

Liquid Courage

by Terra

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Chapter 1 of 1

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The tomb is blinding white, smooth, a husk of marble.

The day of the funeral, the lake is a still, glistening gold, the weather so beautiful it borders on blasphemy. But Dumbledore was no god, Hermione remembers thinking, clutching the rims of her metal chair. She wonders why it isn't rusting beneath her fingertips, why it isn't raining, hailing, rending a torrential hell on the hushed crowd gathered by the lake. Dumbledore is dead and the mourners grieve in neat little rows. The only thing honest is the earth's indifference.

Even from the banks of the water, Hermione can hear the rowdy screams and shrieking laughter. A year later, Voldemort is dead and the living rejoice. Ron is inconsolable and Ginny clutches Harry with a tear-stained grip. Firewhiskey flows unabated and everyone is eager for the liquor to blunt the anguish that their loved ones are dead and burn out the guilt that they survived.

By nightfall, she has screamed and laughed and sobbed until even grief is beyond reach.

She slips out of the Great Hall, instinctively walking to the seductively calm lake. It's dark but a few steps more and a tomb rises out of the ground, blossoming from wreaths and flowers and notes heaped like coins in a vault. She realizes suddenly that she never mourned Dumbledore; after the ceremony, they were packed into trains and made to flee like death was contagious.

She touches the tomb, runs her fingers along it. It's slippery, scraping cold and sleek under her hand - so unlike the man. Then she remembers Rita Skeeter and Aberforth and Ariana and wonders what she really knew about him. Was all the warmth and blazing hope an illusion?

"Aren't you sloshed yet?" a voice drawls.

Hermione has her wand trained on him in less than a breath. "Malfoy," she says, narrowing her eyes. "What are you up to?"

Malfoy is a blur in the dark, pale and unfocused like a grimy photo. Shocks of white smear his forehead - his hair, she realizes. She's never seen it so disheveled, not Malfoy of the silk robes, ironed ties, unblemished skin. She quells the compulsion to brush it out of his face, like she would Harry or Ron, her fingers already splayed in midair. She crumples it into a fist instead.

He comes closer until her wand collides with his chest. It digs into her palm but he keeps leaning until she's stabbing him over the heart. "What are you doing?" she demands.

"This might be my last nighttime stroll," he answers with a flash of teeth. "What with being on the losing side and all."

Then his fingers clench over her wrist and he jerks her off-balance in the same moment she cries, *Stupefy!*"

The red flare bursts futilely over his head, illuminating his eyes, dark slabs of grey, red lightning in the corners like he's been crying. But Hermione won't be fooled; she tightens her grip. He pulls her roughly into him, bony fingers grinding her wrists away from him. "I don't belong in there," he hisses.

She shoves him back as hard as she can. "That is not my problem! You've made your bed . . . now lie in it!"

Malfoy laughs hoarsely. "What is that? Some Muggle saying?"

"What do you care?"

"What do I care?" he repeats. He wrestles her closer until she can smell the firewhiskey on his breath. "I don't. Wasn't that the point of this fucked up war?"

"The point," she retorts, "is that you're a racist prick who thinks less of us than mud under your shoe."

"Yeah. I know." He seizes her neck, forces her head back until their eyes meet. "Look at me."

"Why?" she counters.

"Because I want to know what's so special about you. Are they all like you? Is that why we had to kill them . . . so they wouldn't show us up in marks and spells and intelligence?"

Hermione struggles in his grip. "There *is* no us and you. We're all the same!"

"Is that right?" he says, his eyes flitting down to her mouth. "Are you sure?"

"You've lost it, Malfoy. What's wrong with you? You're touching a Mudblood," she taunts, "don't you have to go drown yourself in soap now?"

He crushes his eyes shut. "No. They're going to exile us, probably send me to Azkaban. Nothing matters anymore."

"Then why are you-"

Malfoy slams her against the tomb. "Don't you get it? I'm scared. I'm fucking scared!"

Her heart pounding in her throat, she yells, "You deserve it!"

Abruptly, he releases her and she slumps back, stunned. He falls to his knees and whispers, "I didn't want to . . . I hated him, you know."

"Who?" she asks shakily.

"The old man," he mutters, staring at the tomb, "he never paid me any attention."

"That's why you-?"

"But I couldn't kill him. Not like that. I've never killed anybody, did you know that?"

"No, I-I didn't."

"Drove Aunt Bella nuts. Some Muggle was going to be my first kill. Be a man, she said." Malfoy smiles bleakly. It's the first time he's ever smiled at her, a crooked red gash across his face, and it startles her more than everything else he's done because it's *genuine*. "Be a *man*. But I couldn't do it."

"Malfoy," Hermione hesitates. "Why are you telling me this?"

"I'm confessing. They're going to lock me up tomorrow and I'll never see you again. I-I'm . . . not brave, like you . . . and Potter. So I got to do it now. While I'm pissed," he laughs, his voice thin, desolate, "and two seconds from throwing up on you."

"Malfoy. I - you should know. They don't have to be right about you."

"No one can save us now. Maybe they'll let my mum go . . . but me and father? We're finished."

"Malf - Draco," she fumbles over the syllables. "Bravery isn't only heroics. There's all kinds. This, right now? This is you being brave. You're the only one who can save you."

"Yeah?" he says, with that same lopsided smile.

Slowly, trembling, she reaches down and threads her fingers into his hair, brushing it out of his face. Hermione murmurs, "Courage is a kind of salvation."