

As Sharp As Any Thorn

by Argosy

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The holly bears a prickle

As sharp as any thorn

Of all the trees that are in the wood,

The holly bears the crown.

--Traditional Christmas carol

Draco Malfoy, unarmed, stared at the three wands pointing in his direction and couldn't bring himself to care.

Weasley could barely look at him, eyes instead darting between the other two, his wand hand shaking alarmingly. Potter had gone so white his stupid scar stood out like an angry red snake. His wand didn't shake; it was gripped fiercely and pointed at Draco's heart. Potter might kill him in a moment, Draco considered thoughtfully.

Granger alone retained some semblance of calm. She studied him clinically, her body alert but watchful, keeping one eye on Potter and Weasley as well. Draco met her gaze momentarily and saw the spark of frank curiosity. *Mudblood*. Unable to work up much animosity, Draco glanced around the hideous room.

So this was the headquarters of the famous Order of the Phoenix. Draco couldn't say he thought much of the decor. Who would combine walls of sickmaking-green with heavy velvet drapery of an almost completely clashing moss color? Snape had told him it was once Sirius Black's house. That perhaps explained quite a lot.

Still, he knew, the house had not been chosen for its beauty. Snape had explained that Dumbledore had placed potent wards on the house, powerful magic that lived on after his death. Its Unplottability was just the start. Sighing, Draco tore his eyes from the rather dizzying pattern on the carpet and sat down on a lumpy sofa.

"Don't move," hissed Potter.

"He's unarmed, Harry," Granger put in softly. Draco glanced up in some surprise. The curious look was still on her face. Keeping his eyes locked with hers, Draco slowly raised his hands, showing them empty, then unhurriedly reached into his coat pocket. Potter made a noise in the back of his throat, but didn't kill him as yet. Draco's hand slowly came out of his pocket with a pack of cigarettes. He extracted one.

"Harry! He's got a wand -- or... something," Weasley broke off confusedly.

"It's a cigarette, Ron," replied Granger. "Filthy Muggle habit. Where'd you pick that up, Malfoy?"

"I've been around since last we met," he drawled in the familiar way. He waved the cigarette vaguely. "Light?"

Though he wouldn't have thought it possible, Potter tensed even further. Granger, however, merely flicked her wand with a muttered, *Incendio*. Draco took a deep drag. The Weasel gaped at the smoke escaping from his mouth on the exhale.

"What are you playing at, Malfoy?" Potter's voice was tight. "What the hell does Snape," he stumbled a bit over the name, "mean by coming here? How the fuck could he even find the place? He's not in the Order anymore."

"Dunno," replied the blond. "I suppose Dumbledore --"

"Shut up! Don't say his name."

Draco elegantly rolled his eyes, glancing a mute appeal at Granger. She looked away. Potter drew his wand arm back.

Draco lifted a curious eyebrow, but whatever Potter had in mind was interrupted by the opening of the drawing room door. A red-haired man Draco recognized as Weasel Senior stepped into the room.

"Harry, may I see you a moment?" He was more serious than Draco had ever seen him on platform nine and three-quarters.

Potter kept his wand trained carefully on Draco. "Say it here. I'm not moving."

The older Weasley sighed. "Then please put your wand down. You too, Ron. Hermione."

Potter didn't move. The other two glanced between Draco and the older man, then slowly lowered their wands.

"Harry, please --"

"Malfoy can't be trusted. I don't care what Snape told you. I saw them kill Dumbledore."

"Harry, I've spoken with Severus. Draco will be staying here with the Order, for a time."

"What? No!"

"Harry --"

"What has Snape done to you?" He glanced wildly through the open door, erupting from stillness to manic action. His wand waved madly, casting off blue sparks. "Where is he? I'll --" He stopped, gathered himself, then said in a much calmer voice, "I'll kill him."

"Severus has convinced me he is still on our side."

"He *killed* Dumbledore!"

"Tonight we will have a full meeting of the Order, and he'll put his case before them. As I said, he has convinced me."

"What could he possibly say?"

Draco closed his eyes and let his head sink back on the couch. He was so *very* tired. Let them argue. Either they'd hold him prisoner or they'd kill him. Right now he didn't much care which.

"It's what Dumbledore has said. Severus has brought us a Memento Mori."

Draco heard Granger's sharp intake of breath. He didn't need to open his eyes to know that Potter and the Weasel would be wearing matching expressions of incomprehension.

"What if I refuse to let him stay?"

There was a pause. The older man took an audible breath. "That, of course, is your prerogative. This is, after all, your house. The wards Albus set were meant to protect you when you came of age. The Order is headquartered here at your generosity. After tonight's meeting we can make other arrangements, if you desire."

Draco heard the senior Weasley leave the room.

"Dad! Harry, tell Dad you didn't mean it."

Potter's heavy footsteps strode out. To Draco it sounded like he took the opposite direction from the older man.

"Harry!" Weasley followed Potter.

Silence at last. After a moment, Draco cautiously opened his eyes. Granger was still there, staring at him intently, her expression unreadable. Draco closed his eyes again.

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"A Memento Mori. That's incredibly powerful magic."

She was seated on the sofa, her legs curled under her. Still staring quizzically. Did the girl never blink? Draco sank further back into his winged armchair and closed his eyes. Perhaps if he ignored her she would go away.

"You have to be dying, and know you're dying, to create one. He must have used an object he had on him at the Astronomy Tower."

Or maybe if he concentrated hard enough he could cast an Invisibility Charm, even without his wand. Draco took a breath and held it. Opening his eyes, he could still see his hand. Damn. Well, perhaps he was invisible to Granger.

"It could have been anything, really. A handkerchief or his glasses. A coin," she mused thoughtfully. "The important thing is that a Memento Mori becomes a container for a wizard's last bit of magic."

Apparently Granger could still see him. He should have tried a Silencing Charm. Why wasn't she at the meeting with the rest of them? Draco knew the Order was downstairs deciding his and Snape's fate. Wizards and witches had been coming in all afternoon. Mad-Eye Moody and the werewolf and that horrible girl with the pink hair that was meant to be some sort of cousin or something of his. They would exchange hushed words with one or the other of the grown-up Weasleys, then peer into the drawing room to get a look at him, faces white and shocky. Never saying a word. *I should charge a Knut a peek*, thought Draco. *Maybe that would make the Mudblood go away.*

"When you use your last magic to make a Memento Mori, dying is supposed to be much more painful. Of course, Dumbledore had something pretty important to say."

A rather hideous grandfather clock chimed nine. Could the girl talk all night? He noticed that for all her seeming casualness, Granger still had a hold of her wand. Ah then, a guard. He considered whether he should feel insulted that the Order of the Phoenix apparently thought that he, Draco Malfoy -- scourge of the magical world, in on the kill of the wizard second only to the Dark Lord in power -- could be safely guarded by a bushy-haired teenaged witch. He decided not to care.

"Of course the message in a Memento Mori --"

"Shouldn't you be downstairs?" Draco interrupted, unable to stand it any longer. "Aren't you afraid Snape will hurt your precious Potter?"

She almost smiled. "Harry can take care of himself."

"Then don't you want to know what's going on? Did you pick today to give up nosiness?"

This time she did smile. "Well, of course they'll let Professor Snape back in the Order. He can't ever really have left it, or he never would have been able to find the headquarters."

An expression of genuine interest appeared briefly on Draco's face, before he schooled his features back to studied boredom.

"It's why the Order felt safe to keep using Grimmauld Place. It's Unplottable of course, but Dumbledore set up special safeguards." She warmed to her subject, unconsciously mimicking the cadence of a Hogwarts teacher, a tone of voice Draco had heard drifting from the Gryffindor table across the Great Hall many times. "Non-members of the Order can't find the house, no matter how many times they've been here. And of course, now that Harry's of age, the magic that used to protect him at his uncle's house has transferred here, and strengthened. No one that means Harry harm can enter the premises."

So perhaps they wouldn't kill Snape. Draco attempted to feel glad, but found it too much effort.

"So you see, just by coming here, Professor Snape has proven his loyalty to --"

"Yes, Granger, I understand. You don't have to explain things five times like I was Potter or the Weasel."

"No," she smiled, unprovoked. "It seems not."

Draco closed his eyes and leaned back, hoping to end the conversation. Granger was blessedly silent.

"It's suicide, Severus! I won't let you do it!" Draco recognized the angry voice of one of his old Defense Against the Dark Arts teachers, the werewolf.

"And when did you begin controlling my actions, Lupin?" Snape stormed into the room, the werewolf at his heels. "If you're worried about the Wolfsbane, perhaps you should take up Potions yourself."

"You've been on the run for months. He'll kill you on sight."

"There is that possibility," Snape conceded evenly.

Some Order members had followed them in and now settled around the room, listening. There was his cousin -- a nervous tic rapidly coloring her hair a bilious green to match the walls -- both Weasley parents, Mad-Eye Moody, and several witches and wizards Draco didn't recognize. Weasley junior and a dangerous-looking Potter brought up the rear, remaining near the door.

"Severus! He'll never take you back. He'll know you're loyal to us. Arthur, make him listen to reason."

"Severus must make his own decisions," the older Weasley replied.

"But Voldemort will kill him before he even has a chance to do anything for us. It will be a complete waste."

"The Dark Lord likely will demand my life. He'll no doubt know I'm a spy for the Order."

"Then why --"

Snape continued, apparently unaware of Lupin's interjection. "I believe it will appeal to the Dark Lord to keep me close, knowing I remain faithful to Dumbledore --"

"*ACCIO WAND.*"

Draco looked up, startled. Granger now held two wands and Potter's empty wand hand was dangling uselessly in mid-curse. He looked murderous. He crossed his arms after a moment and leaned back against the wall, shooting Granger a betrayed look.

Snape looked around the room, seemingly noticing the other wizards for the first time.

"The Dark Lord will know I remain faithful to Dumbledore."

Potter snorted.

"He will know that I only pretend loyalty to him. And he will know that I know that he knows." Snape paused, coming the closest to smiling Draco had seen since Dumbledore's death. "We will both be very knowledgeable."

"Severus!" The werewolf seemed to lack a sense of humor. Or perhaps he really did care if Snape lived or died.

"I believe he will be intrigued enough to keep me alive for a time. I will use that time to sabotage what spells or protections I can." He looked straight at Potter. "I will make your final battle easier, if I can."

Snape looked around the drawing room. "I most likely won't communicate with any of you ever again." His eyes settled on Draco. "I leave you under the protection of the Order of the Phoenix. I take it there are now Anti-Apparition Charms here?"

The older Weasley nodded. Snape broke eye contact with Draco and swept from the room, passing Potter without a glance. The werewolf followed noisily.

There was a moment of silence. The Order members glanced at each other uneasily.

"*Blood traitor! Degenerate! Consort of filth!*" Draco heard a woman shriek from the hall. Granger sighed exasperatedly.

"Right then," said the older Weasley, standing. "You'll need a room."

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Draco was hungry. He turned over in the lumpy bed, unwilling to go downstairs.

"We have no house-elves here," Weasley the elder had told him, ushering him into a gloomy bedroom on the third floor. "You won't be catered to. You're welcome to eat with us in the kitchen."

Finally alone, Draco refused to leave his room. He'd been here, what, a day-and-a-half now? Two days? When had he eaten before that? He couldn't remember.

Draco looked around the tiny, dusty space. "Not much of a prison. What happens if I decide to just walk out?"

"You're not a prisoner, Draco."

Draco heard himself snort, disgusted to realize it sounded much like Potter.

"You're here under our protection. You may leave this house any time you want. Without your wand, of course, but we won't stop you from obtaining a new one. The Order and this house have many defenses. Once you leave, you'll never be able to find us again."

The sun was setting outside his window. The red glow penetrating the thin drapes was doing no favors for the ghastly color scheme. Draco pulled out a cigarette, then realized he couldn't light it without his wand.

"I hope you'll stay. Severus has kept you hidden from You-Know-Who --" He stopped and gathered himself. "From Voldemort for months. And Albus died to keep you from becoming a murderer. You might consider that you owe them something."

He left the room. Draco sat on the bed.

And had moved as little as possible since. But the empty feeling was gnawing at his stomach. He'd have to go downstairs soon.

He heard voices outside his door. "Harry, you don't have to stand guard. Mr. Weasley said --"

"Mr. Weasley doesn't know him the way I do. The way we do." Potter's betrayed tone was evident even through the wall. "How can you trust him, Hermione? I thought that you of all people --"

Were they really going to do this right here? Even as a prisoner he had better things to do than eavesdrop on Potter and the Mudblood. Draco sighed. Apparently he had no choice. Granger had a voice like a dying Kneazle.

"You heard Dumbledore's dying message, Harry. You know he'd arranged for Snape to kill him if it became necessary."

"Faked," Potter spit out.

"There's no way to forge a Memento Mori, Harry." Draco heard her patient tone. "It was from Dumbledore."

"But why? Why would he --" Potter stopped brokenly.

"I don't know, Harry." Granger's voice was comforting. "But I trust Dumbledore. Come on. Let's go have dinner."

Draco heard them move off. His stomach rumbled. He clutched a pillow to it and rolled over, facing the wall.

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Granger was doing some mad thing at the breakfast table when Draco walked into the kitchen the next morning. Her wand was out and pointed at some sort of twig.

"I don't understand. We decorated for Christmas two years ago. Why won't the magic work now?"

That's right, Draco remembered, Christmas was next week sometime. He'd honestly forgotten. With the world falling apart, leave it to the Mudblood to think about Christmas.

"I don't know, dear," came a voice from near the fire. The female Weasley stirred a cauldron with one hand and read a copy of the *Daily Prophet* with the other.

Neither Granger nor the Weasel Mother had noticed Draco standing at the door. He peered over Granger's shoulder. It was a small pine branch, he observed. It lifted slightly and became vaguely conical as Granger passed her wand over it, only to collapse back down to the table, shedding needles.

Mrs. Weasley filled a bowl and levitated it towards Granger's place at the table. Turning, she saw Draco. The bowl slipped, spilling porridge on the floor. She rallied admirably and caught the bowl before it crashed to the ground, sending it to the table in front of Granger mostly full.

Granger abandoned her pine branch and turned contemplative eyes on Draco, again with that look of clinical interest. He found himself wishing she would say something, or eat her porridge or just stop looking at him. Mrs. Weasley sent another bowl of porridge, followed by two plates of sausages. He ate ravenously, glad of an excuse to ignore Granger.

Potter and Weasley stumped into the room, Weasley yelling, "Mum! Breakfast!" They froze at the sight of him.

Granger let them stand there stupidly for a moment, before finally saying, "Sit down, Ron. Harry. Have some breakfast."

"I'm not hungry," Weasley mumbled.

"Yes, you are. Eat." She looked at them expectantly until they took places as far from Draco as possible. Mrs. Weasley gave them porridge and sausages, looking on worriedly.

They sat in silence. Potter stared rigidly forward, gripping a spoon but not eating. Weasley gobbled porridge disgustingly; the Dark Lord himself probably wouldn't spoil his appetite. He stole looks at Draco from time to time, no doubt congratulating himself on his subtlety. Granger ate serenely. Draco pretended they were all shrubbery.

Weasley abandoned all attempts at stealth and stared at him bluntly, mouth hanging stupidly open. Well, at least it was better than Granger's analytical gaze. Draco sighed. Weasley, clearly struck with some idea -- *struck hard*, Draco hoped, *and over the head* -- stood, reaching across the table for the pitcher of pumpkin juice.

"Oops," he exclaimed unconvincingly, spilling the sticky juice on Draco's shoulders. He paused, then dumped a little more as an afterthought.

"Ronald!"

"Accident, Mum. Honest."

Granger again took out her wand. "*Scourg* --"

"Wait." Weasley placed his hand on her wand and looked on expectantly.

Oh. Draco closed his eyes. *Oh.* Hearing Granger's exasperated sigh, he knew that she understood too.

"Oh, for Merlin's sake." She shook her wand free. "*Scourgify.* Honestly, Ron, if you want to see Malfoy's arms --"

Still, thought Draco, *might as well give Granger a thrill. Weasel too, by the look of things.* Standing, he slowly removed his shirt, hanging it carefully off the back of his chair before turning bare-chested to Weasley and displaying his forearms.

"No Mark." The Weasel, he was pleased to note, seemed decidedly uncomfortable at the sight of a half-naked Malfoy in the kitchen, even though he had engineered it.

Granger, after all her previous staring, didn't even have the grace to look intrigued.

Turning back, he put on his shirt, smoothing it down meticulously. "Satisfied?"

He walked to the door, glanced back over his shoulder. "Next time you'd like me to take off my clothes, Weasley, there are easier ways."

He heard Granger laugh as he drifted elegantly out.

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After that he didn't see much of Potter or Weasley. He sat in his bedroom until he was so sick of the sight of the four walls he was willing to sit in the drawing room, even though it came always with hideous green walls and usually with Granger.

She was standing in a corner, not staring at him for once, but instead intently studying the walls. She swished her wand "*Decoro.*"

Sparkling icicles sprouted from the ceiling, descending gracefully down the wall nearest Granger. They held there a moment, breathtakingly beautiful, then melted in a deluge, puddling on the floor.

"Damn," she sighed, drying out her small lake with a Heating Charm.

"And you the cleverest witch of our year."

"Yes." She didn't rise to the rather anemic bait. He was out of practice. "It's the house somehow. I don't understand. It's Harry's house, now. And at any rate we were able to decorate it two years ago."

Draco thought of replying, but considered that one sentence accurately reflected his level of interest in the conversation.

Granger didn't seem to need an answer, anyway. She waved her wand at a corner behind Draco. A Christmas tree sprouted full-grown, then collapsed in an spurt of pine needles.

Granger glanced at the mess, apparently decided the floor looked better that way and sat on the sofa. She was going to start the staring again.

"Why aren't you at Hogwarts?" Draco asked quickly. "It's not holidays yet, is it?"

"No," said Granger. "It's not." And he hadn't headed off the staring. She wore a distinct look of detached curiosity.

"I wouldn't have picked you to skive off early," he continued. "Surely you're Head Girl this year. It can't be a good example to the children."

"We're not at school this year."

Draco looked up, surprised. He got no further information from her imperturbable expression.

"We're fighting Lord Voldemort," she continued.

"In the attic, is he? Perhaps in an old box of Christmas decorations?"

"It's worth a look." She smiled.

He took out his cigarettes, was in the process of extracting one, when to his annoyance he found them Summoned out of his hand.

Draco took a few calming breaths, then turned to Granger. She had two cigarettes in her mouth, and was lighting them with her wand. Before he could process this, she'd leaned forward and placed one in his open mouth.

She took a puff, exhaled. The way she held the cigarette spoke of experience. He'd bet his last Galleon -- his *only* Galleon, Draco amended, thinking ruefully of his changed circumstances -- that she didn't do that in front of Potter and the Weasel.

So Granger thinks she's a bad girl, thought Draco, rolling his eyes inwardly. *Gryffindors.*

Taking a deep drag, she blew a perfect little smoke ring before settling on Draco again that look of dispassionate curiosity. He'd had enough.

"Stop looking at me that way. I'm not an Arithmancy problem."

"No," she agreed, her probing gaze undisturbed. "Those I can figure out."

~*~

Potter had apparently solved his Draco problem by pretending that he didn't exist. Altogether an admirable solution, Draco reckoned. If they met, which they rarely did, Potter looked past him, just over his left shoulder. Draco considered cultivating the Jobberknoll that nested outside his window to sit on his shoulder so Potter would have something to look at.

Potter and Weasley would walk along the corridors, talking in hushed voices, clearly plotting. Then they'd spot him and disappear behind a closed door with an obvious air of conspirators. The odd thing was that they never included Granger. Draco weighed, then rejected, the idea of young love. Their whispered conversations had an air of war about them, not, thank Merlin, romance.

The Order appeared committed to their charade that Draco wasn't a prisoner. They gave him the run of the house, seemingly unconcerned about him trying to escape. His father was in Azkaban, and he personally had failed the Dark Lord, who consequently wanted him dead. Draco supposed that was enough motivation to stay put. Still, though the illusion of a guard would have better satisfied his ego, there was value in being underestimated. Lucius had taught him that.

Apathy giving way to restlessness, he took to roaming the halls late at night. He would catch glimpses of Order members coming in or out, leaving for or returning from missions. Sometimes they would spare him a glance, sometimes not. Once he saw McGonagall stagger through the front door, supported by one of the Weasley brood, a bloody gash across her face.

He'd met Granger later that night, prowling a back staircase. She didn't seem to sleep much, either. He'd had her light a cigarette, offered her one, watched her mouth as she took a drag.

"I'm not to be trusted," he'd offered.

"I'll remember that," she'd replied.

~*~

Potter and Weasley were locked up in one of their endless strategy sessions. They'd taken to using a half-forgotten small attic, a room they were sure Draco didn't know about. He thought about interrupting them there, just to see the outrage on their faces, but couldn't be bothered. Perhaps he'd eavesdrop later.

Granger, maddeningly, didn't seem to care what Potter and Weasley were up to either. She perched on a chair at one of the tables in the drawing room, passing her wand over a lumpy brown mess. "*Decoro*," she was saying. "*Construo*."

The brown mess swirled around her wand, resolving itself into a model of a building. Draco looked closer and sniffed; there were iced towers, sugared turrets, and a distinct spicy aroma -- a miniature Hogwarts in gingerbread. Merlin's beard. Voldemort was planning the bloody death of all of her kind, and the girl was playing with sweets.

The gingerbread Hogwarts held together a moment -- was that a miniature Quidditch Pitch? -- then imploded with a spray of flour and brown sugar. Granger merely wiped a smear of molasses from her forehead, and set back to work.

Again Draco watched the small Hogwarts grow, again saw it collapse. And a third time, and a fourth.

"Is this really the best use of your time, Granger?" he asked finally. "Shouldn't you be upstairs plotting with your boyfriends?"

"I'm all right," she replied. "Though I do appreciate the concern."

This time she managed to add in the lake before her Hogwarts collapsed.

"I know you're a Mudblood --" He waited for her explosion of anger, which, infuriatingly, didn't come. "But I would have thought that Potter, at least, would appreciate the value of your help."

"Don't worry, Malfoy, it's all well in hand. If Voldemort comes, I'll protect you."

"What *is* your great plan to defeat the Dark Lord? Suffocating him in Figgy Pudding?"

She turned her eyes to him, that unflinching gaze making him wish he'd let well enough alone.

"Harry and Ron are planning their tactics. They're going after some objects that belonged to Voldemort --"

"Horcruxes," he said, to prove he knew more than she thought, to unsettle her.

"Yes," she agreed, unruffled. "We've been researching. We've located most of them, figured out how to get past the defenses. Soon Harry and Ron will be setting out for them."

"Leaving you in the cold. Rather hard on you to have all the swot work of finding the things, and none of the adventure of hunting them down."

He'd spoken in a light, mocking tone, but *finally* he seemed to have hit a nerve in Granger. She stared at him a moment, plainly, not clinically, then said simply, "I'm too dangerous to them."

Draco would never understand these mad Gryffindors. If Granger had been a Slytherin, he'd have made her his right hand, wanting her cool head and powerful magic as near him as possible in a battle. He looked at her closely. She'd turned back to her failing gingerbread, single-minded, determined. What a waste she'd been born a Mudblood and made a Gryffindor. *Dangerous*, he thought. *In the best ways*.

He must have said the last out loud, because Granger threw him an unreadable look. "They love me."

She held his eyes a long moment. *Dangerous*. He wanted to look away. Why didn't he?

Her latest gingerbread castle collapsed in a gritty puff of sugar. Draco scowled and blinked it out of his eyes.

"Oh, for -- Here." He grabbed her wand. Waved it over the remains. Hogwarts Castle sprang up, magnificent in gingerbread. They waited, frozen. It remained gloriously standing.

Draco fingered Granger's wand. He hadn't held one in months. Even though it wasn't his, he could feel the power thrumming through it.

Granger beamed at the miniature Hogwarts. There was a fondant lake in which a trail of bubbles produced by the movements of the Giant Squid was emerging. The Quidditch Pitch came complete with a toffee grandstand. As Draco watched, candied first years hurried into the seats.

Granger turned her smile of delight on him. It was a genuine smile, unlike those I-am-much-too-intelligent-to-worry-about-you smirks she generally reserved for him, and Draco found himself forgetting not to smile back.

"Of course," she exclaimed. "You're related. The house will only let a Black decorate it."

With an effort, Draco forced his smile away. "It always comes down to blood, doesn't it?"

He succeeded in making the smile vanish from her face momentarily. But it appeared again as she turned back to the castle. She didn't ask for her wand back.

~*~

They love me, she'd said. Well, of course. Stupid Gryffindors loved everybody, didn't they? And the Terrible Trio had been inseparable for years. Or had Granger meant more than that?

Draco usually preferred to eat by himself. Roaming down to the kitchen after dinner was over, helping himself to leftovers and keeping as far out of the way of Potter, Weasley and the various Order members as he could. But tonight he'd felt like joining in.

Sitting at the table, he looked over the others. It was a small group. Just Mama, Papa and Baby Weasel, Potter, and Granger. Granger had seemed pleased when he sat down, happy to see him socializing, Draco guessed, or just glad for another opportunity to watch him. Potter was maintaining his policy of See-No-Draco, Hear-No-Draco. Weasley Junior seemed jumpy, perching on the edge of his chair and fidgeting. Draco sent him a dazzling smile, which somehow failed to set him at ease, though Draco did note a small grin of amusement from Granger, before she hid it.

The Weasley parents made a few desultory attempts to engage him in conversation -- "Settling in all right?" Mr. Weasley had asked. "Keeping yourself busy?" -- before

landing on the more comfortable tactic of generally ignoring him. Thus, Draco could *observe*.

Potter and Weasley talked more with each other, and more comfortably, than they did with Granger. Once, when Granger turned a warm smile on him, Potter looked stricken and quickly turned away.

"We'll be leaving soon, Hermione," began Weasley.

"Oh, but you'll be here for Christmas," broke in his mother. "Ginny will be here, and Fred and George."

"And I've finally figured out how to decorate the house," added Granger.

Yes. You figured it out, thought Draco. *That's that famous Gryffindor honor, is it?*

Potter looked straight at Granger. "I don't think we'll be able to stay."

He held her distressed eyes for a long, excruciating moment, but it was Weasley who flushed.

Ah, thought Draco, of course. They do love her. They're in love with her. Both of them. Dangerous, indeed. She would be a distraction to them in a battle; they would be easier targets if they were fearing for her safety. If a Death Eater captured her, could Potter be manipulated? Could Weasley? Pretty unfair for Granger, all things considered. Still, Draco knew, if staying out of battle would help keep Potter and Weasley safer, then stay out she would. Draco shook his head at the vagaries of Gryffindors.

"Why are you shaking your head?" Weasley asked, but quickly shut up when Draco smiled at him again.

When had it happened, anyway? He studied Granger. She had gotten rather pretty these last few years, he supposed. Since she had figured out how to tame that ridiculous hair. She had lovely eyes, if she wouldn't use them so often to stare inquiringly at him. As she was doing now. He concentrated on his stew.

Poor Granger. He knew that neither Weasley nor Potter would ever touch her, not when they knew how the other one felt. And they were all far too Gryffindor to have a bit of fun together. Well, Potter and Weasley were anyhow. Granger might be one to have a go. It really was a shame she wasn't a Slytherin.

"Why are you smiling at me?" Granger asked.

Draco said nothing, just let his smile widen as Potter and the Weasel turned murderous looks on him.

~*~

It had been a mistake to make Granger's gingerbread castle. Draco saw that now.

They'd done icicles in the drawing room, garlands down the banisters, and Christmas trees wherever Granger could find spare spaces for them. He'd intended to refuse when she came to him, recruiting for her deranged project, but Potter had been there, glaring, and he couldn't resist.

"When our side wins," he said later, while using her wand to Transfigure some hideous candlesticks into wooden soldiers, "clever Muggle Gryffindor witches will be the first against the wall."

He watched the soldiers drill on the mantelpiece. The rear line would bump into the row ahead of them, knocking the first row to the floor.

"At Malfoy Manor we had house-elves for this."

"And they never got to enjoy Christmas, I'll --"

He lowered Granger's wand to the carpet, letting a fallen soldier grab on for a ride back to his ranks. "Ah, the Christmases of my youth. My stocking was made from Muggle-skin, our tree was imported from the Enchanted Forests of Bavaria, and lighted with strings of burning fairies. I'd wake up at the crack of noon to my masses of presents, spend the day flying the latest model broom I'd undoubtedly found propped against my bed, and building Snow Wizards I'd enchant to rip each other to pieces. The evening would draw to a close with a dinner of some endangered Magical Beast or other, and carols sung by the house-elves. Well, screamed, really," he added thoughtfully. "They *were* being tortured, after all. What?"

She was smiling. "I don't believe a word you say, you know."

"What, just now, or ever?"

She was thoughtful. "Ever, I suppose."

"And yet you let me hold your wand. Reckless girl."

~*~

"Abomination, Mudblood-lover, befouled whelp!"

"I don't think she likes her new Santa hat," Granger chortled breathlessly as they escaped from the hall.

"Defiler, blood-betrayer, fornicator of filth..."

"Steady on. That's a bit personal," Draco stopped, calling back to Mrs. Black's portrait.

"Filthy hormonal adolescent dog --"

"You're not helping." She yanked him through an open door, closing it behind her. Draco could still hear Mrs. Black's muffled screeches. A craven sheep, was he?

He took in his surroundings. It was small and dim. Things were poking him in interesting places. "Granger, I don't know what you have in mind, but..."

She looked around the broom closet and sighed. "Let's just stay here until she quiets down. Otherwise she'll be at it all day."

He settled back, shoving aside a painful mop handle. *Lumos,* he muttered, and the light from her wand was enough to illuminate the tiny room. Somehow, in the close space, Draco didn't want to look at her. Instead he studied the dust motes that floated through the air glowing in the wand's light.

He took out his cigarettes and then, feeling her eyes, looked up. She was studying him again. Enough. He stepped forward, crowding her, speaking low.

"Granger in a closet, defenseless. And me holding her wand." She didn't back away. "What a dream setup this would have been at school."

"Yes. Shame you're not evil anymore."

"Who says I'm not evil?" He placed his hands on the wall on either side of her head and stared at her, waiting for her to flinch.

Which she refused to do, damn her. He leaned forward, almost touching her now. He could feel her breath. "Oh yes, Malfoy, you're the evilest," she mocked softly.

He met her eyes, and for a moment he felt himself falling into their insufferably calm depths. Then he broke away, backing to the furthest wall, which was suddenly not far enough away. He pulled out a cigarette and lit it furiously. His hand was *not* shaking.

"My father --" he began slowly.

"Your father is in Azkaban. You --"

"My father was right hand man to the Dark Lord. As I will be someday."

"No." She sounded utterly confident, far surer than he was.

"How can you know?" His voice was bitter.

She paused, again with that infernal probing look. Then, slowly, it changed. She seemed to decide something. "Because Dumbledore saved you."

Draco held utterly still a moment, then gritted out, "*Nox*," and dropped her wand to the floor. He yanked open the closet door. He needed space between himself and the Mudblood, lots of it, and as quickly as possible.

He strode up the hall. "*Ancestral blot, besmircher of honor, intolerable puppy*," trailed behind him.

~*~

Lucius Malfoy stood tall in his prison cell, meeting his son's eyes. He was shirtless, and as Draco watched, gashes streaked across his torso. Trailing down, dripping blood, sliced by some unseen knife.

Draco tried to say something, tried to move, to save his father, but he was frozen in place. Lucius looked at him expectantly, seeming to feel no pain, even as the blood trickled from him in rivulets, coating him in red. He waited.

Draco stepped forward, but found himself in the same spot. His legs refused to obey his mind's commands. The look in his father's eyes changed to the familiar disappointment. Then resignation.

He felt chilling cold. He couldn't turn around, but he knew without uncertainty Dementors were approaching him from behind. But that was wrong, wasn't it? The Dementors weren't at Azkaban anymore, were they?

Draco's eyes opened. He took in the ugly walls of his Grimmauld Place bedroom. He closed his eyes again, controlling his breathing.

~*~

He was avoiding Granger. It should have been more difficult. Until now she had been everywhere, always underfoot. She was avoiding him too, then. Good.

But he couldn't stay in his room. He needed to move, to feel his muscles work, his nerves. He wandered at night, exploring, finding unused back rooms. He suspected the house changed at its own mercurial whims, rooms seemed to appear one hour and be gone the next.

He opened a door he knew had not been there the last time he made his late-night circuit. Potter sat hunched at a table in the corner.

He faced away from Draco, concentrating intently on something in front of him. Draco approached silently. It was a single phoenix feather. A misty image of Dumbledore, perhaps a foot tall, emanated from it. Draco creased his forehead, then remembered: the Memento Mori.

"-- *bers of the Order of the Phoenix*," the cloudy Dumbledore was saying. "*It is not an easy decision I have made...*"

Draco supposed he should feel more curiosity about the message that had saved his life, had convinced the Order to spare him, but somehow it didn't seem to matter. He backed away soundlessly.

Potter heard anyway and looked up, not bothering to wipe the tears from his eyes. Draco found himself unable to turn away from that blank stare. Finally Potter turned back to the Memento Mori and Draco felt himself dismissed. He silently exited the room.

~*~

"I need you."

Granger was no longer avoiding him, it seemed. "Come on," she said impatiently.

He opened his eyes, still cloudy with sleep. She was crouched at the edge of his bed, straddling the lower part of his legs. She wore rather fetching Muggle pajamas and a dressing gown, and her wand was out and ready. She tapped it against her empty hand restlessly.

Draco blinked and scooted his legs out from under her, leaning up against the headboard.

"It's important," she added seriously.

With a mental shrug, Draco swung his legs over the edge of his bed. Any protest would be pointless, he knew. Might as well see what daft thing the girl was up to now.

Pulling on a dressing gown, he followed her out of the room. It could even actually be important, he mused, trailing her down the dark stairs and into the drawing room.

The moonlight illuminated the room a little too well. The icicles and wreaths had improved the decor a bit, Draco supposed, but it was still the ugliest room he'd ever seen.

Granger shivered. "*Incendio*." She pointed her wand at the fireplace.

The flickering light didn't improve the room's aspect, but at least now it was warm. There wasn't any vital emergency here, as far as Draco could tell. He waited.

"Well?" he asked finally.

She reached into the pocket of her dressing gown and produced a small sprig of something red and green. She waited, apparently in no hurry to explain herself.

"Well?" he asked again.

"It's holly," she explained.

Draco felt that didn't deserve a reply. Let her get to the point in her own time. He yawned elaborately.

"I want you to cover this wall with it. As much as you can. Wreaths and garlands and --"

"And it was important to do this in the middle of the night?"

"Holly is beautiful -- and seasonal," she replied. "And the berries symbolize blood. That should appeal to you."

She held out her wand and looked at him expectantly. Draco looked back. She seemed to think she was making some sort of sense.

Granger continued to offer her wand in her open palm, handle out. "Please, Draco," she said softly. "Ginny's coming tomorrow, and the other Weasleys. Holly is a protective plant. I need them to be safe."

Draco, was it? He found he liked the sound of it on her tongue. Liked the look of her mouth when she said it.

"No such thing as safe," he muttered, but got to work. Balancing the sprig on a picture frame, he cast an Expansion Charm. It sprouted out, vine-like, until it overtook the wall, covering the Black family tapestry in a cascade of glossy red and green.

He sketched circles with the wand, causing the holly to organize itself into wreaths and swirls, then set himself to the niceties. That garland needed to face the other direction, and surely that branch should lean a little to the left?

Granger was silent. He could feel her eyes on his back, making him itch. He didn't want to look at her, not yet.

But still her eyes were on him. He could feel their tug, pulling him to meet their gaze. He turned, cursing himself for having so little self-control, dreading the cool look of impersonal curiosity he knew he'd find.

There was no trace of it. Her eyes shined in the firelight with a look of quiet faith. She smiled. Draco couldn't breathe.

"Granger," he said. "Be careful."

"I wanted to know," she began.

"Don't."

"I wanted to find out," she continued, "why Dumbledore died. Why he made Professor Snape kill him. Did he know you had some destiny, some special part to play in the war?"

He screwed his eyes shut. The firelight licked red and angry against his eyelids.

"Or would he have done the same for any student?" she went on mercilessly. "To save them from being lost, from becoming a murderer?"

Her voice carried thinly over the dull roar in his ears. Where was the noise coming from? Pounding blood, he realized dimly.

"I had to know. So I watched you... and I figured it out."

"Granger --"

"The answer is, it doesn't matter. Whether you're destined, or whether you're ordinary."

He was suffocating. He couldn't listen.

"Dumbledore died for you." She breathed and continued softly, "That's enough to know."

He stepped forward. "Listen to me, Granger. I am not one of you. I am not on your side." He could hear his voice shake. Her wand was in his hands, heavy with power.

"I trust you," she said, and she smiled.

He dropped the wand and lunged at her. He wouldn't listen. She must not be allowed to say any more.

He shoved her against the wall, hard, pushing his mouth onto hers, feeling it hard against him. He was Draco Malfoy, his father was Lucius Malfoy, Death Eater, and right hand of the Dark Lord. Who was this Mudblood to trust him?

Then he was kissing her, and she was kissing him back, tongues tangling, fighting for dominance. He couldn't get enough, and he couldn't think, running his hand hard up and down her sides, over her breasts. Skin, he needed to touch her skin, and she was finally, *finally* silent, only making needy sounds in the back of her throat that went straight to his cock in a rush of heat, and it didn't matter if she trusted him.

He pushed her harder against the wall, he couldn't get close enough, and shoved his hands past her dressing gown, under her pajama top. Her skin was warm under his touch, and her nipples were hard. He took one in each hand, rubbing them between his fingers, feeling her arch and moan against his mouth.

Her hands were fumbling at his shirt, and then she had it off and was pushing it past his shoulders and trailing her fingers down his chest. He felt her hands on him, hot under the elastic at his waist, kneading his cock roughly, rubbing him up and down.

He felt a groan starting all the way down in his thighs and bit hard at her neck to keep it in. He needed to taste her skin. "Draco," he heard her say, "Draco," in a broken, miserable-sounding voice that made him even harder, made his cock throb.

He was Draco Malfoy, and somewhere far in the back of his mind, he knew this was important, knew he had to make her understand, but at the moment he couldn't remember why. He ripped down her pajama bottoms and dragged his fingers up her bare thighs, leaving marks with his nails. He wanted to leave scratches. He needed her to remember this; he'd have liked them to be permanent. She gasped as he found her wetness and moaned, again saying his name. He rubbed circles with his thumb and thrust against her, feeling uncontrolled, unable to think. He couldn't breathe, couldn't wait.

He pulled back, gasping, and looked into her eyes, saw the glazed hunger, saw the predator behind them. Saw his own hunger reflected. She grasped his waist, pulling his hips back to hers. *Granger*, he thought desperately, *Hermione*. Then all thought fled.

He placed his hands under her thighs and lifted her against the wall. She wrapped her legs around him, and he thrust against her, frustratingly close, before she reached down, guiding him. Then he was inside her.

He felt her trembling, heard her shuddering breaths as every thrust shoved her up against the wall. He wanted to slow down, wanted to make it last, but he couldn't stop himself, couldn't hold back, feeling barely in control of his own body. He pushed harder, feeling her around him, tight and hot and wet. A burning redness grew inside him, threatening to overtake him, to spill out through every pore. He felt her stiffen, and come with a shuddering cry, then melt against him. He held her up, pounding into her, once, twice, before he felt his own release.

Letting her down, he felt himself shaking. He leaned close into her, trying to force his body to stop. He wondered why he couldn't, before he realized he was feeling her

own trembling. He closed his eyes, forcing himself to breathe.

"Hermione," he said when he could speak again, when it didn't sound too broken, "you mustn't trust me."

~*~

The next day the Weasley girl arrived, with two or three brothers, but no one could enjoy it because Potter and Weasley were gone. They'd left on their mission, telling no one.

The day after that Draco's father escaped from Azkaban. It was Christmas Eve.

~*~

The house was bursting with Order members. They read that day's *Daily Prophet* in twos and threes, whispering to each other, poring over the text for some hidden clue. It was dog-eared and torn before someone thought to send out for more copies.

"LUCIUS MALFOY, DEATH EATER, IN DARING AZKABAN GETAWAY," blared the headline. Well, said some Order members, at least he escaped alone. Yes, replied others, but how? Did he have help from You-Know-Who? Then they'd steel themselves and amend, from *Voldemort*, I mean.

They'd stare at Draco, waiting for him to burst into flames perhaps, or else pull off his mask and reveal he'd been the Dark Lord all along. He tried to conceal himself in his room, but the werewolf followed him in, wanting to talk seriously.

True to their word, they weren't holding him prisoner, even now. They couldn't help watching him, but he couldn't catch them guarding. Mr. Weasley had asked him if he knew where his father was, he'd truthfully answered no, and that, apparently, was it.

The only time he saw Granger she was huddled with Ginny Weasley. She watched him as he passed by, but said nothing. He didn't try to catch her eye.

~*~

The Order members had conferenced, and planned, and mostly gone home. Draco thought Lupin might have been given a room somewhere, possibly the one Potter wasn't using.

It was late, and Draco had made his decision -- had, in fact, made it instantly upon hearing the news of his father's escape, without having to think! *If you leave*, "Mr. Weasley had said, *"you'll never be able to find us again."*

Granger was waiting for him in the darkened drawing room, as he knew she would be. She sat on the sofa, her legs curled under her, a small sprig of holly in her hands.

"I'm going," he said.

"Yes," she replied, no surprise in her voice.

"I have to join my father."

"Do you know where he is?" She looked up with a trace of the old curiosity.

"No," he replied, meeting her eyes, feeling their pull. "But he'll expect me to find him. So I will."

She looked down, watching her hands worry the holly, turning it over and over.

"Granger," he tried, needing her to look at him. "I'm a Malfoy."

She was silent.

"Things are expected of me." He heard the desperation in his voice, knew he was spinning out of control, yet felt powerless to stop it. "I have no choice. Before anything else, I'm my father's son."

He waited for the protest he knew would come. Dumbledore had saved him from whatever destiny his Malfoy heritage might have demanded. Had saved him, and had died doing so. He was free to choose whatever path he wanted. She didn't understand his path had been laid out long before that night in the Astronomy Tower. What he wanted, what he believed, didn't matter.

The protest didn't come. She just looked at him with an unreadable expression. Curiosity again? Trust? He couldn't tell.

The clock's chimes rang out twelve. He had to leave.

"It's midnight," she said, looking at him expectantly. "Christmas," she added when he only looked confused.

'Christmas," he repeated.

"I've got something for you." She stood.

"Granger --"

She handed him the holly sprig she'd been playing with. He held it, confused.

"I've enchanted it with a modified Locator Charm," she explained. "Wait." She scratched her right index finger with the sharp edge of a leaf. A drop of blood dripped onto the holly, where it was absorbed in the berries. The whole sprig shimmered. Draco saw it become glossier, felt it strengthen in his hand.

"Now you'll always be able to find me. No matter where I am, or where you are, or who you're with. Concentrate on the holly and you'll know."

"Granger," he said, alarmed. "Do you realize how dangerous this is? What if the wrong side got hold of it? What if they forced me to betray you? Perhaps someday I'll decide it's a good idea to betray you on my own."

She smiled. "No one but you can use it. You can't be forced to reveal anything you don't want to. If you want to betray me, then, yes, you can."

"I won't take this." The responsibility staggered him. She wrapped his hand firmly around the holly, then kept his hand in hers. He felt himself falling into her gaze again.

Draco leaned in. If he kissed her now, he wouldn't stop. And he had to stop; he had to leave.

He pulled away, shoving the sprig into a pocket. "I'll most likely throw this away soon."

"All right." And there it was, that look of faith, of trust.

Well, he couldn't help it if the mad Gryffindor would insist on believing in him. He had to go, he had to get away, what he *wanted* didn't enter into it.

He walked to the door, not looking back, knowing she remained still. He hesitated, then turned.

"Hermione --"

"Yes?" she breathed.

He looked into her eyes once more. And turned away. She didn't follow him through the hall; she didn't follow him out the door.

He walked down the front steps and onto Grimmauld Place with only the clothes on his back, hands in his pockets against the cold night air. He could feel the sprig of holly, and ran his thumb back and forth across its sharp edges.

He'd never use it, he kept saying to himself. Never. He wasn't sure if he believed it.

End.

A/N: Comments are loved beyond all measure. Really. The comment dance is performed.

Originally for iceheart161 at the dmhgficexchange's *Celebrate the Season With Draco and Hermione Fic Exchange*, who wanted an accident with pumpkin juice, a childhood story, and mild angst.