

"The four Houses are called Gryffindor, Hufflepuff, Ravenclaw, and Slytherin. Each House has its own noble history and each has produced outstanding witches and wizards. While you are at Hogwarts, your triumphs will earn your House points, while any rule-breaking will lose House points. At the end of the year, the House with the most points is awarded the House cup, a great honor. I hope each of you will be a credit to whichever House becomes yours.

"The Sorting Ceremony will take place in a few minutes in front of the rest of the school. I suggest you all smarten yourselves up as much as you can while you are waiting."

Her eyes lingered for a moment on Neville's cloak, which was fastened under his left ear, and on Ron's smudged nose. Harry nervously tried to flatten his hair.

"I shall return when we are ready for you," said Professor McGonagall. "Please wait quietly."

She left the chamber. Harry swallowed.

"How exactly do they sort us into Houses?" he asked Ron.

"Some sort of test, I think. Fred said it hurts a lot, but I think he was joking."

Harry's heart gave a horrible jolt. A test? In front of the whole school? But he didn't know any magic yet — what on earth would he have to do? He hadn't expected something like this the moment they arrived. He looked around anxiously and saw that everyone else looked terrified, too. No one was talking much except Hermione Granger, who was whispering very fast about all the spells she'd learned and wondering which one she'd need. Harry tried hard not to listen to her. He'd never been more nervous, never, not even when he'd had to take a school report home to the Dursleys saying that he'd somehow turned his teachers wig blue. He kept his eyes fixed on the door. Any second now, Professor McGonagall would come back and lead him to his doom.