

When the Cat's Away

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1. The Locker Room Challenge

Chapter 1 of 2

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Harry, Ron, and Hermione were having such an intense discussion that they didn't notice anything strange in the Potions classroom. They took their customary seats in the back of the room, speaking in hushed voices. "Granger!" bellowed Professor Snape irritably, just before the start of class. "Have you forgotten?"

All three looked up with a start, registering at first that there were still a lot of empty seats scattered throughout the laboratory, and then the more subtle point that all of them were customarily occupied by girls. "Oh, no!" said Hermione with a pained expression. "I forgot, today's The Talk... See you at lunch!" She grabbed her backpack and dashed off at full tilt; she only had to get to the first floor classroom, but the bell would ring any second.

Snape folded his arms and looked at the remainder of the class with a sinister grin. Ron poked Harry's side under the desk and whispered, "Just look at him! Whatever he's got planned, you can bet we're going to hate it."

Harry nodded. Anything that would make Snape grin like that had to be bad.

"Gentlemen," the Professor began with a sneer, "as I hope you can tell, the ladies have been rounded up for a special lecture today, entitled 'Feminine Health,' commonly (and not fondly) referred to as 'The Talk.'" Smirks appeared on every face in the room; it was rare that any one thing would amuse both Gryffindors and Slytherins equally.

"You are fortunate," Snape continued, looking more and more vindictively delighted with every word, "that your anatomy is more easily observed, and as such you do not require any special instruction in *maintaining* it." Neville blushed, but he was not the only one, just the first and reddest. Every one of them prayed, if they were about to receive A Talk as well, that anyone but Snape would give it.

"That is but one advantage. Another is that most of you—I wouldn't presume to say *all* of you—can produce a unique ingredient for Potions."

Ron put his head on the desk. "I knew it. That wanker. Just kill me now, will you, Harry?"

Harry refused to squirm, forced himself not to blush. He raised his hand. Snape, who had leaned back against his desk to enjoy their reactions, wrinkled his nose angrily. "Is there something you don't understand, Potter?"

"Just wondering if we should practice that for O.W.L.s, Professor." The room erupted in laughter, and even Snape chortled for a brief moment.

"Potter, I predict you're ready for the N.E.W.T." Another round of guffaws, but for once Harry didn't mind the jab; anything to steer Snape away from the topic of the day. But he'd obviously expected that tactic, and gave the room a stern glare. "Enough! Today's lesson may *overtax* some of you, but those who are *wizard* enough to take this task

seriously will leave this classroom with a vial of the strongest potion you will brew during your time at Hogwarts."

That got people's attention. "Before you flatter yourselves that your ejaculate"—the room winced as one—"is some sort of miracle compound, I will say that this same potion works perfectly adequately without it. However, it will enhance the potion a hundredfold and give it an indefinite shelf life. The Dark Arts commonly use human blood to take advantage of this same property, but this particular potion neither requires blood, nor is considered Dark." He added quietly, "At least not in the U.K."

Harry and Ron glanced dubiously at one another, wondering exactly what THAT meant.

"I trust you need no instruction in procuring this ingredient." Malfoy nudged Goyle as he pointed to Neville and whispered something with a vile grin. "However, there is an option to consider, though I doubt any of you can handle it, as it were."

This sounded ominous, but no sixteen-year-old male could walk away from a challenge like that without at least hearing it. Snape looked more ferociously serene than Harry had ever seen before.

"There is a way to make this potion a thousandfold stronger and expand its magical properties. The key to this is in acquiring the essential ingredient. Magic is about power, gentlemen, power over yourselves and over others." Snape's eyes flashed, and any hint of nervous giggling evaporated from the room. "Some of you have observed firsthand that the most powerful magic is that which is stolen from an enemy."

Harry felt his heart turn to ice. Even though Snape was staring straight at him, he muttered under his breath, "Bastard."

Snape's black eyes glittered, but he didn't acknowledge the insult. "Understand the distinction, gentlemen: that magic taken by *force* in any way is, by definition, Dark. But there are many ways one can manipulate an enemy into serving your purpose without force. *Cooperation* is one such mechanism."

Ron's face turned white. "Mother of Merlin, I see where this is going," he whispered mournfully.

"There are the terms, gentlemen. The assignment today is not in your textbook; the instructions are on the blackboard." The list of ingredients and preparation appeared at the wave of Snape's hand. "For those of you who cannot *produce* the final ingredient, you need only leave out that step. Those who feel they must settle for the *less potent* version may depart the classroom briefly. A word of warning: I was once sixteen as well, gentlemen; I expect you back here in less than ten minutes. Finally, if there are any of you that have the... *courage* to expand the limits of your power, I will see to the arrangements." Snape lowered his head with a cruel smile and peered over his nose, silently challenging them to make their decisions.

Blaise Zabini picked up his cauldron with a smug grin and gave the class a grandiose wave with his free hand. "Be back in two. Four, if you think some of these Gryffindors could use a little extra." The Slytherins hooted and jeered as Zabini swaggered out of the classroom, and nearly all of them leapt to their feet to follow.

Ron gave Harry a sheepish grin and took hold of his cauldron. "Get up, Neville," he said sharply. "Snape won't let you live it down if you don't give it a shot." Neville turned an even deeper shade of chartreuse, but he gulped and picked up his cauldron, too. "You coming, Harry? So to speak?" Ron said wryly.

Harry didn't move. He was staring at Snape with furious intensity. He knew this whole charade had been aimed at him as soon as Snape had mentioned the blood of enemies, taken by force. "He wants to see how far I'll go for power, or if I'm man enough to dabble in the Dark," Harry thought to himself. "And no doubt he'll carry whatever he learns straight to Voldemort, the traitorous bastard. You're a sick fuck, Snape, but I'm not giving you this round. Unless you're my only enemy left—I'm not letting you put your clammy little hands on me."

Harry glanced around the room. There was one Slytherin remaining in his seat. It was Draco Malfoy.

2: Going for the Gold

Chapter 2 of 2

Messrs. Malfoy and Potter engage in the ultimate face-off.

"Enjoy yourselves, ladies," said Snape with a leer as he held open the door to his office. "And don't touch anything but one another with your sticky little hands." He gave them each a scornful glare before backing into the hall and shutting the door.

Harry and Malfoy stared at each other until their corneas shriveled.

"I bet you had your fingers crossed to pair up with me, Potter."

"I bet you begged Snape to give this lesson in the first place," Harry replied evenly. "Hoped you could go off with your sweethearts, Crabbe and Goyle, no doubt--though you three surely go at it all night down in the dungeons."

Malfoy smiled coldly. "Oh, Potter, if you only knew what I get every night in the dungeons. But hey, after 'The Talk,' Granger might figure out she's got something useful between her legs, unlike the rest of her. Maybe you won't die a virgin after all."

"Not a problem. Your mum took care of that years ago." Harry narrowed his eyes and threw his head back as if reveling in the memory. "Mmm, Narcissa! Of course, I had to pull out of your dad's mouth to stick--"

Malfoy's hand clamped over Harry's mouth so quickly, Harry didn't even see him move. "Don't take it there, Potter. Just don't."

Harry glared at him briefly, but dropped his shoulders in concession, and Draco withdrew his hand. "Leave the ones I care about out of it too."

The two of them stared again, but this time there was at least a truce between them.

"Why are you even doing this, Potter?" sneered Malfoy.

"Why are you?"

Malfoy answered wordlessly, pointing between Harry's eyes to convey the old standby, "I asked you first."

Harry grimaced. "It was a challenge... from Snape. I have to show him I'm not afraid to acquire power."

"What do you know! Spoken like a Slytherin, almost, but a Slytherin doesn't need to prove they aren't afraid, it bloody goes without saying. I'm in here to *acquire* power, not prove a pathetic point about it."

"Yeah, that's you, Malfoy, so brave, so manly... so start stroking it."

Malfoy laughed without humor. "That's rich, that is. Where'd you get the idea I'd be doing you first?"

"Are you kidding?" Harry spat. "If I did you first, as soon as it was over you'd run out of the room and tell the entire school I was your nancy."

Now the blond one laughed sincerely. "Of course I would! So would anybody in their right mind!"

"I wouldn't."

Malfoy sneered again. "Right, you're such a pouf, you'd probably want seconds."

Harry turned away in utter disgust and reached for the latch, but Malfoy yanked on the back of his shirt. "Where the hell do you think you're going?"

Harry spun far enough to knock Malfoy's arm down. "No potion is worth putting up with an asshole like you. I'm gonna go fill my own damn cauldron."

Malfoy slammed the door closed with his shoulder. "The hell you are. I can't go back out there without..."

It was Harry's turn to sneer. "Right, you pouf, I knew you'd beg me for it eventually."

Another stare, then Malfoy slammed his fist down on the nearest bookshelf. "Fuck!"

"Tell me about it," said Harry sullenly.

Malfoy began to study the unidentifiable plants and animals preserved in glass jars all around the office. "I have to do this," he said in a low, scraped voice. "Snape and my dad are friends. He'll tell him if I wimp out of making the strongest potion."

Harry suddenly found the contents of the jars fascinating as well. "Yeah. He's testing me, too. And he'll take the answer straight to Voldemort."

Malfoy spun around to face him. "You don't know shit."

"I know Voldemort's alive, and so do you, you prick. In fact, you can take him the message yourself--I'll do whatever I have to, to become the strongest goddamn sorcerer alive, and then I'm going to kill him! So drop your damn trousers!"

After a split second, both of them roared with laughter.

"That was completely fucked up, Potter."

"I know," Harry agreed, still chortling over the absurdity of it all. "Shit. But we have to do it."

Malfoy fixed him with a dubious gaze. "You'd really do me first?"

Wincing, Harry replied, "Yeah. I guess. I just believe you... about your dad. I think you'd rather make the potion, than just make an ass out of me."

Malfoy averted his eyes. "Yeah, well, I can make an ass out of you any time. But the potion..." His voice had no edge; it could have been a bit of banter from Ron.

"Same here. Look, we better just do it, or we're not going to have time to brew the damn thing." Harry opened his mouth again, but was utterly lost for words. "Do you want to sit down or anything?" he finally managed to croak.

Malfoy still didn't look at him. "I'm going to have to do you first."

Harry was astounded. "Why?"

"Because I'm *not ready*, pricklick. I can't go from zero just like that, at least not in *here* with *you*."

In an act of incredible kindness, Harry bit back all the insults that leapt to his mind. "All right. I can do it." He exhaled nervously. *Can I do it?* He banished that notion immediately; that train of thought led only to derailment. Harry closed his eyes as he unbuttoned his robe, thinking of every beautiful girl he knew and many whom he knew only from pictures (which were kept behind a false boulder in the outer wall over the twenty-first step of the spiral staircase to the Gryffindor boy's dormitories). That worked enough to get things started, but he wasn't going to let that vicious bastard touch him *there* with his eyes closed... Yet with eyes open, all he could see was Malfoy. "This fucking sucks. I think you need to stand behind me."

Malfoy rolled his eyes. "Mother of Merlin, now he's all picky about it. Fine." He strode across the room and pulled Harry around by the shoulders, bracing his left hand firmly on Harry's hip and bringing the right around to rest flat on his belly. "This better?"

It was. "You got your cauldron?"

"Fuck, yeah. Like I would let it fly and have to repeat it."

"All right." Harry steeled himself, unzipped his trousers, and assumed the required stance. He felt both of Malfoy's hands clench into fists, then the right moved downward, barely skimming over his shirt.

"What the fuck, Potter? What the hell happened to it?" Harry would have smashed Malfoy with his elbow if his voice hadn't been so utterly, shakingly sincere.

"What?" Harry bellowed furiously, ripping away to round on Malfoy just in case it really was an act, but one look in his eyes and Harry knew he really meant it. "What?" he said in a level tone of voice, deliberately leaving off "haven't you ever seen one before" that had leapt to mind immediately.

Malfoy had turned downright gray. "Did... did You-Know-Who do that?"

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"It's... half gone!" Malfoy actually squeaked when he said it.

Harry rolled his eyes. "You moron. I'm circumcised. Haven't you ever heard of it?" Malfoy shook his head, looking at him with profound disbelief. "Oh, for the love of Merlin. My mom was Jewish."

"What's Jewish?"

Harry tried to reply, but he really didn't know the answer. That was the only explanation Aunt Petunia had given when, at around age five, Dudley had asked why their *things* were different. She'd rattled on about how *she'd* converted to Protestant when she found out Lily's "horrible secret" and this was just another mark of his mother's errant ways, and at that point Harry had simply tuned her out. "It's a Muggle thing. I think."

If there were any doubt in Malfoy's mind that Muggles were barbarians, it had been erased by that statement. "Was it torture, or what?"

"No. I don't know. I was a week old or something."

Malfoy stared incredulously. "It's... repulsive, and yet I can't look away."

"Oh, shut up and get it done, already!" Harry's nerves were beginning to fray.

"All right, all right," grouched Malfoy, then mumbled under his breath. "It's bad enough I have to jack you off, you turn out to be a bloody mutant or something."

Harry felt one hand firmly brace against his hipbone again, then the other was around him. He drew a rapid breath, but let it out slowly, willing his shoulders to relax; tension would only prolong the process.

After Draco's long fingers settled into a rhythmic motion, Harry thought this might not be so bad after all.

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"Oh. Oh. Harry..."

Draco was obviously a talker, and Harry could tell he was fighting to keep silent. "Say it," he whispered into his ear.

Draco had been generous with him. He'd leaned his body against Harry's back, even discarded the forearm he'd wedged between their hips and let his hand roam instead under Harry's shirt. He'd made it sensual, vital, an act between two human beings. Harry would have made it eventually if it had stayed dry and mechanical, but the connection had kept it in a living realm. It gave him license to relinquish himself in the sensations, and Harry was grateful.

Apparently Draco felt the same way about the license to speak because his spine immediately began to arch, his blond head pressing desperately against Harry's collarbone. "Oh. *Please* don't stop." His voice had dropped an octave.

Harry reckoned he probably liked to listen, too. "Come on, Draco. Come for me," he breathed.

He barely had time to yank his cauldron from the table.

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It was nearly midnight, but there was a knock on Snape's door. "Come." He suspected Dumbledore would drop in, and he was correct. Snape set his quill back in its rest and flicked his wand to banish the remaining essays to a far shelf.

"I still have five minutes, Severus," said Dumbledore, grinning merrily as he held up a green glass bottle.

Snape shook his head reprovingly, but smiled all the same. "If you insist on bringing wine, you are welcome at any time, Albus." He retrieved two crystal chalices with long, elegant stems from the cabinet below the window, as Dumbledore transformed the hard wooden seat Snape had for students into a richly upholstered armchair and settled into it.

"I heard a rather remarkable story today," said Dumbledore amiably as he watched Snape pour the wine.

"Did you, now." It wasn't a question.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled brightly. "Indeed I did. It was so unusual, I thought I might check it for accuracy."

Snape raised his brows impishly as he breathed in the bouquet from the bowl of the crystal, but did not reply.

"You see, this student described a certain potion, one I had never heard of in all my years. I'm certain I would not have forgotten it; it had a unique ingredient."

Snape nodded politely.

"When he told me how it was made, I simply could not think of any possible magical effects that those ingredients would produce in a potion."

"That is odd, isn't it," agreed Snape somberly.

"Oh, hardly," Dumbledore said with a broad smile. "I needn't tell you there are *many* things one could combine into potions that would not be magical. What was *odd* was that the young man did not seem to know that this potion was useless. In fact, he seemed quite proud that he'd made it."

Snape tilted his head curiously. "Well, then, perhaps it wasn't useless after all. It seems there are a number of students who could do with a sense of accomplishment once in a while. And after all, one never knows about ingredients. Sometimes the combination is greater than the sum of the parts."

"Truer words were never spoken, Severus." They clinked the rims of their glasses and drank.

"Tell me," said Dumbledore, "was this mischief in honor of the occasion?"

"One doesn't turn thirty-five every year, Albus."

"Quite so. Happy birthday."

* * Epilogue * *

Ariana Malfoy (nee Lestrangle) made sure her husband had completely disappeared from the Floo before she started throwing everything of value into suitcases.

It just wasn't working anymore. Forty years of marriage had changed him too much. She'd married a dashing scoundrel, one whose exact role in the Greatest War was still the subject of speculation and fear. But time had weathered him into an executive at Gringotts, and now his idea of an exciting evening involved billiards or grandchildren.

She'd seen it coming for years. She'd stayed for the sake of the children. But now Cain and Judas had children of their own, and Jezebel... She still couldn't think about it. The worst part had been *his* reaction. Jezz had stood in the kitchen and introduced the man as "Mark Granger-Weasley, my fiance," and Draco had just stood there, smiling at Daddy's little girl who could do no wrong. From "Malfoy" to "Granger-Weasley." The ladies at the bridge club had actually wept.

No, he was not the man she'd married, and even though time had taken its toll on her, she'd rather be alone than die of the long, slow impalement of boredom. He could keep the Manor, it belonged to his family and it would be Cain's eventually anyway. But she wasn't about to go off and live in squalor as several friends had done. He would always make more money. She would have to make do on what she hauled out today.

A little glass flask fell onto the pile of furs as she pulled everything down from the closet shelf. *How odd.* Worthless, but she was curious. The cork had been charmed, but she opened it easily enough. The scent stunned her; it was downright delicious. *Why isn't this in the kitchen?* she wondered. A bit of that in the punchbowl and their parties would have been the talk of the UK. Another sniff, then she took just the tiniest drop with her fingertip for a taste.

Draco was reviewing an investment portfolio and barely registered the whooshing sound as someone arrived in the fireplace. *No appointments,* he thought, but by then his chair was whipping around. "Ariana! What brings you... Oh! Well, hello there! Oh! Just let me lock the door, my darling..."

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