

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.