

Constantly Draco

by kalina_blue

After the war Hermione returns to Hogwarts to finish her education, but picking up where she had left and forgetting the war isn't all that easy. Sometimes a friendship starts because someone is being rescued from a troll, sometimes because someone is being rescued from themselves.

A Place So Dark You Can't See The End

Chapter 1 of 2

After the war Hermione returns to Hogwarts to finish her education, but picking up where she had left and forgetting the war isn't all that easy. Sometimes a friendship starts because someone is being rescued from a troll, sometimes because someone is being rescued from themselves.

A/N: I started writing this fic last year for hp_secret_santa. After the exchange got cancelled I rewrote the story, adding Draco's POV among many other things. The former oneshot now has three parts. I hope you enjoy reading. Reviews are love.

Thank you, Lighting, for doing the beta on this chapter.

Chapter 1 - A Place So Dark You Can't See The End

The familiar landscape of Scotland washed past Hermione's window, blurred by the speed of the Hogwarts Express and the rain that had been falling ever since she had boarded the train at King's Cross that morning.

Although Hermione had a textbook lying open on her lap, she wasn't reading. Instead, she was staring unseeingly at the raindrops on the glass, worrying about the school year ahead...her eighth year, so to speak.

The Ministry had offered honorary diplomas to everyone in their year who had been unable to finish their education due to the War, wanting to spare them the necessity of having to return to school and be taught with the younger students. As far as Hermione knew, most of her former classmates had accepted, opting to move on with their lives rather than return and finish school.

Harry and Ron were among those students that had refused to return to Hogwarts. They were excited to start their Auror training instead. The year of Voldemort's defeat had brought an onslaught of new applicants to the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, and the Aurors were eagerly hiring new recruits. Though Voldemort was defeated once and for all, many of his followers had so far escaped prosecution. Unwilling to repeat past mistakes, the Ministry was mobilizing as many resources as they deemed necessary to track down the Death Eaters and bring them to justice.

Hermione, on the other hand, had not felt ready to begin her life as an adult just yet. Her education had always been important to her, and she felt the urge to finish it properly. Harry and Ron might not be able to understand it, but she really *wanted* to take her N.E.W.T.s.

So when Headmistress McGonagall's invitation to re-enter Hogwarts arrived, Hermione had seized the opportunity to finish her education and gain some time to properly plan her next steps in life. Harry and Ron had eventually supported her decision...as long as she promised not to try and talk them into accompanying her...and Ginny had been downright ecstatic that Hermione would come back to school with her.

Consequently, doing her seventh year at Hogwarts had been something that Hermione was looking forward to. However, once it was time for her to leave without Harry and Ron, she suddenly wasn't sure anymore whether this was the right place for her to be. After the War against Voldemort, Hogwarts didn't just hold cherished childhood memories but also ugly ones, full of pain and suffering. The Battle at Hogwarts could not simply be forgotten, no less due to the fact that much of the damage was still visible throughout the castle.

But there was also damage inside Hermione, which she had tried to cover up during the funerals and the ongoing celebrations after the war, and now her carefully constructed facade was crumbling.

It had started simple, with a few bad dreams at night, maybe two or three times a week. Hermione had passed it off as stress due to readjusting to regular life. Soon, however, the nightmares came every night, haunting her, forcing her to relive the battles, the torture, and the pain.

The intellectual part of Hermione knew that it was post-traumatic stress, quite understandable after having fought a war, but for the most part, Hermione just hoped that the comfort of the school and studying would help her forget about her nightmares. Everyone else seemed to be able to get on with their lives, and Hermione hoped she would be able to do the same.

It was with that desperate wish that she exited the train at the station at Hogsmeade.

At first it seemed like Hermione's wish might come true. On the first night at Hogwarts she gratefully sank into her bed in the dorm she shared with Gryffindor girls from both her own and Ginny's year. They all belonged to the upper class now.

Hermione slept like a stone, not remembering a single one of her dreams...a welcome respite from her regular nightmares. The next morning Hermione got up early, looking forward to breakfast in the Great Hall and her new classes.

On her way to Ancient Runes, however, Hermione had to take a detour because the corridor leading directly to the classroom was closed. The wall that had buried Fred Weasley still wasn't completely repaired. During the entire class, Hermione tried not to remember how George had broken down at Fred's funeral.

The nightmares returned that night.

The following day Hermione avoided the area around the closed corridor, but she accidentally passed the window where she had been standing when Hagrid had carried a dead Harry from the forest. It didn't matter that Harry hadn't actually died; Hermione could still feel the horror of those moments.

The tower where Dumbledore died, the Room of Requirement, the Great Hall and countless other corridors, windows and classrooms. Each spot seemed to hold a memory of the War, and every time Hermione passed one of them, she remembered.

Her nightmares intensified to the point where Hermione was afraid to go to sleep for fear she would wake up screaming once more.

So far, no one in the seventh-year girls' dormitory had heard Hermione's restless sleep, but only because Hermione was always careful to draw the curtains around her bed as well as casting Silencing Charms to muffle her screams. Still the dark rings beneath her eyes gave her away.

The lack of sleep soon began to take its toll. Luckily, Hermione had always been far ahead of her fellow classmates, so she still didn't have trouble keeping up with her classes. However, her arm shot up slightly less frequently than it used to, and the teachers began to notice.

Hermione's Ravenclaw study partners noticed her decline in school work, too. Only a handful of the students from Hermione's year had returned to Hogwarts, most of them preferring to accept the Ministry's honorary graduation certificates, like Harry and Ron. But even those who previously hadn't partnered with Hermione had heard about her outstanding academic achievements and knew that she had weakened considerably.

There were other signs that showed that Hermione wasn't dealing so well. Her appetite was waning, leaving her to pick at her food in the Great Hall. Lugging around her heavy book bag became harder and harder, until Hermione started leaving some of those books she always had with her in the dorm room. She even smiled a lot less than she used to.

The first one to ask Hermione about the changes was Ginny, but the younger girl's polite questions whether everything was okay were just met with a fake "I'm fine."

Professor McGonagall's enquiries as to whether Hermione needed any help or someone to talk to were answered in much the same fashion, and when Harry and Ron owed asking why Hermione didn't write them anymore, she owed back explaining that she was busy studying for her N.E.W.T.s.

It wasn't that Hermione didn't want to admit that she might need help, even though it was hard for her to accept that there was something she couldn't deal with on her own. That wasn't the reason why Hermione felt she couldn't confide in her friends. It was because Hermione didn't want to burden her friends with her fears.

In her eyes, everyone else seemed to be able to move on with their lives. The War and those who died weren't forgotten, but the surviving witches and wizards seemed to have adjusted to their new situation. Hermione didn't want to dredge up painful memories just because she was the only one stuck in the past.

So Hermione convinced herself that she could get past her fears and nightmares on her own, that all she needed was some time, and she brushed off all her friends' well meant offers to help. All the while, Hermione slept less and less, and the memories of the War began to haunt her day and night.

By the time the first month of school was over, Hermione had lost weight and hardly talked to Ginny or her other friends anymore. It took all her energy just to get through her classes.

This was the reason why, one Monday morning, Hermione had been sitting in her Defence Against the Dark Arts class for ten minutes before becoming aware of that day's topic: Unforgivable Curses.

The class was being taught by Professor Ipsley, a middle-aged teacher, who had been hired by Headmistress McGonagall during the summer when it had once again been difficult to fill this position at Hogwarts. The curse that had afflicted the Dark Arts post might have died together with Voldemort; the superstition, however, that this job was unlucky, had remained. As a result, Professor Ipsley had been the only one willing to teach the subject, and the Headmistress had hired him, even though his experiences as a teacher were limited.

As Ipsley gave an overview of the Unforgivable Curses, it soon became clear that he was an expert on the theory of this subject, but that his teaching abilities were too underdeveloped to attempt to teach such a crucial topic to a class that consisted of one third teenaged war veterans.

Hermione tried her best to follow the lecture, but soon her thoughts lost focus. She didn't want to hear about the dangers of the Avada Kedavra because she had seen people die from that curse. She didn't care for Professor Ipsley's theories about magical mind control because she had already been taught in her fourth year what it was like to be under the Imperius. And least of all did Hermione need to hear about the long-term health hazards caused by the Cruciatus curse because Hermione was still being tortured by that curse every night in her dreams.

While Professor Ipsley droned on about the Cruciatus, the classroom began to vanish in front of Hermione's eyes, and she began to see an entirely different room in another time. Professor Ipsley's voice became muted, and instead Hermione heard female laughter full of malice.

"What else did you take, what else?"

Bellatrix Lestrange's shrieks vibrated through Hermione's head, and she held her breath in terror. Any moment now, Bellatrix would hit her with the Unforgivable again, and the pain would return. Hermione's lungs began to burn from the lack of oxygen, but she didn't dare open her mouth out of fear she would scream.

"How did you get into my vault?"

A sharp blow to her side...so unlike the blinding agony of the Cruciatus...forced Hermione to exhale. The sounds of the classroom rushed back to her, and she became aware of her real surroundings once again.

Surprised, Hermione looked to her left, to the person that had elbowed her just before she had given in completely to her panic. Draco Malfoy was looking towards the front of the classroom, acting as though nothing had happened.

When Hermione had returned to school, she had been surprised to learn that Malfoy was among the few that intended to finish their education at Hogwarts. As soon as everyone had realised that the youngest ex-Death Eater was back at Hogwarts, rumours had spread, one more far-fetched than the next. As far as Hermione knew, nobody really knew why Malfoy had returned.

To the outrage of the public, the Wizengamot had found that due to his age, Draco Malfoy could not be held responsible for his actions during the War. The judges felt that he never had the option to decline Voldemort's service, and thanks to Harry's testimony about Narcissa's role in his escape from Voldemort, Draco's mother had been pardoned as well. Lucius Malfoy, however, had been found guilty and was currently serving a lifelong term at Azkaban.

Apart from those facts, no one knew anything about the family. Malfoy had kept his distance from everyone, even from Millicent Bulstrode and the two Slytherins from Ginny's year, who were the only upper class Slytherins still at Hogwarts. He hadn't even taken the time to insult Hermione, a fact that she would have found peculiar had she not been too preoccupied with her own problems.

And now Draco Malfoy seemed to have noticed her panic attack when nobody else had, and even helped her. Hermione was confused, and for a moment she successfully forgot about the Cruciatus and all unpleasant memories attached to that curse. Instead she was trying to figure out why Malfoy had just done what only a *friend* would do.

The fact that he was sitting next to her wasn't that unusual anymore. The other students were avoiding him, only Hermione couldn't muster enough energy to protest when the only remaining seat was next to the most hated and feared student at Hogwarts.

Ginny, who shared most classes with Hermione, had tried to get Hermione to sit next to her, but Hermione, afraid that Ginny would notice how often she zoned out during class these days, had insisted that she didn't mind. So Hermione and Draco came to sit together regularly, although they had ignored each other the entire time up to that point. Hermione was at a loss as to what had suddenly changed.

Professor Ipsley continued his lecture about the Cruciatus curse, detailing the theories of the wand movement as well as the physical effects on the victim, and Hermione stopped trying to decipher Malfoy's behaviour. Despite her best efforts, the memories returned again and this time they were even more vivid.

"How did you get into my vault?" Bellatrix screamed in Hermione's mind. *"Did that dirty little goblin in the cellar help you?"*

Hermione's breathing quickened, and she desperately tried to fight the rising panic. But she couldn't think of anything else but that day in the drawing room of Malfoy Manor and Bellatrix Lestrange's relentless torture. The classroom blurred in front of Hermione's eyes again, and Hermione scarcely realised that it was her own unshed tears that were obscuring her vision.

"ANSWER ME! CRUCIO!"

Only when Malfoy's arm shot out to keep her upright did Hermione realise that she had been about to fall off her chair. She was surprised that the rest of the class hadn't noticed her distress, but they were sitting almost in the back row, and after all, the screaming had only been in her head.

Although Draco kept his hand on her back to steady her, he still refused to look at Hermione. His attention seemed to be on the lecture. Hermione, at that point, was far past caring that it was Malfoy who was helping her through the panic attack. She was only glad that his hand was grounding her to reality. Fighting to get her breathing under control, she tried to collect enough strength to get up and excuse herself from the classroom.

But before she had the chance to pull herself together, Dimitri Adlam, a Ravenclaw from Ginny's year, raised his hand.

"Professor, I heard that when Professor Moody taught at Hogwarts, he demonstrated the curses on spiders for the years above us. Could you do that as well? Just to show what they are really like?"

Hermione's throat tightened when she heard Dimitri's request. She could barely even stand to hear the professor talk about the Unforgivable curses, and she was sure that if she were to actually witness the curses being performed, insect or no insect, she'd go insane for fear.

The pressure on her back increased surreptitiously.

"Ah, you see..." Professor Ipsley stammered, staring at his student in surprise. "I've never actually... not myself... maybe this isn't the right place."

"But, Professor, I think it would be very... educational," Dimitri insisted, and a few students nodded their heads excitedly.

Hermione began to shake. Suddenly, Draco withdrew his hand from her back and grabbed his wand. The attention of the whole classroom was on him as he slowly stood up to face Dimitri.

"Looks like our professor didn't think to bring any spiders. But if you're really that interested, I could always demonstrate the curses on you," Draco offered, smiling cruelly and pointing his wand lazily at the Ravenclaw.

"You wouldn't dare," a suddenly pale Dimitri stammered, getting up from his chair and pointing his own wand at Draco. A few of his housemates rose with him, daring Draco to make a move. The classroom was filled with outraged shouts.

"Mr. Malfoy, put your wand down at once," Professor Ipsley shouted as well, though his feeble voice was mostly drowned out by the tumult that was threatening to break out in the classroom.

Although she was sitting right next to Draco and could have tried to stop him, Hermione stayed passive. She was still gripping the edge of her desk with both hands, desperately trying to focus on her breathing. The classroom was already beginning to swim before her eyes. But with Draco's hand gone from her back, she had nothing to anchor her to reality and keep the memories at bay.

The fighting in the classroom became a mere background noise as Hermione's breathing grew shallow and she vainly fought for control.

"Let's go, Hermione," Ginny suddenly said, appearing at Hermione's side. Ginny pulled Hermione from her chair and carefully guided the trembling girl from the classroom. Their departure remained unnoticed; everyone's undivided attention was still focused on Dimitri and Draco.

"Take it easy," Ginny whispered, keeping a firm grip around Hermione's shoulders while they walked down the corridor.

Still fighting her panic, Hermione barely heard Ginny's words. She tried to regain control over her breathing, but her chest continued to heave rapidly, leaving Hermione lightheaded and dizzy. She could already taste the bile rising in the back of her throat.

Ginny managed to drag Hermione into the nearest courtyard before she became sick. Doubling over, Hermione's stomach convulsed, expelling its meagre contents over some bushes. Ginny held on to Hermione's shoulders, keeping her from falling over and holding her hair back.

Hermione continued gagging long after her stomach was empty. The dry heaves burned her throat and brought hot tears to her eyes, but they also distracted her from Bellatrix's shouts in her mind. Eventually the torture returned to be a mere memory and grew silent, as Hermione became aware of her surroundings again.

Ginny was still standing behind her, muttering soothing words that only now began to penetrate Hermione's consciousness. She tried straightening up, but her body wouldn't cooperate. Ginny noticed and adjusted her grip to help Hermione into an upright position before gently leading her toward a nearby bench.

"Put this under your tongue. It'll help with the nausea," Ginny instructed, once she had Hermione settled on the bench, offering a white pill to her. Hermione accepted the pill without question and put it in her mouth. The minty flavour of the pastille chased away the sour taste and her upset stomach began to settle.

Hermione looked at Ginny questioningly.

"It's Wheeze's remedy against the Puking Pastilles," Ginny explained, noticing Hermione's expression. "Helps against real vomiting, too."

Hermione nodded. Now that the worst of her anxiety was over, she felt utterly exhausted, not to mention embarrassed. Closing her eyes, she leaned her back against the bench.

"Are you alright?" Ginny asked quietly.

Hermione reluctantly opened her eyes again.

"Yeah, sorry about that," she muttered, some of the colour returning to her pale cheeks.

"You've got nothing to be sorry for," Ginny was quick to assure. "I can't believe Dimitri. To ask such a question after all that's happened... And Professor Ipsley had no sense to stop him, of course. No consideration of those..."

"Ginny, please," Hermione pleaded, "I'd rather not talk about it."

"Okay, fair enough," Ginny relented, seeing Hermione's distress. "Can we talk about how Malfoy just helped you?" she asked instead, eying Hermione with thinly veiled curiosity.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Hermione replied defensively, looking to the ground in front of them.

"Oh, come on," Ginny exclaimed, "I was keeping an eye on you when Professor Ipsley started talking about the Unforgivables."

Hermione winced when Ginny mentioned the curses, but Ginny trudged on in her tirade. "I probably wouldn't have noticed otherwise, but I saw his hand on your back, Hermione, and I know he picked that fight with Dimitri right before you were completely losing it, and I don't think that was a coincidence."

Ginny looked at Hermione expectantly. Hermione remained silent; although the colour had now definitely returned to her face...in fact, her cheeks were a bright shade of red. But she couldn't explain Malfoy's behaviour any more than Ginny could.

"Can't we just forget this mess ever happened?" Hermione pleaded. "I'm sorry I was so weak. I promise it won't happen again."

"Is that what you think?" Ginny asked quietly. "That you're weak? Is that why you refuse to talk to anyone?"

Hermione ducked her head.

"Oh, Hermione." Ginny hugged her reluctant friend. "Can't you see? We're all trying to deal with the War. It isn't easy for any of us."

"Then why was I the only one who freaked out in class just now?" Hermione asked, unbidden tears streaming down her face. "Why am I the only one who can't go on with her life?"

"That is complete bullshit, Hermione," Ginny was quick to assure.

"No..." Hermione started, but Ginny interrupted her.

"In case you didn't notice, most of the students from my year didn't actively fight in the War. Of course, it is easy for Dimitri to ask for a demonstration of the Cruciatus. Unlike you, he hasn't been tortured with it."

Hermione flinched again, and Ginny hugged her closer.

"I know it is hard, but I think you need to hear this," she continued. "All of us who fought Voldemort or lost someone in the war have trouble dealing with it. There is nothing wrong with that."

"But I am the only one falling apart."

"My mother hasn't left the house since my brother's funeral. George hasn't laughed at all, he isn't even smiling. My dad is working like crazy, I think he might be trying to avoid seeing Mom's grief... Do you need me to go on?"

"But you are doing okay. And Harry and Ron, too."

"That might be what it looks like. But do you honestly think you are the only one who has nightmares?"

Hermione didn't know how to reply to that. Of course, she hadn't assumed that she was the only one who was affected by the horrors of war; she wasn't that ignorant. But she had honestly thought that everyone else was dealing much better with it.

"You have to find a way to live with everything that has happened," Ginny said when Hermione remained quiet.

"How do you do it?"

"Haven't you noticed? I'm writing to Harry every day, and he writes back to me. Sometimes I just tell him what we're eating for breakfast at the Great Hall, sometimes I tell him about my nightmares. It makes me feel like we're together and that everything is going to be okay. That's my way of dealing with it."

"And that really helps?"

"Sometimes. It makes things more bearable," Ginny said honestly. "There isn't a recipe to deal with this kind of trauma, there's no right way. You have to find something that anchors you in today's reality that makes it worth working through all the bad memories. A constant that is always with you, no matter what."

"And writing to Harry is your constant?"

"Yes."

"I don't have something like that. Unless you count studying, and that hasn't been going too well lately."

"I thought maybe Ron..." Ginny suggested tentatively.

Hermione looked to the floor. "We're just friends."

"But I thought after the war... you two seemed closer."

Although Ginny was one of her best and oldest friends, discussing Ron with her felt awkward. She was his sister after all, and moreover, Hermione didn't understand why she and Ron hadn't become a couple.

They had kissed during the battle, which had felt nice, but nice wasn't exactly the same as lovely or passionate. It was *just nice*. Somehow it had felt like their moment had already passed, that they had waited too long. They were the best of friends, as close as siblings, but that seemed to be the extent of their relationship. Both Ron and Hermione had realised that quickly and buried all notions of a romantic relationship with each other.

"We're better off as friends," Hermione explained, and Ginny reluctantly accepted her statement.

"You'll find something to balance you, though. I'm sure of it," she said. "And you always have me. And Harry and Ron. We're your friends. You can always talk to us when things get to be too much."

"I didn't want to burden you. I thought that you were dealing so much better and that I would have only dragged you down with me."

"You are never a burden, Hermione," Ginny said forcefully. "And, trust me, we all have to work through this, and you weren't the only one to freak out today. I wouldn't have liked to see a performance of the Unforgivables any more than you would. Seeing Voldemort casting it at Harry isn't exactly one of my fondest memories. Hell, even Malfoy was so spooked that he was being nice to you.... in a Slytherin sort of way."

Hermione smiled despite her tears.

"Yes, that was definitely out of character for him," she agreed.

"Perhaps you should go and talk to him," Ginny suggested reluctantly.

"Why would I do that?"

"Well, I figure he probably wants something in return for helping you. He's a Malfoy after all; and a Slytherin. So you probably should find out right away how he's going to use today's incident against you. It's either that or he is being possessed by an evil spirit that is forcing him to be kind, in which case we should probably inform the Headmistress."

Laughing, Ginny and Hermione left the courtyard.

tbc

Hell Ain't A Bad Place To Be

Chapter 2 of 2

After the war Hermione returns to Hogwarts to finish her education, but picking up where she had left and forgetting the war isn't all that easy. Sometimes a friendship starts because someone is being rescued from a troll, sometimes because someone is being rescued from themselves.

Disclaimer: I don't own Harry Potter and I don't make any money with this.

A/N: I know it's been a long time, but I've finally finished this chapter. I hope you like.

Thank you, dream_mancer, for beta'ing the chapter.

Chapter 2 Hell Ain't A Bad Place To Be

All eyes in the Defence Against the Dark Arts classroom were on him as Draco stood in front of his classmates, his wand pointing towards Dimitri. The Ravenclaw stood opposite to him, his wand in hand as well, although it was shaking badly.

Hexing Dimitri was tempting, but Draco knew better than to give into temptation. He'd be expelled if he tried anything like that; the Headmistress had been painfully clear about that his first day back at school.

Granger already left the classroom with the she-Weasel, so technically there was no need to cause a further stir up anyway. Not that Draco was quite prepared to admit that he had just voluntarily helped out a member of the Golden Trio...not even to himself. He preferred to pretend that he just wanted to spare them all the drama of her impending panic attack. Besides, that Dimitri was awfully annoying, and he really deserved to be scared a bit.

"Mr. Malfoy, I must insist that you lower your wand at once," Professor Ipsley shouted, his feeble voice barely audible over the tumult in the classroom.

Draco lazily lowered his wand and sat down again, his face expressing nothing but boredom. He faced the front of the classroom and took up his quill, giving the appearance of being ready to continue with the lesson.

Professor Ipsley was just as surprised as the rest of the class that their resident ex-Death Eater didn't curse anyone after all. Slowly, they all settled down. Dimitri seemed still shaken and was demanding that the Headmistress would be informed, but his friends quickly hushed him. They clearly were of the opinion that it was unwise to antagonize Draco any further.

Draco allowed himself a smirk. Even if he hadn't gotten to hex Dimitri, seeing the boy almost piss his pants did hold a certain entertainment value. Life at Hogwarts was

boring enough. At least an almost fight with one of his classmates made things interesting for a minute or so.

It took a while until the classroom calmed down enough so that they could go on with the lesson, but even after order was once more restored, Professor Ipsley seemed to be reluctant to continue the lesson where they had left off. It appeared even the Professor now realised that he was not qualified enough to teach a critical lesson such as the Unforgivable Curses, especially not to this particular group of students.

The class waited impatiently for Ipsley to pick up the lecture, but the Professor busied himself with shuffling through the papers on his desk, mumbling to himself rather agitatedly. Draco allowed himself another smirk, silently congratulating himself for having disturbed the Professor to a point where he was talking to himself in a room full of people. It was good to know that he hadn't lost his touch. He had been way too nice lately because being back at Hogwarts meant that he had to be careful to keep a low profile; otherwise he would be kicked out before he even got the chance to take his N.E.W.T.s.

Finally, the Professor cleared his throat and after a dramatic, yet slightly unnecessary pause, addressed his students, "I think it best that we continue this rather crucial topic using a more in depth, written approach. Therefore, you will pair up, and I will assign each group a topic to be scientifically studied and analysed. This project will more than likely occupy the remainder of this term, but I think that only a thorough and theoretical approach will do this sensitive subject justice."

As far as Draco was concerned, this was a rather long-winded way of saying that Professor Ipsley was too scared of teaching them any more and preferred to minimise his involvement as a teacher by giving them papers to write.

Following the Professor's announcement, the class once more erupted into tumult, this time because everyone was trying to find a suitable partner for the project. Predictably, nobody wanted to pair up with Draco. The only other student who couldn't find a partner was Vicky Frobisher, a Gryffindor, who quickly proclaimed she would work with Ginny.

Up to that point, Professor Ipsley had neither acknowledge nor commented on Ginny and Hermione's absence from class. Draco wasn't sure if the scatterbrained Professor had even noticed that the she-Weasel had practically dragged Hermione from the classroom because the other girl had been too distressed to walk on her own.

Now that Ginny was mentioned, however, the Professor was looking through the room. Once he had determined that Ginny wasn't hiding anywhere, he shrugged helplessly. When nobody seemed to protest, he wrote down Ginny's name next to Vicky's on the list of students he was compiling for the project.

"Mr. Malfoy, you will be working with Miss Granger then, right?" The Professor mumbled, while he busied himself with his list. He refused to look up to meet Draco's eyes. Draco shrugged, highly amused that the teacher actually seemed too scared to look at him. While Professor Ipsley couldn't see Draco's gesture because he still hadn't gathered the courage to look up from his papers, he seemed to assume that given the lack of any protest, Draco didn't care who he worked with. He finished his list by writing the names of the last pair: Hermione and Draco.

Now that he had successfully paired up all the students, Professor Ipsley commenced with inventing topics for the project he had just thought of a few minutes ago. Due to this lack of preparation, the selection of topics left something to be desired in Draco's opinion, although the majority of the other students didn't appear to mind that they would spend the remaining time of the term working on subjects like *An etymologic analysis of the word Crucio* or *The importance of grammatically correct commands when using the Imperius Curse*.

Draco and Hermione were assigned *The History of the Criminal Prosecution of the Unauthorized Use of the Unforgivables in the 19th century* Draco rather sourly thought that it was nice of Professor Ipsley not to assign them the current century, considering his father had been sentenced to Azkaban for using the Unforgivables, among other things.

After Professor Ipsley finished handing out the assignments, the class was over, and Draco gratefully left the classroom and went to the Great Hall for lunch. He sat down at his customary spot on the Slytherin table...the far end, furthest away from the teachers' table and the other students. Since there were only a few upper year Slytherins, their house table was never full, and so there was a plenty of space between him and the other Slytherins. As far as Draco was concerned, that was a good thing, and his fellow Slytherins seemed to agree, too.

Draco took out a letter from his mother, which he had received that morning by owl and hadn't yet had the time to read, immersing himself in her writing while absently picking at his food.

His mother didn't have anything new to say though. The manor was still being searched for Dark artefacts by ministry officials. Draco had hoped they would stop once his father was convicted, but unfortunately that hadn't turned out to be the case. Truth was, the ancient curses on the manor were giving even the best curse breakers in the Ministry's service a headache. The Ministry hadn't been able to collect nearly as many Dark artefacts as they had expected, considering the manor had, at some point, housed Voldemort, not to mention countless generations of Malfoys, who had all been practicing the Dark Arts to at least some degree. However, Ministry seemed determined to continue searching until they would produce the results they wanted.

The constant presence of Ministry officials was one of the reasons why Draco had been so keen on returning to Hogwarts and finishing his education. It was tiresome to watch these strangers tear apart his childhood home, so he had opted to leave rather than stay and bear the constant scrutiny both of his home and his own behaviour.

Moreover, if it was difficult to watch his home being dissected layer by layer, it was excruciating to watch his mother fall apart. Draco wasn't proud of it, but part of why he had wanted to leave the manor so desperately was that he couldn't bear to watch his mother in distress. Narcissa had lost everything during the second war against Voldemort. Her husband was in Azkaban, most of her friends and extended family were either dead or had abandoned her because of her affiliation with Voldemort, and the Ministry was doing a thorough job of making her home, Narcissa's last refuge, as unliveable as possible. Unable to do anything to help his mother, Draco had finally decided to leave, and Narcissa had let him go, the happiness of her son being the only thing she had left to care about.

Feeling guilty that he had left his mother to her own devices, Draco put down her letter before he had finished writing his reply. He was already in a foul enough mood thanks to the accused Defence Against the Dark Arts class, and he was selfish enough to put off finishing the letter until he was in better spirits.

Sometime during lunch, Draco noticed that the she-Weasel had joined her classmates at the Gryffindor table. Granger, however, remained absent. Not that Draco cared whether she was at lunch or not. He rather thought that it was yet another sign of how utterly boring his life had become that he even noticed completely irrelevant facts, such as Hermione Granger skipping lunch again.

Then again, Draco reminded himself firmly, boring at least meant that his life wasn't in danger or that he would have to watch his every step in order to avoid being punished with the Cruciatius Curse. Boring definitely had its advantages.

Swallowing down the rest of his lunch quickly, Draco stuffed his mother's letter into his bag and left the Great Hall. His afternoon classes turned out to be just as uneventful as always, save for one small incident where several of the upper year Ravenclaws tried to corner him and punish him for threatening to use Crucio on Dimitri.

Considering that Ravenclaws were generally known for being thirsty for knowledge, Draco was sure they were happy to discover that there were quite a few spells and curses that, while technically not illegal, could still do a lot of damaged when used creatively. Unfortunately for the Ravenclaws, Draco had been aware of that little tidbit of information and was not afraid to use it to his advantage.

Hermione sought out Draco after dinner that same day. She found him at the library, where he was sat on one of the couches in the Transfiguration section, studying.

"Malfoy, can I talk to you for a second?" Hermione asked.

"No talking in the library. Didn't you read the sign?" He didn't even look up from his books.

"Since when do you care about the rules?" Hermione asked, sitting down on the couch.

"Oh, I've always cared about them. I just choose to put them aside every once in a while."

Hermione snorted, but Draco still continued to read.

Seeing that he was ignoring her presence for now, Hermione took out a book from her bag and began to read as well. So far, nobody had ever beat her in a contest of stubbornness, and she wasn't about to let Draco beat her at anything. If he thought she would give up and leave him alone, then he truly was delusional.

To the other students in the library, it looked like Hermione and Draco were studying together, an occurrence that raised quite a few eyebrows. Especially after the scene Draco had caused in that day's Defence Against the Dark Arts class, about which every student at Hogwarts was already well informed. Even people who had never voluntarily set foot in the library before came to take a look at the unlikely study buddies.

Hermione didn't notice how much of a stir they were causing, focusing solely on her book and Malfoy beside her. However, the emotional break down earlier that day and her constant insomnia had taken out a lot of her. Soon, her eyelids were drooping. The couch was comfortable, and before Hermione realised what was happening, she fell asleep.

Hermione woke up slowly, feeling somewhat well rested and relaxed for the first time since she had come back to Hogwarts. Only when she began to stretch in order to work out the kinks in her body did she realise that she was not in her bed, but rather on a couch. Her eyes shot open in surprise.

"Ah, sleeping harpy awakens," a familiar voice drawled.

Hermione sat up, shocked to find herself still at the library.

"What the...?" She and Draco were the only ones left at the library, and judging by the dark windows, it was very late. Even Madam Pince seemed to have turned in for the night already.

"How long have I slept?" Hermione asked confused. "Why did you let me fall asleep at all?" she added as an afterthought.

"I wasn't aware that it is my job to be your personal animator," Draco replied, shutting the book he had been reading at a table nearby. "But if you ask me, it was high time you got some beauty sleep. Those dark rings underneath your eyes were beginning to make you look like an overgrown raccoon."

He got up, gathering his things.

"Wait, I still have to talk to you." Hermione got up from the couch, absentmindedly smoothing down the wrinkles in her uniform.

Draco stopped, rolling his eyes. "You really can't take a hint, can you?"

"Why did you help me today?" Hermione asked, ignoring his sarcasm.

"I have no idea what you are talking about," Draco replied smoothly, turning to leave the library. "If that's all..."

"Of course you know what I'm talking about," Hermione replied, getting annoyed quickly. "I want to know why you did it."

"Look, Granger. I don't know what you want me to say. I didn't exactly plan this. But if it makes you feel better, I promise you if I ever feel the urge to help your pathetic arse again, I will do my utmost to suppress it. I will even kick you when you're down if that's what you want."

"Could you be serious for one second, Malfoy? I need to know..."

"Merlin, Granger," Draco exploded. "Do you ever know when to just shut up? Has it occurred to you that it wasn't exactly pleasant for me to see my Aunt torture someone I know right in front of my eyes? And that is actually just one of the few disturbing memories I have from the last years."

"But you wanted to serve Voldemort!" Hermione said, shocked about his outburst.

"Sure I did. I pledged my allegiance completely willing. They were holding my mother at wandpoint just for show. And the fact that they set me up with a mission no grown wizard had been able to complete for decades probably was just a mistake."

"But you always said..."

"I always repeated what my father said. Turns out, he left out some of the more gruesome details about the service to the Dark Lord. Maybe I would have become a Death Eater even without them threatening my mother, but I sure as hell didn't stay because I wanted to," Draco said bitterly.

"So what? You now don't believe anymore that Muggle-borns should be wiped out and purebloods should rule the universe?" Hermione asked sarcastically.

"Of course, I do. Mudbloods should be exterminated. Along with all the Muggles, Half-bloods and most of the purebloods. As far as I am concerned, ninety-nine percent of all people are a waste of space."

"You cannot be serious," Hermione said disbelievingly.

"Why does that surprise you so much? It's not like I was previously known as some pathetic people hugger. I'm not a stupid Hufflepuff, or Merlin forbid, a Gryffindor."

"If you hate everyone so much, why did you return to Hogwarts then?"

"Beats being at home where the Ministry is looking under every floorboard, searching for Dark Arts stuff. Are we done with the twenty questions?" Draco asked, annoyed.

"I just wanted to understand..."

"Look, I know that you are an annoying Know-it-all with a compulsory habit to stick your nose where it doesn't belong, so nobody realises what a pathetic, wimpy, little nutjob you really are. I helped you out today, saving us all from your whiney hysterics, let's leave it at that."

"Merlin, you're a bastard. Just stay away from me in the future," Hermione bit out, turning to leave the library.

"Oh, I'd gladly do that," Draco sneered. "Unfortunately, we're doing the DADA paper together."

"Which paper?" Hermione asked, still angry. "Professor Ipsley said nothing about a paper."

"He did while you were outside having your pathetic little meltdown, and since you weren't there to object, you were partnered with me. If you ask me, Ipsley made the whole paper up because he finally realised even dear Professor Lockhart was more competent than him. We're to work at this paper during class, as well, for the rest of the term."

"And when were you going to mention this?"

"I just did, didn't I?"

Hermione had had enough. Thoroughly irritated, she stormed out of the library without another word.

The next morning, her classmates confirmed to Hermione that there was indeed a paper to be written for Defence Against the Dark Arts and that the project would, in all likelihood, take up the majority of the remaining term.

Although she had no desire whatsoever to work with Malfoy, especially considering the things he had said to her the previous night, Hermione didn't even bother to try and talk anyone into changing partners with her. While Ginny might have agreed to do it as a favour to her, Hermione didn't want Ginny to be stuck with Malfoy any more than she wanted to be stuck with him herself, and none of their other classmates would ever volunteer to work with the ex-Death Eater.

Failing the project was absolutely not an option, and since they were to work on it in class as well, Professor Ipsley would have noticed if Hermione would have done the project all by herself and just let Malfoy put his name on the parchment in the end. Seeing absolutely no way to avoid the project or her assigned partner, Hermione grudgingly accepted that she would have to form a truce with Malfoy. Somehow.

At lunch, she did not sit down on her regular spot at the Gryffindor table, but resolutely walked towards the Slytherin section of the Great Hall. Draco was sitting at the far end of the table, a few seats away from the rest of the Slytherins. Hermione flopped down on the seat opposite him.

"Go away, Granger. You're ruining my appetite."

Hermione rolled her eyes. "Malfoy, we have to work together on the Defence Against the Dark Arts project, we might as well be civil to one another."

"Why?" Draco asked, between two bites of his shepherd's pie.

"Because I care about my grades, and in order to do well on this assignment, we need to work together," Hermione explained in a voice one might use with a five year old.

"Unfortunately for you though, I don't care about your grades one bit nor do I care for mine."

"You still have to pass the class in order to be allowed to take your N.E.W.T.s, don't you? I'm assuming you plan to take the exams," Hermione said.

"Then just write the bloody thing and put my name on the paper, too," Draco said, abandoning his Shepherd pie and reaching for the pudding.

"I will do no such thing. That's cheating!" Hermione exclaimed. "We will either do this paper together or fail it together."

"You wouldn't deliberately fail the class," Draco said, though he was looking at Hermione uncertainly.

"Try me!"

Hermione stormed out of the Great Hall, while Draco was left to stare after her with apprehension.

To his dismay, Draco quickly reached the conclusion that Hermione would probably never bluff when it came to schoolwork and that she was really capable of throwing the entire project if he refused to work with her. *Silly bint*.

Thus, Hermione and Draco met at the library for their first study session that evening.

To say things went smoothly would be a downright lie. They couldn't agree on anything, from the decision on what table to sit at to who had the better penmanship and should write out the project. They bickered about everything no matter how distantly related to the topic of their paper.

The only thing they had agreed on was that it would be better to use a Silencing Charm around their immediate vicinity, which turned out to be a very wise decision since otherwise Madam Pince would surely have banned them from the library for life.

Draco and Hermione only stopped shouting at each other when they both started to become hoarse. At that point, they redirected their attention to the research they had to do for their project, stubbornly ignoring each other.

While Draco was leafing through an ancient tome about the criminal justice system of the nineteenth century, a dark scowl etched firmly onto his face, Hermione tried her best to focus on *Crime and Magical Punishment* by Chriselda Christopher. But the rather detailed descriptions of the various elements of a crime didn't help her already troubled mind, not least because she had witnessed most of the described crimes first hand. However, Hermione was determined not to show any weakness in front of Malfoy, so she kept on reading page for page.

"Granger, stop!" Draco finally said, sounding somewhat defeated. Hermione reluctantly looked up and forced herself to look at him.

"What is it now, Malfoy?" she asked, working to suppress the quiver in her voice.

"You're crying," Draco said, sighing, and Hermione was surprised to realise that he was right. She hadn't even noticed. Angrily, she wiped away her tears.

For a moment, they both were silent.

"Look, Granger, I..." Draco began.

"Save it, Malfoy," Hermione interrupted angrily, "I don't need your pity."

"No, obviously what you need is extensive counselling and maybe a personality transplant potion, but that is beside the point," Draco shot back.

"Then pray tell, what is the point?" Hermione asked.

"Are you always this defensive?"

"Only when people have been trying to harm me in any way possible since the moment they met me."

"Look, Granger, I know I've taken every opportunity to cause you pain in the past, and believe me when I tell you that I enjoyed that. But as I told you already, I really prefer to stay in Hogwarts, so I'm not going to do anything that's going to get me expelled."

"Good." Hermione spat.

"Good. Glad we cleared that up." Draco said sarcastically. "So are you going to give me that book or not?" He stretched out his hand toward the book Hermione had been reading.

"Why?" Hermione asked, instinctively grabbing the book tighter. Draco rolled his eyes.

"Because it's making you cry and your constant snivelling is grating. Not to mention that everyone else in this bloody library has already noticed you are crying like a baby, and they undoubtedly think it is all my fault."

"And why would you care what the others think?" Hermione asked. A quick look around confirmed that Draco hadn't exaggerated about people staring at them. Hermione self-consciously wiped the last remnants of her tears from her face. Draco used her moment of inattention to switch out her book with the one he had been reading.

"Again with the defensiveness. I just don't want anyone to run to McGonagall and tell her I made their favourite know-it-all cry. I think we've already established that I'm trying *not* to get kicked out of school."

"I wouldn't actually let them expel you over me crying if you had nothing to do with it," Hermione said, though she made no move to reclaim *Crime and Magical Punishment* from Draco.

"Good to know."

With that said, they both directed their attention on the books in front of them.

The rest of the evening, Hermione and Draco actually worked together on their assignment, and those students that had bet that they would hex each other before the end of their first study session found themselves to be thoroughly disappointed.

tbc

A/N: Please review.