

The early morning light had that watery quality unique to summer dawns, thin and hesitant, as if the sun itself wasn't quite committed to the day ahead. Harry noticed how it made the windows of Privet Drive look like cataracts-milky, unseeing eyes that had witnessed sixteen years of his particular brand of misery. The thought should have been melancholic. Instead, it felt like counting down the final moves in a chess game he'd already won.

Tonks's hair had settled into a muted brown during their walk from the apparition point, exhaustion bleeding the color from her metamorphic abilities. Her hand hovered near his elbow.

The front door of Number Four stood slightly ajar, which meant the Dursleys had been watching through the curtains. Waiting. The hallway light blazed behind the gap like a wound.

"WHAT HAVE YOU DONE NOW?"

Vernon's bellow hit them before they'd even crossed the threshold. The man stood in the entrance hall, his face the particular shade of purple Harry associated with overripe plums-the kind Aunt Petunia would never buy because they might suggest impropriety in her shopping habits. His uncle's meaty fists clenched and unclenched in a rhythm that probably felt threatening in his own mind.

"Good morning to you too, Uncle." Harry's voice carried the same pleasant neutrality he'd used with Scrimgeour. It was remarkable, really, how similar the two conversations felt. "Shall we discuss this in the sitting room? I imagine the neighbors are still sleeping."

Vernon's mouth opened and closed like a landed fish. Petunia stood behind him, her dressing gown clutched so tightly around her thin frame that her knuckles had gone white. Dudley lurked on the stairs, trying to make his massive frame invisible-a feat about as successful as hiding a rhinoceros behind a lamppost.

"Living room. Now." Vernon managed to growl, though the effect was somewhat diminished by the way his eyes kept darting to Tonks's wand holster.

Harry walked past them without waiting for agreement. The sitting room smelled of furniture polish and fear-the latter a recent addition to the Dursley household's signature scent. He chose Vernon's chair, settling into it with the authority of someone who'd just negotiated with the Minister of Magic and found the experience mildly tedious.

"A house-elf attempted to kill me last night," Harry said, before Vernon could build up another head of steam. "Here. In this house. Despite the blood wards that were supposed to protect us all."

"A house-what? Don't start with your rubbish-"

"The small creature with the glowing arm that tried to strangle me in my bedroom." Harry's tone remained conversational. "Surely you heard the commotion. Aurors-magical police-had to

intervene. The protective enchantments that kept Death Eaters from finding this address have failed entirely."

Vernon's face cycled through several shades of purple before settling on a sickly grey. "Failed? What do you mean failed?"

"I mean," Harry said, "that the single magical protection keeping Voldemort's followers from knocking on your door at teatime has dissolved. Evaporated. Ceased to exist."

The silence that followed had weight to it, pressing against the walls like water against a dam.

"Are they going to come for us?"

Dudley's voice cracked on the question. He'd moved into the doorway, his bulk filling it completely, but his face held none of the bullying bravado Harry remembered from their childhood. Just fear, raw and honest.

Harry looked at his cousin-really looked at him for perhaps the first time in years. The boy who'd made his childhood a special kind of hell stood there in pajamas, looking terrified of monsters that were actually real.

The kind thing would be to reassure him. The strategic thing would be to let them stew in their fear, make them more manageable. But Harry found, with mild surprise, that he felt nothing at all. They were furniture in a house he was about to leave, relevant only in their irrelevance.

"No," Harry said finally. "Death Eaters have no interest in you. You're not important enough to warrant their attention. You're not allies, not enemies, not even obstacles. You're..." he paused, considering, "nothing to them. Or to me, really. We might share blood, but we've never been family. You're strangers who happened to feed and house me, badly, for sixteen years."

Petunia made a sound like she'd been slapped. Vernon's face darkened again, but before he could speak, Dudley said something that made everyone turn.

"I don't see you as a stranger."

The words came out mangled, as if Dudley's mouth wasn't designed for that particular combination of syllables. His face had gone red with the effort of saying them.

Harry stared at his cousin for a long moment. Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked. The morning light had strengthened, painting rectangles of gold on the carpet that looked almost like windows to a warmer world.

"How interesting," Harry said at last, and stood. "I'll be leaving soon. Permanently. I suggest you use the time to decide what you'll tell the neighbors."

He walked past Dudley without another word, Tonks falling into step behind him. The stairs creaked under their weight, a sound he'd heard thousands of times, now counting down to zero.

Behind them, the Dursleys stood frozen in their sitting room, looking exactly like the furniture Harry had decided they were.

The door clicked shut behind them. His room looked exactly as he'd left it hours ago: books scattered across the desk like casualties of war, the bloodstained carpet where Reggy had bled, and Hedwig's empty cage looking like a skeleton under the sunlight.

Tonks collapsed into his desk chair without ceremony, her hair cycling through three different shades of exhaustion before settling on something that might charitably be called dishwater blonde.

"So," Tonks said, propping her boots on his bed, "you just negotiated yourself into becoming the Ministry's show pony. Scrimgeour must be beside himself with joy."

"Show pony suggests a level of cooperation I haven't agreed to." Harry leaned against the window, watching Mrs. Figg's cats prowl her garden like tiny, judgmental lions. "I prefer 'strategic asset with clearly defined boundaries and mutual benefit clauses.'"

"Merlin, you even sound like him now."

"If you mean I sound like someone who understands the value of political capital, then yes." Harry turned from the window, noting how Tonks had positioned herself to watch both him and the door. "One public appearance monthly, pre-approved talking points, no exclusive interviews. In exchange, I get you as official protection, exemption from underage magic restrictions, and Umbridge's head on a legal platter."

"And the Death Eaters? The ones from the Ministry?"

"Execution, ideally. Though Scrimgeour seemed less enthusiastic about that particular request."

Tonks's eyebrows climbed toward her hairline. "You asked the Minister of Magic to execute prisoners?"

"I suggested that lifetime imprisonment in a Dementor-less Azkaban might be somewhat pointless when Voldemort can walk in and collect his lieutenants at his leisure." Harry said firmly. "Public executions would send a rather different message about the Ministry's commitment to winning this war."

"Merlin's saggy-" Tonks caught herself, studying him with those dark eyes that seemed to see too much. "You've changed."

"I've adapted. There's a difference."

"Is there?"

Harry considered this. "Changed implies I've become something I wasn't. Adapted means I've learned to use what was always there. The Sorting Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin, remember? Perhaps it saw something everyone else missed."

"Or perhaps," Tonks said carefully, "grief and anger are making you into something you'll regret."

"Regret requires survival. I'm prioritizing accordingly."

The silence stretched between them like taffy, sticky and uncomfortable. Somewhere below, Petunia's vacuum roared to life, her traditional response to emotional disturbance. Clean the carpets, pretend the mess didn't exist.

"What happened to the elf?" Tonks asked finally. "Reggy?"

"Dissolved." Harry watched her reaction. "Three hours after capture, his body turned to liquid. Nothing left but blood and whatever nightmares the Unspeakables are having about the magical signatures."

"That's... deeply disturbing."

"That's evidence of planning. Whoever sent him built in a failsafe. No interrogation, no trail back to the source." Harry moved to his trunk, beginning to sort through his belongings. "Which brings us to the rather pressing question of where I go next."

"The blood wards-"

"Are comprehensively fucked, yes. Technical term." He folded a robe that had seen better days, noting the scorch marks from last year's D.A. meetings. "I'll need to relocate."

"Where?"

"Grimmauld Place."

The name dropped into the room like a stone into still water. Tonks went very still.

"Harry," she said slowly, "do you really want to go back there? After... after everything?"

The ghost of Sirius seemed to shimmer in the periphery of his vision. Harry's hands didn't pause in their packing.

"Want has nothing to do with it. It's mine now, legally and magically. Kreacher confirmed it, however reluctantly."

"You'd be alone in that house with the elf who betrayed Sirius."

"I've given him orders. He'll obey."

"That's not-" Tonks stood abruptly, pacing to the door and back like something caged. "Harry, that house is a mausoleum. It's full of dark magic, memories, and a house-elf who actively despises you. Staying there alone will destroy you."

"I'm remarkably difficult to destroy. Recent evidence suggests."

"This isn't a joke."

"No," Harry agreed, closing his trunk with a decisive click. "It's practical. Where else would you suggest? The Burrow?"

Tonks's expression brightened slightly. "The Weasleys would-"

"Report everything I do directly to Dumbledore." Harry's voice remained pleasant, matter-of-fact. "Every spell I practice, every book I read, every nightmare I have. They wouldn't mean it maliciously. They'd think they were helping. But their loyalty to him is absolute."

"They're your friends."

"They are. Which is precisely why I won't put them in the position of choosing between friendship and what they see as moral obligation." Harry sat on his trunk, hands clasped loosely between his knees. "For the Weasleys, Dumbledore isn't just a leader. He's salvation incarnate. The beacon of light against the darkness. They'd betray me in a heartbeat if they thought it would help him help me."

"That's... cynical."

"That's accurate. Ron already questions my break with Dumbledore. Miss Weasley would mother me into submission while fire-calling the Headmaster with hourly updates. Mister Weasley would want to understand, but ultimately, he'd defer to Dumbledore's greater wisdom." Harry's smile held no warmth. "I prefer my betrayals to come from enemies, not friends acting in what they think are my best interests."

Tonks made a frustrated sound, running her hands through her hair until it stuck up in multicolored spikes. "You can't just isolate yourself in that gothic nightmare with only Kreacher for company. You'll go mad."

"Then suggest an alternative."

"Stay with me."

Harry's face went a little red, and his eyes widened a little looking at her, Tonks seemed to quickly realise what she had said.

"Not-I mean, with my family. My parents. Mum would be thrilled to meet family, even distant family, and-"

"We're related?"

Harry's interruption was sharp enough to cut. Tonks flushed slightly, but nodded.

"Distantly. Your great-great-something grandfather, Aldermire Potter, married into the Blacks. My mother is Andromeda Tonks-née Black. Sister to Narcissa and... and Bellatrix."

The temperature in the room seemed to drop ten degrees. Harry went very, very still.

"Your mother," he said slowly as if he could not believe what he had just heard, "is Bellatrix Lestranger's sister."

"Was. She was disowned when she married my father. She hasn't spoken to either of them in decades."

But Harry barely heard her. Bellatrix's laugh echoed in his memory-that unhinged cackle as Sirius fell backward through the Veil. The woman who'd murdered the closest thing to a father he'd ever known, and here was Tonks, her niece, offering him shelter.

The anger hit him like a bludger to the chest. Bellatrix's niece. The words seemed to rearrange themselves in his mind, looking for a configuration that made sense, that didn't feel like swallowing glass.

But even as the rage crested, another part of his mind, the part that had spent hours negotiating with Scrimgeour, the part that had learned to think three moves ahead, grabbed the emotion by the throat.

Tonks hadn't chosen her family any more than he'd chosen the Dursleys.

The realization settled over him like cold water, dousing the initial flame but leaving embers that focused entirely on their proper target: Bellatrix herself. That cackling madwoman who'd stolen Sirius from him, who'd danced away through the Ministry halls while his godfather dissolved into nothing.

"Harry?" Tonks's voice came from very far away, or perhaps he'd just gone somewhere very far inside himself. "I know it's-"

"Your mother." His voice came out steadier than expected, clinical almost. "She was disowned for marrying a Muggle-born?"

"Ted Tonks. My father." Tonks relaxed fractionally. "Mum walked away from everything. The Black fortune, the pure-blood society, her entire world. For love."

Harry found himself studying Tonks's face with new interest, looking for traces of Bellatrix in the bone structure, the shape of her eyes. But where Bellatrix's features were sharp as broken glass, Tonks's held a warmth that seemed to come from somewhere deeper than mere genetics.

"What's she like?" Harry asked suddenly curious about this woman, he remembered Sirius telling him that he had left his home when he was sixteen, and this woman had done a similar thing, she had chosen her heart over what was expected of her from her family. "Your mother. To have sisters like that and become... someone else entirely."

"Fierce." Tonks's smile held edges. "Protective. She gardens with the dedication of someone waging war against weeds. Makes the best shepherd's pie in England and can duel like she was born with a wand in her hand. She's... she's everything her sisters chose not to be."

The description painted a picture Harry couldn't quite reconcile-this woman who shared blood with both Bellatrix the murderer and Narcissa. It was almost enough to make him consider...

No.

"I can't." The words came out flat, final. "It's not about your family history, Tonks. Voldemort knows I survived the attack. He'll send worse than ancient house-elves next time. Anyone near me becomes a target."

"I'm an Auror. Danger is literally in my job description."

"Your job doesn't require you to have a target painted on your house." Harry turned his back on her. "I won't be responsible for your parents paying for their kindness with their lives."

"That's not your choice to-"

"It is, actually." He faced her again, and he looked at her beautiful face, her long pink hair. "I choose not to endanger more people. I choose to handle this alone."

"In that moldering house with a homicidal elf for company."

"Kreacher's not homicidal. He's merely deeply resentful and magically bound to obey me. Entirely different thing."

"Harry-"

"I'll be fine." The lie rolled off his tongue, he wondered since when he got so good at lying. "Grimmauld Place has extensive wards. I'll have books, privacy, and no well-meaning interference. It's perfect."

Tonks looked at him for a long moment, something shifting in her expression that he couldn't quite read.

"You're terrified," she said quietly. "Not of Voldemort or Death Eaters or whatever ancient horror sent that elf. You're terrified of losing more people you care about."

Harry didn't deny it. Couldn't, really, when the thought of Tonks disappearing like Sirius made something in his chest constrict painfully. He'd known her for such a short time, really. A few

weeks of training, some shared grief, that almost-kiss in the garden that neither of them talked about. It shouldn't matter this much.

But it did.

When had she become important enough that losing her would break something in him that might not mend?

"Me being terrified doesn't make me wrong," he said finally. "If anything, it makes me more right. Fear keeps people alive."

"Fear keeps people alone."

"Better alone than responsible for more deaths."

Tonks made a frustrated sound, but whatever argument she'd been preparing died unspoken. Her head snapped toward the window, body tensing into combat readiness so fast Harry barely saw the transition.

"Someone's here," she said, wand already in hand. "Someone powerful."

Harry moved to the window, careful to stay to the side, out of direct line of sight. The street below looked normal enough. Mr. Number Six washing his car with obsessive dedication, Mrs. Number Seven pretending to garden while actually spying on Mr. Number Six. All perfectly ordinary, except...

The streetlights were behaving oddly. Their light seemed to be bending, flowing like honey toward a single point near the garden gate. The effect was subtle enough that mundane eyes would miss it entirely, but to anyone with magical training, it was like watching reality hiccup.

"Dumbledore," Harry said, surprised by how unsurprised he felt. "Took him longer than expected."

"How can you tell?"

"The light thing. He does it sometimes." Harry stepped back from the window. "Someone must have told him about my meeting with Scrimgeour."

"There were dozens of Ministry employees who saw you there."

"Yes, but only a few who'd run straight to Dumbledore with the news." Harry's smile was sharp as winter. "I should start a betting pool on which one."

Tonks was watching him with that look again, the one that suggested she was seeing something she hadn't expected. "You're remarkably calm about this."

"Why wouldn't I be? He's just a man, Tonks. Powerful, certainly. Clever, undoubtedly. But still just a man who makes mistakes and miscalculations like anyone else." Harry straightened his robes. "Besides, I've been expecting this since I signed Scrimgeour's agreement. Dumbledore can't bear not being in control."

Harry walked downstairs, followed closely by Tonks.

Petunia had already reached the door. Through the frosted glass, Dumbledore's silhouette wavered like something seen through water.

"I suppose I should-" Petunia began, but Dumbledore had already turned the handle from the outside, the lock clicking open.

"Mrs. Dursley." His voice preceded him into the hallway, warm as cocoa, twice as likely to rot your teeth. "May I come in?"

He was already three steps past the threshold before finishing the question.

Petunia's shriek could have stripped paint. It certainly made Dudley, lurking in the kitchen doorway, jump hard enough to rattle the good china.

"Professor." Harry's voice was blank, noting how Dumbledore's eyes flickered at the formal address. No 'sir' anymore, certainly no warmth. They might as well have been strangers meeting at a Ministry function.

Which, Harry supposed, they essentially were.

"Harry." Dumbledore inclined his head. "I trust you're well?"

"Well enough."

The pause that followed could have been measured in heartbeats or centuries. Vernon chose that moment to lumber into view, his face achieving new frontiers in the purple spectrum.

"Now see here-" he began, chest puffing like a bullfrog.

Dumbledore turned his gaze on Vernon. Just his gaze, nothing more, but Harry's uncle deflated like someone had pulled his plug. The words died in his throat with an almost audible whimper.

"Perhaps," Dumbledore suggested, already moving toward the sitting room, "we might continue this conversation in more comfortable surroundings?"

He'd conjured drinks before anyone had properly sat down, three crystal glasses materializing. The liquid inside caught the light like trapped fire, probably some obscure wizard brandy that cost more than the Dursleys' mortgage.

Harry chose the sofa facing Dumbledore, Tonks beside him. The old wizard settled into Vernon's chair.

"Petunia," Dumbledore said, raising his glass in something that might have been a toast or a threat. "It has been quite some time."

The flush that crawled up Petunia's neck was fascinating to watch. Her mouth opened and closed several times before settling on an expression of rigid fury.

When had Petunia ever spoken to Dumbledore? The question darted through Harry's mind. His aunt hated magic, yet here was history between her and Dumbledore.

"Vernon," Petunia's voice could have frosted the windows, "perhaps you should-"

"I'm not going anywhere," Vernon blustered, though he'd positioned himself behind Petunia's chair like it might offer protection. "This is my house, and-"

"Yes," Dumbledore agreed pleasantly. "Your house. Where young Harry was placed fifteen years ago for his protection. How fortunate that arrangement has proven to be."

"Fortunate," Harry repeated, tasting the word like something spoiled. "That's one way to describe it."

Dumbledore's gaze finally found his, and Harry was struck by how much older the man looked.

"Indeed," Dumbledore said softly. "One of many ways, I suppose."

"So, Harry," Dumbledore said, swirling the amber liquid in his glass, "what exactly have you been doing with your summer? I trust the time has been... productive?"

Harry settled deeper into the sofa, matching Dumbledore's casual posture with theatrical ease. "Preparing for war, naturally. Working to ensure I'm capable of killing Voldemort when the opportunity presents itself."

Petunia made a small, strangled sound from her position near the door.

"Ah." Dumbledore set down his glass with deliberate care. "And do you truly believe Tom Riddle can be destroyed through conventional means? A well-placed curse, perhaps? Superior dueling skills?"

There it was—that tone that suggested Dumbledore knew something crucial he wasn't sharing. Harry had heard it too many times to miss it now.

"I've already worked out he's more than just a wizard," Harry said, watching Dumbledore's expression for tells. "Whatever he did to survive that night, whatever he's become—"

"Tom Riddle," Dumbledore interrupted gently, "remains fundamentally a wizard. More powerful than average, certainly. More knowledgeable in certain dark arts, undoubtedly. But power alone does not elevate one beyond mortality's reach. Death, as they say, is the great equalizer."

"Death forgot to knock on Voldemort's door fifteen years ago."

"No, Harry. Tom simply refused to answer when called." Dumbledore's eyes held that distant quality that meant he was choosing his words with exceptional care. "He has taken... measures. Ensured his spirit remains anchored to this world even when his physical form fails. What attacked you as an infant was both more and less than human."

Harry felt his jaw tighten. Another riddle wrapped in an enigma, served with a side of careful omission. "If you're just here to remind me how hopeless our situation is-

"Quite the contrary. The situation is far from hopeless." Dumbledore leaned forward slightly. "In fact, I'd like to invite you to participate in something this year. Private lessons that would-

"No."

The word cracked through the room like a whip. Dumbledore blinked, apparently unprepared for such immediate rejection.

"Perhaps if you'd allow me to explain-

"No." Harry's voice remained perfectly level. "I will not be part of anything you're orchestrating. No special projects, no private lessons, no carefully managed adventures where you pull the strings and I dance."

"Harry, this would be entirely for your benefit. To give you advantages against Voldemort, tools you'll desperately need-

A bitter laugh escaped Harry before he could stop it. "For my benefit? My good?" His voice rose despite his intention to remain calm. "Since when have you ever acted for my good?"

He stood abruptly, gesturing at the Dursleys with a sweep of his arm that made Vernon flinch. "Fifteen years with these people. Fifteen years of their particular brand of care, and you want to talk about my benefit?"

Dumbledore's gaze shifted to the Dursleys, and something flickered across his face-disappointment so profound it almost looked like grief.

"I believe," Dumbledore said quietly, "we require privacy for this discussion. Vernon, Petunia. If you would excuse us?"

"Now see here-" Vernon started, his face achieving new depths of red.

"Vernon." Petunia's hand found her husband's arm. "Let's go."

"I will not be ordered around in my own—"

"Vernon. Now."

Petunia's voice cut through Vernon's bluster. He allowed himself to be led away, though the look he shot Harry could have burned through steel. Dudley had already vanished, probably halfway up the stairs by now.

Dumbledore turned to Tonks. "Nymphadora, I wonder if you might—"

"Don't call me—" Tonks caught herself, glancing at Harry. He gave the slightest nod.

"I'll be right outside," she said, the words directed at Harry rather than Dumbledore. The front door closed behind her with a soft click that somehow sounded final.

The door clicked shut behind Tonks, leaving Harry alone with the man who'd orchestrated his life from the shadows for fifteen years. The sitting room felt smaller, as if the walls had crept inward while no one was watching.

"Tell me something, Professor." Harry's voice came out conversational, almost pleasant. "When I was nine, I accidentally broke a vase. One of Aunt Petunia's favorites. White china with painted roses. Do you know what happened next?"

Dumbledore's silence was answer enough.

"Vernon held my hand against the kitchen stove. The burner wasn't on high, he wasn't stupid, couldn't have marks that teachers might notice. Just warm enough to hurt. Warm enough that I felt it for months afterward, every time I tried to hold a pencil." Harry examined his palm, the skin unmarked but the memory carved deep. "Did you have any spell in place to inform you if something was happening to me? Did they register a child's pain as worth investigating?"

"Harry..." Dumbledore's voice carried a weight that might have been regret. "I had hoped—believed—that family, even reluctant family, would eventually embrace—"

"You hoped." The words tasted like ash. "You believed. But you never checked. Never once in fifteen years did you personally verify that your hope had any foundation in reality."

"You're right." The admission came simply, without excuse or elaboration. "I failed you in that regard."

"In that regard?" Harry's laugh could have stripped paint. "Just the one?"

"No." Dumbledore sank back into his chair as if gravity had suddenly doubled. "In many regards. But Harry, whatever my failures—and they are numerous—I cannot change what has been. I can only attempt to shape what will be, to shape the future, to build a better future."

"Shape the future." Harry repeated the words. "Build a brighter tomorrow for everyone. Except there is no tomorrow for Sirius, is there? No future for the man you got killed with your secrets and manipulations."

"I did not kill Sirius—"

"No, you just created every circumstance that led to his death." Harry's voice remained terrifyingly calm. "Kept him locked in that house he hated. Refused to tell me about the prophecy. Ignored me for an entire year while Voldemort played with my mind. Every decision you made pushed us toward that moment in the Department of Mysteries."

"And every decision I made was intended to protect—"

"To protect your grand design. Not me. Never just me." Harry stood slowly. "You've killed the last person I could call family, Professor."

Dumbledore's expression shifted, disappointment settling into the lines of his face. "What happened here last night, Harry? The truth, please."

The change of subject was so abrupt it took Harry a moment to adjust. "A house-elf tried to kill me. Ancient thing with a glowing arm and magic the Ministry couldn't identify. Dissolved into blood when they tried to interrogate it."

Real concern flickered across Dumbledore's features—the first genuine emotion Harry had seen from him all evening. "A house-elf attacked you? Here?"

"The blood wards failed completely. Whoever sent it knew exactly where to find me."

Dumbledore stood, his movement sharp with urgency. "Harry, your anger toward me is understandable. Your hatred, even, is something I've earned. But there are thousands of lives hanging in the balance. Families who will be torn apart, children who will be orphaned, entire communities that will be destroyed if we cannot stop Voldemort."

"And that's my responsibility? I didn't ask for—"

"Sirius would not want you to let your grief destroy—"

Harry's wand was in his hand before conscious thought, pointed directly at Dumbledore's heart. "Don't. Don't you dare speak his name. You lost that right when your actions led to his death."

Only now, with his wand raised and steady, did Harry notice Dumbledore's right hand. The skin was blackened, withered like a branch left too long in fire. Dark veins spread from the fingers up past the wrist, disappearing beneath his sleeve. Whatever had caused it, it looked like death itself had grabbed Dumbledore's hand and refused to let go.

Harry felt... nothing. No concern, no curiosity. The man had made his choices.

Dumbledore, seemingly unbothered by the wand aimed at his chest, reached into his robes with his good hand. He withdrew a slim volume.

"Getting stronger helps win individual fights," he said, placing the book carefully on the coffee table. "But wars are won differently. Through understanding, through knowledge, through connections we forge with others." He stepped back, hands clasped behind him. "Your mother understood that. When she stood between you and Voldemort, she wasn't thinking about magical power or combat strategies. She was thinking about love. About what she was willing to sacrifice to keep that love alive in the world."

"Don't talk about my mother—"

"She could have run. Could have step back. Self-preservation would have been perfectly understandable." Dumbledore moved toward the door. "But she chose differently. Not because she was powerful, but because she understood that some things matter more than personal survival."

"Like your greater good?"

"No, Harry. Like love. The one thing Tom Riddle never understood and never will." Dumbledore paused at the door, his blackened hand resting on the handle. "That book contains some of my thoughts on the subject. Read it or burn it—the choice is yours. But remember: your mother didn't die just to keep you breathing. She died to keep you human."

The door opened and closed so quietly Harry barely heard it. He stood alone in the Dursleys' sitting room, wand still raised, pointing at empty air. The book sat on the table.

Outside, he could hear Dumbledore's voice probably talking to Tonks. Then the distinctive crack of apparition, and silence.

Harry lowered his wand slowly. The book drew his gaze like a magnet. Whatever was in it, Dumbledore thought it important enough to risk this confrontation. Important enough to leave even after having a wand pointed at his heart.

The smart thing would be to burn it. Whatever manipulation Dumbledore had planned, whatever emotional leverage he hoped to gain, destroying the book would end it before it began.

But Harry was, despite everything, still curious.

He picked up the book. It was lighter than expected, warm to the touch like it had been sitting in sunlight. No title on the cover or spine. Just smooth leather and possibility.

Harry tucked it under his arm and headed for the stairs.

The war would continue tomorrow. Tonight, he had a book to not-burn and a future to reshape on his own terms.

