

James Potter

AND THE HALL
OF ELDERS' CROSSING



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Based upon the characters and worlds of J.K. Rowling

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*Then I have an ivory chair high to sit upon,
Almost like my father's chair, which is an ivory throne;
There I sit uplift and upright, there I sit alone.*

- Christina Rossetti



1. SHADOW OF LEGENDS

James Potter moved slowly along the narrow aisles of the train, peering as nonchalantly as he could into each compartment. To those inside, he probably looked as if he was searching for someone, some friend or group of confidantes with whom to pass the time during the trip, and this was intentional. The last thing that James wanted anyone to notice was that, despite the bravado he had so recently displayed with his younger brother Albus on the platform, he was nervous. His stomach knotted and churned as if he'd had half a bite of one of uncles Ron and George's puking pastilles. He opened the folding door at the end of the passenger car and stepped carefully through the passage into the next one. The first compartment was full of girls. They were talking animatedly to one another, already apparently the best of friends despite the fact that, most likely, they had only just met. One of them glanced up and saw him staring. He quickly looked away, pretending to peer out the window behind them, toward the station which still sat bustling with activity. Feeling his cheeks go a little red, he continued down the corridor. If only Rose was a year older she'd be here with him. She was a girl, but she was his cousin and they'd grown up together. It would've been nice to have at least one familiar face along with him.

Of course, Ted and Victoire were also on the train. Ted, a seventh year, had been so quickly absorbed into a noisy throng of returning friends and classmates that he'd barely had time to wave and wink at James before disappearing into a crammed compartment from which emanated the thump of music on a sleek new wireless. Victoire had invited him to sit with her during the trip, but James wasn't as comfortable with her as he was with Rose, and didn't relish the idea of listening to her prattle on with the four other girls in her compartment about pixie powder blushes and hair care charms. Being part Veela, Victoire had never

had any problem making friends of either gender, quickly and effortlessly. Besides, something in James felt that he needed to assert himself as an individual straight off, even if the thought left him feeling nervous and lonely.

It wasn't that he was worried about going to Hogwarts, exactly. He'd been looking forward to this day for most of his life, ever since he was young enough to understand what it meant to be a wizard, ever since his Mum had told him of the school he'd one day attend, the secret school that witches and wizards attended to learn magic. He was positively itching with anticipation of his first classes, of learning to use the brand new wand that he carried proudly in his backpack. More than anything, he was looking forward to Quidditch on the Hogwarts pitch, getting on his first real broom, trying out for the team, maybe, just maybe...

But that was where his excitement began to melt into cold anxiety. His dad had been the Gryffindor seeker, the youngest one in Hogwarts' history. The best he, James, could hope for was to match that record. That's what everyone would expect of him, the first-born son of the famous hero. He remembered the story, told to him dozens of times (although never by his own dad) of how the young Harry Potter had won his first snitch by virtually jumping off his broom, catching the golden ball in his mouth and nearly swallowing it. The tellers of the tale would always laugh uproariously, delightedly, and if Dad was there, he'd smile sheepishly as they clapped him on the back. When James was four, he found that famed snitch in a shoe box in the bottom of the dining room hutch. His mum told him it'd been a gift to Dad from the old school headmaster. The tiny wings no longer worked, and the golden ball had a thin coat of dust and tarnish on it, but James was mesmerized by it. It was the first snitch he had ever seen close up. It seemed both smaller and larger than he'd imagined, and the weight of it in his small hand was surprising. *This is the famous snitch*, James thought reverently, *the one from the story, the one caught by my dad*. He asked his dad if he could keep it, stored in the shoebox when he wasn't playing with it, in his room. His dad agreed easily, happily, and James moved the shoebox from the bottom of the hutch to a spot under the head of his bed, next to his toy broom. He pretended the dark corner under his headboard was his Quidditch locker. He spent many an hour pretending to zoom and bank over the Quidditch green, chasing the fabled snitch, in the end always catching it in a fantastic diving crash, jumping up, producing his dad's tarnished snitch for the approval of roaring imaginary crowds.

But what if James couldn't catch the snitch, as his father had done? What if he wasn't as good on the broom? Uncle Ron had said that riding a broom was in the Potter blood as sure as dragons breathed fire, but what if James proved him wrong? What if he was slow, or clumsy, or fell off? What if he didn't even make the team? For the rest of the first years, that would only be a mild disappointment. Even though the rules had been changed to admit them, very few first years ever made the House teams. For James, however, that would mean he already hadn't measured up to expectations. He would already have failed to be as great as the great Harry Potter. And if he couldn't even measure up to his dad in terms of something as elemental as Quidditch, how could he ever hope to live up to the legend of the boy who defeated the Basilisk, won the Tri-Wizard Cup, united the Deathly Hallows and, oh yeah, put old Moldy Voldy, the darkest and most dangerous wizard who ever lived, in the ground for good?

The train gave a protracted, noisy lurch. Outside, the conductor's voice called for the doors to be shut. James stopped in the corridor, suddenly overcome by a cold certainty that the worst had already happened, he had already failed miserably even before he'd begun to try. He felt a deep, sudden stab of homesickness and blinked back tears, looking quickly into the next compartment. There were two boys inside, neither talking, both looking out the window as platform nine and three quarters began to slip slowly past. James opened the door and blundered in quickly, hoping to see his family outside the window, feeling an enormous need to make eye contact with them one last time before it was too late. His own reflection in the glass, lit by the hard morning sun, blotted the view of the crowd outside. There were so many people; he would never find them in that throng. He scanned the crowd desperately anyway. And then there they were. They were just where he'd left them, a tiny knot of people standing still in the milling faces, like rocks in a stream. They didn't see him, didn't know where he was in the train. Uncle Bill and aunt Fleur were waving to a point further back on the train, apparently mouthing goodbyes to Victoire. Dad and Mum stood smiling somewhat wistfully at the train, scanning the windows. Albus stood next to Dad, and Lily held Mum's hand, transfixed by the gigantic crimson engine as it chuffed great bursts of steam and hissed and rang, picking up speed. And then Mum's eye caught James and her face lit up. She said something and Dad turned, looked, and found him. They both waved, smiling proudly. Mum wiped her eye with one hand, held up Lily's hand with the other, waving it to James. James didn't smile back, but watched them and felt a bit better anyway. They receded backward as if they were on a conveyer belt, more faces, more waving hands and milling bodies coming between them. James watched until they all vanished behind a wall at the end of the platform, then he sighed, dropped his backpack onto the floor and plopped into a seat.

Several minutes of silence went by as James watched London scroll past the windows. The city thinned into crowded suburbs and industrial areas, all looking busy and purposeful in the bright morning sunlight. He wondered, as he sometimes did, what life was like as a non-magical person, and for once he envied them, going to their non-magical, less intimidating (or so he thought) schools and jobs. Finally he turned his attention to the two other boys sharing his compartment. One was seated on the same side as him, closer to the door. He was big, with a squarish head and short dark hair. He was flipping avidly through an illustrated booklet called "*Elemental Magic: What to Know for the New Witch and Wizard*". James had seen copies of these being sold from a small stall on the platform. On the cover, a good-looking teenaged wizard in school robes was winking as he conjured a series of objects from a trunk. He had just produced a full-sized tree with cheeseburgers for fruit when the boy flipped the cover backwards and settled in to read one of the articles. James turned his attention to the boy across from him, who was looking at him openly, smiling.

"I've got a cat." said the boy, unexpectedly. James blinked at him, and then noticed the box sitting on the seat next to the boy. It had a hinged grate for a door and a small black and white cat could be seen inside, lounging and licking its forepaw. "You aren't allergic to cats, are you?" the boy asked James earnestly.

"Oh. No," James replied, "I don't think so. My family has a dog, but my aunt Hermione has a big old carpet of a cat. I've never had a problem with it."

“That’s good.” the boy answered matter-of-factly. He had an American accent that James found a little amusing. “My mom and dad are both allergic to cats so we could never have one, but I like them. When I saw that I could bring a cat, I knew that was what I wanted. This is Thumbs. He has extra toes, see? One on each paw. It’s not particularly magical, I suppose, but it makes him interesting. What’d you bring?”

“I’ve got an owl. He’s been in the family for a few years. A big old barn owl with plenty of miles on him. I wanted a frog but my dad says a boy should start school with an owl. He says there’s no more useful animal for a first year, but I think he just wanted me to have one because he had one. “

The boy grinned happily. “So your dad is a wizard too? Mine isn’t. Neither is my Mom. I’m the first in my family. We just found out about the magical world last year. I could hardly believe it! I always thought magic was the sort of thing that happened at little kids’ birthday parties. Guys in tall black hats pulling silver dollars out of your ear. Stuff like that. Wow! Have you known you were a wizard all your life?”

“Pretty much. It’s hard to miss when your first memories are of your grandparents arriving for Christmas morning via the fireplace.” James answered, watching the boy’s eyes widen. “Of course it never seemed strange to me at all, you know. It was just life.”

The boy whistled appreciatively. “That’s wild and crazy! Lucky you! Anyway, my name’s Zane Walker. I’m from the States, if you haven’t guessed. My dad is working in England for the year, though. He works on movies, which isn’t as exciting as it sounds. I’ll probably be going to the wizarding school in America next year, but it looks like it’s Hogwarts for me this year, which is fine by me, although if they try to give me any more kidneys or fish for breakfast I think I’ll blow a gasket. Good to meet you.” He finished in a rush, and reached across the compartment to shake James’s hand in a gesture that was so guileless and automatic that James almost laughed. He shook Zane’s hand happily, relieved to have so quickly made an acquaintance. “I’m happy to meet you, too, Zane. My name’s Potter. James Potter.”

Zane sat back and looked at James, tilting his head curiously. “Potter. James Potter?” He repeated. James felt a small, familiar surge of pride and satisfaction. He was used to being recognized, even if he pretended to not always like it. Zane made a sort of quizzical half frown, half grin. “Where’s Q, double-oh-seven?”

James faltered. “Excuse me?”

“What? Oh, sorry,” Zane said, his expression changing to one of bemusement, “Thought you were making a James Bond joke. Hard to tell with that accent.”

“James who?” James said, feeling that the conversation was slipping away from him. “And what accent? *You’re* the one with the accent!”

“You’re last name’s Potter?” This came from the third boy in the compartment. He’d lowered his booklet a little.

“Yes. James Potter.”

“Potter!” Zane said in a fairly ridiculous attempt at an English accent. “James Potter!” He raised his fist next to his face, index finger pointed toward the ceiling like a pistol

“Are you related to this Harry Potter kid?” said the bigger boy, ignoring Zane. “Only I’m reading about him right here in this ‘brief history of the magical world’ article. Seems like he was a pretty big deal.”

“He’s not a kid anymore,” James laughed. “He’s my dad. He’s less of a big deal when you see him eating Wheatabix in his boxers each morning.” This wasn’t technically true, but it always put people at ease to think they’d gotten a mental glimpse of the great Harry Potter in a candid moment. The large boy raised his eyebrows, frowning slightly. “Wow! Cool. Says here he defeated the most dangerous evil wizard ever. Some guy named, umm...” He glanced down at the booklet, scanning it. “It’s right here somewhere. Volda-whatsit or something.”

“Yeah, it’s true.” James said. “But really, now he’s just my dad. That was a long time ago.” But the other boy had turned his attention to Zane.

“You’re Muggle-born, too?” he asked. Zane looked baffled for a moment. “What? I’m what-born?”

“Non-magical parents. Like me.” said the bigger boy seriously. “I’m trying to learn the language. My dad says it’s important to get a handle on the basics straight off. He’s a Muggle, but he’s already read *Hogwarts: a History* cover to cover. He quizzed me on it the whole ride in. Ask me a question. Anything.” He glanced back and forth between Zane and James.

James raised his eyebrows at Zane, who frowned and shook his head. “Um. What’s seven times forty-three?”

The bigger boy rolled his eyes and slumped in his seat. “I *meant* about Hogwarts and the wizarding world.”

“I’ve got a new wand.” Zane said, abandoning the bigger boy and turning to dig in his pack. “It’s made of birch, with a unicorn tail in it or something. Can’t get it to do squat, yet. Not for lack of effort, though, I’ll tell you that.” He turned, flourishing the wand, which was wrapped in yellow cloth.

“I’m Ralph, by the way.” said the bigger boy, putting aside his booklet. “Ralph Deedle. I just got my wand yesterday. It’s made of willow, with a Himalayan yeti whisker core.”

James glanced at him. “A what?”

“A Himalayan yeti whisker. Very rare, according to the man we bought it from. Cost my dad twenty galleons. Which translates to a good bit, I think.” He studied Zane’s and James’s faces in turn. “Er, why?”

James raised his eyebrows. “It’s just that I’ve never heard of a Himalayan yeti.”

Ralph sat up and leaned forward earnestly. “Sure! You know what those are. Some people call them abominable snowmen. I always thought they were imaginary, you know. But then on my birthday my dad and me found out I was a wizard, and I’d always thought wizards were imaginary, too! Well, now I’m learning about all kinds of crazy things that I thought were imaginary that are turning out to be true.” He picked up his booklet again and fanned the pages with one hand, gesturing vaguely with the other.

“Just out of curiosity,” James said carefully. “Where did you buy your wand?”

Ralph grinned. “Oh, well we thought that was going to be the hard part, didn’t we? I mean, there don’t seem to be wand merchants on every corner where we come from, which is Surrey. So we got down here to the city early and followed the directions to that Diagon Alley place. No problem! There was a man right there on the street corner with a little booth.”

Zane was watching Ralph with interest.

“A little booth,” James prodded.

“Yeah! Of course, he didn’t have the wands right there in the open. He was selling maps. Dad bought one and asked directions to the best wand maker in town. My dad develops security software. For computers. Did I mention that? Anyway, he asked for the best, most state of the art wand maker. Turned out the man was an expert wand maker himself. Only makes a few a year, but keeps them special for people who really know what they are looking for. So Dad bought the best one he had.”

James was trying to keep his face straight. “The best one he had.” he repeated.

“Yeah.” Ralph confirmed. He dug in his own backpack and pulled out something about the size of a rolling pin, wrapped in brown paper.

“The one with the yeti core.” James confirmed.

Ralph suddenly glanced at him, half-way through un-wrapping the package he’d removed from his backpack. “You know, it starts sounding a little silly when you say it, doesn’t it?” he asked a bit morosely. “Ah, bugger.”

He pulled the brown paper off. It was about eighteen inches long and as thick as a broomstick. The end had been whittled to a dull point and painted lime green. They all stared at it. After a moment, Ralph looked a bit desperately at James. “It’s not really good for anything magical, is it?”

James tilted his head. “Well, it’d be a treat for killing vampires with, I’d think.”

“Yeah?” Ralph brightened.

Zane straightened and pointed to the door of the compartment. “Woo! Food! Hey James, you got any of that wacky wizard money? I’m starved.”

The old witch that operated the food cart peered into the open door of their compartment. “Anything you’d fancy, dears?”

Zane had jumped up and was looking eagerly over her wares, examining them with a serious, critical eye. He glanced back at James expectantly. “Come on, Potter, now’s your chance to welcome us Muggle-borns to the table with a little wizard generosity. All I have is an American ten dollar bill.” He turned back to the witch. “You don’t take American greenbacks, do you?”

She blinked and looked slightly aghast. “American green... excuse me?”

“Drat. I thought not.” Zane said, wiggling his up-turned palm towards James.

James dug in the pocket of his jeans, bemused and amazed at the boy’s temerity. “Wizard money isn’t like play money, you know.” he said reproachfully, but there was a smile in his voice.

Ralph looked up from his booklet again, blinking. “Did he just say ‘drat’?”

“Oooh! Look at this!” Zane cried happily. “Cauldron Cakes! And Licorice Wands! You wizards really know how to carry a metaphor. *Us* wizards, I mean. Heh!”

James paid the witch and Zane flopped back into his seat, opening a box of Licorice Wands. Assorted colors of wands were laid out in neat compartments. Zane produced a red one, brandished it, and then flicked it toward Ralph. There was a pop and a shower of tiny purple flowers peppered the front of Ralph’s tee shirt. Ralph glanced down at them.

“Better than I’ve gotten out of my own wand, yet.” Zane said, biting off the end of the wand with gusto.

James was surprised and pleased to find that he wasn’t nervous anymore, or at least not much. He opened the box containing his own chocolate frog, caught the frog in the air as it leaped out, and bit its head off. He looked down into the bottom of the box and saw the face of his dad peering up at him. “Harry Potter, the Boy Who Lived” ran the caption at the bottom of the card. He took the card out of the box and handed it to Ralph.

“Here. A little something for my new Muggle-born friend.” he said as Ralph took it. Ralph hardly noticed. He was chewing, holding up one of the tiny purple flowers. “I don’t know for sure,” he said, looking at it. “but I think these are made out of meringue.”

After the initial rush of excitement and worry, then the whirlwind of making new acquaintances, the rest of the train ride seemed remarkably mundane. James found himself in turns either acting as a tour guide for his two new friends or having their conversation explained to him wherever they centered on Muggle life and concepts. He found it incredible that they had apparently spent a great chunk of their lives watching television. Whenever they weren't watching it, it seemed that they and their friends were playing games on it, pretending to drive racing cars or go on adventures or play sports. James had, of course, heard of television and video games, but having had mostly wizard friends, he'd assumed Muggle children only engaged in those activities when there was absolutely nothing better to do. When he asked Ralph why he'd spent so much time playing sports on the television instead of playing them in real life, Ralph merely rolled his eyes, made an exasperated noise, and then looked helplessly at Zane. Zane had clapped James on the back and said, "James, buddy, it's a Muggle thing. You wouldn't understand."

James, in turn, had explained as best he could about Hogwarts and the magical world. He told them about the unplotable nature of the castle, which meant it couldn't be found on any map by anyone who didn't already know its location. He described the school Houses and explained the House points system Dad and Mum had told him about. He tried, as best he could, to explain Quidditch, which seemed to leave both of them confused and frustratingly unenthusiastic. Zane had had the ridiculous idea that only witches rode brooms, apparently based on a movie called "*The Wizard of Oz*". James tried very patiently to explain that both wizards and witches rode brooms, and that it wasn't at all "a girly thing." Zane, apparently sensing the consternation this was causing, went on to insist that all witches were supposed to have green skin and warts on their noses, and the conversation quickly deteriorated.

Just as evening was beginning to turn the sky a pale purple and silhouette the trees outside the train's windows, a tall, older boy with neatly cropped blonde hair knocked sharply on their compartment door. "Hogsmeade Station straight ahead," he said, leaning in with an air of brisk purpose. "You fellows will want to be getting your school robes on."

Zane frowned and raised his eyebrows at the boy. "We will, will we?" he asked. "It's almost seven o'clock. Are you *quite* sure?" He pronounced the word "quite" with his ridiculous English accent. The older boy's brow darkened very slightly.

"My name is Steven Metzker. Fifth year. Prefect. And you are?"

Zane jumped up, offering the boy his hand in a parody of the gesture he'd shown James at the beginning of the trip. "Walker. Zane Walker. Happy to meet you Mr. Prefect."

Steven glanced down at the proffered hand, and then decided, with an apparently great effort, to go ahead and shake it. He spoke to the compartment at large as he did so, "There will be a dinner in the Great Hall promptly upon your arrival on the school grounds. School robes are required. I will assume by your accent, Mr. Walker," he said, retracting his hand and looking bracingly at Zane, "That dressing for dinner is a relatively new concept. No doubt you'll catch on fast." He caught James' eye, dropped a quick wink, and then disappeared down the corridor.

“No doubt I shall,” Zane said cheerfully.

James helped Ralph and Zane make sense of their robes. Ralph had put his on backwards, making him look to James like the youngest cleric he’d ever seen. Zane, liking the look, had turned his around on purpose, proclaiming that if it wasn’t the style yet, it soon would be. Only when James had insisted that it would be disrespectful to the school and teachers did Zane reluctantly agree to turn it back around.

James had been told repeatedly and in great detail what would happen when they arrived. He knew about Hogsmeade Station, had even been there a few times when he was very young, although he had no memories of it. He knew about the boats which would ferry them across the lake, and had seen dozens of pictures of the castle. Still, he discovered that none of that had quite prepared him for the grandness and solemnity of it. As the tiny boats glided across the lake, drawing V-shaped wakes on the glassy water, James stared with a kind of wonder that was perhaps even greater than that felt by those with him, who hadn’t come believing they knew what to expect. The sheer bulk of the castle amazed him as it rambled and clumped on the great rocky hilltop. It soared upwards in turrets and ramparts, each structural detail lit on one side by the blue of the approaching night, on the other by the golden rose of the setting sun. A galaxy of windows dotted the castle, glowing a warm yellow on the shaded sides, glittering like sunfire on the lit. The massiveness and weight of the sight seemed to press down on James with a pleasant awe, going straight through him and down, down, into its own reflection deep in the mirror of the lake.

There was one detail he hadn’t expected, however. Halfway across the lake, just as conversation had begun to spring up again among the new students and they began to hoot excitedly and call to each other across the water, James noticed another boat on the lake. Unlike the ones he and his fellow first years’ rode in, it wasn’t lit by a lantern. Nor was it approaching the castle. It was pointed away from the lights of Hogwarts, a larger boat than his own, but still small enough to be nearly lost in the dim shadows at the edge of the lake. There was one person in it, lanky and thin, almost spiderlike. James thought it looked like a woman. Just as he was about to turn away and forget the decidedly unremarkable sight, the figure looked up at him, suddenly, as if aware of his curiosity. In the darkening light, he was almost sure their eyes met, and a totally unexpected coldness came over him. It was indeed a woman. Her skin was dark, her face bony, hard, with high cheeks and a sharp chin. A scarf was tied down neatly over her head, hiding most of her hair. The look on her face as she watched him watch her wasn’t frightened or angry. Her face didn’t seem to have any expression at all, in fact. And then she vanished. James blinked in surprise, before realizing, a moment later, that she hadn’t actually vanished, she had simply been obscured behind a hedge of reeds and cattails as their boats grew further apart. He shook his head, smiled at himself for being a typically jumpy first year, and then returned his gaze to the journey ahead.

The gaggle of first years entered the courtyard with a chorus of appreciative chatter. James found himself straggling, threading almost unconsciously to the rear of the group as they climbed the steps into the brightly lit corridor. There was Mr. Filch, whom James recognized by his hair, scowl and the cat, Mrs. Norris, which he held cradled in the crook of his arm. Here were the enchanted staircases, even now creaking and grinding into new positions to the mingled delight and trepidation of the new students. And here,

finally, were the doors into the Great Hall, their panels gleaming mellowly in the light of the chandeliers. As the students congregated there, conversation faltered to silence. Zane, standing shoulder to shoulder with Ralph, who was nearly a head taller, turned and looked over his shoulder at James, waggling his eyebrows and grinning.

The doors creaked and swung inwards, light and sound pouring out through them as they revealed the Great Hall in all its splendor. The four long House tables were full of students, hundreds of faces grinning, laughing, chattering, and capering. James looked for Ted, but couldn't find him in the throng.

The tall, slightly gawky teacher who'd led them to the doors turned and faced them, smiling disarmingly. "Welcome to Hogwarts, first years!" he called over the noise of the Hall. "My name is Professor Longbottom. You'll be sorted into your Houses straight off. Once that's done, you'll find your table and dinner will be served. Please follow me."

He turned with a flap of his robes and proceeded briskly down the center of the Great Hall. Nervously, the first years' began to follow, first in a shuffle, then in a brisk trot, trying to keep up. James saw the heads of Ralph and Zane crane back, their chins pointing higher and higher. He'd almost forgotten about the enchanted ceiling. He looked up himself, but only a little, not wanting to look like he was *too* impressed. The higher he looked, the more the ceiling beams and alcoves retreated into transparency, revealing a stunning representation of the outside sky. Cold, brittle-looking stars glittered like silver dust on jeweler's velvet and off to the right, just over the Gryffindor table, the half-moon could be seen, its giant face looking both mad and jolly.

"Did he say his name was *Longbottom*?" Zane said to James out of the corner of his mouth.

"Yeah. Neville Longbottom."

"Wow," Zane breathed, "You Brits really have a thing to learn about subtlety. I don't even know where to start with a name like that." Ralph shushed him as the crowd began to quiet, noticing the first years lining up along the front of the hall.

James looked along the table on the dais, trying to pick out all the teachers he knew about. There was Professor Slughorn, looking just as fat and ridiculously baroque as his parents had described. Slughorn, James recalled, had come on as a temporary teacher during his parents' time, apparently reluctantly, and then simply never left. Next to him was the ghostly Professor Binns, then Professor Trelawney, blinking owlishly behind her gigantic spectacles. Further down the table, recognizable by his size (James could see he sat on a stack of three enormous books) was Professor Flitwick. Several other faces James didn't recognize were scattered about, teachers who'd come since his parents' time and were therefore relatively unfamiliar. No sign of Hagrid, but James had learned that he was off among the giants again with Grawp, and wouldn't return until the following day. Finally, at the center of the table, just then standing and raising her arms, was Minerva McGonagall, the Headmistress.

“Welcome returning students, and welcome new students,” she said in her piercing, rather tremulous voice, “to this first banquet of this new year at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.” A cheer of happy acknowledgement went up from the seated students behind James. He glanced back over his shoulder, scanning the crowd. He saw Ted seated, hooting through his cupped hands, surrounded by group of somehow impossibly handsome and beautiful older boys and girls at the Gryffindor table. James tried to smile at him, but Ted didn’t notice.

As the cheers diminished, Professor McGonagall continued. “I’m glad to see you are all as excited to be here as are your teachers and school staff. Let us hope that this spirit of mutual understanding and unity of purpose accompanies us throughout the school year.” She eyed the crowd, picking out certain individuals. James heard scattered scuffling and the marked silences of conspicuous guilty grins.

“And now,” the Headmistress went on, turning to watch as a chair was carried onto the stage by two older students. James noticed that one of them was Steven Metzker, the prefect they’d encountered on the train. “As is our proud tradition on the occasion of our first gathering, let us witness the sorting of our newest students into their respective Houses. First years, will you please approach the platform. I will be calling your names individually. You will approach the platform and have a seat...”

James tuned out the rest. He knew this ceremony well, having quizzed his parents endlessly about it. He had been, in the previous days, more excited about the sorting ceremony than he had been about anything else. In truth, he recognized now that his excitement had actually masked a numbing, terrible fear. The Sorting Hat was the first test he’d have to pass in order to prove he was the man his parents expected him to be, the man the wizarding world had already begun to assume he was. It hadn’t quite hit him until he’d seen the article in *the Daily Prophet* several weeks earlier. It had been a fluffy, happy little article, of the “whatever happened to so-and-so” variety, and yet it had filled James with a sort of cold, creeping dread. The article summarized the ongoing biography of Harry Potter, now married to his school sweetheart, Ginny Weasley, and announced that James, the firstborn son of Harry and Ginny Potter, was to be attending his first year at Hogwarts. James had been particularly haunted by the line that ended the article. He could recall it word for word: “We at the Daily Prophet, along with the rest of the magical world, wish young Mr. Potter all the best as he moves on to fulfill, and perhaps even surpass, the expectations any of us could hope to have of the son of such a beloved and legendary figure.”

What would *the Daily Prophet*, or the rest of the wizarding world, think of the son of the beloved and legendary figure if he sat on that chair and the Sorting Hat proclaimed him something other than a Gryffindor? Back on platform nine and three quarters, James had confided this very fear to his dad.

“There isn’t any more magic in being a Gryffindor than there is in being a Hufflepuff or a Ravenclaw or a Slytherin, James.” Harry Potter had said, squatting down and putting his hand on the boy’s shoulder. James had pressed his lips together, knowing his dad would say something like that.

“Would that have comforted you back when you were getting ready to sit on the chair and put that hat on your head?” He’d asked in a low, serious voice.

His dad didn't answer, only pressed his lips together, smiled ruefully and shook his head. "But I was a worried, superficial little git back then, James, my boy. Try not to be like me in that regard, OK? We know great witches and wizards from all the Houses. I'll be proud and honored to have my son in any of them."

James had nodded, but it hadn't worked. He knew what his dad really wanted- and expected- despite the talk. James was to be a Gryffindor, just like Mum and Dad, just like his uncles and Aunt, just like all the heroes and legends he'd been told about since he was a baby, all the way back to Godric Gryffindor himself, greatest of all the founders of Hogwarts.

And yet now, as he stood, watching the Sorting Hat being produced and held aloft by the skinny arms of Headmistress McGonagall, he found that all his fears and worries had somehow drained away. He'd had a sort of idea during the last few hours. Now it came fully to the front of his mind. He had assumed all along that he had no choice but to compete with his father and try to fill his enormous shoes. His subsequent terrible fear had been that he would be unequal to the task, that he would fail. But what if there was another option? What if he simply didn't try?

James stared ahead, unseeing, as the first students were called to the chair, as the hat was lowered onto their heads, almost hiding their intensely curious, upturned eyes. He looked like a statue- a statue of a small boy with his father's unruly black hair and his mother's nose and expressive lips. What if he simply didn't try to live up to the giant shadow cast by his dad? Not that he wouldn't be great in his own way. It would just be a very different way. A decidedly, *intentionally* different way. And what if that started here? Right here, on the platform, on his first day, being proclaimed... well, something other than a Gryffindor. That would be all that mattered. Unless...

"James Potter." the voice of the headmistress rang out with her distinctive rolled R on his last name. He startled, looking up at her as if he'd forgotten she was there. She looked a hundred feet tall standing there on the platform, her arm held out ramrod straight and holding the Sorting Hat over the chair, casting a triangular shadow onto it. He was about to move forward and climb the short flight of steps to the platform, when a noise broke out behind him. It shocked and worried him for a moment. He was irrationally afraid that somehow his thoughts had gotten out and betrayed him, that it was the noise of the Gryffindor table standing, booing him. But it wasn't the sound of booing. It was the sound of applause, polite and sustained, in response to the calling of his name. James turned to the Gryffindor table, a smile of gratitude and happiness already lighting his face. But they weren't the ones applauding. They sat there rather blankly. Most of their heads were turned toward the source of the sound. James turned, following their eyes. It was the Slytherin table.

James felt rooted to the spot. The entire table was looking at him with pleasant smiles, every one open, happy, applauding. One of the students, a tall, very attractive girl with wavy black hair and large, sparkling eyes, was standing. She clapped lightly but confidently, smiling directly at James. Finally, the other tables began to join in, first in dribs and drabs, and then in a sustained, rather puzzled ovation.

“Yes. Yes, thank you,” Headmistress McGonagall called over the applause. “That will be enough. We are all quite, er, happy that we have young Mr. Potter here with us this year. Now, if you’ll please resume your seats...” James began his ascent of the dais while the applause died down. As he turned and sat down on the chair, he heard the Headmistress mutter, “...so we can finish this and have dinner before the next equinox.” James turned to look up at her but saw only the dark maw of the Sorting Hat coming down on top of him. He closed his eyes tightly and felt the cool softness of the hat cover his head, slipping down over his brow.

Instantly all other sound stopped. James was in the mind of the hat, or perhaps it was the other way around. It spoke, but not to him.

“Potter, James, yes, I’ve been expecting this one. The third Potter that’s come under my brim. Always difficult, these...” it mused to itself, as if it enjoyed the challenge. “Courage, yes, as always, but courage is cheap in the young. Still, good Gryffindor stock, just like the ones before.”

James’s heart leaped. Then he remembered the thought he’d had standing before the dais, and he faltered. *I don’t have to play the game*, he thought to himself. *I don’t have to be a Gryffindor*. He thought of the applause, thought of the face of the pretty girl with the long wavy black hair, standing beneath the green and silver banner.

“Slytherin, he thinks!” the hat spoke in his head, considering. “Yes, always that possibility as well. Like his father. He’d have made a great Slytherin, but hadn’t the will. Hmm, very unsure of himself is this one, and that is a first for a Potter. Lack of sureness is neither a Gryffindor nor a Slytherin trait. Perhaps Hufflepuff would do him some good...”

Not Hufflepuff, thought James. Faces swam up before him in his mind: Mum and Dad, uncle Ron, aunt Hermione, Gryffindors all. Then they faded and he saw the girl at the Slytherin table, smiling, applauding. He heard himself thinking, as he had thought minutes earlier, *I could be great in a different way; an intentionally different way...*

“Not Hufflepuff, hmm? Perhaps you’re right. Yes, I see it now. Confused you may be, but uncertain you are not. My initial instincts are correct, as always.” And then aloud, the Sorting Hat called out the name of his House.

The hat was whipped off his head, and James had actually thought he’d heard the word “Slytherin” still echoing from the walls, actually looked with sudden horror toward the green and silver table to see them applauding, when he realized it was the table beneath the crimson lion that had jumped up and applauded. The Gryffindor table cheered loudly and raucously, and James realized how much more he liked that than the polite, practiced applause he’d gotten earlier. He leaped from the chair, ran down the steps, and was enveloped amongst the cheers. Hands patted his back and reached out to shake his and high-five him. A seat near the front opened for him and a voice spoke in his ear as the cheers finally subsided.

“Never doubted it a minute, mate.” The voice whispered happily. James turned to see Ted give him a confident nod and a slap on the back before settling back to his seat. Turning back to watch the rest of the sorting ceremony, James felt so suddenly, perfectly happy that he thought he might split right down the middle. He didn’t *have* to follow exactly in his dad’s footsteps, but maybe he could start doing things deliberately differently tomorrow. For now, he gloried in the knowledge that Mum and Dad would be thrilled to know that he, like them, was a Gryffindor.

When Zane’s name was called, he trotted up the steps and plopped on the chair as if he thought it was going to take him on a roller coaster ride. He grinned as the shadow of the hat fell over his head, and it had no sooner done so than the hat cried out “Ravenclaw!” Zane raised his eyebrows and rocked his head back and forth in a cheerfully mystified way that brought a peal of laughter from the crowd even as the Ravenclaws cheered and beckoned him to their table.

The rest of the first years made their way to the dais and the house tables filled out appreciably. Ralph Deedle was one of the last to climb up and sit on the chair. He seemed to shrink a bit under the hat as it thought for a surprisingly long time. Then, with a flourish of its peak, the hat announced, “Slytherin!”

James was stunned. He had been sure that at least one, if not both of his new friends would end up seated next to him at the Gryffindor table. Neither of them had joined him, however, and one of them, the one he least expected, had become a Slytherin. Of course, he conveniently forgot that he himself had almost succeeded in getting sent there. But Ralph? A Muggle-born if ever there was one? He turned and saw Ralph seating himself at the table on the far side of the room, being patted on the back by his new House mates. The girl with the sparkling eyes and the wavy black hair was smiling again, pleasantly, welcomingly. Maybe Slytherin House had changed, he thought. Dad and Mum would hardly believe it.

Finally, Headmistress McGonagall put the Sorting Hat away. “First years,” she called. “Your new House is your home, but we are all your family. Let us enjoy competitions wherever we may find them, but never forget where our ultimate loyalties lie. And now,” she pushed her spectacles onto her nose and addressed the crowd over them. “Announcements. As always, the Forbidden Forest is off limits to students at all times. Please be sure that this is not a merely academic preference. First years may ask any older students- *except* for Mr. Ted Lupin and Mr. Noah Metzker, whose council you might wish to avoid on the matter- what they can expect if they determine to ignore this rule.”

James let the rest of the announcements roll over him as he scanned the faces of the crowd. Victoire had ended up at the Hufflepuff table, where she sat happily whispering to another girl. Zane, at the Ravenclaw table, had pulled a bowl of nuts in front of him and was determinedly working his way through it. Across the room, Ralph caught James’s eye and gestured wonderingly at himself and his new Housemates, seeming to ask James if it was all right. James shrugged and nodded noncommittally.

“Leaving us with one last order of business,” the Headmistress finally said, to the accompaniment of a few brave cheers. “Some of you may have noticed that there is one empty chair amidst your teachers here on the dais. Rest assured that you shall have a defense against the dark arts professor, and that he is indeed a

uniquely qualified and gifted expert on the subject. He will be arriving tomorrow afternoon, along with a full complement of fellow teachers, students and associates, as part of a year-long international magical summit between his school and ours. I will expect you all to turn out tomorrow afternoon in the main courtyard for the arrival of the representatives from Alma Aleron and the United States Department of Magical Administration.”

Sounds of mingled excitement and derision erupted in the hall as the students instantly turned to discuss this rather remarkable turn of events with their fellows. James heard Ted say, “What is some old Yank gonna be able to tell us about the dark arts? What channel to watch them on?” There was a chorus of laughter. James turned around, looking for Zane. He found him, caught his eye, and pointed at him, shrugging. *Your people are coming here*, he mouthed. Zane clapped his hand over his heart and saluted with the other.

In the midst of the debate, dinner appeared on the long tables, and James, along with the rest of Hogwarts, dug in with fervor.

It was nearly midnight by the time James made his way to the portrait of the Fat Lady marking the entrance to the Gryffindor common room.

“Password,” she sang out. James stopped short, letting his green backpack slip off his shoulder and thump to the floor. No one had told him any passwords.

“I don’t know the password yet. I’m a first year. I’m a Gryffindor.” He added lamely.

“Gryffindor you may be,” said the Fat Lady, looking him up and down with an air of polite patience, “But no password, no entry.”

“Maybe you could give me a little hint this time?” James said, trying to smile winningly.

The Fat Lady stared at him levelly. “You seem to have some unfortunate misunderstanding of the nature of the term ‘password’, my dear.”

There was a commotion on the moving staircase nearby. It swung into view and settled, lurching slightly, at the end of the landing. A group of older students clambered up, laughing and shushing each other conspicuously. Ted was among them.

“Ted,” James called in relief, “I need the password. A little help?”

Ted saw James as he and the others approached. “*Genisolaris*,” he said, and then added to one of the girls in the group, “Hurry it up, Petra, and don’t let Noah’s brother see you.”

She nodded, brushing past James as the portrait of the Fat Lady swung open to reveal the fire-lit glow of the common room. James began to follow her in when Ted threw an arm around his shoulder, turning him around and bringing him back out onto the landing. “My dear James, you can’t imagine we’re going to let you toddle off to bed at such an early hour, do you? There are Gryffindor traditions to think about, for Merlin’s sake.”

“What?” James stammered. “It’s midnight. You know that, do you?”

“Commonly known in the Muggle world as ‘The Witching Hour’.” Ted said instructively. “A misnomer, of course, but ‘The Witching and Wizarding Pulling Tricks on Unsuspecting Muggle Country Folk Hour’ is just a bit too long for anyone to remember. We like to call it, simply, ‘Raising the Wocket’.”

Ted was leading James back toward the stairs, along with three other Gryffindors. “The what?” James asked, trying to keep up.

“Boy doesn’t know what the Wocket is,” Ted said mournfully to the rest of the group. “And his dad’s the owner of the famous Marauder’s Map. Just think how much easier this would be if we could get our hands on *that* bit of skullduggery. James, let me introduce you to the rest of the Gremlins, a group you may indeed hope to join, depending on how things go tonight, of course.” Ted stopped, turned and threw his arm wide, indicating the three others skulking along with them. “My number one, Noah Metzker, whose only flaw is his unwitting relationship to his fifth-year prefect brother.” Noah bowed curtly at the waist, grinning. “Our treasurer,” Ted continued, “if we ever manage to come across any coin, Sabrina Hildegard.” A pleasant faced girl with a spray of freckles and a quill stuck in her thick reddish hair nodded to James. “Our scapegoat, should such services ever be required, young Damien Damascus,” Ted gripped the shoulder of a stout boy with heavy glasses and a pumpkin-like face who grimaced at him and growled. “And finally, my alibi, my perfect foil, everyone’s favorite teacher’s favorite, Ms. Petra Morganstern.” Ted gestured affectionately to the girl who was just returning from the portrait hole, stuffing something small into her jeans pocket. James noticed that everyone but him had changed out of their robes and into jeans and dark sweatshirts. “Is everything clear for takeoff?” Ted asked Petra as she met them.

“Affirmative. All systems go, Captain.” she replied, and there was a titter from Damien. They all turned and began to descend the staircase, Ted steering James along with them.

“Should I go change or something?” he asked, his voice shaking as he pounded down the stairs.

Ted gave him an appraising look. “No, I don’t think that’ll be necessary in your case. Relax, mate. You’re going to have a blast. So to speak. Jump just here, then. You don’t want to step on *that* step, mind you.” James jumped, his backpack swinging from his shoulder, feeling himself pulled along partly by the group’s enthusiasm but mostly by Ted’s grip on his elbow. He landed on the floor of a long, torch lit

corridor and stumbled to keep up. At the end of the hall, the group met three more students, all standing in the shadow thrown by a statue of a gigantic, hunch-backed wizard wearing a very tall hat.

“Good evening, fellow Gremlins,” Ted whispered as they all clustered together in the shadow of the statue. “Meet James, son of my godfather, some guy named Harry Potter.” James grinned sheepishly at the new faces, and then did a double-take at the third face in the group. “James, meet our Ravenclaw chapter, Horace, Gennifer, and young whatsisname.” He turned to Gennifer. “What’s his name?” he asked, gesturing at the boy on the end.

“Zane.” Gennifer said, throwing an arm around the smaller boy, who grinned and let himself be playfully shaken. “Just met him tonight, but he’s got a little something that says Gremlin to me. I’m thinking there might be some imp in his lineage somewhere.”

“We’re gonna play Hunt the Wocket!” Zane said to James in a stage whisper that carried along the entire corridor. “Sounds iffy to me, but if this’ll make us cool, well, I figured we might as well get it out of the way straight off!” James couldn’t tell if Zane was joking, and then he realized it didn’t really matter.

“*Raise* the Wocket,” Noah corrected.

James decided it was time to impress himself upon the conversation. “So where is this Wocket? And why are we all crammed into a corner behind a statue?”

“This isn’t just any old statue,” Petra said as Ted shimmied as far between the statue and the wall as he could, apparently looking for something. “This is St. Lokimagus the Perpetually Productive. We only learned his story last year, and it led us to a rather amazing discovery.”

“Led *you*, you mean.” Ted said, his voice muffled.

Petra considered this and nodded. “True enough,” she agreed matter-of-factly.

“Back in your father’s day,” Noah said as Ted scratched around behind the statue, “there were six secret passages in and out of Hogwarts. But that was before the Battle. After that, a lot of the castle was rebuilt, and all the old secret passages were permanently sealed off. Funny thing about a magical castle though. It just seems to grow new secret passages. We’ve only found two, and those only because of Petra and our Ravenclaw friends here. St. Lokimagus, the Perpetually Productive is one of them. It’s all right there in his slogan.”

Noah pointed to the words engraved into the statue’s base: *Igitur Qui Moveo, Qui et Movea.*

Ted made a grunt of triumph and there was a loud click. “You’ll never guess where it was this time,” he said, puffing from beneath the statue. With a grind of moving stone, the statue of St. Lokimagus straightened up as much as his humped back would allow, stepped carefully off his plinth, and then walked across the corridor with a slightly bow-legged gait. He disappeared into the door opposite, which James saw was a boy’s bathroom.

“What’s his slogan mean?” James asked as the Gremlins began to duck hurriedly into the low doorway on the back of St. Lokimagus’s plinth. Noah grinned and shrugged. “When you gotta go, you gotta go.”

The passage led to a short stairway with rounded stone steps. The Gremlins pounded noisily up the steps, and then shushed each other as they reached a doorway. Ted creaked the door open a fraction, peering through the crack. A moment later he pushed the door wide and motioned for the rest to follow him outside.

The door opened inexplicably out of a small shed near what James recognized as the Quidditch pitch. The tall grandstands rose into the moonlight, looking bleak and imposing in the silence.

“The passage only works one way,” Sabrina explained to James and Zane as the group ran lightly across the Quidditch pitch toward the hills beyond. “If you go into it without having come through St. Lokimagus’s tunnel first you just find yourself in the equipment shed. Pretty convenient, since it means that even if we get caught, nobody else can chase us back through the tunnel.”

“*Have* you gotten caught yet?” James asked, puffing along next to her.

“No, but this is the first time we’ve tried to use it. We only discovered it at the end of last year.” She shrugged as if to say *we’ll see how this turns out, won’t we?*

Zane’s voice came out of the darkness behind James, conversationally. “What if St. Magic Buns gets done with the loo before we all come back through his hole?” James shuddered at Zane’s turn of phrase, but admired his logic. It seemed like a question worth asking.

“That’s definitely a question for a Ravenclaw.” Noah called back as quietly as he could, but nobody answered.

After ten minutes of skirting the border of a scraggly, moonlit wood, the group clambered over a wire fence into a field. Ted pulled his wand from his back pocket as he approached a patch of rambling bushes and weeds. James followed and saw that there was a low barn hidden among the growth. It was ramshackle, bowed and buried in vines.

“Alohomora.” Ted said, pointing his wand at the large rusted padlock hanging on the door. There was a flash of yellow light. It bloomed out of the lock, and then resolved into the shape of a glowing, ghostly arm that snaked from the padlock’s keyhole. The arm ended in a fist with the index finger pointed in the air. It wagged the finger back and forth reprovingly for a few seconds, and then vanished.

“Protective charm’s still in place, then.” Ted announced happily. He turned to Petra, who came forward pulling something out of her jeans pocket. James saw it was a rusted skeleton key.

“That was Gennifer’s idea,” Horace, the second Ravenclaw, said proudly. “Although I had wanted it to be a different gesture.”

“Would’ve been a nice touch.” Zane agreed.

“We figured any magical types that tried to break in here wouldn’t think to try anything as boring as a key.” Noah explained. “We put up disillusionment charms to keep the Muggles away, but they don’t come out here anyway. It’s abandoned.”

Petra turned the key and pulled away the padlock. The doors of the old barn swung open with surprising silence. “Creaky doors are for novices.” Damien said smugly, tapping the side of his pug nose.

James peered inside. There was something large in the shadows, its bulk blotting out the rear of the barn. He could just barely make out the shape of it.

“Cool!” Zane cried happily, understanding dawning on him. “Raise the *Wocket!* You’re right, James. There was nothing like *this* in *the Wizard of Oz*.”

“The Wizard of what?” Ted said to James out of the corner of his mouth.

“It’s a Muggle thing.” James replied. “We wouldn’t understand.”

Frank Tottington awoke suddenly, sure he’d heard something out in the garden. He was instantly alert and angry, throwing off his covers and swinging his legs out of bed as if he’d fully expected such an annoyance.

“Hmwah?” his wife mumbled, raising her head sleepily.

“It’s those dratted Grindle kids out in our garden.” Frank announced gruffly, jamming his feet into his tartan slippers. “Didn’t I tell you they were sneaking in at night, trampling my begonias and stealing my tomatoes? Kids!” He spat. He shrugged into a threadbare robe. It flapped about his shins as he clumped down the stairs and grabbed his shotgun off the hook by the back door.

The screen door squeaked open and clapped against the outside wall as Frank barreled out. “All right, you hooligans! Drop those tomatoes and step out here into the light wheres I can see you!” He raised the shotgun in one hand, pointing it warningly at the star-strewn sky.

A light popped on over his head, illuminating him in a blinding white beam that seemed to hum faintly. Frank froze, his shotgun still held barrel up, pointing up into the beam of light. Slowly, Frank raised

his head, squinting, his stubbly chin casting a long shadow down the front of his robe. There was something hovering over him. It was hard to tell the size of it. It was simply a round black shape, with dim lights dotting the edge. It was turning slowly and appeared to be lowering.

Frank gasped, stumbled and nearly dropped his gun. He recovered and backed quickly away, not taking his eyes from the gently humming object. It lowered slowly, as if cushioned by the beam of light, and as it came to rest its hum deepened, throbbing.

Frank boggled at it, his knobby knees bent in a sort of alert crouch. He chewed on his dentures fretfully.

Then, with a burst of steam and a hiss, the shape of a door appeared in the side of the object. It was outlined in light, and the light brightened as the door unfolded, forming a short ramp. A figure was standing framed in the light. Frank gasped and raised his shotgun, socking it to his shoulder. There was a blast of red light and Frank jumped. He made to pull the trigger but nothing happened. The trigger had changed, become a small button instead of the comforting loop of metal. He glanced down at the shotgun, and then held it out in front of him in shock. It wasn't his shotgun at all. It was a small, ratty umbrella with a fake wooden handle. He'd never seen it before. Recognizing he was in the presence of something truly otherworldly, Frank dropped the umbrella and sank to his knees.

The figure in the doorway was small and thin. Its skin was a purplish green, its large head was nearly featureless, with the suggestion of large, almond-shaped eyes barely visible in the glare of light from the open hatchway. It began to walk down the ramp toward Frank, and its footsteps seemed unusually careful, almost awkward. It ducked slightly to clear the doorway, then, suddenly the figure tripped on the lip of the hatch. It stumbled forward, pin-wheeling its arms, and seemed about to throw itself upon Frank. He scrambled backwards desperately, terrified. The small figure toppled forward, its disproportionately large head zooming towards Frank, filling his vision.

In the moment before Frank blacked out he was distracted only by the rather strange fact that the figure seemed to be wearing, if nothing else, a fairly ordinary dark green backpack slung over its shoulders. Frank fainted with a look of rather worried confusion on his face.

James awoke blearily the next morning. He pried his eyes open, taking in the unfamiliar shapes of his surroundings. He was in a four-poster bed in a large, round room with a low ceiling. Sunlight beamed

cheerily in, lighting more beds, most of which were disheveled and empty. Slowly, like owls coming in to roost, he remembered the previous night: the Sorting Hat, standing before the portrait of the Fat Lady and not knowing the Gryffindor password, meeting Ted, and then the rest of the Gremlins.

He sat up in bed quickly, reaching for his face. He patted his cheeks, his brow, the shape of his eyes, and then sighed with relief. Everything appeared to be back to normal. Something flopped onto his bed next to him, a newspaper James didn't recognize. It was turned to an article with the headline: *Local Man Insists Martian Rockets Steal His Tomatoes*. James glanced up. Noah Metzker was standing at the foot of his bed, a wry look on his face.

"They miss-spelled 'wocket' again." he said.