

Harry had made the mistake of arriving at breakfast early.

He'd thought that getting to the Great Hall before the rush would mean a quiet meal. Toast, porridge, maybe some eggs, a few minutes to sit with his thoughts before the day started. What he hadn't accounted for was that the Ravenclaw students who arrived early were the same ones who woke up with *questions*, and questions.

"Potter, is it true you didn't use a wand?"

"How did you do the light thing?"

"Can you do it again? Right now? Just a small one?"

Harry smiled and shook his head and said "I don't really know" enough times that it started to lose meaning, and by the time Terry, Michael, and Cho arrived, he'd retreated to the far end of the table with the expression of a man who had seen too much.

"You look haunted," Michael said, sliding onto the bench opposite.

"A third-year asked me to levitate her spoon."

"Did you?"

"No."

"Wise choice." Michael reached for the toast rack with the economical precision of someone who'd thought about this during the walk down. "Which, now that I say it out loud, would actually be quite useful. Can you do the marmalade as well?"

"Leave him alone," Cho said, sitting beside Harry with a warmth that suggested she'd said this phrase to Michael before and expected to say it many more times. She poured Harry a cup of tea and pushed it toward him without being asked. "How long have you been down here?"

"Twenty minutes. It felt like twenty years."

"Fame," Terry said wisely, buttering a crumpet. "Heavy lies the crown."

"I'm not *famous*. I did one spell."

"You did one spell without a wand in front of thirty people, half of whom have older siblings. By now it's probably reached the Hufflepuff common room, which means by lunch it'll be in the owlery, and by dinner your aunt and uncle will be getting letters from people they've never met." Terry took an enormous bite of crumpet. "You're famous."

Harry opened his mouth to argue and closed it again, because Terry was almost certainly right, and arguing with someone who was right was one of the less productive ways to spend a morning.

They ate. The Great Hall filled around them. Sunlight moved across the enchanted ceiling in long, and Harry was just beginning to relax, shoulders dropping, jaw unclenching, the knot in his chest loosening enough to let breakfast settle properly, when a voice behind him said:

"Excuse me. Is this seat taken?"

Hermione Granger stood at the edge of the Ravenclaw table holding two books against her chest, her bushy red hair slightly wider than yesterday, her chin lifted at an angle that was either confident or defensive.

Michael raised an eyebrow. Gryffindors didn't sit at the Ravenclaw table. It wasn't a rule, exactly, more of an unspoken understanding.

Cho shifted sideways to make space. "Go ahead."

Hermione sat down. She placed her books on the table, *The Standard Book of Spells, Grade 1*, and something that Harry couldn't read the title of, aligned their edges, folded her hands on top of them, and looked directly at Harry.

"I need to ask you something."

"Okay," Harry said.

"Several things, actually."

"...Okay."

"The Lumos Charm you performed in yesterday's lesson." "You cast it without a wand. Sustained, brighter than anything else in the room. I've been trying to understand how."

She paused, but not long enough for Harry to respond.

"I've read Waffling's chapter on intent-based casting three times since yesterday. He mentions wandless magic only in a footnote, and only in the context of adult wizards with decades of experience. I also checked *Quintessence: A Quest* by Bathsheba Babbling, which has a section on magical channelling through physical mediums other than wands, but it's all theoretical and none of it describes what you did." She took a breath. "So. Which book did you study? Was it a focusing technique? Did someone teach you a specific method?"

Terry had stopped chewing. Michael's eyebrow had climbed higher. Cho was watching Hermione with a quiet expression of interest.

Harry set down his fork.

"I didn't learn it from a book," he said.

Hermione blinked. "What do you mean?"

"I mean I didn't, there wasn't a book, a technique, or anyone teaching me." The truth was stranger than any answer she was expecting, and he wasn't sure how much of it he wanted to share with someone he'd spoken to exactly once. "I taught myself. At home. In the dark, before I knew what magic was. Before I even knew I was a wizard."

The silence that followed was different from the one in Flitwick's classroom.

"You taught yourself," she repeated.

"Yes."

"Without knowing what you were doing."

"Yes."

"Without any theoretical framework at all."

"No. No framework."

Hermione stared at him for a long moment. He could practically see the gears behind her eyes grinding against each other. She had come to this table with a hypothesis, and he had knocked it sideways, and she was the kind of person for whom a knocked hypothesis was physically uncomfortable.

"That shouldn't be possible," she said.

"And yet," Michael said, gesturing at Harry with a piece of toast.

Hermione's mouth pressed into a thin line. She didn't argue. She opened the green book, found a page she'd marked with a slip of parchment, and made a note in the margin with very precise handwriting. Then she closed it, set down her quill, and shifted direction.

"There's something else. Duelling."

Harry felt his stomach tighten. "What about it?"

"Professor Flitwick is running an introductory session for first-years next week. Basics, the Disarming Charm, Shield Charm, proper stance. Everyone's talking about it." She looked at him, and the question in her eyes was practical, not unkind. "How are you going to duel without a wand?"

The table went quiet. Terry and Cho looked at Harry. Michael developed a sudden intense interest in his scrambled eggs.

Harry didn't have an answer. A week ago, the question would have destroyed his day, but that was before the Lumos. Before the light had come when he called it and held because he asked it to.

"I'll figure something out," he said. The words came out steadier than he felt. "I managed the Lumos. Maybe I can manage a Shield Charm the same way. With my hands."

"That's the spirit," Terry said immediately. "If you can make light, you can make a shield. It's all intent, right? Flitwick said so himself."

"Flitwick also said it takes most adult wizards years to do what Harry did in one lesson," Michael pointed out. "So either Harry's some sort of prodigy, or the rest of us are spectacularly bad. I'm comfortable with both explanations."

Cho said nothing. She was watching Harry's face. The way his fingers had tightened around his teacup when Hermione said *duel*. She saw it, and she didn't call it out, and Harry was grateful in a way he couldn't have articulated.

Hermione was quiet for a moment. She looked down at her books, then back at Harry, and something shifted in her expression. Almost shy.

"If you want," she said, "I could practise with you. Before the session. I've read ahead on defensive spells, *The Dark Forces: A Guide to Self-Protection* has a whole chapter on basic shielding, and I've been working on Expelliarmus already." She paused. "I haven't got it right yet. But I'm close. We could work on it together."

It was an offer wrapped in a justification, as though Hermione couldn't bring herself to say *I want to help you* without first proving that she had a legitimate academic reason for doing so.

Harry looked at her, this strange girl from a different house who had crossed an invisible line to sit at his table because she had questions she couldn't answer alone.

"Yeah," he said. "I'd like that."

Hermione nodded once, happily. She stood, collected her books, aligned their edges again, and said: "I'll put together a reading list. We can start tomorrow evening, if the library's free."

"A reading list," Michael murmured into his eggs.

"Thank you, Hermione," Cho said.

Hermione's expression flickered, surprised that someone had thanked her, and then she nodded again and walked back to the Gryffindor table.

The four Ravenclaws watched her go.

"She's a bit intense," Terry said.

"A *bit*?" Michael set down his fork. "She's read ahead on defensive spells. It's the second day of term. She's read *ahead*."

"She came over to help," Cho said quietly. "From a different house, to a table where she doesn't know anyone, to offer practice time to a boy she's spoken to once." She picked up her tea. "That takes courage. I don't think she has a lot of friends."

The table was quiet for a moment. Harry thought about Hermione's face when she'd said I could practise with you, that shy face which gave Harry a feeling that he didn't know what it was.

"He finished his tea, pushed back from the bench, and followed Terry, Michael and Cho out of the Great Hall. McGonagall's class started in ten minutes, and the Transfiguration corridor was three floors up."

Professor McGonagall did not smile.

This was the first thing Harry noticed about her, and it set the tone for everything that followed. Where Flitwick bounced and beamed and radiated warmth like a small, enthusiastic sun, McGonagall stood behind her desk with the rigid composure of a woman who had been carved from Scottish granite and given spectacles. Her robes were emerald green. Her hair was pulled back in a bun so tight it seemed to be in an argument with her skull. Her eyes, behind square-framed glasses, moved across the rows of students with the slow, cataloguing precision of someone who was already sorting them into categories: those who would try, those who would not, and those who would waste her time.

Harry sat very straight and tried to look like the first kind.

"Transfiguration, is the most complex and dangerous magic you will learn at Hogwarts. It is not forgiving. It does not bend to enthusiasm or good intentions. It requires precision, discipline, and an understanding of what you are truly asking of the world when you change one thing into another."

She paused. The silence was absolute. No one was passing notes. Harry suspected that fidgeting in McGonagall's presence might be a punishable offence.

"Charms," she continued, "persuades an object to behave differently. A Levitation Charm convinces a feather that it wishes to rise. The feather remains a feather. Transfiguration is fundamentally different. Transfiguration *changes* the object at its most essential level. You are not asking. You are *rewriting*."

"By the end of today's lesson, you will attempt to turn this matchstick into a needle. Most of you will fail. That is expected. What I require is that you understand *why* you are failing, because understanding failure is the first step toward competence."

Harry's quill moved fast across his parchment, trying to capture everything. He could feel the difference already, this wasn't like Charms. Transfiguration was architecture. You had to understand the structure of the thing you were changing and the structure of the thing you wanted it to become. It was harder, and without a wand, Harry's headache started just about thinking.

His open palm had held a light, but could it reshape a matchstick?

He didn't know. And not knowing, in McGonagall's classroom, felt more dangerous than in Flitwick's.

McGonagall had begun distributing matchsticks when the door opened.

It did not open the way doors normally open, with a knock. It swung inward, silent and complete, and Severus Snape stood in the frame.

His black eyes found Harry before they found anyone else.

McGonagall's expression did not change. But something behind it did.

"Severus," she said. In a tone acknowledging that he was currently in her classroom without permission.

"Minerva." Snape's voice was silk over something sharp. "I apologise for the interruption. The Headmaster requires Mr. Potter's presence in his office." A pause, timed with surgical care. "*Immediately.*"

Snape had a gift for making ordinary language sound like a sentencing. *Immediately* in his mouth didn't mean *at your earliest convenience*. It meant *now, and the fact that I'm the one delivering this message should tell you something about the gravity of the situation*.

McGonagall's gaze moved from Snape to Harry.

"Very well." She did not ask why, "Mr. Potter, gather your things."

Harry stood. Every eye in the room tracked him as he shoved his quill and parchment into his bag, fumbling with the clasp because his fingers had apparently decided to stop cooperating. Being pulled out of a lesson, on the second day of term, by Snape to see Dumbledore.

He slung his bag over his shoulder and walked toward the door. The aisle between desks felt longer than it had any right to be.

As he passed Cho's desk, she caught his eye.

She looked at him the way she'd looked at him outside the third-floor corridor, steady and serious and said, very quietly:

"Good luck, Harry."

He nodded. It was all he could manage.

Then he was through the door, and Snape was already moving.

The man walked the way he did everything in a fast way, with an absolute refusal to accommodate anyone else's pace. His robes swept behind him like something alive, billowing around corners with a dramatic flair that Harry suspected was at least partially intentional. Harry had to half-jog to keep up, his bag bouncing against his hip, his shorter legs covering two strides for every one of Snape's.

They didn't speak. The corridors passed in a blur of stone and torchlight and portraits that fell conspicuously silent as Snape swept by. Harry wanted to ask, *Why does Dumbledore want to see me? Is this about the Lumos? Is this about the wand?* But Snape's silence was a wall, and Harry understood that asking would accomplish nothing except proving that the silence was working.

They stopped before a stone gargoyle on the second floor. It was large and ugly and completely motionless, staring at nothing with the vacant commitment of something that had been staring at nothing for several centuries.

"Sherbet Lemon," Snape said.

He spoke the password the way another man might speak the name of a disease. The gargoyle ground to life, spiralling upward to reveal a moving staircase behind it.

Snape stepped aside and gestured toward the opening with one pale hand.

"The Headmaster is expecting you."

Harry looked at the staircase. Looked at Snape. Some wild, desperate part of him wanted to ask *Aren't you coming?* not because he wanted Snape's company, but because the prospect of riding a spiral staircase alone into the headmaster's office felt like the kind of thing that should come with an escort.

He said nothing. Snape's expression made it clear that the conversation had ended.

Harry stepped onto the staircase. Behind him, Snape turned and swept back down the corridor without a word.

The staircase carried Harry upward in a slow, grinding spiral. The walls were close and the stones old and his reflection slid across the polished brass railing beside him.

His stomach was a knot. His mind was a mess. Dread and curiosity circled each other like two dogs that hadn't decided whether to fight or lie down.

The staircase stopped. A heavy oak door waited at the top.

Harry raised his hand and knocked.

The door opened before Harry's knuckles left the wood.

"Come in, Harry."

He stepped through, and the world changed.

Dumbledore's office was a circular room, there was no other word for it. Not in the way the castle was alive, with its shifting staircases and breathing walls and doors that appeared where they hadn't been the day before. This was something more intimate, more human. Every surface held something that moved. Silver instruments he had no name for stood on spindly-legged tables, puffing small clouds of smoke or spinning in precise, silent circles. One of them appeared to be tracking something, a tiny silver arrow rotating inside a glass sphere, pointing first north, then east, then nowhere at all. Another emitted a low, rhythmic clicking, like a mechanical heartbeat.

Books. Books *everywhere*. Stacked on shelves that climbed the curved walls from floor to ceiling, piled on the floor in leaning towers that defied structural logic, wedged into spaces between instruments and perched on the arms of chairs. Harry saw titles in languages he couldn't read and spines so old the lettering had worn to gold dust.

On a high shelf to his left, the Sorting Hat sat motionless and silent, its fabric crumpled, its brim low, looking like nothing more than a discarded piece of clothing. It was hard to believe that forty-eight hours ago, it had spoken inside his head.

And on a golden perch beside the window, Harry stopped.

The bird was the colour of sunset. Not a single colour but all of them at once, the way the sky looks in the moment before the light goes: deep crimson bleeding into burnt orange into gold, the feathers shimmering as though lit from within. It was the size of a swan, perhaps larger, with a long, elegant tail that swept downward in a cascade of fire and a crest of gold plumage that caught the light from the window and held it. Its eyes were dark and bright and ancient, and when they found Harry, they didn't blink. They watched him with an intelligence that was not human but was not less than human either, something older, something that had been watching the world for a very long time and had formed opinions about it.

Harry stared. The bird stared back. Something passed between them a warmth, faint and fleeting, like a hand brushed against his in the dark.

"That is Fawkes," said Dumbledore.

Harry turned. The Headmaster sat behind a great claw-footed desk, looking exactly as he had at the welcoming feast. His hands were folded on the desk in front of him, and his expression was one of calm so profound it didn't seem like an emotion at all. It seemed geological. The kind of calm that had been forming for decades and would outlast whatever happened next.

"He's beautiful," Harry said.

"He is," Dumbledore agreed. "He is also occasionally vain about it, though he would deny this. Please, sit down."

Harry sat in the chair across from the desk. It was large and soft and seemed to adjust itself to him as he settled into it, the back tilting slightly, the arms widening.

Dumbledore reached into a small dish on his desk and held up a yellow sweet between thumb and forefinger. "Lemon drop?"

"No, thank you, sir."

"Very well. More for me, then." Dumbledore placed it in his mouth and sucked on it contentedly for a moment, his eyes twinkling behind his spectacles. "I find that difficult conversations are improved immeasurably by the presence of citrus. But that is, perhaps, a personal failing."

He let the silence settle. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence, Dumbledore seemed to carry a version of quiet that had room in it.

"Tell me, Harry," he said. "How are you finding Hogwarts?"

"It's..." Harry searched for the word. Good? Amazing? The most wonderful and overwhelming thing that had ever happened to him? "Big," he said finally.

Dumbledore smiled. "It is that. Hogwarts has a talent for making people feel very small and very significant at the same time. I've always admired it for that." He tilted his head. "And your classes? Your friends?"

"Charms was good. Professor Flitwick he's been really kind to me." Harry hesitated. "Transfiguration just started. I was in the middle of it when Professor Snape came."

"Ah, yes. I apologise for the interruption. Professor McGonagall's lessons are not the sort one should leave halfway through, and I suspect she will remind me of this the next time we speak." The twinkle in his eyes suggested this was not entirely unwelcome. "And friends?"

"Terry Boot. Cho Chang. Michael Corner." The names came easily, and saying them aloud made something in Harry's chest feel solid. "And Hermione Granger, maybe. She's in Gryffindor. She came and sat with us at breakfast this morning."

"Miss Granger. Yes." Dumbledore nodded as though this confirmed something he'd already suspected. "A remarkably talented young woman. I'm glad she found you."

He was quiet for a moment. Fawkes shifted on his perch, the soft rustle of feathers filling the pause. Outside the window, the September sky was a pale, cloudless blue.

Harry could feel it coming. The real conversation. The room was warm, and Dumbledore's voice was kind, and none of it changed the fact that the Headmaster of Hogwarts did not summon first-year students to his office on the second day of term to ask about their friends.

Dumbledore seemed to sense the shift too. He set the lemon drop dish aside, placed both hands flat on the desk, and looked at Harry over the rims of his spectacles. His eyes were very blue and very serious.

"Harry, I have spoken with Mr. Ollivander. At some length, in fact, we exchanged seven owls over the summer, which I believe is a personal record for both of us. I wished to understand why no wand in his shop chose you."

Harry's hands tightened in his lap. Here it was. "And?"

"And the answer is not what you might expect." Dumbledore paused, choosing his words with the deliberate care of a man laying stones across a river. "The reason no wand chose you is not a flaw, Harry. It is not a weakness, or a sign that your magic is somehow less than your peers'. It is something far more unusual than that."

He leaned back in his chair. The silver instruments clicked and whirred around them, filling the silence with tiny, precise sounds.

"Tell me, in your lessons so far, has anyone explained what a magical core is?"

Harry shook his head.

"Every witch and wizard possesses one. Think of it as... a wellspring. An inner source from which all your magic flows. It is as unique to you as your fingerprint, no two cores are exactly alike." Dumbledore lifted one long-fingered hand and turned it slowly, as though examining something invisible. "A wand is a conduit. It channels and focuses your core's power through a complementary medium, wood, which provides structure, and a magical substance at its heart, which provides resonance. Dragon heartstring, phoenix feather, unicorn hair. The wand 'chooses' the wizard, as Ollivander likes to say, because the materials within it *recognise* the shape of the wizard's core. They vibrate at the same frequency, if you'll forgive a somewhat imprecise metaphor."

"Like tuning a radio," Harry said, before he could stop himself.

Dumbledore's eyebrows rose. Then he smiled. "Like tuning a radio. Yes. That is precisely it. I shall have to remember that analogy."

The smile faded gently, and the seriousness returned.

"Harry, your core is different. It was shaped, marked, by what happened to you the night Lord Voldemort attacked your family."

The name dropped into the room like a stone into still water. Harry felt it land in his chest. Dumbledore said it plainly, without flinching, and that steadiness made it easier to hear.

"I will not tell you everything today," Dumbledore continued. "Some of what happened that night is complex, and you are eleven, and there are things I wish you to understand fully before I ask you to carry them. But I will tell you this."

He held Harry's gaze.

"The Killing Curse that struck you and rebounded, the curse that took your parents and failed to take you, left an imprint on your magic. Not a wound, precisely. A *signature*. Something in the shape of your core that is unlike anything Ollivander has encountered in his lifetime of work, because no wand in his shop, no wand in any shop, was designed for a core that has been touched by that kind of magic."

The silver instruments clicked. Fawkes was silent. Harry sat very still.

"So the wands didn't reject me," he said slowly.

"No."

"They just... couldn't recognise me."

"Yes." Dumbledore's voice was soft. "You were speaking a language none of them had learned."

Harry looked down at his hands. They were resting on his knees, palms up, ordinary and empty. Eleven-year-old hands with bitten nails and a scar on the left thumb from a broken glass at the Dursleys'. These hands had held light. And the reason was that the worst dark wizard in a century had touched his magic and left something behind.

"So I'll never have a wand," he said.

"On the contrary." Dumbledore's voice changed. The gentleness was still there, but underneath it was the sound of a man arriving at the part of the conversation he had been building toward all along. "You will have a wand, Harry. But it will not come from a shelf. It will have to be *made*. Specifically, uniquely, for you."

Harry looked up.

"In my youth," Dumbledore said, and something in his expression shifted, a lightening, almost playful, as though he were opening a door he hadn't opened in decades, "I studied wandlore with considerable interest. I worked alongside Ollivander for two summers. I experimented with unusual combinations of wood and core. I even crafted a few wands myself." He paused. "I would describe this as a hobby, much like knitting, and with similarly uneven results. My third attempt exploded. My fifth produced a wand that could only cast spells on Tuesdays. Ollivander was very patient with me."

Harry almost laughed. The image of Dumbledore, this ancient man, blowing up a wand in Ollivander's shop was so absurd and so human that it cut through the heaviness of everything else like a window being thrown open.

"What I am proposing," Dumbledore said, "is this: you and I will craft your wand together. Not overnight. Not in a single session. This is delicate work, and it must be done correctly. But you will be part of the process, Harry, not a passive recipient, but an active participant, because the wand must be built around *your* core, and only you can feel what resonates."

"You want me to help *build* my own wand?"

"I want you to understand it before you ever hold it." Dumbledore leaned forward, and his eyes behind the half-moon spectacles were as bright and focused as Harry had ever seen them.

"Most wizards never think about their wands. They are given one at the age of eleven, a stranger places it in their hand, it produces sparks, and they use it for the rest of their lives without once asking *why*. They learn spells. They master techniques. But they never understand the fundamental relationship between themselves and the instrument through which their magic flows."

He spread his hands.

"The wand is not a tool, Harry. It is a partnership. And like any partnership, it must be built on understanding. You will learn the properties of different woods, what rowan knows that yew does not, why holly chooses the wizard it chooses. You will study the nature of magical cores, the courage in phoenix feather, the steadiness of unicorn hair, the fire of dragon heartstring. And you will begin to understand the philosophy of how magic moves from intention to reality, the architecture of spellwork that most wizards never see because they've never had to look."

Dumbledore sat back. His voice softened.

"You learned magic on your own, Harry. In a dark room, without help, without even knowing what you were doing. You learned to understand your own power before anyone gave you the language for it. What I am proposing is simply an extension of that same principle, understanding first, mastery second."

This conversation started making Harry feel good, finding a way for his solution, not yet, but the shape of one.

"Most wizards learn spells first and understanding later," Dumbledore said quietly, "if they bother with understanding at all. You, Harry, are doing it the other way round. That is not a disadvantage. It may, in time, prove to be the very opposite."

The words settled over Harry like warm cloth. He didn't fully understand them, not yet, not all the way, but he felt their weight and their promise, and he held onto them the way he'd held onto the light in the cupboard: tightly, with both hands, because the dark was still there and the light was still new and he wasn't sure yet how long it would last.

"When do we start?" he asked.

Dumbledore smiled. It was the smile of a teacher who has just watched a student ask exactly the right question.

"Saturday morning. I will provide the tea. You will provide the curiosity." He paused, and the twinkle returned. "And perhaps a willingness to get sawdust in your hair."

From the perch by the window, Fawkes let out a single, low trill. It was not a loud sound, barely enough to fill the room, but it moved through Harry like a hand pressed against his chest, and wherever it touched, something loosened. The knot that had been there since Ollivander's shop. The tight, curled thing in his ribcage that whispered *broken* and *wrong* and *you will never be like them*. It didn't disappear. But it eased, the way a fist eases when someone places their hand over it and holds it still.

"Thank you, Professor," Harry said. And meant it with everything he had.

"You are most welcome, Harry." Dumbledore reached for another lemon drop. "Now, I believe Professor McGonagall still has ten minutes of class remaining, and she will be far less forgiving than I am if you miss the theory of molecular restructuring. It sounds dreadful, I know. She makes it rather riveting."

Harry stood. He slung his bag over his shoulder and walked to the door, and Fawkes watched him go with those ancient, knowing eyes, and Dumbledore was already unwrapping the lemon drop behind him.

On the spiral staircase going down, Harry paused.

The brass railing caught his reflection again, the same warped, stretched boy who had ridden this staircase upward ten minutes ago. But something was different now. Not in the reflection. In the boy.

He raised his right hand and held it open in front of him. The same hand that had held the Lumos. The same hand that would, on Saturday, begin learning to build the thing it had been missing.

Empty.

But not for long.

The Ravenclaw common room was quiet when Harry came through the door. The eagle knocker had asked him *What can be broken without being held?* and he'd stood there for a full thirty seconds before saying "A promise," which felt too easy but turned out to be right, and for a moment he thought his friends had gone to dinner without him.

Then Terry's head appeared over the back of the sofa nearest the fire.

"He's alive."

Michael's head appeared next. "Disappointing. I'd already started dividing up his belongings. I was going to take the trunk."

"You were going to take the *trunk*?"

"It's a nice trunk."

Cho was sitting in the armchair beside the window, a book open in her lap, but she hadn't been reading, Harry could tell because her eyes found him the moment he stepped through, and they had the particular quality of eyes that had been watching a door for some time. She closed the book and sat forward.

"What happened?" Terry asked, abandoning all pretence of casualness and vaulting over the back of the sofa. "Are you expelled? Was Dumbledore angry?"

"I'm not expelled," Harry said.

"That's the relief portion of the evening sorted," Michael said. "Now the interesting part."

Harry sat on the sofa. The fire was warm against his side and the common room was empty except for the four of them, everyone else was still at dinner, which meant he had this: a window of time, a circle of faces, and the strange new feeling of having something worth telling.

He told them.

Not everything. Some of what Dumbledore had said existed in the space between the old man's words, meant only for the two of them. But the shape of it, the magical core, the Killing Curse's imprint, the reason no wand had chosen him and the plan to build one that would, he gave them all of it, and they listened without interrupting, which was remarkable given that one of them was Terry Boot.

The silence afterward lasted about four seconds.

"Wood properties," Terry said. His eyes had gone very wide and very bright. "He's going to teach you *wood properties*? Do you know how many types of wand wood there are? Ollivander uses thirty-eight. Gregorovitch used forty-two. There's an entire chapter in *A Study of Wand Woods and Their Magical Affinities* about the difference between English oak and sessile oak, and apparently they produce completely different temperaments in the finished wand." He grabbed Harry's arm. "You have to bring me notes. Promise me you'll bring me notes."

"I'll bring you notes, Terry."

"Detailed notes. With diagrams if possible."

"I'll ask Dumbledore if he can include diagrams."

Michael had been quiet through the telling, which for Michael usually meant he was thinking rather than disengaged. He sat with his arms folded, his head tilted, his expression cycling through something that eventually resolved into a single, measured observation.

"So you're telling me," he said slowly, "that the Headmaster of the school, Albus Dumbledore, Order of Merlin, First Class, is personally going to make you a wand. On a Saturday. With tea."

"Yes."

A beat.

"I can't get a meeting with Flitwick about my essay extension." Michael shook his head. "I can't even get him to respond to a *note*. You walk around without a wand for two days and you're having Saturday morning tea with the most powerful wizard in the world. There's a lesson in this and I refuse to learn it."

Cho hadn't spoken. She sat in her armchair with her hands folded over her closed book, and her expression was the one Harry was beginning to recognise, the quiet, steady look that meant she was thinking about the thing no one else had said yet.

"He told you your core was changed," she said. "By what happened that night."

Harry nodded.

"That means Voldemort left a mark on your magic." She said the name without flinching, which Harry noticed, because most people didn't. "That's... not nothing, Harry."

The common room fire cracked and settled. Outside the tower windows, the sky had gone the deep, bruised blue of early evening.

"I know," Harry said. And he did know. Voldemort had touched his magic. Had *shaped* it. Whatever lived inside Harry's core, the thing that made him different, the thing no wand could match, it existed because of the worst night of his life. That was not nothing. That was, in fact, something enormous, and he could feel it waiting at the edges of his thoughts like a shadow in a room he hadn't entered yet.

But not tonight. Tonight the fire was warm and his friends were here and somewhere in this castle an old man with half-moon spectacles was preparing to teach him how to build the thing he'd been missing. Tonight, the hope was enough.

"I know," he said again, quieter. "But I'm not ready to think about that yet."

Cho held his gaze for a moment, then nodded. She understood. She always seemed to.

The evening settled around them. Terry had already pulled *A History of Magic* from his bag and was flipping through the index, muttering "wandlore, wandlore, wandlore" under his breath. Michael had spread his Transfiguration homework across the table and was regarding it with the

expression of a man who had been asked to defuse a bomb. Cho reopened her book and began to read, her feet tucked beneath her, the firelight turning the pages gold.

Harry sat among them and breathed.

He was different. He had always been different at Privet Drive, in the cupboard, in Ollivander's shop, in every room he'd ever entered where the gap between him and everyone else felt as wide as the sea. But Dumbledore had looked at that difference and called it something else. Not a flaw. Not a failure. A beginning.

His difference was a door. And he'd just been given the key.