



7. ALMA ALERON

James had wanted to explore the grounds that very night, but his parents, along with the rest of the adults, had insisted on getting everyone to their rooms and into bed.

The guest quarters were housed in a large brick mansion that overlooked the grounds, relatively near the Warping Willow. Shortly, James had found himself in a surprisingly sumptuous bedroom with a gigantic marble fireplace, nearly as tall as he was, and three four-poster beds so high that they had little wooden stepstools next to them. Albus claimed the one nearest the window and James took the one in the middle. Within minutes, despite the excitement of the night, and the thrill of finally arriving, James had dropped into a deep dreamless sleep.

He seemed to wake almost immediately and blinked at the bright sunshine that beamed through the window, swimming with dust motes. Bird song twittered nearby and as James sat up in his high bed, he could see people moving on the flagstone walkways of the campus below the window. He grinned and saw that Albus was already awake.

“I smell bacon,” Albus said, nodding. “The kitchens are in the basement. Come on, let’s see if we can nick a little nosh!”

“Way ahead of you,” Ralph announced from the other side of the room, shrugging into a very oversized white robe. “Come on, there are two more. One for each of us. Man, this is living.”

“I can’t imagine that this is what life will be like in the dorms,” James replied, grabbing one of the robes, “but when in Rome...”

Together, the three boys tramped down the stairs and down a high, richly paneled hall. Display cases on one side showed a variety of trophies and awards as well as a collection of strange leather sporting balls, most dull and worn with age. On the other side of the hall, framed portraits and photographs peered down. James recognized some of the faces in the images—Abraham Lincoln and George Washington among them—but most were completely unknown to him. Very few of the images moved and James assumed that most of the paintings were, in fact, non-magical.

The boys passed a large sitting room and a coat closet and stopped as they neared a busy dining room, filled with bright morning light from two tall windows. Most of the adults were already gathered around the table, babbling, passing plates, and pouring steaming cups of coffee and tea. Happily, James, Ralph, and Albus ran into the room and found seats around the long table.

“Robes and pyjamas?” Lucy said, blinking aside at James as he climbed into the chair next to her.

“Al smelled bacon,” James shrugged. “Be glad he’s dressed at all.”

Percy spooned sugar into his tea as he spoke, apparently in the middle of a conversation with Chancellor Franklyn, who sat across from him. “So, in order to maintain security and remain hidden in Muggle Philadelphia, Alma Aleron exists in a time bubble in the year seventeen fifty.”

“Actually,” Franklyn replied, leaning back in his chair and dabbing at his chin with a napkin, “we are now back in the twenty-first century, as of this morning. Twenty forty, I believe. We try to use round numbers, but even so, it can be monstrously difficult to keep track of.”

Georgia Burke spoke up next. “The time bubble roams daily, spanning approximately four hundred and fifty years. The historical target of any given day is determined by a complex algorithm based on the actual date, the phase of the moon, and... er... the mood of a certain Kneazle-cat.”

“Yes,” Franklyn nodded. “Patches, the administration pet. The wizard who designed the algorithm is a believer that there needed to be a single random variable to prevent outsiders from cracking the timecode. He figured that only those that truly deserve to be on campus would know Patches the cat, and her moods. Ingenious, really, but somewhat obtuse, since cats, even of the Kneazle variety, really only have one mood.”

“Sullen,” Burke agreed. “With various shades of petulant, haughty, aloof, and bored. Still, as a security concept, it is fairly solid.”

“Oh, we know all about Kneazle-cats,” Izzy commented from across the table. “Remember Crookshanks? Rose’s family’s cat?” she asked, looking aside at Petra, and then turning to address everyone else at the table, her voice sober. “But Crookshanks isn’t sullen at all. He’s a sweetheart.”

“To you, perhaps,” Harry muttered.

“So what if someone hops over the school wall from the inside?” Albus asked around a mouthful of toast. “Would they be able to go explore the future or the past? What if they got lost? Or went and screwed up history somehow?”

Franklyn laughed lightly, as if this were a question he'd had to answer many, many times. "Fortunately for history, the time bubble stops at the boundary of the campus: the stone wall we all observed last night. The moment you climbed over, you'd leave the Timelock and find yourself in the normal flow of time, only locked out of the campus, and with Flintlock to convince to let you back in."

"Ah," Albus said, disappointed.

"At any rate, we have a full day ahead of us," Ginny announced placing her napkin next to her plate. "Lily, we need to get you and Izzy settled in at your new school, elsewhere in the city, and we need to get ourselves squared away with our own flat."

Franklyn cleared his throat. "Harry, I've arranged for an indefinite Floo visa for you and your charges, effective as of this morning. It will allow you free access to the Crystal Mountain and any domestic magical destinations you may require for the duration of your stay."

"That will do nicely," Harry agreed. "But what about communication with my associates abroad? I understand that you have an entire department dedicated to international experimental communications. As you know, Titus Hardcastle, my second-in-command, will be joining me periodically during the investigation. It will be necessary for me to communicate with him regularly and international post is notoriously slow."

At the end of the table, Merlin spoke. "I have foreseen just such a requirement, Mr. Potter. Speak to me in my quarters when you have the opportunity."

Franklyn blinked at Merlin, and then turned to Harry. "And of course, the Department of Experimental Magical Communications will assist you in any way that you might require. I will equip you with a pass that will grant you immediate access to the campus through the main gate. Flintlock knows you now, and will escort you through the Timelock. As you can imagine, however, you cannot Apparate onto the campus from outside of the time bubble, nor can it be accessed via Floo. Alas, our security measures, foolproof as they are, do present their own unique limitations."

"I don't plan on leaving campus at all during my stay," Neville Longbottom announced, smiling. "I've a meeting with the Head of the Flora Department, Professor Sanuye, later this morning, in preparation for my presentation tomorrow night. Frankly, I admit, I'm a wee bit nervous about it."

"You shall do splendidly," Audrey announced confidently. "There is no greater expert on the subject of herbology than you, Professor Longbottom."

"Well," Neville replied, blushing, "that may be stretching it a bit far..."

"As for you four," Ginny said, indicating James, Albus, Ralph, and Lucy, "you are scheduled to meet Zane next to the Octosphere at ten o'clock. He'll show you around the campus and get you prepared for your first day of school. If you plan to wear something other than your pyjamas and those ridiculous robes, I suggest you finish up quickly and change."

“Ugh!” Albus proclaimed suddenly, lifting his cup and staring at it disdainfully. “You call this tea? I’d heard that Americans couldn’t brew a decent cup, but really! This tastes like warmed over prune juice!”

“Albus Severus!” Ginny scolded.

Franklyn peered at the cup in Albus’ hand. Gently, he reached for it. “Ah, yes. Ahem. It tastes like warmed over prune juice because that’s precisely what it is, young man,” he said, taking the cup and sniffing it. “You seem to have picked up my drink by accident.”

Albus’ face reddened as James and his parents laughed. Audrey covered her own mouth to stifle a smile while Percy rolled his eyes. Merlin moved to get up, indicating the end of the meal.

“Oh. Well,” Albus said stiffly. “Never mind then.”



By daylight, the scale of Alma Aleron campus seemed even larger. Neatly cropped lawns and flower gardens were crisscrossed with paths running in all directions. Some of the footpaths were meandering and narrow, laid with pea gravel, others were wide flagstone thoroughfares, cutting straight swathes between the various buildings.

As James, Albus, Ralph, and Lucy made their way to the center of campus, they encountered innumerable students of nearly every age, most dressed in various versions of the school uniform, which consisted, generally, of a dress shirt, tie, pants, and blazer for the boys, or a blouse, skirt, and tie for the girls. V-necked sweaters were occasionally worn in place of the blazer, especially by the girls, and some students forewent the blazer altogether or carried it slung over their shoulders.

The confusing bit was in the fact that there didn't seem to be an established school color. As James glanced around, soaking in the sights, he counted at least half a dozen different color combinations. He did notice, however, that students in similar colors tended to cluster together in knots, either walking swiftly to their classes or hovering near the benches and low walls that dotted the campus, laughing and lounging, occasionally tossing around strange leather sporting balls.

The buildings that comprised the campus were mostly brick, covered in ivy, with dormers and towers jutting from their high roofs. The entrances were wide and grand, with stone staircases leading to banks of heavy wooden doors, many propped open to admit the fresh autumn air. Most of the main buildings seemed to range along a very long narrow common space, dotted with huge ancient trees, pools, bridges, gardens, and statuary. On the closest end of the commons, near the guest house and the Warping Willow, was something like an old ruin, mostly comprised of stone blocks stacked haphazardly around a grass-filled foundation. The only recognizable portion of the ruin was the main entrance and steps, which seemed ready to collapse at the slightest provocation. A very worn and broken statue of a severely dressed wizard holding a wand at his side stood in front of the entryway, looking as if it had once stood atop a grand pedestal which had, through time and entropy, become buried. The name engraved along the top of the ruin's doorway was barely legible: Roberts.

Across from the ruin, sitting at the far end of the commons like a patriarch at the head of a gigantic table, was a very imposing red brick building with buttresses and stone columns, ranks of tall windows, and a dizzyingly tall clock tower which stood over its impressive central entryway. The school's full name and date of origin were engraved over the columns in huge block letters: '*ALMA ALERON UNIVERSITY of MAGICAL HUMANITIES and SPELLCRAFT – 1688*'. James had an inkling that he'd seen the building before, and then he remembered: it had been in the background of his first glimpse of A.A.U., seen through the magical rear wall of the Trans-Dimensional Garage during his first year at Hogwarts. He'd seen that very clock tower, albeit from a different angle, and heard it tolling the hour. He felt a little surreal now, looking up the building from its own lawns, knowing that he'd be attending school under it, probably for the entire year.

Finally, the four students made their way into the center of the campus commons and stopped beneath one of the massive elm trees that cast their shadows over the grounds, their turning leaves catching the sunlight like kaleidoscopes. Nearby, a grand, terraced pool splashed with fountains, surrounding a strange black marble ball that seemed to float in the very middle.

"Here he comes," Ralph said, mopping his brow with his sleeve. "How can it be so hot here this late in the year?"

Lucy shrugged. "This is mild by their standards. Be glad we didn't arrive in the middle of August. My father says you can boil a cauldron on the footpath during a typical American summer."

"Ugh," Albus grunted, shaking his head.

"I'm disappointed not to be able to try it, really," Lucy said, bending down and laying her palm on the stone at her feet. "This is barely hot enough to soften a jellywort."

“Has it ever occurred to you,” Albus said, peering sideways at his cousin, “that your dad might be *full* of jellywort?”

Lucy regarded Albus calmly. “Yes,” she said. “Actually it has.”

“Morning everybody,” Zane said happily, crossing the pool’s terraces to meet them. “Sorry I’m a little late. There was an incident last night in my house involving a pledge, an *Engorgio* spell, and a key lime pie. I’ve never seen such a mess, and it was up to me to make sure it got cleaned up afterwards. The pledges barely swam through half of it. If you ask me, there isn’t a Zombie in the bunch.”

Lucy frowned. “A key lime pie?”

Ralph glanced at her. “You heard him say the word ‘zombie’, and the thing that struck you was the pie?”

“He obviously doesn’t mean real zombies,” Lucy sniffed. “Zombies are forbidden. At least in this country.”

Zane raised his voice and pumped his fist in the air. “Zombie pride! Zombie grit! Undead fight and never quit!” He stopped, lowered his fist, and grinned. “Sorry, force of habit. Go Zombies, eh?”

“Whatever you say,” James smiled, shaking his head.

“Come on, I’ll give you the lowdown while we walk,” Zane said, beckoning. “There’s a lot to go over and not much time. I have class in half an hour. You can sit in if you want.”

“Oh yeah,” Albus commented brightly. “That’d be *buckets* of fun.”

Lucy smacked her cousin lightly on the back of the head as they stood up. “Give it a rest already, Albus.”

“All right,” Zane said, turning around and walking backwards, his arms held wide. “This is Alma Aleron’s main mall. Most of the classroom buildings are along here, on either side. Back by the Warping Willow, that pile of bricks and stone is the home of one of the original founders. Looks tempting to climb on, but not a good idea. Magic’s the only thing holding what’s left of it together these days.”

“What happened to it?” James asked, looking back over his shoulder at the faded ruin. “Looks like it’s a thousand years old.”

Zane shrugged. “Sorry, that’s not part of the tour. Mainly, ’cause I don’t know. I’m sure somebody told me at one time, but I did myself a favor and forgot it as soon as I could. Leaves more room up here for Clutchcudgel and pledge dares,” he said, tapping the side of his head with one finger. “Anyway, most of the dormitory houses are on the other side of the classroom buildings. There are six of them, which brings me to the most important part of your life here at the Aleron: which society you end up in.”

“Just like the houses at Hogwarts,” Lucy nodded, brightening.

“Yes!” Zane said, pointing at her. “And no. Things here are totally different, beginning with the Sorting. Mainly because there isn’t one. Here, you have to rush for the society you want to get into. If you don’t, or if you blow it during rush, you’ll get assigned to a dorm house by the administration, and you don’t want that to happen.”

James followed Zane over a narrow footbridge, sidling past a knot of students going in the opposite direction. “Why not? You get into a house either way, right?”

“Yeah, but you don’t have any say about what house they put you in. It’s based entirely on whatever space is available. And houses don’t treat leftovers very well. Even Zombie House. I should know.”

“Were you a... er... leftover?” Ralph asked.

“Heh,” Zane said, glancing back. “No. Let’s just say Zombie House’s leftovers are still cleaning key lime pie off the basement walls. It’s an ugly hierarchy, but an effective one.”

“Sounds a bit barbaric,” Lucy said mildly.

Zane nodded. “Anyway, there’s six societies here, all originally named for Greek mythology, which the founding fathers were all just mad about. Nobody really calls them by their Greek names anymore, though, so don’t worry about trying to remember it all. The societies have been in existence since the beginning of the school and they were designed to accommodate pretty much any magical personality type.”

He stopped and turned around again, gesturing between two nearby buildings. “See that old mansion back there, behind Rhines Hall? That’s Hermes Mansion, otherwise known as the home of the Zombies, where I live. My dorm is in the top right window, next to the tower. Zombies are perseverant and mischievous, adaptable to almost any situation. Just like me, eh?”

Albus nodded. “Hermes House Zombies are also known for having questionable judgment and requiring a lot of supervision.”

Lucy, James, and Ralph glanced aside at Albus, eyebrows raised.

“What?” Albus said, spreading his hands. “Lucy’s not the only one who can read, you know! It was in a booklet I found in our room last night.”

Zane rolled his eyes. “Well, you’re right, technically. If you ask anybody else, they’ll tell you that Zombie House is the home of punks, rebels, and troublemakers. But they only say that ’cause they’re jealous. Our colors are bile yellow and black.”

“What about the other societies?” Lucy asked.

“All right,” Zane said, raising his hand and beginning to count them off on his fingers. “Besides the Hermes House Zombies, there’s Erebus, better known as Vampire House, headed up by Professor Remora, who you already met. They’re all dramatic and morose, and they take themselves super seriously. You can tell them by their black and blood red uniforms, and by the fact that most of them are as pale as the moon and like to let their hair flop all over their eyes so they have to pull it out of the way just to see who’s making fun of them. And it’s usually a Zombie,” he added proudly.

“Then there’s the Aphrodite House Pixies. They’re all cheerleader types, hung up on looking good and who has the most expensive broom and who’s still wearing last season’s designer cape. They’re not bad, if you can get past the ego, and nobody can out-charm them when it comes to school politics and debates. They even have some real-life Veelas in Pixie House. Their colors are pink and yellow since those are the colors that are most commonly in fashion.”

Zane started walking again, leading the group toward the main administration building at the end of the commons. “Next is Ares House, commonly known as the Werewolves. They’re the military types, and the jocks of the campus. Their house is the one up on Victory Hill, behind the admin building. They’ve won that spot for twelve years in a row since nobody can beat them in the Clutch tournament. Werewolves are arrogant and tough, and they don’t have much respect for anyone who isn’t like them, so you’ll want to steer clear of them unless you are one. Their colors are slate gray and burgundy, like military uniforms. There’s their president over there, Professor Jackson.”

James blinked and turned to look. Professor Theodore Jackson strode through the sunlight on the other side of the campus, wearing a slate gray coat and a dark burgundy ascot, his steely brow low. He apparently hadn’t noticed James or the rest of his group, and James was glad.

“Then there’s Hephaestus House, home of the Igors. They’re just about the exact opposite of the Werewolves. Igors are technomancy and alchemy freaks, and they’re dead geniuses at clockwork. Most of them spend so much time in their house laboratory that they hardly ever know what’s going on around the rest of the campus. They talk a big game about taking over the world and creating doomsday devices, but they’re really pretty harmless when you get to know ’em. You can tell them by their acid green uniforms.”

Zane stopped at the base of the steps to the administration building, which was the enormous brick edifice with the clock tower. He turned and pointed across the campus, back the way they’d come. “And finally, there’s the Bigfoots, Apollo House. They have that mansion way back there on the other side of the ruin, about as far from Victory Hill as possible. Bigfoots are nice guys, but there’s nothing really interesting about them. They’re a friendly, hardworking, upstanding bunch of fairly competent witches and wizards, which explains why everybody forgets about them about two seconds after they meet them.”

“They sound like a very decent group,” Lucy said, peering at the distant house.

“That’s exactly my point!” Zane exclaimed. “They field a respectable Clutch team, but their spell game is totally weak, which explains why they never win. Their House president is a decent guy, can’t remember his name. Professor Birch, or Bark, or something like that. Teaches Ethics of Magic at the college level. *Way* boring.”

“Hold on,” Albus said, raising a hand. “So this is supposed to be the best wizarding school in the whole Unites States, and you’re telling me the best your people could come up with for house names was a bunch of half-rate monsters?”

“I suspect the Vampires, at least, would object to the term ‘half-rate,’” Lucy interjected.

Zane rolled his eyes. “Yeah, yeah, join the club. Remember, I’m still a Ravenclaw to the core. When I got here last year, I told them how lame it all was compared to life at Hogwarts. Surprisingly, none of that went over very well. The point is, these nicknames were voted on by students, a hundred years or so ago, and they obviously weren’t the most imaginative bunch. If you think monster names are bad, though, you should have seen the *original* society names from back when they started the school! The founding fathers may have been geniuses in a lot of ways, but deciding mascots wasn’t one of them.”

“How’s that?” Lucy asked.

“Well,” Zane said, lowering his voice, “those were the same guys that eventually decided the symbols for our political parties should be an elephant and a donkey. Benjamin Franklyn himself voted against making our national symbol an eagle. You know what he wanted it to be? A turkey!”

Albus shook his head, grinning. “You’re joking.”

Zane straightened. “I wish I was, dude. He’s still a little rankled about it, and it’s been *centuries!* But anyway, like ’em or not, that’s all the house societies. They’ll grow on you once you get settled into your own. Rush week is still going on, so you still have a chance to pledge for a good house. I vote Zombie for the lot of you, but we’ll have to ask Patches.”

“Patches?” Albus blinked. “The administration cat?”

“He’s a Kneazle,” Zane corrected. “And he has a sixth sense about such things. You can apply for whatever house you want, but it’s tradition for new students to consult Patches first. It’s fun. In fact, there he is now.”

James looked in the direction Zane indicated. In the far corner of the stone stairway, lying in the shadow of a statue of a huge eagle, was a perfectly ordinary looking calico cat. Its eyes were closed but the tip of its tail flicked restlessly, as if the cat was only pretending to be asleep.

“Come on,” Zane grinned. “Let’s ask him.”

“This is some kind of prank you all play on new students,” Albus said, lagging behind. “I can appreciate that. I won’t be falling for it though.”

“Suit yourself,” Zane replied, unperturbed. He hunkered down in front of the cat and scratched it between the ears. “Hey Patches, how’s everybody’s little kitty-boy doing?” he said, as if he was talking to a baby. “Yeah, that’s it. You like getting scratched between the ears, don’cha? You feeling like helping out some of my friends today? Sharing a little of that crazy feline intuition?”

Slowly, Patches slit his green eyes and peered up at James. His tail flicked.

“This is James,” Zane went on, glancing back. “I know he’s a day or two late, but he’s come a long way, so he has a good excuse. You want to give him a little push in the right direction, society-wise?”

The cat continued to regard James thoughtfully. James could hear him purring as Zane petted him. Finally, the cat stood up, stretched and yawned luxuriously, and padded away into the sunlight.

“Thus spake Zarathustra,” Albus quipped, rolling his eyes.

“Shh,” Zane said, raising one hand.

Patches paced toward the administration building’s open doors, tail held high, and then stopped with his left front paw raised. He turned to look back, as if making sure that the students were watching.

“Look where his foot is,” Lucy whispered, nudging James with her elbow.

James looked closer. Engraved into the stone blocks of the steps was a line of six symbols. The one closest to James was a bat, its wings half-furled. The cat was standing over one of the symbols in the middle, its right paw resting right in the middle of it.

“That can’t be right, Patches,” Zane said, frowning.

“What is it?” James said, squinting. “I left my glasses in my duffle bag. I can’t see the symbol.”

Zane sighed. “It’s a glass beaker with electric bolts coming out of it, the symbol of Igor House. Patches, James is no Igor. Technomancy isn’t his thing. He’s an expert with defensive magic. He’s a Zombie all the way. Go on, go over to the cross-eyed skull.”

To James’ surprise, the cat almost seemed to shake its head. It stayed on the Igor symbol, its left foot raised, its right planted right in the center of the engraved beaker.

“I’m pretty sure I’m not an Igor,” James commented.

“Yeah, well, stupid old cat,” Zane agreed, peering sidelong at Patches. “Good thing it isn’t like the Sorting Hat back at good ol’ Hoggies. You can pledge at whatever house you want, regardless of what *he* says.”

“Do me now!” Albus proclaimed, stepping forward. “Let James go to the spods. What about me, Patches, ol’ buddy?”

The cat regarded Albus coolly, and then put down his left paw. Slowly, he meandered along the symbols and stopped at one near the end. The shape was obvious enough that even James could make it out. It was a werewolf.

Albus nodded, grinning. “Excellent. Wolves it is.”

“What about Ralph, then?” Zane asked, pushing the bigger boy forward.

Patches studied Ralph for a long time, his green eyes narrowed. Finally, he sat down, licked his flank a few times, got up again, and walked in a large circle. When he was done, his right foot rested on the beaker again.

“Somebody’s putting catnip in your Tender Vittles, puss,” Zane said, shaking his head. “Ralph’s even less of an Igor than James here. He didn’t even take Technomancy when he had the chance.”

“It’s true,” Ralph said to the cat. “I can’t even spell ‘technomancy’.”

Patches lifted his nose and yawned again, as if bored.

Lucy walked over to Patches and hunkered down on one knee. “Hi Patches,” she said, tilting her head. “I’m Lucy Weasley. Where do you think I belong?”

Patches strolled forward and rubbed against Lucy’s leg, purring loudly. He walked around her and then angled toward the opposite end of the line of symbols. His shadow fell over the bat as he walked around it consideringly. Finally, he stopped and touched the center of the bat with his right paw.

Zane bobbed his head back and forth. “Could be right on that one,” he said. “You do seem to have a little of that ‘creature of the night’ mystique going for you, Lucy.”

“But I really dislike that Remora woman,” Lucy said, reaching forward to pet Patches again. “She’s so vain and ridiculous.”

Zane raised his eyebrows and poked a finger into the air. “All types come in all houses. That’s a direct quote from my House president, the dapper Jersey Devil himself.”

“What’s it supposed to mean?” Ralph asked, confused.

“It means that no house is all good or all bad,” Zane answered, hefting his backpack. “There’s obnoxious twits in every society, not just the Vampires. There’s even a few duds among us Zombies. On the other hand, there’s decent types in every house too, although they’re a little fewer and far between in some. Don’t worry about it, Lucy. If you do pledge Vampire House, you’ll find a few like-minded people there despite Remora’s best efforts.”

“So where do we stay until we get into a society?” Ralph asked.

“There’s a common dorm behind the guest house,” Zane said, nodding back the way they had come. “Your stuff’s probably been sent there already. You’ll want to get out of there as soon as you can. They haven’t updated the common dorm in, like, three hundred years. If I was you, I’d get inside right now and sign up for one of the societies. The initiation process will start pretty much immediately. While you’re in there, you can get your class assignments sorted out and sign up for any clubs or sports you want to get involved with.” He stepped aside and gestured toward the Administration Hall’s main doors. “Unless, that is, you want to come along with me to Precognitive Engineering.”

“No thanks,” James sighed. “I think we better get all of this out of the way as soon as we can.”

“And I don’t know about the rest of you,” Albus added, “but I’ll put off starting classes as long as I can.”

“I’d like to come along with you, actually,” Lucy said, moving to stand next to Zane. “Unlike these two, I am anxious to see what classes look like here. I’ll settle the official arrangements after lunch.”

“This way, then,” Zane said, offering Lucy his elbow. “Precog isn’t as hard as it used to be, apparently, now that Madame Delacroix is in a padded room in the medical complex, but it’s still a challenge. Stick close and I’ll show you the ropes.”

James shook his head as the two headed away into the throng of students.

“So,” Ralph said, moving hesitantly toward the Administration Hall doors, “are you going to sign up for Igor House?”

James scoffed. “No way. I’m going for Zombie House. With apologies to Patches over there.”

“That’s what I was thinking too,” Ralph nodded. “Although I can’t help wondering what that cat knows that we don’t.”

“You’re both daft,” Albus said seriously. “That cat’s got some kind of mental link with the cosmos or something. It can see right into your soul, just like the Sorting Hat back home. Did you see how quick it was to figure out I belonged in Werewolf House? That’s the house of sporting greats, strength and order. If the cat says you two are a couple of Igor spods, then you shouldn’t argue with it. Patches knows his stuff.”

James pushed his brother out of the way as he turned toward the Administration Hall doors. “A minute ago, you thought the cat was just a freshman prank.”

“Ugh,” Ralph said, following. “I thought I was through with all of this. I was just starting to get comfortable with Slytherin. Now we have to start all over again.”

Albus frowned. “I love Slytherin, but I have a feeling that me and the Wolves are going to get along just fine.”

“At least Quidditch isn’t as big a deal over here as it is back home,” Ralph commented, stepping into the echoing shadows of the Hall’s lobby.

James frowned. “Why is that a good thing?”

“Well,” Ralph grinned, clapping his friend on the shoulder, “it improves your chances of making the team, doesn’t it?”

Albus hooted laughter, and the sound of it echoed throughout the grand, dark lobby.



Twenty minutes later, the three boys emerged into the sunlight again, studying their class assignments.

“Do either of you have Clockwork Mechanics?” Albus asked. “I can’t even imagine what that is.”

“Hardly any of these make any sense,” Ralph agreed. “Look here: Muggle Occupation Studies. What’s that about?”

“Hey!” a voice called nearby, startling the three. James looked around and saw a pair of older students standing next to the doors of the Administration Hall. One, a girl, wore a dark slate skirt, matching button-down sweater and a burgundy tie. Black hair framed her dark, severe face. The other, a boy older than James, had bright green hair cut into a stripe that ran from his brow to the base of his neck. He wore a screamingly yellow tie and black pants. The crest on his blazer identified him as a member of Zombie House.

“Are you talking to us?” Ralph asked querulously.

“Do you see any other new students who’ve gotten it into their heads to pledge the Hermes House Zombies?”

“And the Ares Werewolves,” the girl added, smiling crookedly. “Which one of you is Albus Potter?”

Albus jumped to attention and did his best salute. James knew it was an attempt to be funny, and knew as well that it would fail miserably.

“On the ground, pledge,” the girl barked, pointing to the portico floor. “Salutes are for those who serve. You’ll make up for that mockery by giving me thirty.”

Albus was halfway onto his face on the hot stone. He stopped and glanced up at the taller girl. “Er, thirty what? Galleons? Kisses? Sorry, I’m not from around here. Is this some sort of bribe?”

The girl grinned again. She hunkered down in front of Albus so that her face was only a foot from his. “Thirty *pushups*, Cornelius,” she said sweetly. “And just to make sure you remember, you’ll do them one-handed.”

“*Cornelius?*” Ralph muttered.

“Pushups,” Albus moaned. “That’s, like, exercise, right?”

The girl nodded and produced her wand from the sleeve of her white blouse. “Here. I’ll get you started.”

She flicked her wrist and Albus levitated smartly into the air. A moment later, he plopped back down onto his hands and the tips of his toes.

“That’s one,” the girl said, still smiling. “Now count them out.”

Albus grunted as he began to count, touching his nose to the stone and pushing himself up.

“As for you two,” the boy said, moving close to Ralph and James and looking them up and down, “I wouldn’t have picked you out of a meat locker lineup, but you come with a decent recommendation from one of my house members. Zane Walker says you were members of the Gremlins. Is that so?”

James blinked. “How do you know about them?”

The boy cuffed James lightly over the ear and grinned. “I just explained it. Zane told me. So were you members or not?”

“Yeah,” James said, rubbing the side of his head. The cuff hadn’t really hurt, but he felt he should do something more than just absorb it.

“I *suppose* I was a member,” Ralph said, thinking hard. “I mean, unofficially, I guess. There was never any swearing in, if you know what I mean...”

“We take initiation seriously in Zombie House,” the boy said. “My name’s Warrington. You’ll call me... let’s see... you’ll call me ‘Mr. Warrington, his grand exalted poobahness’. Until I tell you otherwise. Understood?”

“Yeah,” James said wearily, nodding.

“Yeah, what?” Warrington prodded, leaning closer.

“Yeah, Mr. Warrington, your grand exalted, er... poobahness?”

“Close enough,” the boy said, straightening again. “So you’re James Potter and this ton o’ bricks here is Ralph Deedle, both of you from jolly old England. All right, then. Here’s what I want you both to do right now. I want you to run along to Hermes Mansion and introduce yourselves to the rest of the Zombies. But you can’t go inside, you understand. You’re only pledges, and pledges have to be invited in. So, *you’ll* have to stand outside and yell. Tell everybody in the house your name, who recommended you, and why we should make you official members. And wear these.”

Warrington held out two hats. James was not exactly surprised to see that they were yellow and black beanies, with gently spinning propellers on the tops. Some things, of course, were just tradition no matter what country you were in. Slowly, he and Ralph took them.

“Put ’em on now,” Warrington grinned. “Show some house pride, why don’t you? When I get back to the house, in an hour, I want to see you outside, hard at work. And when I get *inside*, I want the rest of the Zombies to be able to tell me everything about you that I need to know, with no exceptions. Got it?”

“Yes,” James sighed, jamming the beanie onto his head.

“Yes, *what?*” Warrington prodded again.

“Yes, Mr. Warrington,” both boys said in sloppy unison, “your grand exalted poobahness.”

“Nah, I don’t want to be called that anymore,” Warrington said, cupping his chin. “Now, you will refer to me as ‘Captain Warrington, the Superduke of the Realm of Coolness’. Remember that. I don’t want to have to remind you. Now run!”

He shoed James and Ralph, who turned and trotted haphazardly down the steps of the Administration Hall, leaving Albus grunting out pushups on the portico.

“I didn’t realize,” Ralph panted as they began to cross the campus, “that running... would be part of the deal.”

Thus concludes chapter seven. What did you think?

Tomorrow’s chapter will be released at noon, CST, via www.jamespotterseries.com. In the meantime, come on over to the [Grotto Keep forum](#) to discuss what’s happened thus far.

For instance, what did you think of Patches’ recommendations? Should James and Ralph have listened? Or do you think they’d make better Zombies than Igers? We’ll find out soon enough!