, just like we both knew it would be. I'm sure that Harry especially is enjoying his quiet days, though I'm also certain that boy will find himself in some mishap to get into. Some people just attract trouble, even if they don't mean to. Preferably this time it's something teenage-related, like girl problems or a bad case of acne.

Also, over your sentiments on not being named Head Girl, though I sympathize with you greatly, because we know you deserve it very much so, I'm also glad you didn't get it. We know you can juggle anything, sweetheart, but maybe you can take this year to be a regular student. Go to classes, do your homework, spend time with your friends, and maybe get yourself a boyfriend; you know, like the, like. You deserve some quiet, some normalcy...

Anyway, things in the office are going well. We hired a new secretary, someone recommended to us by your Uncle Steve. Richard was very hesitant, with good reason as you know, but this girl is very capable. She's really surprising us.

With the matter of Richard, Hermione...I've given him your letters. It's been extremely tough on him, sweetheart, I can't tell you how so and I won't try to. Richard knew all along that someday this might happen, but I think he forgot about it along the road of the years. But he is still your father, and he loves you. We will always love you.

Hope you're well,

Mother Jean Granger.

Staring down at the letter she'd gotten from the muggle world the day before, Hermione chuckled with sadness as she reread it for the hundredth time.

How could things be this different? How could they have gone from a loving family to her father not responding to her letters? How did he end up needing time to get over the hurt of their lack of blood ties? How did her mother end up identifying herself as Jean Granger at the end of her letters? And why did she have to desperately cling onto their assurance that they still loved her?

Cutting through the frustration and the already stinging tears in her eyes, Hermione was joined on her lonely corner of the Gryindor table by someone she very least expected.

"Chin up, Granger. You look like your Hippogri just died—or you've just been failed on an exam." Taking the liberty to do so, Theodore Nott sat on the open seat opposite her. He wasn't phased by the questioning raise of her eyebrow or the glancing a few near Gryindors were giving him by his action. "Merlin, did you really fail an exam?"

The brunette frowned at the dark-haired boy. "What are you doing here, Nott?" She didn't bother answering his question, it was a ridiculous thing to ask in the first place. She instead dropped her uncertainty as she folded her muggle-mother's letter into a neat square and then tucked it into the pocket of her robes.

The Slytherin smiled a little as he watched her. "Haven't seen you around for a few days, and when I finally get to see the top of those brown curls, you're isolated and looking like you're on the verge of hanging yourself. Just curious and slightly concerned."

"Slightly?"

"I'm still working on the caring-for-someone-else-that-isn't-me part," he told her sincerely, a smile still hugging at the corner of his lips. "And as your new acquaintance, I just wanted to make sure you're alright." He leaned a little closer to her to whisper, sliding his hands on the foreign tabletop and almost touching her fingertips. "I don't know if you've noticed, but you're scaring some people."

Pulling her hands away from his almost-near ones, Hermione sat taller for a moment to take a good look around her. Previously, she hadn't noticed if anyone was looking back at her while she observed them, as she looked for tell-tale signs on someone's face to see if they were the ones that attacked her. She hadn't processed her isolation, but Nott was right: her housemates were sitting as far away from her as possible, like she had a plague.

"Some people don't like to have their parade be rained on," the boy spoke once more, his eyes still very much glued to any little movement she made. "Survivors of war included."

Hermione stared right back at a Gryindor girl giving her an awkward glance for a few uneasy seconds; her eyes met the dark ones of the Slytherin across from her in the next fragment of time. "Then why are you here?"

He shrugged a little as he played with the end of her fork, making it tip up and down at the edge of her plate. "Who says shades of grey can't be beautiful?"

Their eyes connected at the very instant he finished his comment. It felt like her brown eyes were being held captive in his bottomless pools of black. She could feel a strong surge, a strong bond, a pull that gave her the sensation like she could see comfort in his shadows. It was strange, unknown, and it terrified her. It was like her self-will had been stripped.

She cleared her throat. "You can run along now, Nott. I promise to leave before I scare more innocent children and find some lonely classroom to pass the time, then."

"Now, what kind of acquaintance would I be if I let you do that?" He clucked his tongue at her in a toying, disappointed manner. "No, I think we should take a walk around the gardens together before our Herbology lesson starts."

"I don't—"

"Come on, Hermione," he interrupted her rejection, his voice warming up. "I'm trying to distract you over whatever it is that's making you look so helpless."

"You are?" She asked hesitantly, eyebrow back up and raised with question.

"And I might want to bribe you into being my partner for Herbology this week. I worked with Finnegan and Patil last week and those two almost caused me to resort to some of my Slytherin ways. If I have to work with Gryindors, I mind as well will work with one that's absolutely brilliant."

There it went again—control. Whenever Theodore Nott appeared Hermione felt it, her control coming back and filling her body like it was blood that she needed to function. He gave her options, he gave her a chance to make him believe that nothing had changed inside of her when it really had. But he didn't know, he didn't know who she really was, that Aria Zabini lived within her. He just wanted to befriend Hermione Granger, he just wanted to talk to that girl from the past that no one realized didn't exist in the first place.

"You have fi-reen minutes to convince me," she said to the Slytherin with an air of friendliness. "I hope you've prepared for that."

Gathering grandly as she stood from her house-table, Nott was quick to gather her books before she did. "I do have something up my sleeve," he replied.

With a twinkle in his dark eyes, Hermione ignored that bit and her surroundings as she and the Slytherin headed towards the doors of the Great Hall together. And because she was, because she shut out the background that possibly contained her attacker in any of the house-tables, Hermione didn't notice the glance between Blaise Zabini and Theodore Nott. She didn't see the deep and utter hatred that gleamed out of her brother's eyes and the hostile understanding that shot out from Nott's dark ones.

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In the almost eight years of knowing her he was used to seeing three certain feelings take her face hostage: all-knowing, scolding, and loving. The fact that he was watching her pace up and down, up and down, and up and down on a little patch of corridor-floor with nervousness a few feet away from him made him very much amused. It wasn't even that type of nervousness where she was fearing for his life or anxious over getting her exams back, but it was the type that made one believe that she was about to face her worst fears.

"You look like I did when I was about to face that Hungarian Horrtail in the TriWizard Tournament."

She was down her little pathway and then she spun on her heels, scowling. His mocking smile deflated slightly, but there was enough of it for her to see. She marched her way closer. "Do you find this amusing, Harry James Potter?"

Harry's stare tensed as his brunette pointed a finger at him—it was as equally dangerous as having her wand tip directed at him—or worse, actually. "I'm just saying that you're overreacting." And maybe that wasn't the right choice of words but they had already slipped out before he thought it over. "Meaning that you're not about to face a monster, Mione. You shouldn't be as panicked as you are."

She grinned at him with an almost cynical distaste, so unlike herself. "Oh, well of course! I have no reason at all to be anxious about descending to my doom! There's absolutely no danger at all in what I'm about to do, so let's just keep laughing at Hermione!" Her best friend was about to say something but she cut across him quickly, "and now that I remember the TriWizard Tournament thoroughly, you didn't listen at all to me then! I told you to prepare, Harry! I told you to practice, practice, pra—"

"For Salazar's sake, shut up!"

Before he could be chewed up alive for something that he'd neglected to do almost four years back, Harry was never happier in his lifetime to see a Slytherin. So when his best friend spun around in her heels to glare dangerously at whoever interrupted her mid-rant, the Chosen One took a deep breath and put distance between him and the Brightest Witch of the Age as a safety precaution.

"That right there is the reason why a party of me continues to be appalled at the idea of being related to you." If there was anything that anyone had to know about Blaise Zabini, it was the fact that he was nothing but blunt. Sure, there were times when he dabbled in lies to save his own skin or to torment someone, but usually honesty was always the way to go for him. "You can be a little McGonagall, honestly."

Instead of responding with a scary remark that he or Ron would usually get if they ever dared to talk back to her in such manner, Harry just saw Hermione grow instantly nervous all over again. She stiffened her shoulders, standing a little taller since the first glance at Zabini, and her hands twitched at her sides and a shaky swallow passed her throat.

Looking away from Hermione, Zabini proceeded to throw a mighty glare at the Boy Who Lived. "Why are you here, Potter?"

"Just hanging out." Leaning against the corridor wall, Harry crossed his arms over his school-robes casually; all while smirking at the dark-skinned Slytherin. "Thinking I might join this little experience—as support for Hermione, that is."

"The hell you won't!"

Harry chuckled. "Hear that, Mione? Your brother doesn't want me to be there when the snakes begin to descend."

Though they were in a lonely hall, Hermione still had the reflex to look around her to make sure no one was within earshot it was something unheard of around the marbled walls like it was her something unimportant. Sucking up the unsettling feeling she'd been carrying all day—since Blaise cornered her on the way to Potions class and called in for a promise she made idiotically—Hermione frowned disapprovingly at both boys as she turned to them. "Get out of the hostility, will you." She was back to her parental self. "Blaise, we've talked about this before, okay, Harry is my best friend. And you," she turned to the Gryindor boy as the Slytherin rolled his eyes, "don't add to the situation, please. I appreciate you being here and all, but just go."

Harry wasn't ended one bit by her exasperated tone. Though Zabini hated him for having such bonds with Hermione, Harry was on his own little mission to smooth over the tension among the two new siblings. Hermione was always trying to ease rough situations for him and it was now time that he repaid the favor. He knew she'd object if he volunteered her publicly for such task, but then again, she always took charge of his problems and went full-speed in fixing them despite his warnings not to get involved.

Though it wasn't desired at all, Harry was more equipped than Hermione to understand the meaning of the opportunity that the twists of Fate gave her. He knew that it mustn't be easy to learn that who she thought were her real parents weren't that at all, but she was given something that he wasn't going to get, that many people never got—more family. Not just that, Hermione got sent a family that actually wanted to be a part of her, that loved her. Though Zabini was arrogant and too poised for his liking, Harry could see the flicker of pure affection the Slytherin had for his best friend.

And if there was something war should've taught all of them, it was the importance of love and family.

Raising a brow at the strange smile that had taken over Harry's face before he shauktered away with a wave, Hermione shook her head as if she was shaking off the tingles of hesitance and jitters of nervousness.

Blaise snorted with disapproval at her reaction, even rolling his eyes as he grabbed one of her hands and he stared her down the dungeon they were in. And just as her hand started sweating in his, Blaise said a latin-rooted word and the wall before them started to part.

She really didn't want to do this. She didn't even know why it had to come to this! All things, really. Did it make any sense? No, of course not. He was pushing her, Hermione was well aware of that. Blaise was cunning and smart—he wanted to see how far she'd go for him. She would've complimented him for such wit, but she also didn't like the fact that she had to prove herself to him in the first place...

But how could she have proved herself in any other way, right? This started because she couldn't see Blaise as a brother and had hurt his feelings. Family love is supposed to be automatic, like caring for a cousin that's a complete nuisance to you despite that. And she did care about Blaise, he was an innocent in the mess he had become—yet she'd run to Harry in a heartbeat. And there wasn't any fairness to that at all, was there?

With a sigh of defeat, Hermione looked up to meet Blaise's eyes. And once brown and green sparkled in some sort of truce, in an acceptance that there was no other way around this, Blaise's hold on the girl's wrist loosened and it fell to hold her hand instead. Both then stepped into the opening of the wall.

She had heard a description from Ron and Harry back in Second Year, but she hadn't given justice to the feelings the Slytherin Common Room at all. Contrasting to the Gryindor Common Room's warmth, home-like, light and coziness, the Slytherins lar was cold, dim with tints of green, too refined-looking, and hostile. It didn't appear to be someplace for students to relax and gather together to chat or study, it was like something taken out from a pureblood mansion.

The deeper Blaise led her into the room the more she noticed. The walls were stone-made, some parts smooth and others cobbled. There were archways that resembled something inspired by colosseums, black chandeliers hanging from the dark ceiling, and vines growing in twists around giant stone-posts.

She didn't realize she was being led down a few steps as her eyes focused on a few portraits hanging darkly against the walls of the common room. One in particular that caught her eye was the one of Severus Snape. He stood in his portrait, lit by moonlight, and had his arms crossed over his usual black robes. His painted black eyes found hers, but there was no question at all in them as she proceeded further into the room with Blaise pulling at her hand. She felt a surge of courage run deep in her bones from the eye-contact she'd made with her deceased Potions professor. It made her realize, even if for the briefest second, that loyalty, bravery, and even goodness can also come from people with the Dark Mark branded in their arms.

Blinking away and readjusting her vision, Hermione noticed that Blaise and her had come to a stop. And once she realized that they were standing before a group of people, her ears also took in the fact that the Slytherin Common Room was deadly silent; nothing but the wood burning in the fireplace was heard.

Tension automatically flew around, wrapping around every single person in the common room when the fact that the Gryindor Princess was in their territory settled a eer their conversation died down.

On a black-leather couch, Gregory Goyle stared wide-eyed, embarrassment and shame somehow coloring his cheeks pink. Next to him, Daphne Greengrass rose a blonde brow, her dark eyes narrowing at the direction of the newcomers with a bit of mild and cold confusion. And also seated in that couch with Goyle and Greengrass, Pansy Parkinson masked her own share of confusion as her gaze lowered and focused on Blaise and Hermione's hooked hands. An understanding then proceeded to flicker across her pale features; like she'd come up with a conclusion.

On the corner of the couch opposite the three Slytherins, Theodore Nott sat by himself. Questioning had also taken over his features for a split second, but before anyone could see it, the boy had just let his eyes glimmer and his lips tug on a smile that he knew the Gryindor girl would find familiar.

Ever the silent one since their return to complete their Seventh Year, Malfoy watched with no expression at all as Zabini and the girl marched their way into the common room. He had been the first to spot them from his lonesome armchair by the fireplace as those around him talked about things he cared not far. He swallowed roughly, trying to subdue a foreign feeling that demanded interaction with the girl.

Panic rose inside Hermione's chest. "Blaise," she hissed as she looked up at him and away from his house-mates, "why am I here?"

It didn't take a genius to figure out that she was filling up with dread at the idea that those sitting before her were about to learn the secret she'd been trying to undo since the moment it was told to her. She barely had enough courage to remind herself every day that she was truly a Zabini—she was not about to give that grudging acceptance to Slytherins for them to exploit.

"Want you to meet my friends." He gave her hand a painful squeeze.

"—We're your friends now?"

At the comment that had shot out from Daphne's mouth, Blaise narrowed his green eyes in lack of patience. "Shut it, Greengrass."

Hermione shook her head. "Blaise, seriously. Why am I here?"

Blaise was more annoyed now—she just couldn't go with the flow, could she? Look, these idiots are the closest I'm going to get to having friends. Not because I can't make any, but because no one in this castle is appealing or interesting enough for me to befriended them so they're substitutes until I can come across human beings of my liking and standards.

"Charming, Zabini," Greengrass hushed, frowning at the dark-skinned boy.

Blaise ignored the girl and continued to look at Hermione with an almost ordering glint to his gaze. "Let's pretend they really are my friends, a part of my life—accept them as such. There are things about me that you don't like, them especially, but you can't change that. Sound familiar?"

Harry, Ron and the Wessleys-Hermione almost laughed at the true brilliance her half-brother had. He had dragged her into the snake pit just to teach her a lesson, and even to repay her back for making him try to accept the fact that the people she considered family were going to remain so, despite his dislike for them.

"So...they're your friends?"

Blaise almost smiled at her resignation. "Everyone except for Nott." And then that bizarre feeling that suggested glee was transformed to irritation as he threw daggers at the particular Slytherin in the midst of trying to get his sister to fully accept him into her life. "What the hell are you doing here, Nott? I don't recall asking you to show up."

"I guess I didn't get your threat to scram from the common room like the rest of the House," Nott replied, his smile not dropping at all as he looked at the two standing.

"Consider this one, then: Get the fuck—"

"Blaise!" Hermione cut across the Slytherin next to her, scowling. "Don't be so mean. And you honestly made everyone leave? If it was that much of an inconvenience to bring me here you shouldn't have in the first place."

Watching with more curiosity and confusion as Zabini zipped his lips and let the Gryindor Princess scold him, Daphne Greengrass called for attention as she came up with a theory. "Zabini, you had us wait for you because you said you had something to tell us? So is this? You're with Granger now?"

Pansy perked her ears at the noises in the common room, more interested in the conversation now than before when all she'd been doing was processing some thoughts over the situation.

Hermione made a disgusted face and pulled her hand away from Blaise. At her reaction, the boy just smirked. "She wishes," was his response to the blonde witch. "Hermione and I recently decided to leave the past behind us and be friends."

"Friends?" Greengrass scooped at the word. "Why on Earth would Granger want to be friends with you?"

"Do try to not sound like a bitter ex-Greengrass," Blaise said with a condescending tone. "And again, shut it. It's none of your business why Hermione and I've decided to become friends. You're job just to sit there and let her see that not all Slytherins are particularly horrible."

As Greengrass was still glaring at her statement of her being bitter, Hermione was led by Blaise to the open seats on the couch next to Nott. "I can see that, actually," she mumbled. "You two dating?"

"Really? No one else could. It was a bloody disaster since the day it began." Still smiling, Nott angled his body to face the brunette despite the warning expression on Zabini's face not to.

"It was just a fling. It meant nothing."

Nott chuckled mockingly at the blonde girl's quick remark. "A fling lasts a week, Greengrass. You and Zabini had a catastrophic relationship for almost two years."

"Why'd they break up?" Hermione asked for the sake of not letting an awkward silence to occur.

She had no such luck, however. The room went silent again in the moment she had asked her question, and the Gryindor among Slytherins could see that the tension grew thicker as everyone avoided eye-contact with Blaise.

"It was too good for her," was the boy's response as his shoulders stiffened. Greengrass didn't bother to defend herself from his degrading and Hermione wondered why that was. "Anyways," he continued with a clearing of his throat. "Since we're starting anew here, I want all of you to tell Hermione how brilliant you think she is. It'll make the transition easier if you all get it out of your systems that a Muggle-born saved your asses during the war."

The awkwardness just kept on coming. "Blaise," Hermione was again stressing his name like she was parenting a young child, "stop it."

"It's part of the truth, isn't it? And when the entire truth comes out they're all going to eat every insult they—"

"I think you're brilliant, Hermione." Putting a hand on the brunette's shoulder as she shook her head and complained with what Zabini was ranting about—making everyone more uncomfortable—Nott was still the epitome of smiles and friendliness. "But I've already told you that. Though, a reminder wouldn't hurt, now would it? You're doing particularly well."

Looking thoroughly disgusted at the embarrassing words Nott was spewing, Blaise rose from his seat and tugged on Hermione's arm with speed and strength, sending her flying backwards. "Oh, shut the fuck up, Nott. I told you, scram!"

Hermione stopped listening to whatever crude and uncivilized remark her brother was throwing at Theo—she was caught in a place that froze her completely. A few Blaise had rudely bunched her chest, Hermione had landed in a cage composed of strong arms and chest-warm hands, and that overflowed with the smell of lime and mint.

Draco Malfoy was staring down at her as she looked at him through her lashes. His molten-metal orbs were overpowering uncomfortably intense, and digging past her plain brown with something that suggested that he was having an inner-turmoil of his hands were at both her sides, just beneath her breasts, and it sent tingles of panic into her skin.

"Sorry," she muttered in a barely audible tone as she pulled away from him.

And just as Blaise pulled her down on the opposite end of the couch, away from Nott as he ordered Goyle to start talking about something else, Hermione swore she heard the Slytherin Prince say, "I'm sorry too."