



## 2. ARRIVAL OF THE ALMA ALERONS

By the time James had dressed and made his way down to the Great Hall for breakfast it was nearly ten o'clock. Less than a dozen students could be seen moving disconsolately among the detritus of the morning's earlier rush. At the far corner of the Slytherin table, Zane sat hunched and squinting under a beam of sunlight. Across from him was Ralph, who saw James enter and waved him over.

As James made his way across the Hall, four or five house elves, each wearing large linen napkins with the Hogwarts crest embroidered on them, circled the tables, meandering in what at first appeared to be random paths. Occasionally, one of them would duck beneath the surface of a table, and then reappear a moment later, tossing a stray fork or half biscuit casually onto the mess of the table. As James passed one of the elves it straightened, raised its spindly arms, and then brought them swiftly down. The contents of the table in front of him swirled together as if caught in a miniature cyclone. With a great clattering of dishes and silverware, the corners of the tablecloth shot upwards and twisted around the pile of breakfast debris, creating a huge clanking bag floating improbably over the polished wood table. The house elf leaped from floor to bench to table-top and then jumped, turning in mid-air and landing lightly on top of the bag. It grasped the twisted top of the bag, using the knot as if it were a set of reins, and turned the bag, driving it bobblingly toward the gigantic service doors in the side of the Hall. James ducked as the bag swooped over his head.

“Phew,” Zane muttered as James plopped down next to him and reached for the last piece of toast. “These little waiters of yours may be weird-lookin’ buggers, but they do know how to make a good cup of coffee.”

“They’re not waiters, they’re house elves. I read about them yesterday.” Ralph said, happily munching half a sausage. The other half was speared on the end of his fork. He used it like a pointer, indicating the elves. “They work downstairs. They’re like the elves in that kids’ story. The ones that came at night and did all the work for the cobbler.”

“The what?” Zane asked over his coffee mug.

“The guy that makes shoes. He had all these shoes half finished and just lying around and he was about to fall over from all the work. You know that story, don’t you? So he falls asleep and in the middle of the night all these little elves show up and whip out their hammers and go to town fixing up all the shoes for him. He wakes up and bammo, everything’s cool.” Ralph bit the rest of the sausage off his fork and munched it, looking around. “I never pictured them wearing napkins, though.”

“Hey, alien-boy, I see your face is back to normal.” Zane said, examining James critically.

“What passes for it, I suppose.” James replied.

“Did it hurt at all when Sabrina zapped you?”

“No,” James said. “It felt weird. *Really* weird. But it didn’t hurt. It just went back to normal overnight.”

“She must be an artist. You looked great. Webbed feet and all.”

“What are you two talking about?” Ralph asked, looking back and forth between them. They told him all about the previous night, about raising the Wocket, and the farmer who’d fainted when James, the little alien, had stumbled and fallen on top of him.

“I was hiding in the corner of the yard, near the shed, and I about gave myself a hernia trying not to laugh when you tackled him. Attack of the Martian Klutzes!” He dissolved into laughter and after a moment, James joined him.

“Where’d they get the spaceship?” Ralph asked, bypassing the humour.

“It’s just a bunch of chicken-wire and papier-mâché,” Zane said, downing the last of his coffee and clapping the mug onto the table. He raised his arm and snapped his fingers twice. “Sabrina and Horace made it last year as part of a float for a Christmas parade down in Hogsmeade. It used to be a giant cauldron. Now, with the help of some paint and something Gennifer called a *visum-ineptio* charm, it’s the R.M.S. Wocket.”

A very small house elf approached Zane, frowning. “You, er, *snapped*, young master?” The elf’s voice was gratingly deep, despite his size.

“Here you go, buddy.” Zane said, handing the elf the empty coffee mug. “Nice work. Keep it up. This is for you.”

The elf looked down at the piece of paper Zane had just handed him. He raised his eyes again. “Thank you, young master. Will there, er, be anything else?”

Zane flapped his hand dismissively. “No thanks. Go get some sleep or something. You look tired.”

The elf looked at Ralph, then James, who shrugged and tried to smile. With a barely perceptible roll of the eyes, the elf tucked the five dollar bill into his napkin and disappeared under the table.

Zane looked thoughtful. “I could get used to this.”

“I don’t think you’re supposed to tip the house elves.” Ralph said uncertainly.

“I don’t see why not,” Zane said airily, stretching. “My dad tips everybody when he’s travelling. He says it’s part of the local economy. And it fosters good service.”

“And you can’t just tell a house elf to go get some sleep,” James said, suddenly realizing what had just happened.

“Why the heck not?”

“Because that’s exactly what he’ll have to go and do!” James said in exasperation. He was thinking of the Potter family house elf, a sad little pug of an elf whose moroseness was only offset by his sheer bloody-minded determination to do exactly what was asked of him. It wasn’t that James didn’t like Kreacher. It was just that you had to learn precisely *how* to ask things of Kreacher. “House elves have to do what is asked of them by their masters. It’s just the kind of beings they are. He’s probably heading back to his cupboard, or shelf, or wherever it is he sleeps even now and trying to work out how he’s going to sleep in the middle of the morning.” James shook his head, and then realized it struck him funny. He tried not to smile, which only made it worse. Zane saw it and pointed at him.

“Ha ha! You think it’s funny, too!” He chortled.

“I can’t imagine that they have to do everything *we* ask of them.” Ralph said, his brow furrowed. “We’re just students. We don’t own the place or anything. And we’re just first years.”

“You remembered the name of the spell Sabrina used to make the Wocket look like a Rocket?” James asked, turning to Zane, impressed.

“*Visum-ineptio*.” Zane said, relishing the sound of it. “It means something like ‘eye-fooling’. If you work through the Latin, you can sort of figure it out. Horace says it just helps people see what they think they are going to see.”

James frowned. “So when that beam of light came out of the sky onto that farmer, he, sort of, *expected* to see an alien spaceship?”

“Sure. *Everybody* knows that a beam of light, at night, out in the middle of nowhere means the little green guys are coming.”

“You’re a strange guy, Zane.” Ralph said, not unappreciatively.

Just then, James sensed someone standing behind him. All three of them turned, looking up. It was the Slytherin girl from the previous night, the one who’d led the applause for James before his sorting. She was looking down at him with a pleasant, vaguely indulgent expression. She was flanked by two other Slytherins, a boy with handsome, rather sharp features whose smile showed an awful load of teeth, and another girl, who wasn’t smiling. Heat rushed to James’s cheeks as he remembered he was sitting at the Slytherin table. Before he could think, he scrambled to get up, a chunk of toast still sticking out of his mouth.

“No, no!” The pretty Slytherin girl said, raising her hand toward him, palm out, stopping him in his tracks almost as if she’d used magic. “Don’t stand. I’m happy to see you feel comfortable enough to sit at the Slytherin table with us. These are quite different times than those of your father. But I assume too much. Mr. Deedle, would you be so kind as to introduce me to your friend?”

Ralph coughed, clearing his throat in embarrassment. “Uh, this is my friend James Potter. And this is Zane. I forget his last name. Sorry.” He said the last to Zane who shrugged, grinned at Ralph, then jumped to his feet and reached across the table to shake the Slytherin girl’s hand.

“Walker. Zane Walker. It is a distinct and heartfelt pleasure to make your acquaintance, Ms...?”

The girl’s smile broadened a tiny bit and she tilted her head, still looking at Ralph.

“Oh!” Ralph said, jumping a bit. “Yes. This is, um, Tabitha Corsica. She’s a prefect in Slytherin House, a sixth year, I think. Captain of the Slytherin Quidditch Team. And the debate team. And, um... she has a really cool broom.” Having exhausted himself of everything he could think of to say about her, Ralph slumped as if exhausted.

Tabitha finally accepted Zane’s hand, holding it lightly then releasing it. “I’m glad to have officially made your acquaintances. Mr. Potter, or may I call you James?” she said, turning to him. Her voice was like silver bells and velvet, lower than James’ own, but rather beautiful. He realized she’d asked him a question, shook himself and answered.

“Yeah. Sure. James.”

“And I’d be delighted if you’d call me Tabitha.” she said, smiling as if this gesture of familiarity pleased her immensely. “I’d just like to say, on behalf of all Slytherin House, that we are glad you are among us, and we hope sincerely that any remaining...” She glanced upwards with her eyes, considering. “*prejudices* will be left in the past, where they forever belong.” She turned left and right, encompassing the two Slytherins with her. “We all have nothing but the highest respect and, yes, regard for you and your father. Can we, I hope, expect to all be friends?”

The boy on Tabitha’s right continued to smile down at James. The girl on her left studied a spot on the table somewhere between them, her face expressionless.

“S- sure. Friends. Of course.” James stammered. The silence of the rest of the hall seemed a huge thing. It swallowed his voice, made it tiny.

Tabitha’s smile warmed even further. Her green eyes twinkled. “I’m pleased that you agree. And now we will leave you to finish your, er, breakfasts. Tom? Philia?”

The three turned on the spot and swept away down the aisle.

“What did you just agree to?” Ralph asked as they stood and followed the Slytherins at a careful distance.

“I think James here has either just made a gorgeous friend or a sultry enemy.” Zane said, watching the swoop and drape of Tabitha’s robes as she turned the corner. “I can’t say for sure which I am rooting for.”

James was thinking hard. Things certainly had changed a lot since Dad’s and Mum’s day. He just couldn’t quite tell if they were, in fact, better.

The three of them spent the rest of the morning exploring the school grounds. They visited the Quidditch pitch, which looked to Zane and James remarkably different in the bright, hazy sunlight than it had in the dark. Zane’s mouth fell open when he saw a group of older students playing a scratch three-on-three Quidditch match. The players swooped in and out of formations, barely missing each other, calling out plays and occasional swear words.

“Brutal!” Zane proclaimed happily as one of the players walloped a bludger at an opposing player’s head, knocking him into a barrel-roll around his broomstick. “And *I’ve* been to a *rugby* match.”

They passed Hagrid’s cottage, which looked empty and dark, with no smoke in the chimney and the door shut tight. Shortly after, they ran into Ted Lupin and Noah Metzker, who led them to the edge of the Forbidden Forest. A gigantic, ancient-looking willow tree dominated the edge of the clearing. Ted held out his arm, stopping Ralph as he moved toward it.

“Close enough, mate,” he said. “Watch this.”

Ted loosened the mouth of a large laundry bag he’d been dragging behind him. Out of it he produced an object shaped roughly like a four-legged animal with wings and a beak. It was covered in multi-colored scraps of paper whose colors shifted and swam in the light breeze.

“No! It’s a piñata!” Zane exclaimed. “In the shape of a... a... don’t tell me! A... sphinxoraptor!”

“It’s a hippogriff,” James said, laughing.

“I like his name better,” Ralph said.

“Me too!” Noah added.

“Silence!” said Ted, raising his hand. He lifted the piñata in his other hand, hefted it, and then threw it as hard as he could into the curtain of branches hanging from the willow. It vanished into the dense foliage, and for a moment nothing else happened. Then there was a rustle among the whip-like branches. They writhed, as if something large was moving beneath them. Suddenly, the tree exploded into a violent flurry of motion. Its branches flailed wildly, slapping, groaning, and creaking. The noise it made was like a very localized windstorm. After a few seconds the piñata was caught up visibly in the branches. The tree embraced it in dozens of coiling, angry whips, and then all of the branches pulled at once. It was as if the piñata had been dropped into a blender. Shreds of multicolored paper and wizard candy exploded as the ballistics charm core of the piñata triggered. Confetti and candies peppered the tree and the surrounding clearing. The tree thrashed in apparent annoyance at the sudden colorful mess in its branches, then seemed to give up. It settled into its original shape.

Ted and Noah laughed uproariously. “Behold the death of the Sphinxoraptor!” Noah proclaimed. James had heard about the Whomping Willow, but was still impressed by both its violence and the other Gryffindors’s casualness about it. Zane and Ralph simply stared, mouths agape. Without looking, Ralph plucked an every-flavor bean out of his hair and stuck it in his mouth. He chewed meditatively for a moment, and then glanced at James. “Tastes like taco! Cool!”

James separated himself from the group a little later and made his way up the stairs to the landing outside the Gryffindor common room.

“Password,” the Fat lady sang out as he approached.

“*Genisolaris*.” He replied, hoping it hadn’t changed already.

“Proceed,” the painting answered, swinging open.

The common room was empty, the fireplace cold. James ascended to the sleeping chamber and headed for his bed. He was already feeling a warm sense of belonging in this room, even in its dozing, mid-day emptiness. The beds had been neatly made. Nobby, James’s huge brown barn owl, was sleeping in his cage with his head tucked under his wing. James flopped onto the bed, pulled a sheaf of parchment and a quill to him, and began to write, being careful not to spill ink onto the blankets.

*Dear Mum and Dad,*

*Arrived last night with no problems. Met some cool new friends so far. Ralph turned out to be a Slytherin, which I’d have never guessed. Zane is a Ravenclaw, and he’s about as crazy as Uncle George. They’re both Muggle-born, so I’m learning a lot even though classes haven’t started yet. With their help, Muggle studies should be a breeze. Ted showed us the Whomping Willow, but we didn’t get too close, Mum. Some new teachers here. Saw Neville yesterday but didn’t have a chance to give him your greeting. Oh, and a delegation of American wizards and such is arriving later today. Should be interesting since Zane is from the States himself. Long story. More later.*

*Your son,*

*James*

*P.S. I’m a Gryffindor!*

James smiled proudly as he folded and sealed the letter. He’d debated about the best way to announce his House to Mum and Dad (and everybody else, since they’d all be waiting to hear about it from his parents), and had decided that just saying it straight up would be best. Anything else would have seemed either too casual or unnecessarily grand.

“Hey Nobby,” James whispered. The bird raised its head halfway, revealing one great orange eye. “Got a message for you to deliver. How about a nice fly home, hmm?”

Nobby stretched, ruffled his feathers so that he seemed to double in size for a moment, and then stuck out his leg. James opened Nobby’s cage and attached the letter. The owl sidled carefully to the window, unfolded his wings, hunched, and then launched himself easily into the bright daylight beyond the window. James, feeling almost absurdly happy, watched until Nobby was a speck between the distant blue mountain peaks. Whistling, he turned and ran noisily down the stairs.

He had lunch at the Gryffindor table in the Great Hall and then met up afterwards with Zane and Ralph as the rest of the school began to assemble in the main courtyard. A small student orchestra had assembled to play the American national anthem upon the arrival of the United States delegation. The cacophony as they tuned their instruments was deafening. Zane commented with conviction that it was the first time he'd ever heard *the Star Spangled Banner* played on bagpipes and accordion. Students milled and congregated, filling the courtyard. Finally, Professor Longbottom and another Professor who James didn't know yet began to move among the crowd, pressing the students into orderly arrangements along the walls. James, Zane and Ralph found themselves near the great front gates, watching for the arrival of the Americans with growing anticipation. James remembered the stories his parents had told of the arrival of the Beauxbatons and Durmstrang delegations back when the Tri-Wizard Tournament had been held at Hogwarts: the gigantic horses and flying carriage of the one and the mysterious submarine galleon of the other. He couldn't help wondering how the Americans might choose to arrive.

The gathered throng watched and waited, voices hushed. The student orchestra stood on a small tiered grandstand, instruments held at the ready, blinking in the hazy afternoon sunlight. Headmistress McGonagall and the rest of the teaching staff stood watching the sky, arranged along the portico which led into the main hall.

Finally, someone pointed and voices called out. All eyes turned, straining. James squinted into the golden haze over the distant mountain peaks. A dot resolved, growing larger as it approached. As he watched, two more became visible, closely following the first. Sounds drifted into the courtyard, apparently coming from the approaching objects. James glanced at Zane, who shrugged, obviously mystified. The sound was a low, droning roar, growing quickly louder. The objects must have been moving at a great speed because they were already swooping down, taking on shape as they approached the courtyard. The sound of them became lower, vibrating, a beating thrum as of giant insect wings. James watched as the objects slowed appreciably, lowering to meet their shadows on the courtyard lawn.

"Cool!" Zane called out over the sound of them. "They're cars!"

James had heard about his grandfather Weasley's enchanted Ford Anglia, flown once by his dad and uncle Ron to Hogwarts, where it took refuge in the Forbidden Forest and was never seen again. These weren't like that at all. One difference was that, unlike the photos James had seen of the Anglia, these cars were shiny and immaculate, with chrome accents throwing darts of sunlight all around the courtyard. The other difference, which produced a sustained sigh of appreciation from the gathered Hogwartsians, was the wings which folded out of the rear half of each vehicle. They were exactly like giant insect wings, thrumming loudly, catching the sunlight in blurring rainbow-colored fans.

"That's a Dodge Hornet!" Zane called, pointing at the first one as it landed. Its front wheels touched down first and rolled slightly forward as the rest of the car settled behind them. It had two doors, and was a fierce yellow color, with long wasp-like wings. The second, according to Zane, who seemed to be an expert on the subject, was a Stutz Dragonfly. It was bottle-green, low and long, with swooping fenders and chrome pipes curling from its tapered hood. Its wings were also long and tapered, making a deep,



beating drone James could feel in his chest. Finally, the last one landed, and James didn't need Zane to identify it. Even he knew what a Volkswagen Beetle was. Its bulbous body rocked back and forth as the flaming red car descended, its stubby wings thrumming underneath two hard outer wings which were unfolded from the back of the car just like a real beetle. It settled onto its wheels as if they were landing gear, and the wings stopped thrumming, folded delicately, and disappeared beneath the hard outer wings, which closed over them.

The Hogwartians erupted into a great, exhilarated cheer at the same moment that the orchestra began to play the anthem. Behind James, a girl's voice scoffed over the noise, "Americans and their machines."

Zane turned to her. "That last one's German. I'd have thought you'd known that." He grinned at her, then turned away, enjoying the applause.

As the Hogwarts band plodded its way through the anthem, the doors of the cars opened and the American delegation began to emerge. Three identically dressed adult wizards appeared first, one from each car. They wore dark, thigh-length grey-green cloaks, black vests over high white collars, and loose grey pants that gathered just above their white socks and shiny black shoes. They stood for half a minute, blinking and frowning about them as if surveying the crowd. Apparently satisfied with the security level of the courtyard, the men stepped away from the open doors of each vehicle and assumed guard positions nearby. James could see a bit into the open door of the nearest car, the Beetle, and wasn't surprised at the disproportionately large and sumptuous interior. Figures moved inside, and then the view was blocked as they began to climb out of the car.

The number of figures that emerged from the cars surprised even James, who'd camped inside wizard tents on many occasions and knew how flexible wizard spaces could be. Porters in burgundy cloaks moved to the boots of each vehicle, producing small flat carts and unloading innumerable trunks and cases onto them, forming dizzying, swaying piles. Young wizards and witches in surprisingly casual robes, some even wearing jeans and sunglasses, began to fill the center of the courtyard. Official-looking adult witches and wizards followed, their light grey cloaks and charcoal tunics identifying them as the members of the American Department of Magical Administration. They gravitated, smiling, hands outstretched, toward the portico, where Headmistress McGonagall and the staff were descending to meet them.

The last to emerge from the cars were also adults, although their variety of dress and ages implied they were neither department officials nor students. James guessed these were the teachers of Alma Aleron, the American wizarding school. There appeared to be one per car. The one nearest, climbing from the Beetle, was as stout as a barrel, with long grey hair parted to frame a pleasant, blocky face. He wore tiny square glasses and smiled with an air of vaguely arrogant benevolence at the Hogwartians. Something about him rang a faint bell in James's memory, but he couldn't quite place it. James turned, looking for the second professor, and found him emerging from the Stutz Dragonfly. He was very tall, white-haired, with a long, gray face, unsmiling and severe. He surveyed the crowd, his bushy black eyebrows working on the slab of his forehead like a pair of caterpillars. A porter appeared next to him and held out a black leather case. Without

looking, the professor grasped the handles of the case in a great knobby-knuckled hand and moved forward, approaching the portico like a ship under full sail.

"I'm making it my New Year's resolution to avoid any classes with that guy." Zane said gravely. Ralph and James nodded.

James found the third professor from Alma Aleron just as she was climbing slowly, imperiously out of the Dodge Hornet. She raised herself to her full height and turned her head slowly, as if examining each face in the crowd. James gasped, and without thinking, ducked down behind Ralph's bulky form as her gaze moved over the crowd. Carefully, he peeked over Ralph's shoulder.

"What're you doing?" Ralph asked, straining to see James out of the corner of his eye.

James squinted through the crowd over Ralph's shoulder. The woman wasn't looking at him at all. She didn't appear to be looking at anything, precisely, despite the scrutinizing expression on her face. "That tall lady over there. The one with the scarf tied down over her head. I saw her the other night on the lake!"

Zane stood on tiptoe. "The one over there that looks like a gypsy mummy?"

"Yeah." James said, suddenly feeling foolish. The scarfed lady looked a lot older than he remembered. Her eyes were a dull grey, her dark face bony and lined. A porter handed her a large wooden cane and she accepted it with a nod. She began to make her way across the crowded courtyard slowly, tapping the cane ahead of her as if feeling her way.

"Looks to me like she's blind as the proverbial bat," Zane said doubtfully. "Maybe it was an alligator you saw in the lake instead of her. It'd be an easy mistake."

"You guys know who that other teacher is?" Ralph suddenly interjected in a low, awed voice, indicating the stout man in the square spectacles. "That's...! That's...! He's the five... no! Wait, the fifty...!" He babbled.

Zane looked at the portico, frowning. "The little dude with the John Lennon glasses and the weird little ruffled collar?"

"Yes!" Ralph rasped excitedly, beckoning to Zane as if trying to pull the man's name out of his head. "That's... oh, whosname! He's money!"

"How surprisingly hip of you to say so, Ralph." Zane said, slapping Ralph on the back.

Just then, Professor McGonagall touched her wand to her throat and spoke, magnifying her voice so that it echoed throughout the courtyard. "Students, faculty and staff of Hogwarts, please join me in welcoming the representatives of Alma Aleron and the United States Department of Magical Administration."

Another burst of perfunctory applause filled the courtyard. Someone in the student orchestra, mistaking the announcement as a cue, began to play the American anthem again. Three or four other

musicians joined in, hurriedly trying to catch up, before they were silenced by Professor Flitwick's frantic waving.

"Esteemed guests of Hogwarts," the headmistress continued, nodding at the crowd of newcomers. "Thank you for joining us. We all look greatly forward to a year of mutual learning and cultural exchange with such long-standing and steadfast allies as our friends from the United States. And now, representatives from Alma Aleron, if you would be so kind as to step forward so that we may introduce you to your new pupils."

James assumed that the tall professor with the steely features would be the leader, but this was not so. The stout wizard with the square glasses approached the portico and bowed gallantly to the headmistress. He turned and addressed the crowd without using his wand, his clear tenor voice carrying expertly, as if speaking in public was something he was quite used to.

"Students of Hogwarts, faculty and friends, thank you for such a warm welcome. We've come to expect no less, though I assure you that we require nothing so grand." He smiled and winked to the crowd. "We are thrilled to be a part of your schooling this year, and let me assure you that the learning will certainly go both ways. I could, at this point, stand up here in the sun and regale you with endlessly impressive anecdotes of all the assorted similarities and differences between the European and American magical worlds, and I promise that such a diatribe would be, of course, endlessly engaging..." Again the smile and the feeling of a mutual, inside joke. "But as I can see that my own delegation of students are eager to rid themselves as quickly as possible of our administration for the afternoon, I can only assume that the same is true of our new Hogwarts friends. Thus, I shall merely provide the necessary introductions so that you may know who will be teaching what, and then release you all to your assorted devices."

"I like this guy already," James heard Ted say from somewhere behind him.

"In no particular order," the stout wizard called out, "Let me introduce Mr. Theodore Hirshall Jackson, professor of Technomancy and Applied Magic. He is also a three-star general in the Salem-Dirgus Free Militia, so I'd advise you all to call him 'sir' as many times as possible whenever you address him."

Professor Jackson's face was as impassive as granite, as if he had long since grown impervious to his associate's joking. He bowed slowly and gracefully, his chin raised and his dark eyes hovering somewhere over the crowd.

"Next to him," the stout professor continued, gesturing expansively with one arm. "Professor of Divination, Advanced Enchantments, and Remote Parapsychology, Desdemona Delacroix. She also makes a rather, er, *intimidatingly* delicious gumbo, although you'll consider yourselves very fortunate indeed if you are allowed to taste it."

The dark woman with the scarf over her hair smiled at the speaker, and the smile transformed her face from that of a skeletal hag to something resembling a desiccated but pleasantly mischievous grandmother. She turned and her blind eyes roved, unfocussed, over the crowd, crinkling as she smiled. James wondered

how he could have thought that blind, milky gaze had been the same one he'd seen piercing him through the darkness across the lake the evening before. Besides, she'd just arrived, he reasoned. She couldn't even have been there the night before.

"And finally," the stout professor said, "last and quite possibly least, allow me to introduce myself. Your new defense against the dark arts teacher, head of the Alma Aleron Debate team, and unofficial but very willing Wizard Chess contender, Benjamin Amadeus Franklyn, at your service." He bowed deeply, arms wide, his stringy gray hair drooping.

"That's who I was trying to think of!" Ralph whispered harshly. "He's on your money, you goon!" He elbowed Zane in the ribs, nearly knocking the smaller boy off his feet.

Minutes later, James, Zane and Ralph were pounding up the stairs toward the Ravenclaw common room.

"Benjamin Franklyn?" Zane repeated disbelievingly. "That can't be the original Ben Franklyn. He'd be..." He thought for a moment, frowning. "Well, I don't know how old, but he'd be really, really old. Crazy old. Older than McGonagall even. No way."

Ralph wheezed, trying to keep up. "I'm telling you, I think these wizard types—*us* wizard types--have ways of sticking around for a long time. It's not all that surprising when you think about it. Ben Franklyn almost seems like a wizard when you read about him in the Muggle history books. I mean, the guy caught lightning with a key on a kite string."

James was thoughtful. "I remember my aunt Hermione telling me about some old wizard they learned about in their first year. Nicholas Flannel or something. He'd made a sort of stone that made him live forever, or close to it. Of course, it was the sort of thing that always seemed to be falling into the wrong hands, so eventually he destroyed it and ended up dying just like everybody else. Still, I think there probably are lots of ways for witches and wizards to prolong life for a long time, even without Flannel's stone. "

"Maybe you should get his autograph on one of your hundred dollar bills." Ralph mused to Zane.

"I don't have any hundreds. I gave my last five to that elf doorman downstairs. It was all I had."

"He wasn't a doorman!" James tried again to convince Zane.

"Well? He got the door for us." Zane said placidly.

"Ralph knocked him over when he shoved it open! He wasn't trying to open it *for* us!"

"Well I'm out of money anyway. I just hope the service doesn't suffer."

Zane stopped in front of the door to the Ravenclaw common room. The eagle door knocker spoke in a high, trilling voice. "What is the significance of the hat in magical mastery?"

"Ahh, sheesh, these are supposed to be the easy ones." Zane complained.

"Are you sure it's all right for us to go in there?" Ralph said, shuffling his feet. "What're the rules for hanging out in common rooms other than your own?"

"There aren't any rules about it that I know of," James said. "I just don't think people do it much." This didn't seem to ease Ralph's mind. He looked up and down the corridor fretfully.

"The hat... the hat..." Zane mumbled, staring at his shoes. "Hat, hat, hat. Rabbit out of a hat. You pull things out of a hat. It's probably like a metaphor or something. You wear a hat on your head... your brain's in your head, under the hat. Ummm..."

He snapped his fingers and looked up at the eagle door knocker. "You can't pull anything out of a hat that you haven't already put in your head?"

"Crude, but close enough." The doorknocker replied. The door clicked and swung open.

"Wow!" James said, following Zane into the common room. "And your parents are Muggles?"

"Well, like I said, my dad makes movies, and my mom has E.S.P. about anything I try to sneak past her, so I assume I am unusually prepared for the magical world." Zane said in an off-hand manner. "So. This is the Ravenclaw common room. Not an electric light or a Coke machine in sight. We do have a really cool statue, though, and a talking fireplace. Saw my dad in it last night. He's adapting to all of this a little too well, if you ask me."

Zane toured them through the Ravenclaw rooms, apparently making up details whenever he didn't know them. Ralph and Zane tried to teach James how to play gin rummy with a deck of Muggle playing cards, but James couldn't get interested in King, Queen and Jack cards that didn't actually attack one another. When they got bored, Ralph took them to the Slytherin common room, leading them through a maze of dark, torch-lit cellar passages. They stopped at a large door that dominated the end of a corridor. Set in the middle of the door was a brass sculpture of a coiling snake, its wedge-shaped head protruding menacingly, open-mouthed.

“Oh, yeah.” Ralph muttered. He shook back his sleeve, revealing a new ring on his right hand. The ring was set with a large green emerald, shaped like an eye with a slit pupil. Ralph pressed it carefully into one of the snake’s eye sockets. The other socket glared to life, glowing green.

“Who sssseeks entry?” The snake’s head said in a thin, hissing voice.

“Me. Ralph Deedle. Slytherin, first year.”

The glowing green eye flicked over James and Zane. “And thessssse?”

“My friends. I, uh, I can vouch for them.”

The glowing eye studied Zane then James for an uncomfortably long time, and then finally winked out. A series of complicated ratchets, clicks and clanks came from within the door. It swung ponderously open.

The Slytherin rooms occupied a large, gothic space carved from beneath the lake. Thick, stained glass windows in the vaulted ceilings looked up through the depths of the lake, making the filtered sunlight flicker greenly on the glass portraits of Salazar Slytherin and his progeny. Even Ralph seemed jumpy as he showed them around. Only a few other students were in the common room, draped over the furnishings with extravagant indolence. They followed Zane and James with their eyes, smiling cryptically but apparently without malice. Ralph stiffly mumbled greetings.

The Slytherin sleeping quarters felt to James like someplace a very tasteful and wealthy pirate captain might sleep. The room was wide, with a sunken floor and low ceilings hung with gargoyle head lanterns. The large beds were mahogany with great square pillars at each corner. The Slytherin House crest hung on curtains at the end of each bed. The three boys clambered onto Ralph’s immaculately made bed.

“These guys are pretty hard-core,” Ralph admitted in a low voice, indicating the owners of the other beds. “To tell you the truth, I feel a little out of place here. I like the Ravenclaw rooms better.”

“I don’t know,” Zane said, looking around the room admiringly. “They sure have a flair for decorating. Although it’d be hard to sleep with all those stuffed animal heads on the walls. Is that one a dragon?”

“Yes,” Ralph replied, his voice strained and terse. “These guys bring them from their houses. They have families that actually go out dragon hunting.”

James frowned. “I thought dragon hunting was illegal.”

“Yeah,” Ralph whispered severely, “That’s the thing, isn’t it? These guys’ families have hunting preserves where they can go shoot just about anything! That over there is the skull of a unicorn. Still has the horn on it, although they said it isn’t the real horn. The real horn is too valuable for magical uses to leave hanging on the wall. And that thing back behind Tom’s bed is a house elf head! They put them on the wall

when they knock ‘em off! And I swear it looks at me sometimes!” Ralph shuddered, and then seemed to decide he’d said too much. He pressed his mouth into a thin line and looked from James to Zane and back.

“Yeah, it is pretty creepy,” James admitted, deciding not to tell Ralph any of the things he’d heard about how some of the Slytherin families lived. “Still, I expect it’s mostly just for show.”

“What’s that?” Zane said suddenly, pouncing forward on the bed. “Is that a GameDeck? It is! And you’ve got the wireless uplink for online competition and everything!” He rummaged into a duffle bag at the end of Ralph’s bed, pulling out a small black box about the size and shape of the deck of cards they’d been playing with earlier. It had a tiny screen set into the front, with a mind-boggling array of buttons beneath it. “What games do you have for it? Do you have *Armageddon Master Three*?”

“No!” Ralph rasped, grabbing the tiny machine away from Zane. “And don’t let anybody else see this thing! They flip out about stuff like this.”

Zane was incredulous. “What? Why?”

“How should I know? What’s the deal with wizards and electronic stuff?” Ralph addressed the question to James, who frowned and shrugged.

“I don’t know. Mostly, we just don’t need it. Electronic stuff, like computers and phones, are just Muggle things. We do what we need to do with magic, I guess.”

Ralph was shaking his head. “That’s not how these guys act about it. They talked about it like I’d brought something nasty to school with me. Told me if I meant to be a real Slytherin I needed to abandon all my false magic and machines.”

“False magic?” Zane asked, glancing at James.

“Yeah,” he sighed. “That’s what some wizarding families think of Muggle electronics and machines. They say those things are just cheap knockoffs of what real wizards do. They think any wizards who use Muggle machines are traitors to their magical heritage or something.”

“Yeah, that’s pretty much what they told me.” Ralph nodded. “They were, like, *passionate* about it! I hid my stuff right away. I figure I’ll give it all to Dad at the next break.”

Zane made a low whistle. “I’ll bet your orthodox wizard types didn’t like seeing my guys landing today in those hunks of rolling iron. You can’t get much more machine-y than a Dodge Hornet.”

James considered this. “Yeah, they might not like it very much, but there’s a difference between electronics and clockwork. They think of cars as just a bunch of cogs and pistons. They aren’t so much false magic as just unnecessarily complicated tools. It’s the computers and stuff they really hate.”

“I’ll say,” Ralph breathed, looking down at his GameDeck, and then stuffing it back into his duffle bag. He sighed. “Let’s get out of here. Dinner’s soon and I’m starved.”

“Are you ever full, Ralph?” Zane asked as they jumped off the bed.

“I’m big-boned.” Ralph said automatically, as if he’d said it many times before. “It’s a glandular problem. Shut up.”

“Just asking,” Zane said, raising his hands. “Frankly, around here, I like the idea of having a friend who is the size of a Dumpster.”

At dinner, the three of them sat together at the Gryffindor table. James was a little worried about it until Ted appeared and slapped Zane on the back affectionately. “Our little Ravenclaw imp. How’s life in the second best House on campus?” After that, James noticed that Zane and Ralph weren’t the only students to sit down at other House tables.

After dinner they discussed the following day’s schedules. Zane would be joining James for his Technomancy class with Professor Jackson, and Ralph would be with James in Defense Against the Dark Arts. The boys explored the library, hovering outside the forbidden books section for a while until the librarian shooed them away with a stern warning. Finally, they said their goodnights and went their different ways.

“See you tomorrow with Professor Stonewall!” Zane, who had a unique predisposition for nick-naming teachers, called as he climbed the staircase to the Ravenclaw common room.

Entering his own rooms, James found Ted seated on the couch with his arm slung casually around Petra. Sabrina and Damian were at a nearby table, arguing quietly over some papers spread on the table between them.

“Ready for school tomorrow, Junior?” Ted piped as James joined them.

“Yeah! I think so.”

“You’ll do fine,” Ted said reassuringly. “First year is mostly wand-practice and theory. Wait until you get to fourth year and professor Trelawney.”

“At least we get to dilute Trelawney with that new bag of bones from the States.” Petra said.

James raised his eyebrows. “How do you mean?”

Ted answered, “Looks like they’ll be dividing the class. Last year it was Trelawney and Firenze, the centaur, but he’s gone this year, moved back with the valley centaurs in Greyhaven. So this year it’s Trelawney and the voodoo queen, Madame Delacroix.”

“I imagine they’ll be best of friends,” Damian announced philosophically. “Like peas in a pod. Like powdered dragon eggshell and mandrake sap.”



James blinked, but before he could ask Damian what he meant, Ted shook his head, smiling wickedly. “Use your imagination, mate.”

A few minutes later, James detached himself from the group and climbed up to the sleeping quarters. He felt a pleasant mix of nervousness and excitement about the next day. For a moment, he simply stood in the moonlit room, soaking up the thrill of being there, being a Gryffindor, and starting his studies. He had a momentary, dizzying sense of the adventures and challenges he’d be facing in the coming years, and in that moment he wished he could jump ahead, and take them all on at once.

Noah appeared from the tiny washroom. He glanced at James before flinging himself onto his bed. “We all feel that way sometimes,” he said, as if he’d read James’s thoughts. “Wait until tomorrow evening and you’ll be back to normal. A good dose of lectures and homework does it to the best of us.” And he blew out the candle by his bed.

