

A Helping Hand

Chapter 1

Harry's first week at Hogwarts had been exhilarating, if not a little overwhelming. For the first time in his life, he didn't have the Dursleys hanging over his shoulder, watching his every move, constantly ready to reprimand him for the slightest perceived misstep. For the first time in his life, he could make his own decisions. He could make friends, and Dudley wasn't there to scare them off.

But his newfound freedom came with downsides. He was famous for something he didn't even remember. His classmates all wanted to know what happened the night his parents were killed, how he stopped the Killing Curse, or what Voldemort looked like, and he didn't have any answers. As a result, he shied away from the constant attention.

On top of that, Magic was daunting. It was more than just waving a wand and muttering a few nonsensical words. You had to know what you were doing. And the castle was an absolute maze. A momentary lapse in concentration, and you could find yourself in a part of the castle you'd never seen before and didn't know how to get out of.

Like now.

Harry sighed, running a hand through his hair as he glanced up and down the hallway. He didn't know which way to go. He didn't even know which direction he'd come from. He'd been lost in thought after Transfigurations and wandered into an entirely unfamiliar part of the castle. Realizing his mistake, he tried to find his way back, only to get even more lost. Thankfully, he'd been on his way to the Great Hall for lunch. He had an hour to find his way back.

He looked to his left, then to his right. Which way should he go? The portrait to his right looked vaguely familiar, so he chose that direction. The hall led to a few twists and turns, a couple of locked doors, and eventually, a corridor. He went straight and came to a dead end. Turning around, he went back to the corridor and took a right. Or would that be a left? He walked down a long, empty hall. Once again, his mind began to wander. He was unknowingly on the verge of

getting lost again when, suddenly, someone grabbed the sleeve of his robe and yanked him bodily into an empty, dusty classroom.

Harry felt a surge of fear. Even though he didn't know any spells yet, his hand instinctively reached for his wand. He spun around and came face-to-face with a pretty blonde witch in Slytherin robes. He vaguely recognized her from the sorting, but couldn't recall her name. She wasn't part of Malfoy's group, at least. He relaxed slightly.

"Potter," she said, though without the vitriol he was used to hearing behind it from some of her housemates, "I need your help."

"Er, sorry, who are you?" Harry asked.

"Daphne Greengrass," she replied, tossing her long, golden hair over her shoulder. "I need your hand to get rid of Malfoy. He won't stop bothering me."

Harry furrowed his brow. How was he supposed to help? He didn't even know how to get Malfoy to leave him alone. Still, if there was one thing he hated, it was bullies. Maybe, being his housemate, she had an idea to get him in trouble or something.

"Okay," he said.

Daphne looked at him in surprise before it morphed into a brilliant smile.

"Really?" she asked.

"Well, yeah," Harry shrugged.

Suddenly, she dashed forward and wrapped her arms around him. Harry stiffened at the unfamiliar contact. His arms stayed riveted to his sides. Daphne pulled back slightly and kissed

him on the cheek. He blushed furiously, heat pouring from his face, as she stepped back and beamed.

“Thank you,” she said happily.

Turning around, she skipped from the classroom, her hair swaying behind her. Harry reached up and touched his cheek, feeling a confusing swirl of emotions. After a moment, he abruptly dashed towards the door.

“Wait!” he yelled.

He looked out into the hallway, but it was empty. Daphne was already gone.

“You never told me how I’m supposed to help!” he called.

There was no response, and worse yet, he still didn’t know how to get back to the Great Hall. Thankfully, the first left he took led him back to the grand staircase. From there, he was able to make his way down to the Great Hall with ease.

Over the next couple of days, he caught a couple of glimpses of Daphne in the halls, but he never got close enough to actually talk to her. He’d decided not to tell Ron about their encounter. He hated all Slytherins with a passion, and he didn’t want to get into a fight with his new friend. He didn’t feel close enough to anyone else to talk to them about it either, so he kept it to himself.

Besides, there wasn’t much to tell. He still didn’t know how he was supposed to help her.

Harry put it to the back of his mind and decided to try and talk to her after Potions on Monday. At least, that was the plan until Sunday. He was playing Exploding Snaps with Ron, Dean, Seamus, and Neville in the common room after dinner when Professor McGonagall approached them with a distinctly unhappy look. Her lips were the thinnest they had seen them.

“Mr. Potter, come with me,” she said. “Professor Dumbledore wants to see you in his office.”

Harry shared a startled look with his roommates and nervously climbed to his feet. McGonagall spun on her heel and marched for the exit, forcing him to jog to catch up.

“Am I in trouble, professor?” he asked.

Her look in his direction did nothing to settle his nerves.

“We’ll discuss that in the headmaster’s office,” she said.

Harry swallowed thickly and followed her through the halls. He couldn’t think of anything he’d done that would get him kicked out. Maybe his grades weren’t good enough. He wasn’t the best student, but he was definitely better than Crabbe and Goyle.

“Blood pops,” McGonagall said.

Harry wiped his sweaty palms on his robes as they rode the spiraling staircase up to Dumbledore’s office. When they reached the top, she knocked sharply twice and swung open the door without waiting for a reply. As he stepped inside, Harry was surprised to see Daphne and a man he didn’t recognize. He was tall and square-jawed, with short blonde hair and the same bright blue eyes Daphne had. He assumed they were related.

“Ah, Harry,” Dumbledore smiled from behind his desk. “Please, take a seat.”

Harry did as he was told. Everyone stared at him, and he shrank slightly in his seat.

“Now that everyone is here,” he continued. “Harry, is it true that you offered Ms. Greengrass your hand?”

Harry blinked in surprise and glanced briefly at Daphne, but her face gave nothing away.

“She said Malfoy was bothering her,” he said defensively. “I just offered to give her a hand so he’d leave her alone.”

Dumbledore frowned and steeped his fingers, while McGonagall huffed angrily.

“But I haven’t done anything,” Harry clarified quickly.

“Harry, I didn’t ask for *a* hand,” Daphne said. “I asked for *your* hand. As in marriage.”

Harry’s heart dropped and landed somewhere in the vicinity of his shoes. His heart raced, and a cold sweat broke out on his forehead.

That’s what she’d meant?

“And you agreed?” the man asked, staring down at him intently.

“Er, well, I mean, yes, but-”

“Then it’s settled,” he declared, pulling a scroll of parchment and a quill from his robes with a flourish. “Now, if you’ll just sign this-”

“You can’t be serious!” McGonagall yelled in outrage.

“Come now, Gareth,” Dumbledore said much more calmly. “You know as well as I that they’re both far too young to enter into a binding agreement. It was a simple misunderstanding.”

"But Harry agreed to help me," Daphne said, staring at the headmaster defiantly.

"Indeed, he did," Dumbledore smiled kindly. "Perhaps we can reach a compromise. What if Harry were to agree to act as your betrothed? That should be enough to keep Mr. Malfoy at bay without the need for an official contract. Would that be acceptable?"

Harry nodded quickly. Anything to keep him from accidentally marrying a strange girl he'd only had one brief conversation with. Daphne, however, frowned thoughtfully and folded her arms over her chest.

"That's acceptable," she said finally.

Dumbledore sat back with a smile.

"Then it's settled," he said.

"I suppose that's acceptable, for now," Gareth frowned. "Very well."

"Excellent," Dumbledore smiled, turning back to Harry and Daphne. "Let's not take up any more of this wonderful Saturday. You're both free to go."

Harry nodded and nearly bolted from his chair, but Daphne reacted quickly and seized him by the hand.

"Thank you, headmaster," she said, standing slowly.

Keeping a tight hold of his hand, she led him from the office and back down the stairs.

“What was that?” Harry hissed, slightly upset at the girl holding his hand.

“It’s not my fault you misunderstood my intentions,” Daphne said, looking at him with an arched brow.

“We almost got married!” he barked.

“It was just a simple contract negotiation,” she replied, rolling her eyes. “We wouldn’t get married until after graduation. Surely your guardians explained that to you.”

“I grew up with Muggles,” Harry growled, frustratedly.

Daphne came to a dead stop, eyes wide and jaw hanging open.

“Muggles?” she asked, horrified.

“Yeah,” Harry said, tugging his hand free of hers.

“That explains so much,” she whispered to herself, but loud enough for him to hear.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” he asked, folding his arms over his chest.

“It explains why you seem so clueless,” Daphne said. “I thought it was because you were kept isolated. Don’t worry, I’ll teach you.”

Looping her arm through his, she led him down the hallway. Harry huffed but let himself be pulled along.

"What's this betrothed rubbish?" he asked.

Daphne shushed him, dragged him into an empty classroom, and closed the door.

"It's not rubbish," she said. "It's an important part of wizarding culture. A betrothal is a declaration of your intention to marry someone."

"I know that," Harry said, slightly offended. "I meant, why do we need to pretend to be betrothed in the first place?"

"Malfoy and his father have been trying to force a contract with my father for years," Daphne said, swinging her long hair over her shoulder. "My family is very wealthy and well-connected. They want to use me to further their businesses, and I have no desire to be some pawn."

"Then just tell him no," he said.

"It's not that simple," she sighed. "My family owes them a debt. Their family gave ours a very large loan after the war with Grindlewald. Draco had been trying to pressure his father into using it for leverage to secure a betrothal contract with my family. Lucius hasn't shown too much interest yet, but he might in the future. I have no interest in marrying into that awful family. I need you to pretend to be my betrothed so he wants nothing to do with me."

Harry frowned. He could understand her fear. If Malfoy had a sister, he wouldn't want to be forced to marry her either.

"So, what, I just need to act like your boyfriend?"

"Put simply, yes," Daphne said. "But it has to be convincing. We have to pretend to be betrothed in public and in private. If he suspects I'm lying, he'll want revenge, and the Malfoys are powerful enough to cause me and my family real problems if they wanted to."

"Alright," Harry nodded, then paused and scratched the back of his neck. "Er, I don't really know how to be a boyfriend," he admitted.

"Then I'll show you," Daphne said with a bright smile. "Thank you so much."

She darted forward and hugged him tightly. Harry froze for a moment, then raised his right arm awkwardly to pat her upper back. When she pulled back, she took his hands and pulled him over to a desk.

"We should get to know each other," she suggested.

They talked for hours. She told him all about her family. Her mother, Anastasia, was a Charms Mistress, a person who created Charms for a living. Her father, Gareth, ran their businesses in England and abroad. She had a sister, Astoria, a year younger than her. From the way she talked about her, Harry could tell she cared deeply for her sister. Astoria had a Malediction, a blood curse that left her sick and weak.

It had been placed on their family centuries ago and affected one child every generation. Her family strongly suspected someone from the Malfoy family had cast it in retaliation for a business deal gone bad, but they didn't have any proof. It was one of the reasons she hated Malfoy and wanted as little to do with him as possible.

In exchange, Harry told her about his upbringing with the Dursleys. He told her more than he told most people, but not everything. He didn't tell her about the cupboard under the stairs, the Harry hunting, or just how deep his relatives' hatred of him ran, but he told her enough. She sat stony-faced through the brief description of his childhood.

They left the classroom shortly before curfew and headed back to their respective common rooms. Harry was glad everyone was distracted by a fighting couple when he returned. He knew his roommates would have a lot of questions, and he didn't know how to explain. Quietly, he slipped up the stairs, climbed into his bed, and closed the curtains.

Maybe Daphne could give him some advice tomorrow.

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“You’re not in trouble already, are you?”

Harry looked up from his plate as Hermione dropped into the seat next to him and swallowed a mouthful of eggs.

“What are you on about?” Ron asked.

“I heard Harry got called to the headmaster’s office yesterday,” Hermione said. “I just wanted to make sure he didn’t get in any trouble.”

She paused and glanced over her shoulder at the hanging hourglasses that kept track of the house points.

“It doesn’t look like we lost any points.” She noted.

“Oh, yeah,” Ron said, blinking in realization. “I forgot about that. What was that all about, mate?”

“Er...”

“He was with me.”

Daphne had appeared out of nowhere behind him. Taking the seat next to him, she grabbed a piece of toast and buttered it, completely ignoring the hostile look Ron directed at her.

“What are you doing here?” he asked aggressively.

“Don’t be rude,” Hermione snapped. “Why would he need to meet you in the headmaster’s office?”

“Not that it’s any of your business,” Daphne began, giving Hermione a pointed look that had her looking slightly abashed, “but my father wanted to meet him. I think it’s perfectly reasonable that he wanted to meet my betrothed.”

Ron’s fork clattered loudly onto his plate. He and Hermione stared at him, aghast. Conversation all around them died as his classmates turned to listen. Harry blushed and stared down at the table, embarrassed.

“You’re betrothed to *her*!” Ron shouted.

Harry cringed, but didn’t dare look up. The whole hall would be staring at him by now.

“That’s barbaric!” Hermione gasped.

Daphne tossed her hair over her shoulder and pinned Hermione with a piercing stare.

“It’s quite disrespectful to call a culture you know very little about barbaric,” she bit back icily. “Betrothals have been a part of Wizarding culture for thousands of years. They’re quite normal.”

“But you two hardly know each other,” Hermione argued.

“It’s an old contract between our families,” Daphne replied, taking a small bite of her buttered toast.

“That’s even worse!” Hermione yelled, outraged. “Shouldn’t you have some choice in who you want to marry?”

“Of course, we have a choice,” Daphne said with a condescending look. “Betrothal contracts can be cancelled. It happens all the time. You really shouldn’t insult things you don’t understand.”

Hermione reared back like she’d been slapped. Harry felt a little bad for her, but Daphne did have a point. She just told her more harshly than she needed to.

“Mate, you can’t marry a Slytherin!” Ron burst.

“Urgh,” Daphne said, throwing her toast down in disgust. “Let’s go, Harry. Class will be starting soon.”

Harry was glad to get out of the Great Hall. He jumped to his feet. Daphne looped her arm through his and led him toward the door. The Great Hall, which had fallen unusually silent, burst into conversation before they’d even left the room. The muffled voices beat against Harry’s ears until they descended into the dungeons, and the thick stone walls finally blocked out the sound.

What had he gotten himself into?

Potions was tense. Snape was clearly unhappy to see him partnered with Daphne. Harry could see Snape’s desire for one of his Slytherins to do well warring with his desire to see Harry fail. His classmates weren’t happy with him either. The rest of the Slytherins, particularly Malfoy, glared at them venomously. The Gryffindors weren’t quite as bad. Ron, Seamus, and Dean looked at him like he’d somehow betrayed them, but Neville and the girls looked at them curiously.

Harry was so determined to ignore the attention that he ended up producing his best potion yet. Most of that was down to Daphne and her constant whispered instructions, but some of it was down to not getting distracted and making as many mistakes as he usually did. By the end of class, Snape was forced to grudgingly give him an Exceeds Expectations for the day.

As they packed up, Daphne slung her bag over her shoulder and dropped her books into his arms. Hooking her arm through his, she led him out of the classroom, seemingly unaffected by all the attention they were getting.

Unfortunately, they didn't have any other class together for the day. Harry left Daphne outside the Transfigurations classroom and made his way to Charms. Without Daphne around, his classmates felt more inclined to approach him. Lavender and Parvati asked him a lot of questions about the wedding that he couldn't answer.

But the worst were Ron and Hermione. Both of them tried to talk him out of the betrothal for their own reasons. Ron thought Daphne was using him, even going so far as to suggest Daphne would kill him and take his money the moment they were married. Hermione, on the other hand, thought betrothals were an archaic practice. She didn't care that he married Daphne, but she made betrothals sound like a form of slavery.

As they left History of Magic, their last class of the day, they started up again, and Harry hit his breaking point.

"Enough!" he yelled, stopping in the middle of the hallway. "Have either of you bothered to consider how I feel about the whole thing?"

Ron and Hermione stared, shocked by his outburst.

"No!" Harry answered for them. "Because neither of you has asked!"

He was so angry that, even if Daphne hadn't asked him to keep the truth of their betrothal secret, he wouldn't have told them anyway just because of the way they were acting. Without waiting for a response, he stormed away.

Daphne had warned him to be careful who he told the truth about their betrothal to. He'd considered at least telling Ron, just to calm him down, but now, he didn't want to tell him

anything. He was so angry, he avoided everyone at dinner. Sitting at the end of the table, as far from anyone else as he could, he ate with a scowl sufficiently fierce enough that no one bothered him.

Harry didn't talk to either of them for the next two days. In fact, he mostly kept to himself outside of class, and the times he was with Daphne. Any time he tried to strike up a conversation with his classmates, they bombarded him with questions he either didn't know the answer to or didn't want to talk about.

Surprisingly, it was Hermione who approached him first, just after lunch. They had left a few minutes early so he could escort her to History of Magic, once again carrying her books. She caught up to them in a quiet hall just outside the Entrance Hall.

"Harry. Daphne," she called.

They stopped and turned. Daphne frowned and crossed her arms over her chest while Hermione bit her bottom lip.

"Can I talk to you for a minute, please?" she asked.

Daphne looked at Harry, her left eyebrow cocked questioningly. He shrugged. Turning back to Hermione, Daphne stared at her hard for several seconds. The silence stretched awkwardly, and Hermione shifted her weight from one foot to the other nervously.

"Fine," Daphne said eventually. "What do you want, Granger?"

"I wanted to apologize," Hermione said contritely. "I did some research in the library last night, and you were right. I didn't really understand how betrothals work. I didn't realize either of you could cancel the betrothal if you decide you don't want to marry. I was just surprised. That sort of thing isn't allowed in the Muggle world anymore, and it seemed so old-fashioned, and I'm really very sorry."

She finished in a rush and sucked in a breath at the end. Harry smiled and nodded. As far as he was concerned, that was the end of it. Daphne, however, didn't seem satisfied. She continued staring hard at Hermione, who shifted nervously, and looked surprised that her apology hadn't been immediately accepted.

"Old-fashioned?" Daphne asked. "I believe the word you used was barbaric."

Hermione winced slightly.

"I did," she acknowledged. "But I thought you were talking about the kind of betrothals they had in Victorian times. I didn't realize the magical version was different."

"And that's the issue," Daphne pressed coldly. "I'm not upset with you because you were wrong about how our betrothal works; I'm upset because you look down on our society. Most Muggleborns do. They come into our world and see it as old-fashioned and barbaric without bothering to understand our culture and customs. Just because the Muggle world has better technology now doesn't mean your society is better than ours."

Hermione nodded thoughtfully. She stared off into nothing for a long moment before she replied.

"I guess I did think that way," she admitted. "I'm sorry. It's just-this is all so new to me. Everything is so different, and sometimes I feel like I've stepped four hundred years into the past. I promise I'll try to understand the magical world better."

"Good," Daphne nodded. "Then, if you'll excuse us, we need to get to class."

She spun on the ball of her foot and started off down the hall. Hermione looked disappointed, but when she turned to Harry, he smiled.

"I'll see you in class, yeah?" he asked.

Hermione smiled in relief and nodded. Harry gave her a wave and jogged to catch up to Daphne. After dropping her off at Professor Binns' classroom, he raced through the halls to make it to Herbology in time. Glancing around the classroom for an open space. He spotted one next to Hermione and slipped in next to her. She turned and they shared a smile just as Professor Sprout entered with a tray full of small, green seedlings.

"Hello, class," she said cheerfully, setting the tray on the heavy wooden table. "Today, we're going to learn how to transplant Dittany into a larger pot. Now, Dittany is a very fragile plant, so you have to be careful..."

Three days later, Harry also made up with Ron. Sort of. They didn't have a big talk like he had with Hermione. Harry had passed him in the common room when Ron called out.

"Hey, you want to play chess, mate?" Ron asked.

Harry nodded and took the seat across from him, thinking he would eventually bring up the betrothal, but he never did. It bothered him that Ron never really apologized, but, selfishly, Harry enjoyed having a friend in the dorm to talk to again. As long as Ron didn't make the same mistake again, he supposed that was an apology enough.

They played for a couple of hours, and after an initial awkwardness, they started talking like nothing had ever happened. Ron did end up bringing up the betrothal in a way toward the end of their last game.

"Can't believe you're marrying a snake," he'd muttered, shaking his head.

Harry looked at him sharply, expecting more, but that was all he said. After a few seconds of thought, he let it go. If that was the worst thing Ron said, he could deal with that.

Life went relatively back to normal after that. At least, normal for Hogwarts. Surprisingly, the biggest conflict going forward wasn't between Ron and Daphne-they both pretty much ignored

each other-it was between Ron and Hermione. They clashed constantly. The tension between them built until it finally boiled over on Halloween.

“Can you believe her?” Ron asked as they left Charms. “It’s Levi-O-sa, not Levi-o-SA. Honestly, no wonder she hasn’t got any friends.”

Before Harry could respond, Hermione shouldered her way between them and stormed off down the hall. He watched her go sadly, turned to Ron, and slugged him in the shoulder.

“Oi!” Ron shouted. “What was that for?”

“She was just trying to help, you git,” Harry growled.

Ron looked bewildered as he took off after Hermione, but she was long gone. She wasn’t in their last class of the day either, which was highly unusual for the studious witch. Harry searched the usual spots, the library and the common room, but she wasn’t there. Eventually, he gave up searching and walked down to the Great Hall for the feast, hoping she would be there. Once again, she was nowhere to be seen. It wasn’t until he overheard Parvati gossiping with Lavender that he learned where she was.

“She’s been crying her eyes out in the first-floor lavatory all afternoon,” Parvati said. “I tried to talk to her, but she just screamed at me to go away. I heard Penelope Clearwater threatened her with detention, and she still wouldn’t come out.”

Harry sighed heavily and took a seat next to Neville. He pointedly ignored Ron, who was just a few seats down. This Halloween was turning out to be a terrible night. Ron was being a git, Hermione was hiding, and he couldn’t sit with Daphne. They were expected to sit with their own houses for feasts.

And then, it got even worse. Much worse.

Professor Quirrel came sprinting into the Great Hall, huffing and puffing.

“Troll in the dungeon!” he screamed. “Troll in the dungeon! Thought you should know.”

And then he collapsed on the spot. The hall burst into pandemonium. People were screaming and running all over the place until Dumbledore ordered everyone back to their common rooms while he and a few other teachers went in search of the Troll.

As Harry lined up with the rest of his classmates, Daphne suddenly appeared beside him.

“Why are they leading us *towards* the dungeons if that’s where the Troll is?” she muttered. “The Hufflepuff and Slytherin common rooms are that way.”

Harry shrugged helplessly. It did seem like a stupid decision, but that’s when he realized there was another room near the dungeons. The first-floor girls’ bathroom.

“Hermione!” he gasped. “She doesn’t know about the Troll.”

Daphne turned to him sharply and frowned.

“What?” she asked.

“She’s in the first-floor bathroom,” he explained quickly. “She got in a fight with Ron after Charms. Parvati said she’s been in there, crying, all afternoon.”

Ron, who was within earshot, looked down guiltily while his ears turned bright red. Daphne folded her arms over her chest and glared at him.

“We need to warn her,” Harry said.

He made towards the door, but Daphne reached out and stopped him.

“We’ll tell a teacher,” she said firmly.

They turned to look for one, but half of the teachers had already left to search for the Troll, and the other half were struggling to round up all of the students.

“Excuse me, professor,” Daphne called as Professor Sprout walked by.

Professor Sprout apparently didn’t hear her as she continued without pause.

“Professor,” she called more loudly, this time for Professor Sinistra.

“Not now,” Sinistra replied, waving her off as she hurried past.

Daphne sighed frustratedly and looked for another professor, but Harry wasn’t willing to wait. He felt like he was on the verge of a full-blown panic attack.

“I’m going to go find her,” he said.

Without waiting for a response, he slipped out of the Great Hall, unnoticed in the confusion.

“Harry!” Daphne hissed.

She raced to catch up with him and, after a moment’s indecision, Ron followed.

“We have to warn her,” Harry hissed back, jogging down the hall.

Daphne sighed and fell silent as she followed him. The three of them jogged down the hall, taking a left, then the second right, until they reached the hallway near the bathrooms.

“Urgh, what’s that smell?” Ron asked

Daphne’s eyes widened. She grabbed the back of Harry’s robes and pulled him to a stop.

“It’s the Troll!” she hissed.

Harry turned to argue that he didn’t see a Troll when the sound of thunderous footfalls echoed through the hall. Quickly, they ducked behind a suit of armor just in time. The large figure of a fully grown Mountain Troll lumbered into the corridor. It was massive. The top of its proportionally small head brushed the bottom of a hanging chandelier. Its skin was a greyish blue, and only a dirty, tattered fur loincloth covered its body. In its right hand, it dragged a massive wooden club along the floor.

Pausing in the corridor, it looked around with a rather stupid expression on its face, looking slightly confused. Harry, Daphne, and Ron held their breath. Its eyes passed right over their hiding spot. With a snuffle, it wiped its nose on its arm, turned, and squeezed its massive bulk through a doorway.

“Quick!” Ron whispered urgently. “We can lock it in!”

Harry nodded. It was a good idea, but before Ron could take a step, Daphne grabbed the back of his robes and yanked him back roughly.

“That’s the girls’ bathroom, you idiot!” she hissed angrily.

Harry and Ron’s eyes widened in horror, and they heard a shrill, terrified scream.

“Hermione!” he gasped.

Harry sprinted towards the bathroom, Ron and Daphne hot on his heels. They burst through the doors to a horrific sight. Hermione was cowering in one of the stalls, huddled around the toilet. The door to the stall had been ripped off and lay, broken in half, near the sinks. The Troll stood over her and raised its club with a deafening roar.

In a panic, Harry did the dumbest thing he’d ever done in his life. He sprinted forward and jumped onto the Troll’s back. It grunted in confusion and tried to turn its head far enough to see what was on its back. When it couldn’t, it tried to shake him off. Harry clung to its neck as tightly as he could as he was flung from side to side.

“Hermione, run!” he shouted.

She didn’t move. She just sat and stared, pale and petrified. Ron and Daphne rushed over and pulled her to her feet.

“Move it, Granger!” Daphne yelled.

Harry hung on as long as he could, but the Troll was shaking him too hard. His grip slipped, and he was flung across the bathroom. He landed painfully on the stone floor and slid until he hit the wall. Scrambling to his feet, he stood, only to feel a sharp pain in the top of his head. He’d hit his head so hard on the bottom of the sink that he saw stars briefly. When his vision cleared, he saw the Troll standing in front of Ron, Hermione, and Daphne, its club raised.

Drawing his wand from the pocket of his robes, he aimed it at the Troll and froze. He couldn’t think of a single spell. Not one sprang to mind. Everything seemed to move in slow motion. The Troll swung its club down, Hermione screamed, and all three of them ducked.

“No!” Harry shouted.

The tip of Harry's wand pulsed. He didn't know what spell he'd cast, but it hit the Troll's club mid-swing. The end of the club, which had been moving downward, suddenly shot in the opposite direction. It was ripped from the Troll's hands, and the tip collided with its face with a tremendous thud.

The Troll staggered and shook its head.

"Run!" Harry shouted.

Ron, Hermione, and Daphne jumped to their feet and raced over to him. Wands raised, they prepared to face the Troll. It took a step forward, and then, like a felled tree, pitched forward. The floor shook as it landed face-first on the stone floor. They all froze, waiting to see if it would move again.

"Is it dead?" Ron asked.

Just then, the Troll let out a loud snore, startling them so bad they jumped.

"No, just unconscious," Harry said, sighing in relief. "Come on, let's get out of here."

They turned towards the door, and it burst open. Professors McGonagall and Snape sprinted inside and came to an abrupt stop at the scene before them, eyes wide and mouths gaping open. Professor Dumbledore stood in the doorway and raised a bushy white eyebrow.

"What in Merlin's name happened here?" Professor McGonagall yelled. "You four, explain yourselves."

"It's my fault," Hermione replied quickly.

“No, it’s not,” Daphne interrupted, giving her a stern look. “Hermione was in the bathroom when we found out about the Troll. We tried to warn the professors, but no one would listen, so we decided to do it ourselves. And it’s a good thing we did. If Harry hadn’t knocked out the Troll, Hermione would probably be dead.”

Professor McGonagall stared at her incredulously, and Professor Snape snorted derisively.

“You expect me to believe Potter managed to take out a fully grown Mountain Troll all by himself, as a first year?” he sneered.

Daphne looked pointedly at the unconscious Troll between them and arched an eyebrow. Snape scowled.

“And how did you manage this?” Professor Dumbledore asked curiously, gesturing to the Troll.

“Er,” Harry said, glancing to his friends, who shrugged. “I’m not really sure. I just yelled, and a spell came out. I don’t know what I did.”

“Really?” Dumbledore said, both eyebrows raised in surprise. “May I see your wand for a moment?”

Harry handed it over. Professor Dumbledore touched the tip of his wand to Harry’s and muttered under his breath. A ghostly blue ball appeared above the tip and hovered for a moment before it vanished.

“A Banishing Charm,” Dumbledore said. “And a powerful one at that. Impressive. You must have been quite desperate.”

“And stupid,” Snape sneered. “Ten points from each of you for leaving the Great Hall.”

“What!?” Ron gasped.

“And twenty points to you three for coming to rescue your friend,” McGonagall added, giving Snape a sideways glare. “And to Mr. Potter, fifty points for overcoming a Mountain Troll. Now, perhaps you should get back to your common rooms.”

Snape seethed silently, teeth gritted.

“Greengrass, come!” he barked.

Spinning on his heel, he strode from the bathroom, his cloak flapping behind him. Daphne kissed Harry on the cheek and followed after him calmly. Harry hoped she didn’t get into trouble because of him.

“I trust you three can make it back to the common room without any more detours,” Professor McGonagall asked pointedly.

“Yes, professor,” they muttered in unison.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione scurried out of the bathroom and made their way towards the stairs.

“Thank you,” Hermione said softly, “for saving me.”

“What are friends for?” Harry asked.

Hermione beamed, but her smile fell when Ron awkwardly cleared his throat.

“Erm, I’m sorry for, well, you know...,” he muttered, trailing off awkwardly.

Harry narrowed his eyes and elbowed him sharply. He wasn't letting Ron get away without a proper apology this time.

"I'm sorry for yelling at you," Ron continued quickly, his voice slightly louder. "And I'm sorry for being a git. You were just trying to help."

"Apology accepted," Hermione said.

There was a pause, an awkward silence.

"So, friends?" Ron asked, holding out his hand.

Hermione turned to him slowly, nodded, and shook his hand.

"Friends."

Harry grinned. Maybe this Halloween hadn't been so bad after all.

Chapter 2

"I never imagined the Wizarding World would be so societally advanced when their technology is so far behind," Hermione commented. "They had comprehensive women's rights and ended slavery centuries before the Muggle world."

Harry glanced up briefly from his Charms book. He was sitting in the library with Hermione, Daphne, and her best friend, Tracey Davis. Tracey was a plain-looking girl with pale skin and light brown hair, which she'd tied back in a loose, messy ponytail.

Ron had been with them earlier, but he'd left to use the loo an hour ago and never returned. They were supposed to be studying for their upcoming midterms. Harry and Tracey still were, but Hermione and Daphne had long since fallen into a discussion about the differences between the Muggle and Magical worlds.

"I told you," Daphne said. "We have our own issues, of course, but our worlds are very different."

"Muggleborns tend to think the Muggle world is better just because we have cars and telephones," Tracey added.

"We?" Hermione asked. "Are you Muggleborns?"

Tracey looked up from her book and shrugged.

"Might as well be," she said. "My parents are Squibs."

Hermione tilted her head curiously.

"What's a Squib?" she asked.

"A witch or wizard born to magical parents who can't perform magic themselves," Tracey answered. "It mostly happens in Pureblood lines, and they tend to be looked down upon, even by the more moderate magical families. Both my parents were disowned. Daphne and I are actually cousins by blood."

"That's horrible," Hermione gasped.

“Yeah, but it’s a bit of a blessing, too,” Tracey told her. “Imagine growing up in a world where your friends, your family, and everyone you meet can do magic except you. My parents are much happier in the Muggle world than they ever were in the Magical world.”

Harry wondered if that’s why his aunt hated him so much. Was she jealous that he and his mum could do magic, and she couldn’t? He’d seen how nasty Dudley could get when he was jealous, and it made sense. It didn’t explain why Vernon hated him, though.

“Why do you think Filch is so awful?” Daphne asked.

“Filch is a Squib?” Harry replied, setting aside his book.

“That’s what my dad said,” she shrugged.

“Was he kicked out of his family, too?” Hermione asked, looking horrified.

“Probably,” Daphne said. “And it’s not done entirely out of cruelty. It’s illegal for Squibs to inherit magical artifacts. The Ministry doesn’t want them to fall into Muggle hands.”

“That still doesn’t make it right,” Hermione said, folding her arms over her chest.

“Maybe,” Tracey shrugged. “But it’s the way things are.”

Hermione huffed indignantly, and they all turned back to their studies.

It turned out that midterms weren’t Harry’s biggest worry before Christmas. Oliver broke the terrible news at the end of practice that Snape would be refereeing the next match against Ravenclaw. He was convinced that if Gryffindor played by the book, Snape wouldn’t have any

reason to penalize them, but Harry wasn't so sure. He'd followed the rules in every Potions class he'd ever had, and Snape still found a way to take points.

He was so worried that he didn't notice Daphne waiting for him by the entrance until she'd looped her arm through his. His teammates glanced back briefly before continuing.

"I heard the news," she said. "Malfoy's been bragging since you left for practice. Are you alright?"

"What am I supposed to do?" Harry asked miserably. "There's no way Snape's going to call the game fair."

"You could sit out the game," she offered, rubbing his arm soothingly. "Maybe fake an injury?"

"No," he said, shaking his head. "I'm the only Seeker Gryffindor has. If I don't play, the team has to forfeit."

"Well," Daphne drawled, "as far as I know, Snape never played Quidditch, and he probably hasn't flown since he was a student. You could always suggest to Fred and George that they send a few Bludgers his way."

Harry's jaw dropped, and he stared at her incredulously. The corners of her lips quirked up in a restrained smile, and he burst out laughing. The image of Snape ranting for a hospital bed with a bandaged leg sprang to mind.

"That'd be brilliant if he didn't murder them after the game."

Daphne shrugged.

"The twins might think it's worth it."

“Knowing them, you’re probably right,” Harry said.

“Feel better?” she asked.

“A little,” he admitted, then sighed. “We’ll still probably lose the game, but I have to play. Plus, I still have mid-terms to worry about and figure out who this Flamel guy is.”

“Flamel?” Daphne asked. “You mean Nicolas Flamel?”

“You know who he is?”

“He’s a famous Alchemist,” she said, confused. “What’s so important about Flamel? We haven’t studied him in History.”

Harry hesitated. He hadn’t told her about his trip to his vault with Hagrid or the incident with the giant dog. That had all happened before he’d met her, and he’d never had a reason to bring it up since. But she could help, and he trusted her.

“How long do we have until curfew?” he asked.

Daphne glanced at her watch.

“About an hour.”

“Good. Meet me in the library. I need to get Ron and Hermione. I’ll explain everything then, I promise.”

Daphne raised an eyebrow but nodded.

A few minutes later, the four of them were crowded around a small table in a dark corner of the library. Harry, with the help of Ron and Hermione, quickly recounted everything they knew.

“So, you think Dumbledore is hiding something on the third floor behind a Cerberus?” Daphne asked.

“Yes,” Hermione nodded. “And whatever it is has something to do with this Flamel guy.”

“Well, it’s not really a big secret,” Daphne said. “I’m surprised Weasley doesn’t know. Every wizarding family knows who he is.”

Harry and Hermione turned to Ron, whose ears rapidly reddened.

“Well, if you’re so smart, why don’t you tell us?”

Daphne gave him a flat look.

“Nicolas Flamel, the creator of the Philosopher’s Stone.”

“Oh! Him,” Ron said, his face reddening with embarrassment.

Hermione gasped and jumped to her feet.

“I’ll be right back!”

She quickly disappeared amongst the bookshelves. They shared a bewildered look and sat quietly for a brief moment before Hermione returned with a massive old tome clutched to her chest.

"I took this book out ages ago for a bit of light reading," she said.

"Light?" Ron asked incredulously.

Hermione ignored him as she frantically flipped through the pages.

"I think it mentioned something about the Philosopher's Stone... Ah! Here it is! Nicolas Flamel is the only known maker of the Philosopher's Stone!"

"What is the Philosopher's Stone, exactly?" Harry asked.

"It turns anything it touches into gold!" Ron said excitedly.

"It does a lot more than that," Daphne told him, rolling her eyes.

"The Philosopher's Stone is a miracle of Alchemy with astonishing powers," Hermione read from the book. "Most famously, it will turn any metal it touches into gold."

"Told you," Ron said smugly.

"It also turns water into the fabled Elixir of Life, granting the drinker a form of immortality by leaving them in perfect health. Many Alchemists have claimed to have created the Philosopher's Stone over the centuries, but the only one known to exist today belongs to Nicolas Flamel, who just celebrated his six-hundred and sixty-fifth birthday, and his wife, Pernelle, age six-hundred and fifty-eight."

"A stone that turns metal into gold and stops you from dying," Ron said. "No wonder Snape wants it."

“But why is it even in the castle?” Daphne asked. “I know Dumbledore trained under Flamel, but he’s rarely, if ever, let anyone use the stone.”

“Someone did break into Gringotts for it,” Harry said. “Maybe Flamel knew someone was after it and asked Dumbledore to hide it?”

“Maybe,” Daphne nodded. “I’ll keep an eye on Snape and let you know if I see anything suspicious.”

The week leading up to exams and the Quidditch match was torture for Harry. All of his free time was spent on studying and Quidditch practice, leaving him little time to worry about the stone except in his dreams. More than once, he’d dreamt of chasing a winged stone on his broom with Snape hot on his heels, a malevolent grin on his face. Each time, he woke in a cold sweat just as Snape grabbed his ankle.

Finally, the day of the match came, and Harry felt like he was going to be sick from worry. Despite Hermione and Ron’s best attempts to calm him, he barely talked or ate at breakfast. When Oliver finally stood and signaled for them to go to the pitch, it happened silently, without the usual fanfare. It felt less like they were heading to a Quidditch match and more like they were walking to their own execution.

The locker room was just as silent and even more tense as they suited up.

“Right, listen up,” Oliver said. “We know this is going to be a tough match. Remember, we need to play clean. Harry, if there was ever a time to catch the Snitch early, this is it. Our best chance is to end this before Snape can hit us with too many penalties.”

Harry nodded once and then stopped, worried he might lose what little breakfast he’d eaten if he moved too much.

“Alright, let’s do this!”

Daphne and Tracey ignored the dirty looks they received as they climbed the stands and took a seat next to Ron and Hermione.

“And they’re off!” Lee Jordan announced, lacking his usual enthusiasm.

The game had been going for just a few seconds before he called his first foul. He called blatching on Fred Weasley for flying too close to one of the Hufflepuff Chasers.

“That’s bullocks!” Ron screamed.

“Oh, this is going to be terrible, I just know it,” Hermione fretted.

“It’s great, isn’t it?”

The four of them spun around and glared at Malfoy, who’d seated himself smugly in the row behind them, along with Crabbe and Goyle.

“We should have Professor Snape referee all the games.”

“Shut, Malfoy,” Ron said through gritted teeth.

The Gryffindors groaned as Snape awarded Hufflepuff with another penalty, this time for seemingly no reason at all.

“A pity this is the only way our team can win,” Daphne sighed.

Malfoy pinned her with a nasty glare.

"I can't believe your father saddled you with a loser like Potter," he spat.

Daphne, who'd never taken her eyes off the game, smirked.

"He doesn't look like a loser to me," she said just as Harry pulled into a sharp dive, the Hufflepuff Seeker scrambling to catch up. "Imagine if Slytherin still lost after all their cheating. That would be truly pathetic."

Malfoy seethed, breathing harshly through clenched teeth as his cheeks reddened.

"At least my mother's not a Mud-"

Before he could finish, Ron turned and jumped on top of him. Crabbe and Goyle tried to pull him off just as he struck Malfoy sharply in the eye. Neville hesitated for a moment before joining in. The girls ignored the mass of bodies and pained grunts as they jumped to their feet in excitement.

"Go, Harry!" Daphne screamed at the top of her lungs.

"He's gonna hit the ground!" Hermione yelled fearfully.

"No, he's not!" Tracey shouted. "Look!"

Harry pulled up just a few feet from the ground, his fist raised. Two golden wings glinted in the sun.

“Gryffindor wins!”

Not only had Gryffindor won, they’d taken the lead in the Quidditch Cup for the first time in seven years. Harry and his teammates were hailed as heroes by three-quarters of the school. The celebration lasted for a week, as did Ron and Neville’s detentions for fighting.

Christmas came and went, with Hermione and Daphne returning home to see their families, while Harry and Ron remained at the castle. Upon their return to the castle, Harry excitedly showed them his Invisibility cloak and told them about the Mirror of Erised and the conversation he’d had with Dumbledore. However, before any of them could figure out why the mirror was in the castle, and what connection it might have with the stone, they ran into a more pressing problem.

Hagrid was trying to raise a dragon in his hut.

“This is absurd,” Daphne had ranted when they told her. “The stone, the Cerberus, the Troll, the Mirror, and now a dragon? Hogwarts can’t always be like this, can it?”

She thought they should let Hagrid deal with his own problems, but Ron, Harry, and Hermione were determined to keep him out of trouble. After weeks, they finally convinced Hagrid to send the dragon to Romania with Ron’s brother, Charlie.

It had all gone downhill from there. While Ron was in the hospital wing getting his dragon bite treated, Harry, Hermione, and, surprisingly, Neville, had all been caught out of bed. On the bright side, they’d managed to send Norbert off without notice, and Malfoy had also been caught. All of them had been given detention with Hagrid in the Forbidden Forest.

As terrifying as the experience was, Harry learned something very important. The next morning, he gathered Hermione and Daphne around Ron’s bed in the hospital wing and told them everything.

"It's Voldemort," Harry whispered. "That's why Snape wants the Stone."

"Are you sure it was him?" Daphne asked softly, her face unusually pale.

"Positive," Harry said. "My scar burned when I saw him. What else could it be?"

"But he's dead."

"Well," Hermione said, "no one *actually* knows what really happened that night. It's all just speculation. There's no proof that Voldemort died."

"Stop saying his name," Ron said with a shiver.

"It has to be Voldemort," Harry said, ignoring him. "I know it. I can feel it."

"What do we do?" Hermione asked nervously.

Harry looked from one face to the next, each looking as pale and worried as he felt.

"I don't know."

Days and weeks passed, and yet, a gnawing worry remained ever-present in the pit of Harry's stomach. His sleep was constantly interrupted by nightmares of a figure, shrouded in darkness, with bright red eyes, reaching out through a mirror to grab him. Each day felt like it was bringing him closer and closer to a fateful confrontation.

As final exams neared, Harry had an epiphany. How could it be a coincidence that Hagrid just so happens to run into a strange with the one thing he wanted most, a dragon egg, in his pocket.

He, along with Ron, Hermione, and Daphne, ran down to his hut to question him, and that's when he let slip just how simple it was to sneak past Fluffy.

They raced to warn Dumbledore, but he was out of the castle, and when they told McGonagall, she brushed off their concerns. Harry felt like he was being forced to take action himself.

"It's tonight," he said, pacing back and forth in front of his friends in an empty corridor. "Snape's going after the stone tonight, and I'm going to stop him."

Later that night, once everyone had gone to sleep, Harry, Ron, and Hermione snuck out of Gryffindor Tower. Poor Neville had tried to stop them, but Hermione petrified him. Harry felt bad leaving him frozen in the middle of the common room, but Voldemort had to be stopped.

Quickly and quietly, they gathered under the cloak and snuck their way to the third-floor corridor, where they were met with a surprise. Daphne was waiting for them. She jumped when Harry slung off the cloak, but sighed in relief when she recognized them.

"What are you doing here?" Ron asked.

Daphne pinned him with a glare.

"I'm not going to let my betrothed face that monster alone," she said with a haughty sniff.

Harry felt tempted to remind her that they weren't actually betrothed, but thought better of it. Now wasn't the time to be hanging out in the corridor having a discussion.

"Come on," he said. "We need to get moving."

Drawing his wand, he crept to the door.

“Alohamora.”

The lock clicked open. He was mildly surprised and disappointed that it had been so easy. Slowly, he pushed open the door. Fluffy was sound asleep at the back of the room. A golden harp in the corner had been charmed to play a continuous song. In the center of the room, the trap door stood open.

“Snape’s already been here,” he said with growing dread. “Come on.”

They slipped into the room one by one and gathered around the hole in the floor. It opened up to the deep, dark pit. So dark they couldn’t see the bottom.

“We have to go down there?” Ron asked nervously.

“That’s the plan,” Harry said, swallowing his own nerves.

“But we don’t know what’s at the bottom.”

Harry looked up at his friends’ scared faces.

“Only one way to find out,” he said.

Taking a deep breath, he took a step forward and jumped.

“Harry!”

He wasn’t sure who screamed. It could’ve been Daphne or Hermione, but the wind was rushing past his ears too quickly for him to tell. He fell, faster and faster, and just when he thought he’d for sure end up as a stain on the floor below, he came to a stop.

But the floor wasn't hard. It was soft and surprisingly squishy.

"Harry!" Daphne called, her voice echoing through the long, square hole he'd fallen through.

"I'm fine!" he yelled. "It's safe!"

Ron came screaming down the hole, then Hermione, then Daphne. Harry scrambled to get out of their way on the uneven, slippery floor.

"Urgh, what is this?" Ron asked.

"Lumos."

Harry shielded his eyes and blinked away the spots as light poured from Daphne's wand. He looked down at the floor he was sitting on, only to realize it wasn't a floor. It was a plant. A plant that was slowly moving and wrapping around them. Everyone panicked and began to struggle, but the plant only wrapped more tightly around them.

"It's going to kill us!" Ron shouted.

"That's it!" Hermione exclaimed. "It's Devil's Snare!"

"Oh, just bloody great!" Ron yelled, struggling even harder.

"Stop struggling, Weasley, it'll only kill you faster," Daphne said.

"Oh, that's a relaxing thought!" Ron howled, his entire lower body wrapped in vines.

"You need to relax," she told him.

Hermione and Daphne went still, and slowly sank into the Devil's Snare. Ron froze, watching in horror, and then his struggles resumed.

"You just need to relax!"

"Hermione?" Harry called.

"We're fine, just relax," she yelled.

Harry lay back against the vines and stopped struggling. Every instinct in his body told him to fight as the vines swallowed him, but he remained still. He nearly panicked when he was covered entirely and everything went dark, but a moment later, he fell through the bottom and landed on the hard stone floor.

"Help! Help!" Ron screamed.

"He isn't relaxing, is he?" Hermione asked.

"Idiot," Daphne muttered. "He's going to get himself killed."

"I know!" Hermione gasped. "Devil's Snare shrinks in the sun! We need light!"

She looked around wildly.

"But we don't have any wood."

Harry stared at her incredulously.

“You’re a witch, aren’t you?”

“Oh, right,” she said, embarrassed.

“We don’t need fire, we need sunlight,” Daphne said. “Remember the Sunlight Charm Quirrell mentioned. The one he said was useful against Vampires?”

Hermione’s eyes widened, and she nodded quickly. Together, they raised their wands.

“Lumos Solem,” they incanted in unison.

Bright light lit the room like morning sun pouring in through a window. The Devil’s Snare retreated rapidly, and Ron fell with a scream. He hit the floor with a thud and gingerly climbed to his feet.

“We’re through,” he said in relief. “Good thing no one panicked.”

Hermione and Daphne placed their hands on their hips and gave him an unimpressed stare. Harry turned away and examined the room. It was fairly small, dark, and there was only one door.

“We need to keep moving,” he said.

He marched over to the door and cautiously pulled it open. At first, it looked empty, with only another wooden door at the other end, but as he entered, he heard a sound above him and looked up. The room was so tall he couldn’t see the ceiling, and was filled with dozens, maybe hundreds of winged creatures.

"Are those...keys?" Daphne asked.

"Looks like," Harry replied after a moment.

"Look!" Hermione exclaimed.

She was pointing behind them at an old, battered broom leaning next to the door they'd entered through.

"Looks like you'll have to catch the key," Ron said.

"But which one?" Harry asked.

"It'll probably be old and rusted, like the lock," Daphne told him.

Harry searched around until he spotted an old, rusted key with a bent wing. Mounting the broom, he flew up and chased after it. Catching it was easy enough, but the moment he touched it, the other keys attacked. He threw the rusted key to Hermione and outflew the keys chasing him until they'd unlocked the door and slipped into the next room. Pulling into a sharp dive, he pulled up inches above the floor and shot through the door while Ron slammed it closed behind him. They could hear the keys thudding against the other side.

The moment of relief was short-lived until they turned around and spotted the Troll in the room. After a moment, they realized it was already dead. It sat slouched against the wall below a bloody stain where it had hit the back of its head. Sharing a fearful look, they crept past it and went through the door into the next room.

It was much larger than the others. Torches flared to life as they entered, illuminating a life-size chessboard. There were four missing pieces on the black side, and it became clear that if they wanted to get through, they would have to play.

Ron performed wonderfully, but in the end, had to sacrifice himself so they could win. The Queen's staff shattered the stone horse he was riding, and he fell to the floor hard. As soon as the game was won, they rushed over to check on him.

"I think he's just unconscious," Hermione said. "He's still breathing."

They were reluctant to leave him, but the only way out was to keep going through. The next room contained a wall of fire, a potions cabinet, and a riddle. Harry wasn't much good at riddles, but Hermione and Daphne were. He stood back and waited nervously as they talked it through.

"So, this one should get you past the fire," Daphne said.

"These are the nettle wine," Hermione continued, "and these should be the poison."

"Should be?" Harry asked.

"They are," Daphne corrected. "We're sure of it, but there's only enough for one of us to keep going."

Harry snatched up the potion and downed it before anyone could argue. It felt like ice had been injected into his veins, and he shivered. A moment later, the feeling passed.

"I'll delay Snape as long as I can," he said. "You two go find someone, anyone, and get help. We just have to hope Professor Dumbledore gets back soon."

With tears welling in her eyes, Hermione lunged forward and hugged him tightly.

"You promise me you'll come back," she sniffled.

Harry wanted to, but he knew it would be a lie.

"I'll try," he whispered.

Hermione stepped back, and Daphne jumped into his arms.

"Why do I have to be betrothed to a Gryffindor?" she asked.

Harry smiled and hugged her tightly before pulling back. She kissed his cheek, stepped back, and took Hermione by the hand.

"We'll go get help," she promised. "You'd better still be alive when we get back."

He nodded and watched them leave with a lump in his throat. Turning back to the flames, he took a deep breath and stepped through to the door on the other side.

Harry woke in a dark room. It took him a moment to realize he was in the hospital wing, and another for his memories to come crashing back. His eyes widened, and he sat up swiftly.

"Ah, you're awake."

"Professor Dumbledore!" Harry gasped. "Professor, it was Voldemort! Quirrell had him on the back of his head! He was after the stone!"

"The stone is safe," Dumbledore said with a reassuring pat on the shoulder. "Your friends are well, and Voldemort is gone. Please, calm yourself before Madam Pomfrey throws me out."

Sighing in relief, Harry sat back against his pillows.

“Thank you,” Dumbledore said. “Now, I’m sure you have many questions, but first, I’d like you to tell me everything that happened.”

Harry nodded and started from the beginning. At the end of his explanation, Dumbledore answered a few of his questions, though not as many as he would have liked. By the time Madam Pomfrey forced the headmaster to leave, Harry was already feeling tired. As he adjusted his position on the bed, he felt a sharp pain in the heel of his palm.

At first, he’d thought one of the mattress springs had poked through, like his bed at the Dursleys. On closer inspection, he noticed something red and sharp, like a sliver, sticking out of the skin. He picked at it for a bit and eventually managed to grip it with his nails and pull it out. Holding it under the candlelight, he realized what it was. A tiny shard of the Philosopher’s Stone. It must have broken off when Quirrell had knocked him down.

For a moment, he thought about giving it back to Professor Dumbledore, but then he remembered what the stone could do. Surely Flamel wouldn’t miss such a small piece.

Grabbing an empty potions vial from the bedside table, he dropped the shard inside, sealed it with the cork, and tucked it safely under his pillow. Turning onto his side, he was asleep in seconds.

Harry was released from the hospital wing just in time for the leaving feast. Dumbledore gave his end-of-year speech, and while he was glad to have won the House Cup, the way in which it happened left a bad taste in his mouth. Sure, Snape had cheated to give Slytherin the lead, but it just didn’t feel right to rip it away from them at the last moment.

Daphne didn’t look pleased either, and Harry shared a commiserating look with her across the hall.

He didn't get to see her again until it was time to get on the train. She and Tracey joined him, Ron, and Hermione in a compartment. Shortly after the journey began, Tracey stepped out to visit a few of her friends, and Harry quickly leaned over to lock the door and close the curtains. His friends looked at him curiously.

"I have something for you," he said to Daphne.

Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out the vial containing the Philosopher's Stone shard. She peered at it closely.

"What is it?" she asked.

"It's a piece of the Philosopher's Stone," he told it. "It was stuck in my hand when I got to the hospital wing."

Daphne gasped and gazed in wonder at the stone shard.

"Blimey," Ron said, leaning forward eagerly.

"Are you sure you should keep that?" Hermione asked, worrying her bottom lip. "Didn't Dumbledore say it was better if the stone was destroyed?"

"It's only a small piece," Harry shrugged. "I doubt Flamel will even notice it missing."

"That's not the point," Hermione argued.

"Oh, come on, Hermione," Ron said. "Think of all the gold he could make. He'd be richer than the Malfoys!"

“Actually, I was thinking about its other properties,” Harry said, turning to Daphne. “Remember what the book said. The Elixir of Life leaves you in perfect health. I thought, maybe, if you gave it to your sister...”

Daphne gasped, and her eyes widened.

“You think it could cure her?”

“Maybe,” Harry shrugged. “It’s worth a try, isn’t it?”

“What’s wrong with your sister?” Hermione asked.

“She has a Malediction,” Daphne said softly, staring at the stone. “It’s a blood curse that’s slowly killing her. It runs in the family.”

“Oh,” Hermione said, eyes widening. “Well, if it’s to save a life, then I suppose that’s alright.”

Harry flashed her a grateful smile.

“But what about the gold?”

Daphne and Hermione turned to him with poisonous glares.

“I mean, after you save your sister,” he added nervously.

Daphne rolled her eyes.

“Weasley, if this cures my sister, I’ll turn the biggest piece of metal you can find into gold.”

Ron grinned and rubbed his hands together gleefully. As he stared off through the window dreamily, Daphne turned back to Harry.

“Thank you,” she said gratefully. “I-”

She broke off, as if unsure what to say. Harry smiled, but before he could reply, she lunged forward and pressed her lips against his. His eyes widened, and his heart raced. He froze, not knowing what to do, and before he could come up with an answer, she pulled back. While he struggled to form a useful thought, she smiled more brightly than he’d ever seen and curled up against his side.

Slowly, he turned to Hermione, hoping for advice, but her only response was to cover a laugh with her hand. Harry’s cheeks burned. Mercifully, Ron was still busy staring out the window. Cautiously, he slipped an arm around Daphne’s shoulder. When she didn’t react, he relaxed and smiled.

The summer hadn’t even truly begun, and already he couldn’t wait to return to Hogwarts.