

The Frost So Bitter Hung

by Gelsey

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The frost clung with a leeching cold to the ground beneath her, to the ground behind her, to the ground around her, above and below. It had been necessary to cut into the cold earth earlier that morning when they had first stumbled upon the small deployment of Death Eaters. *Or, in all honesty, soldiers*, Hermione thought wearily. Soldiers were expendable... Death Eaters were the ones in charge, the ones giving the orders, taking them only from those higher up in the Circle.

Hermione's own squadron of fighters ranged out with her along the magic-made trench. Soldiers, her mind wearily corrected again. What did that make her? Cold earth had her back, her bum, met her gaze looking forward. Faint whispers occasionally broke the stillness: her people talking, their people talking. The occasional moan, too, of pain--and someone was crying.

She closed her eyes and swallowed against the cloying temptation of her own tears. Christmas Eve, and she was out in the field, fighting still. Christmas Eve, and she had lost a man today who wouldn't be going home to his family. Christmas Eve, and it was so damned cold, and she was so lonely. Harry was back at Headquarters somewhere; Ron was probably with another squadron like hers.

Hermione tilted her head back against the frozen earth, her sigh billowing out in the air before her, an icy plume that reminded her too much of a ghost. She let her mind roam over memories of past Christmases, the celebrations and feasts. She didn't immediately realize that the new sound that colored the crystalline air was her voice, sweetly, sadly singing a familiar carol.

She didn't stop, either, when she did realize it. The fighting had stopped some hours ago, an impasse of sorts, each side holing up for the night in their newly dug holes, though at least the enemy had a coppice of trees as well.

And then, surprisingly, another voice joined hers, but from the sound she knew it wasn't anyone on her side. The smooth tenor tones wafted across the frozen, pocked field to entwine with her own, creating a delicious harmony. Then another joined, and another, until almost everyone was singing a part, an unlikely choir on a night such as this.

It ended and the silence hung, exquisite and bittersweet after such a lovely interlude. Then that voice spoke, tones no less smooth when talking than when singing. "Granger... It is you, isn't it?"

She contemplated not answering, but what use would it be? "Yes, Zabini. It's me." She would know the cultured, slightly accented voice anywhere. She'd shared classes with the boy for six years, studied closely with him for several of those.

"It's Christmas, Hermione. Let's call a truce. Just for tonight." Perhaps it was the use of her first name, or the exasperated tint to his voice she hadn't heard in years, but somehow she thought he was serious.

She stood stiffly and carefully looked over the edge of her trench, crouching uncomfortably. Joints ached, mocking her youth. She thought she could see him, half behind a tree, looking her way. What was he playing at? What was that wily Slytherin plotting now?

"What's in it for you?" she asked bluntly.

"Merlin, girl. We're tired and cold, and it's Christmas Eve. Don't tell me you wouldn't like to forget about all this for a few hours." The words rang true, both in tone and in her spirit. Her men and women looked at her with hope-filled eyes, though they were wise enough to doubt the proposed truce as well.

Taking a deep breath, she stood up more fully, and in reciprocation, he stepped forward from behind the shield of the trees. His coffee-chocolate skin (gods, what she wouldn't give for a cup of hot coffee and a bar of dark chocolate) was barely distinguishable in the sharp darkness, though the gossamer light lent by the moon and stars helped somewhat.

"Swear to it," she said before thinking about it.

He seemed to consider her for a moment before nodding slowly. "I swear on my life and my magic that no one--myself or any of those with me--shall harm you or yours for the length of this night." A Wizard's Oath, magically binding.

Her breath let out in another ghosting whoosh. "As do I, on my life and magic, that none of mine shall do any harm to you and yours on this night." Stupid thing, doing this... too trusting. Would it backfire, was there a loophole? Gods, had she just made a mistake? Doubt ran in chaotic circles through her mind.

And yet she found herself clambering up out of her hole, biting her lip against the pain of abused joints and limbs. Her gait was smooth, though, as she walked across the frosty field to stand in front of him, leaving a trail of broken crystals behind her, crushed from the grass.

She still had to look up at him, she realized. He seemed thinner, more careworn but then, weren't they all? His dark eyes were still as deep and unreadable as ever, but his lips tilted up in a faint ghost of a grin. "Merry Christmas, Hermione," he said and held out his hand to her.

"Happy Christmas, Blaise," she returned softly, taking his hand and shaking.

At this evidence that a truce was, indeed, on for the night, the fighters from both sides slipped from their hiding places. They were a motley crew, all of them. Torn and worn robes, jeans and thick jackets. Most sported a few scars at least, a couple missing parts of themselves-- a finger here, part of an ear there. The consequences of war. Most were hex-marked from the day's fight.

They circled warily around each other for a long moment, neither side willing to break the vows that their respected superiors had just sworn. Blaise and Hermione both watched from their spot off to one side, her with her lip caught in her teeth, him with a slight furrow in his brow.

And then a miracle happened: Someone laughed. Then another, and another, and suddenly their differences were put aside for the night. She wasn't sure how, but wasn't willing to question the sudden goodwill. She watched as their people visited, reminiscing about past Christmases and talking about their families.

Forbidden alcohol appeared out of pockets and thin air and was passed around indiscriminately. Everyone was so tired of the fighting that despite being right in front of their enemies, no harsh words were said, no voices were raised in accusation or anger.

It was a testament to how long she'd been fighting that Hermione took an easy pull of the liquor being passed around and barely grimaced as it burned down her throat. She and Blaise stood off to one side, in the shadows of the trees. Their silence was oddly easy and she felt her eyes fill with tears as the horribly unfamiliar feeling of peace, no matter how temporary, touched her battered soul.

Blaise said nothing; there was no remonstrance against crying, as her boys might have uttered. No looks that suggested she was being weak. Instead, his arm looped around her waist and pulled her close, and he let her weep. No false platitudes or promises, no lies, just silent understanding.

Someone proposed a bonfire and everyone enthusiastically embraced the idea. Blaise and Hermione were among the volunteers to gather firewood. It was quiet inside the coppice, though the muted sounds of the impromptu merrymaking could still be heard. They walked until the shadows pooled deeply under the trees and the sounds were but a faint murmur in the background, and the moonlight barely slivered through the leaves.

"When will it end?" Her words were quiet, so quiet, carried on a silent sigh of muted anguish.

"I don't know," he replied, turning to face her. He didn't remember her being so small or thin, though he knew that the diminutive outside hid steely determination and power.

She hugged herself as if cold, though she had a Warming Charm cast on her clothing and movement had put color in her cheeks. It was the chill that war had left inside her that kept her cold now. He couldn't help but reach for her again.

She came willingly into his arms, and as if the whole war had never happened, his lips found hers and they kissed. It was as if the years had been stripped away and they were back in the deserted Arithmancy corridor where he had first kissed her. She'd forced herself to forget how soft his lips were, just as he had buried the feeling of her hair against his fingers and the sweetness of her mouth.

"It's not fair." He sounded so unlike himself. Blaise Zabini wasn't supposed to sound lost or hopeless. "It wasn't supposed to be like this."

"All's fair in horseshoes and hand grenades," she murmured as she stroked his faintly stubbled cheek.

"In love and war."

All they could do was hold on tightly for a long moment, all of the would-have-beens and could-have-beens and should-have-beens dying for a second time, victims of the shadows and the cold, unforgiving war.

There was no need for words; indeed, neither could speak for the tightness in their throats as they proceeded to head back towards the party, gathering wood as they went.

The glade was full of life and light, a large fire burning merrily and several trees magically decorated in festive cheer. Small, unimportant things were traded as if they were gifts and were treasured as such. A small group of people struck up a mysterious, made-up game involving a charmed ball and two streamers.

The two leaders sat near the fire, oddly quiet. Hidden by the folds of a blanket, their hands clasped tightly, almost painfully, but neither winced nor let go.

Aurora came with her pale light and watered-down colors all too soon. There was more purpose to people's movements now, and, when the sun first peeked over the horizon, they were once more separated into sides, factions, the bonfire still weakly burning between them. People stirred uneasily but no one drew their wands, not yet.

All eyes turned to Hermione and Blaise for guidance. Blaise took her hand and raised it to his lips, placing a chaste and courtly kiss upon its back, though he lingered a moment longer. And then, as one, they stepped apart, letting go of one another.

Responsibility settled upon them like a heavy, damp cloak, weighing them down. Blaise's countenance became cool and distant once more, and Hermione's shoulders squared and her eyes grew steely again.

"Until we meet again," he said in that smooth tenor of his.

"Until then," she replied softly and didn't flinch as he whirled, cloak billowing, and disappeared with a loud crack. A second later, his whole contingent followed, and their

ears rang. Hermione's heart reverberated as if it were a bell, tolling mournfully into the silence that followed.

"We won't speak of this," she said, voice strong and commanding once again. As one, her people nodded. They knew instinctively that no one would understand this, least of all their leader, Harry Potter. Hell, they didn't understand what had happened last night.

"Yes, ma'am," her second-in-command said. Hermione turned and looked at her people. They'd been up all night, after a long day of fighting and then unexpected merrymaking. Exhausted faces stared back at her.

Faces that no longer carried the same degree of hopelessness as before. Last night had changed something, she could feel it in her heart. They'd met the "enemy," they'd shared something. No longer were they merely nameless, faceless, family-less evil.

At the end of each wand, they were the same.

What would change, if anything, she didn't know. But a shift had occurred, nevertheless.

"Let's go home," she said out. In a movement eerily reminiscent of Blaise's, she turned and disappeared, her people following her.

All that was left was a dying fire and magical decorations that would quickly deteriorate. Around the small area, frost still clung to the ground, cold and unyielding, like war.

But also beautiful and fragile, like hope.

A/N: This was initially a response to a Fic-a-thon prompt on the LJ group Quiet Ones:*It's the middle of the war, but any fighting has ceased for Christmas Eve. Only one night before they go back to being mortal enemies. (Draco - and/or Blaise as the muse strikes).* I was inspired by the lyrics to the song [Christmas in the Trenches](#) and the true story about the unofficial ceasefire in 1914.

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