The Fourth School

by Stargon

Summary

The TriWizard Tournament has been revived and the three largest and most prestigious schools in Europe are due to compete - Hogwarts, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. And in a mark of respect, the newest and smallest school in not only Britain but also all of Europe, has been invited to watch. If only things were that simple.
Chapter 1

Harry Potter, boy wizard and no longer student of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, shuffled deeper into the shadow of the pillar that he was standing beside. It wasn’t that he was hiding so much that he was trying not to be noticed. But when you’re classed as a celebrity in the wizard world with a ridiculous hyphenated name, it’s generally best to stay out of the spotlight.

Not that he ever could really seem to manage it.

Take the past year for example. It started out with him being called a hero, one of the greatest wizards alive and being praised in every wizarding home, business and newspaper, all because he’d managed to get lucky and survive being kidnapped and murdered. Of course, that actually entailed fighting and then killing a sixty foot long basilisk that had been roaming the halls of Hogwarts, petrifying students and staff (if Filch, the caretaker, and his cat, could be classed as such) alike.

And then, within the space of a week, everything changed. And it was here, less than fifty metres away where it all happened. Exactly one year ago today.

That was when he, along with his classmates, had returned from their year away at the castle in Scotland, arriving at King’s Cross Station in London. He’d passed through the barrier that led from the magical platform into the muggle side of the station and, after greeting a few parents and friends, he’d pulled Hermione, his best friend in the entire world, aside for a private conversation. Not that it’d stayed that way.

No. Before they could finish and he could tell her … what he’d wanted to, they’d been interrupted by Albus Dumbledore, their Headmaster. Apparently, he was there to take Harry back to his relatives for the summer holiday. Normally that wouldn’t be a problem, but when you’ve cast a magical vow stating that you’d rather lose your magic than every spend a single night with said relatives, as Harry had done nearly a year previously, it was a big problem.

As a consequence, Harry’s magic had reacted. Violently. It’d erupted in such a way as to knock everyone around him to the floor and to send Dumbledore crashing into the nearest concrete pillar, knocking him unconscious in the process. Seeing what he’d caused and knowing that he’d not only performed underage magic but in the presence of muggles to boot, he’d understandably panicked and fled.

That had led to an eight month time where he was in hiding and the wizarding world, or more precisely, the Ministry of Magic, was hunting for him and calling for him to be arrested and to have his wand snapped and his magic bound. Understandably, Harry’d ignored their directives to turn himself in.

Instead, he’d gone to the one place that he knew that he’d be safe: Potter Haven.

Potter Haven, the valley that he owned in southern Scotland, had been set up as a retreat, a place where he could stay undetected and continue his magical education by himself. It had the best goblin wards that money could buy, augmented by the ones that Dobby, his house-elf, could add to them. The manor was vast, with ten bedrooms, a series of classrooms, a potion lab, a massive, two-storied library and even had a telescope in the retractable roof. Greenhouses and a massive domed area set aside on the grounds to contain magical animals ensured that he could cover every topic that he wanted to learn.
It’d taken six months before anyone had even found out where he was hiding and even that was a complete fluke. Colin Creevey, his friend from Hogwarts, had inadvertently stumbled upon his location when his parents had taken him and his brother on a tour of Scotland for Christmas. That had inevitably led to him telling his best friends, Hermione Granger and Neville Longbottom, who in turn shared the secret with his other closest friends.

The group of twelve had surprised Harry by sneaking away from the castle on a Hogsmeade weekend to visit him and to spend the day with him. As startled and initially angry as he was, Harry simply couldn’t deny how happy seeing them all again made him. That’s why he agreed to a second clandestine meeting the following month.

Unfortunately, this one went a little differently. They’d been followed by Lucius Malfoy, the uppity Lord who once owned and severely mistreated Dobby. In order to give his friends time to get back to Hogwarts, Harry had engaged Malfoy in a duel. As outclassed as he was, Harry found that he was able to distract the man well enough, that was until Malfoy targeted Dobby with a killing curse. In his panic to save his friend, Harry did the only thing that he could think of – he dove in the way of the killing green beam of light, pushed Dobby out of the way and took the hit himself.

That, of course, led to his death. And, after a short talk with his parents in what he guessed was some Limbo-like state, he came back to life.

Malfoy, of course, got away, while Harry was arrested by the DMLE who’d responded to the magical discharges that they’d detected and was on-hand to witness the end of the ‘battle’.

Less than two weeks later, he was put on trial. Because of that vow that he’d made, combined with the fact that the King’s Cross Incident was instigated by Dumbledore, Harry was found not guilty. Ignoring the directives to surrender himself to the DMLE, though, was a completely different matter. As was the fact that he’d been truant from formal education for so long. By the time that the Wizengamot had finished with him, he’d been fined nearly twenty thousand galleons.

And he was back to being the darling of the wizarding world again. Even his hyphenated name was added to. Now, he was *The-Boy-Who-Lived-Again*. Plus, the newspapers had decided that the villain of the day was the Minister for Magic himself. Fining an under-aged wizard such a ridiculous amount and threatening said boy to gaol time if he failed to pay was not kosher as far as the wizarding population was concerned.

How Cornelius Fudge had survived the vote of no confidence against him a month later was anyone’s guess. All that could be said was that he managed to scrape over the line by a single vote. And since then, he’d been doing his utmost to keep his head down and not doing anything to attract any hint of negative publicity onto himself.

Harry, too, had done all that he could to avoid the spotlight, thus why he was currently secluded from view behind the pillar on Platform Nine and Three Quarters waiting for the Hogwarts Express and his friends to arrive – friends that he hadn’t seen for more than three months.

Peeking around the pillar, Harry swept his eyes over the platform. He’d never seen it like this before, filled with only parents, the occasional grandparent and the younger siblings of his classmates.

They were clumped together, not unlike their children would be gathered around their friends. Some were talking animatedly, gesturing wildly around them with their hands; others had their heads bent together, speaking in hushed tones. One or two stood off to the side by themselves. But the one thing that they all seemed to have in common was the fact that every couple of seconds, a
head would turn to look towards the left, directly towards the direction that the Hogwarts Express was to come.

As he looked, Harry began picking out faces that he knew: there was Madam Longbottom, her ramrod straight back making her tall, vulture topped hat stand out even more prominently above the crowd; there, chuckling together in a small group was Cyrus Greengrass with his wife, Penelope, and a tall, thin man with a close cropped light brown beard; and standing off by himself, looking up into a corner of the platform with the most intense expression that Harry’d ever seen on the man, was Xenophilius Lovegood.

Glancing down at his watch, Harry noted that it was almost exactly five o’clock. As though that was the cue that it’d been waiting for, a clattering rumble of an approaching locomotive heralded the arrival of the train that everyone was waiting for.

Harry saw smiles break out on dozens and dozens of faces as the great scarlet engine materialised into view. Parents began waving as the first of the passenger carriages came level with the end of the platform and the young ones waiting for their siblings began to run along, keeping pace with the train.

Heads and arms began to appear from the windows and doors of the Express itself, waving and laughing and calling out to the ones waiting for them. Mostly, Harry noted, this behaviour was confined to the first and second year Hogwarts students. He smiled wistfully at it, daring to dream for a second of what it must be like to have a parent waiting to welcome you home.

As the train came to a stop, it released great gusts of steam, allowing the light grey cloud to billow throughout the platform, burying everyone to their knees.

Harry’s eyes roved over the train doors slamming open as he eagerly searched for the ones that he’d been waiting for.

The dirty blonde locks of Luna Lovegood was the first that he saw. She’d paused momentarily in the doorway, her head turning this way and that until, with a grin so wide that it threatened to split her face in two, she hopped down and began skipping off in the direction of her father.

Harry was in two minds. He could either follow Luna or he could wait until he saw the one who he was most eager to see. With a sigh, he decided to use his fame to his advantage for once. It took only three steps towards Luna and Xeno before the whispers started up.

“Is that Harry Potter?”

“The-Boy-Who-Lived-Again!”

Ignoring them all, Harry kept his face fixed on his goal.

“Harry! Harry!”

As tempting as it was, he ignored the cries coming from all around him but they did have the effect that he was hoping for. Long before he’d reached them, word of his approach turned Luna’s head around. And then, with the loudest, most piercing squeal that he’d ever heard her use, she bounced through the crowd and jumped into his arms.

“How didn’t you tell us that you’d be here?” she asked, pulling back to stare at him with her large grey eyes seeming to see directly into his soul.

“I wanted to surprise you all,” he smiled.
Grabbing onto his hand, Luna tugged him back towards her father.

“Hello, Harry. Still no crumple-horned snorkacks in your hidden place?” Xenophilius greeted.

“Daddy! You know that crumple-horned snorkacks love heat and there’re no volcanos anywhere near Potter Haven,” Luna interjected.

“Of course, my apologies, Harry,” Xeno replied with a small bow.

Just as he was placing his hand into his pocket, Harry felt himself hit from behind by what felt like two big bodies.

“Harry …”

“Old boy …”

“Old chum …”

“What brings you here …”

“To this lovely place?”

“Would you two hooligans let me go?” Harry asked, trying to squirm out from under the arms of Fred and George Weasley who were continuing to ruffle his hair.

“The-Boy-Who-Lived-Again has spoken,” one intoned solemnly.

“We must obey,” the other agreed before both stepped back.

Harry looked up at their identical grins. “It’s good to see you two as well.”

“Harry?”

Hearing his name, he turned to find a group of girls advancing on him.

“Hi,” he managed before he was engulfed in the first hug.

Susan, who’d he’d managed to briefly recognise before she’d grabbed him, deftly passed him along to Hannah, who passed him on to Lil, who then spun him around until Tracey and Fiona gave him a three-way hug before he finished up with Daphne.

Eyes whirling a bit at the way that he’d just been tossed around from arm to arm, Harry smiled at the group.

“I take it you guys missed me?” he asked.

“Of course, we did, Harry,” Hannah told him.

“But don’t think that we’ve forgiven you yet for not coming back to Hogwarts,” Daphne groused, only the twitch at the corners of her mouth indicating that she wasn’t serious.

“Or for taking us away with you instead,” Lil added.

“Speaking of which,” Harry said, once again putting his hand into his pocket, “I’ve got something for each of you.”

He’d managed to get the pile of cream coloured envelopes out of the pocket of his robe before he
found himself blinded by a flash of light.

“Colin! What have I told you about taking pictures of people without asking?” Harry blinked.

“Sorry, Harry,” the younger boy replied, not sounding apologetic in the slightest.

“Here, guys,” Harry said as he began handing out envelopes according to the name on the front.

Fred and George, predictably, were the first to rip theirs open.

*You are invited to an end of term party.*

*Where: Potter Haven*

*When: Saturday July 2, 1994*

*Time: 10am til Late*

*Bring: your bathing gear (the loch is lovely this time of year)*

This invitation will act as a two-way portkey, taking you and your family to Potter Haven and returning you to the place you left at a second tap of your wand.

“Wow, Harry, this sounds like fun!” Lil grinned.

“And it’s for our families as well? You mean I have to bring Astoria?” Daphne asked.

Harry grinned back at her. “Well, that’s up to your parents, I suppose. I thought that it’d be nice to catch up and you can spend time at the manor without worrying about getting back to school undetected.”

“You better have one of those invites for us,” a voice stated from behind him.

Spinning around, Harry found the two who he’d been most looking forward to seeing standing there. Neville was smiling broadly at him before looking pointedly at the envelopes the other’s hands.

“Sure, Nev,” Harry replied, “here you go.”

Somewhere between handing it to him, Harry and Neville ended up quickly embracing and patting each other on the back.

“It’s good to see you, Harry,” Neville said, stepping back and beginning to open his invitation.

“You too, mate,” Harry replied and then his eyes turned to the one standing beside him. “Hey, Hermione.”

Her chocolate coloured eyes were shining brightly at him with a distinctive sheen to them that he thought meant that she was about to cry. Instead, she launched herself at him, wrapping her arms tightly around his body as though she was trying to squeeze the life out of him.

“I missed you too, Hermione,” he whispered into her ear, making her arms tighten even more, a feat that he didn’t think was possible.

Finally, after the snickering of their friends began to register, they let go, although Hermione only ventured to his side, standing close enough to ensure that their shoulders remained in contact.
“Here you go, Hermione,” Harry said, handing over the last envelope.

“Thank you, Harry,” she beamed, making her front teeth protrude slightly from her mouth.

“We’d be delighted to come, Harry,” Luna said, waving a hand at her father.

“Us, too. We’ll see you Saturday,” Fred and George replied, although Harry noticed that their invitation disappeared before they waved the group farewell and went to join the cluster of red-heads a little way down the platform.

“I’m sure my parents and my brother, Dennis, would love to come, too,” Colin chirped.

“We’ll be there,” chorused most of the group around him.

“Perhaps I can drown Astoria in the loch,” Daphne mused as she eyed her sister and parents ambling up the platform towards them.

“I’m sorry, Daphne, it’s no good,” Tracey laughed, “you simply can’t fool us. We all know how much you love your sister. Even if she is a pest at times.”

With a sniff of annoyance, Daphne winked at Harry before putting her nose in the air and stalking away from her best friend. Tracey, of course, humphed before turning to follow her.

“You’ve invited everyone who came to Potter Haven to see you?” Hermione asked.

Harry nodded. “And their families. And Professor McGonagall and Professor Flitwick and Remus. They all helped me with my studies this year, so I thought that it’d only be fair to show them where I’ve been doing my learning.”

Hermione nodded. “Will anyone else be there?”

“Sirius, of course, and Beth and Mickey if she can get someone to watch Hermione’s Book Nook for the day,” he replied.

“Sounds like quite a crowd,” she remarked.

“Yeah,” he grinned back. “Should be heaps of fun.”

“Do you want to come with me to see my parents? They’ll be just outside the portal,” Hermione offered.

Harry eyed the crowd that still lingered on the platform warily. There was no way that he wanted to go through that unless he really had to.

“I think I’ll pass. I’ll see them on Saturday, but say ‘hi’ to them for me,” he replied.

Taking out his wand and a small stone from his pocket, Harry made ready to touch them together.

“It was really good to see you again, Hermione,” he said.

He watched as she momentarily seemed indecisive, biting her bottom lip as she thought. Then, moving faster than he thought was possible, she lifted up to her toes and pecked him on the cheek with her lips. It was so unexpected that Harry accidentally let his wand tip droop. Right onto the stone. And, with a feeling like being hooked behind his navel with a giant fish hook, was whisked away home.
“Master Harry Sir?”

“Master Harry Sir!”

The tone, if not the words, pierced the haze that Harry was caught in and lifted his head. Prolific blinking of his eyes brought Dobby into focus standing in front of him, looking down upon him worriedly.

“Dobby?” Harry asked.

“Yes, Master Harry Sir,” Dobby replied, looking relieved.

“How did I get here? I thought that I was, that I was …. Hermione!” he finished in a panic.

This was definitely not King’s Cross Station where he was the last time that he remembered anything. Right where Hermione’d … Lifting his hand, he placed it on his cheek as though to feel her lips once more.

“How long have I been here?” he asked, unfolding himself off of the floor.

“Only a few minutes. Dobby came as soon as you arrived home only to find yous on the floor,” Dobby related.

“Oh, she’s going to think that … Actually, I don’t know what she’s going to be thinking,” his face fell into his hands. Suddenly, his head snapped up. “I need to explain. Somehow. Is the journal in my room still?”

“As far as Dobby knows, Master Harry Sir,” the elf replied.

Wide eyed, Harry started for the door that led from the Receiving Room of the Potter Haven manor.

“Master Harry Sir?” Dobby said tentatively, pausing Harry with his hand on the door.

Harry looked around to see Dobby looking at the top of his head. With a frown, Harry reached up and patted his head. Then, with a soft “oh”, he screwed up his eyes and concentrated for a moment.

“Better?” he asked.

“Yes, Master Harry Sir,” Dobby nodded, making his great ears flap. “And Master Harry should also know that Mister Wolfie is in the library.”

“Remus is here?” Harry asked excitedly.

“Lord Blackie brought him, but Lord Blackie had to go and said to tell Master Harry Sir that he’d be back in time for dinner.”

“Thanks, Dobby,” Harry replied before ducking out of the room.

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Harry found Remus standing alongside one of the shelves, a book open in his hands. As usual,
Remus looked shabby. His old threadbare cardigan was tossed over a nearby chair, while his shirtsleeves were rolled up to the elbow. His head was bowed allowing his slightly greying ginger hair, obviously in need a trim, to fall across his face.

“Remus!” Harry called as he crossed the room.

At his voice, Remus snapped the book closed and swivelled around, a broad smile on his face.

“How are you, Cub?” Remus asked, crossing the room to give Harry a hug.

“I thought that you’d still be at Hogwarts,” Harry stated as they parted.

Remus’ hand went to the back of his neck momentarily.

“Ordinarily, I would have been. However, I found it necessary to quit at the end of last week,” he related.

Harry frowned. “But you loved that job.”

“Very true, Harry, but it’s a bit hard to teach when your students are afraid of you.”

“They found out about your ‘furry little problem’,” he said. It was obviously a statement rather than a question.

Remus sighed. “Unfortunately.”

“What happened?” Harry asked.

“Professor Snape and I had a little … disagreement, one that Dumbledore decided to side with me upon. The letters and howlers from anxious and irate parents began arriving the next morning. I thought it prudent to quit before I was fired.”

“I’m sorry, Remus,” Harry said, giving his honorary uncle another hug.

“Thank you, Harry,” Remus replied, giving a tiny smile.

“You know, I reckon that you’d be brilliant as a tutor,” Harry smirked.

“Why, Harry, are you offering me a job?” Remus laughed.

“Could be, Remus,” Harry replied. “Perhaps we could talk about it over dinner?”

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Dobby had the manor sparkling well before ten in the morning of the second of July. Extra tables and chairs had been procured and set out on the back patio. One was filled with jugs of soft drinks and butterbeer and teas, all charmed to stay hot or cold, depending on the beverage. Another was ready for the bowls of chips, platters of cheese and crackers and trays of pastries that Dobby only needed to magic there at the appropriate time.

Even the valley had been given a once over. The fledgling gardens were weed free, the greenhouses sparkled and the paths had been swept clean. A new path that meandered from the manor all the way down to the loch had also been added. The newest addition was a large gazebo set on a small hill just back from the sparkling blue water. Four small huts had also been placed behind the gazebo so that people had somewhere to change in before and after a swim in the loch.
And Harry had been banished to the Receiving Room. Dobby had deemed him a distraction and boldly stated that he’d be best awaiting his guests in there, right before he began to twist his ears to punish himself for speaking in such a way to his master. It’d taken Harry nearly ten minutes to settle him down.

Harry’d taken great care in deciding what to wear today. He knew that, as the host, he should be dressed more formally, but, as this was supposed to be a party, he’d wanted to at least be comfortable. In the end, he’d settled for a pair of dark grey three-quarter cargo pants and a bottle green polo shirt with a pair of sneakers.

The sound of bodies hitting the ground behind him spun Harry around mid-step as he paced the room.

“Fred, George!” he exclaimed, surprised to only be seeing two red-heads.

“Harrykins!” the one on the left stated as he scrambled to his feet.

“Hope you don’t mind us coming a bit early,” the other said

“But with the way Mum’s been acting, we thought it best to come early to make sure that we didn’t miss out.”

“Not a problem, guys,” Harry replied, “I’m glad that you could make it.”

“And we’ve got a little something for later as well,” the one on the right stated, patting the bag at his side.

“Once it gets dark,” the other twin clarified.

“Was your Mum not going to let you come?” Harry asked.

“Well … we accidentally let slip that we didn’t think that we did so well on our OWLs, so she was all for grounding us.”

“We left a note saying that we were going to Lee’s for the day while she was out feeding the chickens,” the twin on the right confided.

Suddenly, Harry narrowed his eyes. Neither twin had yet identified which one was which. Moving his hands behind his back, Harry flicked his wrist.

“Right. Let’s get this sorted out. Which one of you is Fred?” he asked.

“Why Harry, can’t you tell that I am?” the one on the left exclaimed sounding incredibly indignant that he wasn’t recognised on sight.

Whipping his wand around, Harry pointed it at the now identified Fred.

“Transmutare capillus flavus!”

Fred’s expression turned horrified. “What’d you do?”

George, though, was nearly rolling around on the ground, pointing at his now yellow haired twin.

“And just so you don’t feel left out, George, transmutare capillum album!” Harry intoned, pointing his wand at him.
This time it was Fred’s turn to laugh. “Your hair’s white!”

Harry gave a stiff nod. “I’ll put your hair back before you leave, but at least for today everyone’ll be able to tell you apart.”

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“Madam Longbottom, Neville, welcome to Potter Haven,” Harry stated formally for what must have been the tenth time that morning.

Augusta Longbottom inclined her head regally. “Thank you for inviting us, Mister Potter.”

“Hey, Harry,” Neville greeted.

“Hey, Nev,” Harry grinned. “Would you mind showing your Gran to the back patio? Everyone’s gathering there and there’s still a couple of people to come.”

“Sure thing, Harry. This way, Gran,” Neville said, indicating the door.

The door had barely closed behind them when there was the sound of another group arriving. At the sight of the bushy brown hair of the smallest of the three, Harry’s heart felt like it skipped a beat. Swallowing through his suddenly dry throat, he rushed forward.

“Let me help, Mrs Granger,” he said.

Emma looked up and smiled before taking his outstretched hand and allowing him to help her to her feet.

“If that’s how you magical folk travel, I think I’ll stick to cars and planes,” Mister Granger groused.

“Apparently you get used to it,” Harry told him, “not that I have yet.”

“At least it’s not just me then,” Dan stated before reaching out to clap Harry on the shoulder. “It’s good to see you, Harry. Thanks for inviting us.”

Harry smiled. “My pleasure. Thanks for coming.”

And then his eyes shifted to take in Hermione. She was standing just behind her mother, an almost-smile on her face. Her chocolate eyes were watching him intently.

“Come on, Dan,” Emma suddenly interjected. “Let’s go and find everyone. I assume that everyone’s outside?”

“Yeah,” Harry replied absently.

“Hi, Harry,” Hermione said quietly after the door had closed behind her parents.

“Hey, Hermione,” and then, in a rush, “I’m sorry about disappearing like that on you, I didn’t mean for it to happen. I just accidentally touched the portkey and it took me away.”

“It’s okay, Harry,” she smiled, reaching out to place a hand on his arm. “You already explained in the journal, remember?”

“Oh, um, yeah,” he replied, rubbing the back of his neck. “So, um, shall we go and join the others?”
At her nod, he rushed for the door and held it open for her. Desperately he tried to will away the feeling of his cheeks burning but, even with his newfound abilities, he didn’t think that he was very successful. The two walked in silence through the Music Room before Hermione stopped dead at the sight of the crowd outside the glass windows.

“What in Merlin’s name happened to the twins?” she exclaimed.

“That was me,” Harry admitted. “I figured that with so many people here today, it’d be easier if we could tell them apart.”

“So, you turned their hair different colours?” Hermione asked, turning her round eyes onto him.

“Which one’s which?”

“Fred’s sporting the yellow hair and George the white hair,” Harry stated.

Hermione shook her head at him. “I’m glad I won’t be you when they decide to prank you back.”

Harry froze. He hadn’t thought of that. Nervously, he looked through the windows at the exact same time that the pair of them saw him and broke out into identical evil grins. Harry gulped. In a panic, he wondered if he could manage to send them home before the party really got started. Nope, not a chance, he quickly decided.

As the pair stepped out onto the back patio, Harry looked around. The three dozen or so people were spread out from one end to the other, all split into small groups. The mothers had settled themselves in a grouping of chairs, while the men, led by Sirius, seemed to have commandeered the area around the bar-be-que, much to Dobby’s obvious annoyance. Remus, Minerva and Filius Flitwick had stepped out onto the grass with Remus pointing out something in the distance further down the valley.

For the most part, his friends were all together, clustered near the table of nibbles. Even Mickey, Beth’s son from Hermione’s Book Nook, seemed to have been accepted; Harry noted that his eyes were glued to the twins and whatever story they were currently telling. The only one missing from that grouping was Neville and Harry’d bet his broomstick that he knew exactly where he was – in the greenhouse making sure that the plants had survived Harry’s treatment of them.

“Everyone here now, Pup?” Sirius asked.

“Yes, the Grangers were the last ones,” Harry replied.

“When can we go see the mokes and diricawls?” Luna asked, skipping across the patio to join them.

“Anytime you want, Luna,” Harry grinned. “Today’s a day for fun. The manor and valley’s here for everyone to do what they like.”

Twin squeals from Hannah and Susan preceded the two of them racing over, grabbing Luna’s hands and making a beeline for the creature dome.

“Where are you three off to?” Mary Abbot, Hannah’s mum called.

“To see the animals!” Hannah called back through her blonde hair streaming out behind her.

“Ooh, I’d love to see them all again,” Emma commented, rising from her chair.

Within minutes, the entire group of mothers were up and following behind the girls.
“Master Harry Sir?” Dobby called from where he’d popped beside Harry to pull on his pants.

“What is it, Dobby?”

“Lord Blackie has told Dobby that he be going to cook the meats,” Dobby groused.

Harry let loose a lop-sided grin. Dropping to one knee, he whispered in one overly large bat-like ear. “Leave him be but prepare something else inside. He’s bound to ruin whatever he cooks and whatever that is, we’ll make him eat. Everyone else can have what you make.”

“Yes, Master Harry Sir,” Dobby replied before popping away, looking somewhat happier.

He’d barely had time to grab himself a handful of chips before a tap on his shoulder turned him around.

“You have a lovely place here, Harry,” Minerva stated.

“Thank you, Ma’am,” Harry smiled.

“I especially like the colours that you’ve chosen to decorate with,” Professor Flitwick grinned, flicking his eyes sidewardswards towards the two-no-longer-red-heads.

“Thanks, Professor,” he replied.

“Do you mind if we tour inside?” Minerva stated.

“I’d be happy to show them around,” Remus offered.

“Thanks, Remus,” Harry replied. “Just don’t get lost in the library.”

At that magical word, Hermione’s eyes lit up. “Library?”

“Uh ah, Hermione, we’re here to have fun, not to sit in the library all day,” Daphne laughed, waggling her finger at her friend.

Harry leant across to his best friend, “don’t worry, Hermione, I’ll make sure that you get some time there later.”

Her smile in response to his promise, lit up her face.

“So, who wants to have a swim before lunch?” Harry asked, changing the topic.

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“There’s no magical creatures in here, is there?” Dennis Creevey asked.

Harry looked back at the small mousey-haired boy who looked like a small version of Colin. At the moment, he was standing on the edge of the loch with only his toes touching the water.

“Nah,” he replied. “I considered it but thought that it’d be best not to. That way we could enjoy swimming in it without worrying about anything. Of course, I did plant a batch of gillyweed over that way. Apparently if you eat it, it’ll let you breathe underwater.”

“Have you tried it?” Mickey asked eagerly from where he was splashing about with Colin.

“Not yet,” Harry admitted.
Suddenly, a pair of yellow and white haired bodies raced into the water, kicking up great plumes of spray before diving headlong into the cool waters of the loch.

“Come on, you lot!” George called.

“Last one in’s a big, fat hag!” Fred added.

Hearing the pounding of feet coming down the hill from the gazebo, Harry glomped into the water to avoid being over-run. As he crashed into the water, he attempted to keep his head above water; he still had his glasses on, after all. A sudden burst of water hit him head on and he nearly choked. Shaking his head, Harry tried to wipe his eyes, only to find a second, even bigger wave slap into him, knocking him backwards.

As he came up, it was to hear the twins’ raucous laughter. Harry’s eyes narrowed, even as water streamed from his hair.

“Augamenti!” he cried, after snapping his wand into his hand from his wrist holster and pointing it at the twins.

A jet of water shot out, deluging the two, cutting off their laughter and turning it into shocked yells. Unfortunately, Harry was jostled from behind and his aim wavered. Now, instead of shooting water at the twins, he hit Fiona in the back, knocking her off her feet.

“Two can play that game, Harry!” she spluttered as she finally managed to get back to her feet.

“Augamenti!”

Seeing the jet of water coming right at him, Harry dove sidwards. This allowed the jet to hit Lil in the stomach

“Augamenti!” the twins attempted to retaliate while Harry was distracted.

“Protego!” Harry managed, only his head and his wand tip above water.

Twin jets of water bounced off of the dome of Harry’s shield, spraying Tracey, Hermione and Colin. And then it was a free for all. Jets of water criss-crossed the loch. Shields diverted one person’s aim, directly at another unsuspecting one. Mickey and Dennis, both who had yet to start their magical education and had yet to even get their wands, spun in tight circles, using their hands to whip up a spray of water at anyone close enough to target.

Peals of laughter rang over the lower end of the valley as the teens all splashed their way into what became known as the ‘Potter Valley Water War of Ninety-Four’. At one point, Harry lost his glasses, but a quick summoning charm from Fred retrieved them before the war continued. By the time that Beth and Penelope Greengrass came down to fetch them back to the manor for lunch, all agreed that it was the best way to start not only the day, but also the summer holidays.

-ooOoo-

“There you are!” Harry remarked.

He’d been looking for Hermione for a bit now. Fred and George had hinted that it was almost time for their special surprise and he hadn’t wanted Hermione to miss out. He should have known that he’d find her in the library.

Hermione looked up at him, blinking away, whether to see who was talking to her or to shift her focus from the big book in her lap to something further away was hard to say. She was curled up in
the big, high-winged chair in the corner of the room, her feet tucked up under her.

Shifting the mass of pamphlets to one side, Harry took a seat on the low table in front of her chair.

“What did you say, Harry?” Hermione asked.

“Nothing really,” he replied. “I’ve just been looking for you. It’s nearly time for Fred and George’s fireworks.”

“Oh, alright then,” she said, closing the book.

Harry watched her bite her lower lip.

“Spit it out, Hermione,” he said.

“What are these, Harry?” she asked reaching forward to touch the pamphlets. “Aren’t you coming back to Hogwarts with us next year?”

Harry could hear the nervousness in her voice and decided to answer as honestly as he could.

“I don’t know, Hermione,” he sighed. “I’ve just been learning so much here, away from Hogwarts. These, and here he spread out the pamphlets on the table, “are just to help me see what other magical schools are like elsewhere. It’s not that I’ve decided to go anywhere else.”

Hermione lent forward, spreading the pamphlets further apart so that she could read the names. Beaubatons Academie of Magic. Durmstrang Institute. Salem Witches Academy. Indianapolis School of Warlocks. Majorca Fellowship of Magic. Dijabelonga Dreamtime High. And, at the very bottom, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

“These are from all over the world,” she remarked.

Harry shrugged. “I figured that it’d give me the best idea of what other schools are like.”

“And what did you find?” Hermione asked, her eyes shining with the prospect of new knowledge.

“Every school’s different, with different focuses. But there was one thing that really stood out, though,” he replied. “Hogwarts is really backwards. It’s the only one that still insists on using parchment and quills and it has the smallest number of electives on offer.”

“But I thought that it was the best school for magic in the world,” Hermione remarked.

“Propaganda, Hermione,” Harry remarked sadly. “And it can get away with it because it’s the only magical school in the United Kingdom.”

“What does that mean for you? For us?” she asked.

“At the moment, I don’t know,” Harry shook his head. “But there’s one thing for sure: if it wasn’t for you guys, I wouldn’t even give Hogwarts a second look. But I don’t want to leave Britain either. Come on; let’s not talk about that right now. Besides, if we take too long, the fireworks the twins have cooked up will start without us.”

And then, taking her hand in his, he pulled her up and, side by side, they headed for the door.
“And you’ve looked through all of these?” Minerva asked, tapping the fan of brochures on the tabletop.

Harry nodded. “I’ve ordered a few others, but I don’t think that they’ll be much different.”

“Where from?” Remus asked. “You’ve already got brochures on the top schools in France, Bulgaria, Spain, Australia and the United States.”

“Italy and China. Oh, and Kenya,” he added as an afterthought.

“But you don’t speak any of those languages!” Sirius protested.

“I know,” Harry replied before sighing. “It’s just that, after seeing how much of a difference there was between Hogwarts and Beaubatons and Salem, I simply had to know whether all magic schools were so much more advanced than Hogwarts claims to be.”

Minerva, predictably, bristled at the denigration of her beloved Hogwarts.

“Hogwarts has consistently had the highest grades in all of Europe and in fact in the world for decades,” she stated emphatically.

“In the subjects that Hogwarts offers. Well, if you don’t include Muggle Studies and Divination,” Harry added. “The problem is that, including electives, Hogwarts only offers a dozen subjects when most of these other schools offer up to thirty different subjects.”

“He’s right, Minnie,” Sirius said softly. “You know as well as I do that even a hundred years ago, Hogwarts offered nearly twice as many subjects as it does now.”

“That’s why the castle has so many empty classrooms nowadays,” Remus added.

Minerva stared hard at the other three around the dining room table in Potter Haven for close to a minute before giving way with a sigh.

“I guess you’re right. Hogwarts isn’t what she used to be. In the subjects that we offer, we’ve maintained our high standards but we’re falling behind in so many other areas,” she finally allowed.

“And these,” here Harry tapped the brochures in the middle of the table, “only represent the largest schools in Europe, the US and Australia. There are dozens of other, smaller schools in every country. Except Britain. Why is that? Why aren’t there other schools in Britain?”

Sirius leaned back in his chair studying the ceiling for a bit before offering a one word answer. “Money.”

At his confused expression, Remus attempted to elaborate.

“It’s not that there haven’t been other schools in Britain in the past, it’s simply that none of them lasted very long. Every couple of decades, it seems, a new school would pop up somewhere in Britain, struggle along for a few years before simply collapsing and disappearing again. I think the one in Ireland, at Tara, lasted the longest, maybe ten or twelve years before they were forced to shut down.
“You see, schools need money to run. Money to pay the staff, buy equipment, buy and maintain land and facilities and for all those odds and ends that a school needs to run. And that money usually comes in through the tuition that parents pay to send their children there. Students are a school’s lifeblood, you could say.

“And what has traditionally happened is that a new school will form because they see a need. Of late, that need has been to offer extra subjects, just like we were talking about before. Sadly, the old pure-blood families don’t like it when others, especially muggleborns, who often make up the bulk of these new schools, begin to learn something that they didn’t. So, they start boycotting the school.

“They’re the ones who control the Wizengamot, so they make sure to enforce extra laws to make it difficult for the new school to operate. They also control the media and ensure that new students don’t hear about the smaller school until after they’ve already enrolled in Hogwarts, if at all. They do all that they can to dry up the funding and simply force the new school to eventually close.”

“But why would they do that?” Harry asked.

“Two reasons,” Sirius replied. “Firstly, they feel threatened. There are more and more muggleborns coming into society, muggleborns full of new ideas and ways to do things. Your mum was a perfect example of that. She would get so frustrated at what she called the ‘dark age thinking of stodgy old codgers’ that she’d go off on a rant that would last for hours.”

Harry grinned at the image that Sirius conjured in his mind. An image that strangely enough or perhaps not so strangely, reminded him of Hermione.

“And to counter that, the purebloods like to make sure that muggleborns are dropped in the deep end of magical culture and what better way to do that than to send them to a school where the purebloods have the advantage.

“The second reason is the prestige that having a Hogwarts education has always given. Even with such a small number of subjects on offer, Hogwarts’ reputation is still nearly unparalleled in the wizarding world. And if a smaller school was to come along and start producing comparable or even better results, then that reputation would be shattered. Therefore, they see it as best to simply eliminate the competition as quickly as possible.”

“Okay, okay, I think I can understand that,” Harry said slowly. “I don’t agree with it, but I can see where they’re coming from.”

“Do you not want to have a Hogwarts education, Harry?” Minerva asked carefully.

Harry looked sideward at his old professor, certain that she was nervous of his answer.

“I don’t know,” he sighed. “After all that I’ve learnt here on my own, I’m having trouble seeing the benefits of returning to the castle. I’ve already got an OWL in Muggle Studies; I’m nearly a year ahead in History of Magic; and, while I’m on par with all of the other subjects that Hogwarts offers, there’s a bunch of extra subjects that I’ve been studying that I wouldn’t be able to if I returned to Hogwarts. Mind Arts doesn’t matter, I don’t think …”

“You’re right, Harry,” Sirius cut in. “You don’t need to study that one any more. I know that you only started that one to help with your animagus studies but after a year of study, your occlumency shields are really impressive; all you need to do is continue to work on them for a couple of minutes each night. And as for legilimency, you’ve got the basics down and we can work on that together whenever we have time.”
Harry nodded in agreement before turning back to Minerva.

“No, the big ones are Beginning Healing and Enchanting. I’ve been really enjoying both of them and would hate to have to give them up.”

Minerva nodded. “As much as I’m sure that Poppy would love to help, I doubt that you’d be given the time to continue the studies of those subjects in any meaningful way at Hogwarts.”

“And from what I’ve seen, another half year and you’ll be ready for the potion that’ll show you your animagus shape,” Sirius added. “This time next year, you’ll be getting your Marauder name — less if the work you’ve started with Tonks progresses as quickly as she thinks it will.”

Harry smiled at the thought of the klutzy auror that he’d been spending time with each week, working on his ‘new’ ability. As much hard work as it was, he was sure that the two of them spent more time laughing than actually studying.

Minerva stared at Harry’s old timetable lying near her elbow. Right above it were the marks that Madam Marchbanks had given Harry for each subject that she’d tested him on. With a final shake of her head and a sigh, she gave in to the inevitable.

“No, I think that I’m going to have to agree with Sirius and Remus. Hogwarts is simply not for you any more, Harry. You simply won’t fit in to a regular fourth year Hogwarts mould next year.”

“That’s what I thought, too,” Harry stated. “And also why Sirius and I have been trying to get Remus to agree to be my permanent tutor.”

“I’ve told you why that simply will not work,” Remus frowned.

“Your furry little problem is not a reason, Moony and you know it,” Sirius near-bellowed. “We’ve been telling you for the past week that we’re going to be getting a team of dwarven builders in here to build you a secure room for those couple of days’ a month that you’ll need it for.”

“It worked fine at Hogwarts,” Minerva insisted, “there’s no reason why it won’t be fine here as well, assuming that we all take precautions. With a special room and the wolfsbane potion, Harry would be perfectly safe here with you.”

Remus dropped his head. It was hard enough fighting against Sirius and his cub against something that he wanted anyway, but to add in the tough as nails Minerva McGonagall as well and he knew the battle was lost.

Alright, alright, I’ll do it,” he said.

Harry’s face split into a wide grin as Sirius pounded his best friend on the back in congratulations.

“Now that I’ve got Remus, the only thing that I’ll miss from Hogwarts now is my friends,” said Harry. “Really, they’d be the only reason that I would have even considered going back.”

“I never thought that I’d be the one to suggest this,” Minerva began, closing her eyes and shaking her head, “but that doesn’t necessarily have to be the case.”

-oOoOo-

Emma Granger frowned as she passed the doorway to Hermione’s room. Carefully, quietly, she backed up to peer inside.
Just as she’d thought, her daughter was curled up on her bed, a not unexpected sight. And, as would be expected, a thick book was propped up on a couple of pillows, making it the perfect height for the girl to read. But what had caught Emma’s eye was the expression on her daughter’s face.

Hermione’s eyes were glued to her book, but instead of continuously darting backwards and forwards, they were fixated on the one point. Her brow was puckered in deep thought but instead of confusion or intense interest as she expected, Hermione looked to be deeply troubled, almost on the verge of tears even.

With a soft knock on the door, Emma entered the room, crossed the floor and perched herself on the bed beside her daughter.

“Hermione, is something wrong?” she asked softly.

Hermione’s brown eyes, so like her father’s, darted to her mother’s face. Instantly, Emma could see the lie, the evasion forming, but what came out was most unexpected.

“It’s Harry,” Hermione sighed.

“What about him, honey? You only saw him the other day. Did something happen at the party?” she asked.

“Yes. No. Oh, I don’t know,” Hermione replied, clearly frustrated.

“Well there’s a plethora of answers to choose from,” Emma laughed. “How about you start from the beginning.”

Hermione swung her legs around and sat up cross-legged on her bed facing her mother. Her head dropped momentarily as she appeared to gather the words.

“As you know, I went to the library for a bit in the afternoon,” she began.

Emma nodded.

“I … I found a bunch of brochures for other magical schools on one of the tables there,” she confessed.

“For other schools in Britain?” Emma asked, cocking her head in puzzlement. “I thought that you said that Hogwarts was the only magical school in the country.”

“It is, Mum,” Hermione confirmed. “No, these were schools from around the world – France, Spain, Australia, the US.”

“And you’re afraid that Harry is going to leave,” Emma deduced. “Did you ask him about them?”

“I did,” Hermione nodded. “He says that he’s not going to leave the country but he also said that they offer a much better magical education than Hogwarts offers. From what I read, Hogwarts doesn’t even come close to most of them. They all offer so many more educational prospects – different subjects, languages, modern facilities, none of them bother with using antiquated quills and ink and parchment.”

Emma ignored the growl of frustration that her daughter emitted at the end of her tirade, indeed, she’d happily add her own growl if it was true that she and Dan were paying such an exorbitant fee for a substandard education for her daughter.
“Is Hogwarts truly so far behind?” Emma asked carefully.

Hermione’s fast-paced nodding only emphasised her point. “Yes, Mum. And Harry’s already worked it out and started doing something about it. He’s already got his first OWL, is ahead in a bunch of other subjects and is studying things that Hogwarts doesn’t even offer. And that’s simply because he’s refused to allow himself to be held back by antiquated teaching methods.”

“Antiquated teaching methods?” Emma asked, her eyes narrowed.

“One of our teachers is a ghost who only ever talks about the one topic,” Hermione stated, throwing her hands up in the air. “And don’t get me started on the abysmal teaching style of Professor Snape. ‘Your instructions are on the board. Begin.’ As if that’s going to teach us anything! It’s only because I read ahead that I’m able to get as good marks as I do in Potions and History of Magic.”

“Perhaps we should pull you out of Hogwarts and home school you ourselves, just like Harry’s been doing,” Emma stated.

Hermione’s eyes widened. “But you can’t do that! I looked up the ruling as soon as they announced that bogus truancy charge against Harry. I have to be either enrolled in a magical education or be tutored by an approved magical tutor.”

“Then we’ll get you a tutor,” Emma stated with a nod of her head.

“But I don’t want to leave my friends,” Hermione protested.

Emma looked at her daughter and noted the slight panic in her eyes, a panic that was completely understandable considering that Hogwarts was the place where she’d made her first friends.

“Look, it’s nearly two months until you’re due to go back to Hogwarts,” Emma said gently. “We don’t have to make any decisions right away. How about you let your father and I talk about it and see what other information we can find before we come to any conclusions, okay?”

“Okay, Mum,” Hermione agreed with a sigh.

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Taking a deep breathe, Emma stepped into The Leaky Cauldron. Only the fact that she’d been there a number of times now with Hermione helped her eyes to stop sliding past the old, dingy-looking pub entrance. This, though, was the first time that she’d ventured into the magical world without her daughter, the witch.

“Mornin’ Ma’am, what can I be helping you with?” the old stooped man behind the counter called.

“I’m fine,” she replied. “Just passing through.”

At his nod, she weaved her way through the pub to the back court only to find herself staring at a red brick wall. With a frown, she popped her head back into the bar.

“Um, excuse me, I was wondering if you could help me get into the alley?” she asked, trying to hide the warble of nervousness in her voice.

Tom grinned toothlessly at her before stepping out and tapping the bricks with his wand.

“There ya go,” he smiled.
“Thank you,” Emma replied before walking into the bizarre alley.

Cauldrons and brooms and barrels of strange looking things met her eyes as she walked down the centre of the alley. But it was the stares that she was receiving that really unnerved her. Witches and wizards of all ages and sizes, all dressed in the ridiculous out-dated robes that resembled Hermione’s school uniforms, only in different colours, stared at her as she passed. But then, why shouldn’t they? Here she was, an obvious outsider, a muggle in bizarre clothing, invading their domain.

Finally, the street curved and her destination came into sight.

The three storied building was exactly as she remembered it from the last time that she visited it nearly a year ago. One side looked old, its windows boarded up and the paint peeling. The other side though, looked as different as chalk and cheese. Its windows were clear, allowing prospective customers to peer inside at the wares for offer. The soft cream paint looked as fresh as the first time that she’d seen it with the sign above it welcoming all inside.

As Emma pushed open the door to *Hermione’s Book Nook*, a soft tinkling bell could be heard above her. To her right, the glass counter showed off the dozens of different cakes and slices for sale, bounded by half a dozen small tables and chairs. And to her left, the counter held displays of a couple of books for sale from the second hand book store.

“Emma?”

She turned at the sound of her name to see the tall form of Beth Pemberton emerging from the shelves. Her long brown hair was tied back in a ponytail and her sparkling deep blue eyes suggested that her day was still early enough to ensure that she hadn’t yet started to tire.

“Hi, Beth,” Emma greeted.

“What brings you here today? Looking for something for Hermione?” Beth asked.

“Actually, no. I’ve come to see you, that is, if you’ve got the time,” Emma replied.

“Of course, I do,” Beth smiled. “Let me put this lot down and we can sit and chat.”

Emma waited patiently as Beth first placed the pile of books she was carrying onto one counter before crossing to the second and ordering a pot of tea and two cups.

“How’s here?” Beth asked, indicating one of the tables.

“That looks fine,” Emma smiled.

Just as they settled themselves, the young girl that Beth employed brought them their tea.

“Now what can I do for you, Emma,” Beth asked, leaning back with her cup in her hand.

Emma decided to get straight to the point, not wanting to keep the store-keeper away from her work for too long.

“You went to Hogwarts, didn’t you?” she began.

“I did,” Beth nodded.

“What did you think of it?” she asked.
Beth took a sip of her tea while she thought of her reply. “To be honest, terribly stuffy and old-fashioned. Of course, like Hermione, I’m muggleborn, so coming from the muggle world probably coloured my view of things.”

Emma nodded. “Hermione came across some pamphlets of some other schools while she was at Harry’s the other day.”

“They’d be schools from other countries,” Beth remarked.

“They were,” Emma confirmed. “But they highlighted that Hogwarts isn’t as good a school as we’ve been led to believe.”

Beth sighed. “I’m not surprised. I’ve been hearing the same thing from other muggleborn families since I entered the wizarding world, but when it comes down to it, there’s not much choice on offer. It’s either Hogwarts or home schooling.”

“What are you going to do with Mickey?” Emma asked.

“As much as I’d prefer to keep him home, if only to offer him more choices of things to study than Hogwarts offers, I’ll be sending him,” Beth told her. “I don’t have much choice. I simply don’t have the time to run the Nook as well as home school him.”

“And we can’t homeschool Hermione because we’re not magical,” Emma agreed.

“I think that’s how the old fuddy-duddies like it. Don’t give us any choice and it keeps the status quo stable,” Beth nodded.

“Do you … do you know if there are others that have the same concerns?” Emma ventured.

Beth frowned. “What are you thinking, Emma?”

Emma glanced nervously from side to side before leaning closer to the other woman.

“Dan and I aren’t interested in paying for second-rate schooling for Hermione. And while we can’t help Hermione learn magic, there might be others that can. Harry managed to learn things by himself — quite successfully, too, I might add. So, we were wondering if there might be someone who we could get as a tutor or a … a facilitator that could help Hermione learn her magic in a better way. And if there happened to be others who felt the same way, then who knows what we could accomplish?”

Beth stared at her. “Are you talking about starting another school?”

Emma blinked. “We hadn’t thought that far ahead, but, but, maybe we are.”

“You know, I’d like to hear more about what you’re thinking,” Beth told her, “and I’m positive that there are others who’d be interested as well. What do you say we write a few letters and see what happens?”
“Ma, there’s an owl here for you!” Colin called as he raced into the cottage, the door slamming shut behind him.

Ava Creevey looked up in confusion from the kitchen bench where she was in the beginning stages of making that night’s dinner – in this case, a shepherd’s pie. The notion of an owl delivering mail had seemed ludicrous two years ago when Professor McGonagall first introduced the idea to the family when she was giving Colin his very first introduction to the world of witches and wizards.

Even now, after receiving an owl a week for two years with Colin’s weekly letter to them from school, she still hadn’t completely become used to the concept.

“For me?” she asked.

Now if it’d been for Colin from one of his many friends, it’d make sense. But for her to receive one when Colin was home … ?

“That’s what it says on the envelope,” Colin replied. “And the owl won’t let me take the letter since she knows that it’s for you.”

Indeed, now that she looked properly, Ava noted the owl perched on her eldest son’s shoulder.

Dusting her hands off on her apron, Ava approached the boy and bird before reaching out and untying the letter from the owl’s outstretched leg. As soon as it was in her hand, the owl flapped off, before perching on top on the curtain rail.

“I guess she’s been told to wait a reply,” Colin remarked.

Deftly, Ava extracted the letter.

Dear Ava,

We met the other day at Harry’s place, Potter Haven, when Harry invited our children for the day.

I (Emma) recently had an interesting discussion with my daughter, Hermione, in relation to some facts about the standard of magical education that is on offer to our children at Hogwarts that she found out about at Potter Haven.

After relating this conversation with Beth, we decided that it could be quite beneficial to hold a larger discussion with a number of other parents about this topic. Therefore, we would like to invite you to my house this coming Saturday at two p.m.

We’ve instructed the owl to await your reply.

Kindest regards,

Emma Granger and Beth Pemberton.

After noting the address in Crawley at the top of the letter, Ava looked across at the calendar on the wall. Yes. Yes, she could make that work. She may not understand what Colin, and soon Dennis, were learning at Hogwarts, but as their mother, she was determined to make sure that she showed as much of an interest as she could. Especially if it related to the standard of education that they were receiving.
As could only be expected, Augusta found her grandson in one of the greenhouses of Longbottom Manor. They’d been his favourite haunt for years, his retreat, she knew.

As the years had progressed, she’d had to grudgingly admit that he had some talent in the area of Herbology. In that, he was much like his mother, Alice. And as much as it pained her to admit, Neville was much more his mother’s son than his father’s.

She’d been trying for years to mould him more into the direction that his father, Frank, had grown. She’d tried being disapproving of his need to hide out in the greenhouses while at the same time encouraging his duelling skills by enforcing a mandatory hour each day in the manor’s duelling room.

When Neville had started at Hogwarts, she’d ceremoniously passed on Frank’s old wand for the boy to use. Unfortunately, as good of a wand that it was, he hadn’t produced the results and marks that she’d expected. Meeting Harry Potter on the very first day had also encouraged Augusta’s hopes.

With The-Boy-Who-Lived, who also happened to be a centuries old alliance partner as a friend, she’d expected great things. And indeed, during those first two years at Hogwarts, there’d been the occasional hopeful sign.

And then had come the disaster of last year. And without Harry Potter’s influence, Neville had slipped back somewhat to the point where it was more obvious than ever that he was going to take after Alice. Not that that was necessarily bad – Alice did have an extraordinarily good charms and herbology knowledge – but it wasn’t what she’d always hoped for.

“Neville,” she called as she stepped into the greenhouse.

Neville’s head popped up half-way down the far left aisle and he blinked owlishly at her.

“Yes, Gran?” he replied.

Augusta waited to answer until they were in comfortable talking distance – there was, after all, no need to do away with the niceties. Obviously realising her intentions, Neville immediately came trotting.

One look at the boy caused her face to fall into its familiar frown. His hands, knees and face were covered in dirt. Splotches of alternating green and brown were strewn over his shirt, shorts and even, for some inexplicable reason, his hair.

“Neville,” she began once he’d settled in front of her. “I shall be away from the Manor this coming Saturday.”

At Neville’s cocked head, she held up the letter that she’d just received.

“I have been asked to provide some advice to some Hogwarts parents. At this stage, I am unsure how long I shall be away. I’m certain that you can occupy yourself for the day?”

“Yes, Gran,” Neville nodded. “I’ve got a lot of work to do in here after being away at school all year.”

Augusta nodded absently. “In any case, Mippy will be around and I’ll instruct her to watch over you.”
Placing the tea-tray on the coffee table, Emma stepped back to survey her preparations. The lounge room provided ample seating for herself and her expected guests – there were three single arm chairs as well as the long three-seater set against the back wall. In the centre was her low cheery-wood coffee table, complete with the tea service and twin trays of pastries that she’d picked up from the bakery that morning.

Rounding out her preparations for the afternoon were the two things that she knew were no longer in the house – Dan and Hermione. At her insistence, Dan had taken the two of them out for some ‘father-daughter bonding time’. She and Dan had both decided to keep these discussions from Hermione until they’d reached some conclusions.

The ringing of the doorbell brought her out of her ruminations and sent her towards the door. Dispelling her sudden inexplicable case of nerves, she pulled the door open.

“Good afternoon, Emma,” Augusta Longbottom said with a small nod of her head.

“Augusta, it’s so good to see you again,” she replied. “Come in, come in. Thank you for coming.”

She’d barely gotten the stately old lady situated in the living room when the doorbell sounded for the second time. Excusing herself, she rapidly made her way back to the door.

This time there were two ladies standing there. Beth, of course, she knew quite well. The other, Leanne Spinks, she’d only met for the first time a week ago.

Leanne, like Emma herself, was non-magical. The tiny lady with long brown hair had confided that it’d come as quite a shock when her then boyfriend, Julian, had revealed that he was a wizard. Over the years and especially after discovering that her only daughter, Fiona, was also magical, she’d grown used to the wizarding world.

She, Emma and Ava, who arrived a few minutes later, had all struck up an instant friendship at the party at Potter’s Haven – the only three non-magical mothers there.

“Thank you all so much for coming,” Emma began once all five ladies had been supplied with a cup of tea and their selection of pastry. “I’m sure that you’re wondering why Beth and I invited you here today.”

At their nods, Emma took a fortifying sip before launching into her explanation.

“A number of days ago, Hermione related to me something that she found out about last week at Harry’s party. Harry had quite a number of brochures from other magical schools from around the world that he’d been looking into.”

“Harry’s not thinking of leaving Britain, is he?” Augusta gasped.

Emma shook her head. “Hermione says no. But it was what reading those brochures revealed that had, first Hermione, and now Dan and I, worried. It would seem that Hogwarts isn’t as great a magical school as we’ve been led to believe.”

“But I always heard that it’s the best school in Europe, if not the world,” Leanne stated, obviously confused.

“Apparently it is, but only in ten of the twelve subjects that it offers,” Beth supplied.
Emma noticed Augusta nodding slowly, a hard look on her face. Not knowing what that meant, she ploughed on regardless.

“Twelve subjects,” she reiterated, “twelve subjects out of about thirty that other schools around the world offer.”

“As a member of the Hogwarts Board of Governors,” Augusta sighed, “it pains me to say that what you’ve discovered is true. Over the years, Hogwarts has been offering less and less subjects. In the subjects that they do offer, the standard of education has remained of the finest calibre. But every year, her reputation has been slipping. Soon enough, I fear that Hogwarts will become a laughingstock to the rest of the magical world.”

The ensuing silence was broken after some minutes by the small voice of Ava Creevey.

“What other subjects do those other schools offer?”

“I’ve found some of those brochures since Emma and I spoke the other day,” Beth replied, pulling out a bundle of brightly coloured brochures which she placed on the coffee table between them all.

She gestured towards them for the others to examine while she outlined her findings.

“The most common ones, apart from the ones also offered at Hogwarts, were Healing, Enchanting, Alchemy, Spellcrafting, Magical Studies and even a number of muggle subjects.”

Emma’s head shot up at that last bit from the brochure that she’d picked up. “Muggle subjects? Like what?”

“English, Mathematics, Science, Languages, as well as Art, although that one seemed to have a magical component as well,” Beth replied.

“Why doesn’t Hogwarts offer all of these subjects?” Leanne asked.

Augusta sighed. “I’ve been asking the Board that very question for years. The best answer that I can give you is laziness. The rest of the Board simply aren’t concerned with spending time, energy and money to find a teacher and then to set up classrooms, extra timetables, source textbooks and then to fund the whole endeavour.”

“But shouldn’t that be the Headmaster’s job?” Ava asked.

“One would think so, wouldn’t you?” Augusta frowned.

“Didn’t Harry study some of these last year?” Emma asked slowly.

“Indeed – Enchanting and Beginning Healing,” Augusta replied. “Griselda Marchbanks was quite impressed with his progress.” Then, seeing some looks of confusion around her, clarified. “Griselda’s the Head of the Wizarding Examination Board and tested Harry’s progress before his trial.”

“So, it’s possible to learn some of these subjects independently?” Leanne asked. “I can think of one or two off the top of my head that Fiona would definitely be interested in.”

“I can see some that would interest Colin as well,” Ava agreed.

“In theory, of course, it is possible,” Augusta allowed after taking a sip of her tea. “Practically, though, it is a completely other hippogriff. I’ve seen Hogwarts timetables for years and there really
is no place in it for independent study. Perhaps during the NEWT years, but even then, it may only put undue pressure on the students.”

“Is there really no other school in Britain?” Ava asked.

“No, there’s not,” Emma stated grimly.

“The only other option for our kids to study some of these subjects is to do so with a private tutor,” Beth added.

“Just like Harry did,” Leanne mused thoughtfully.

After a few minutes of quiet while everyone was engrossed in the brochures, Beth cleared her throat, gathering all attention on to her.

“After Emma and I talked the other day, we saw two options for our kids if we wanted them to have the opportunity to learn extra subjects. The most extreme one that we toyed with was to start our own school where a wider selection of subjects could be offered.”

Emma glanced around subtly to see that all three, including Augusta Longbottom, displayed varying degrees of interest in the idea.

“The other idea, and the one that we thought could be more immediate to us, assuming that you all agreed that is, was to talk with Harry himself to find out more about how well his independent study went last year,” Beth continued.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Leanne nodded. “I’d be quite interested in finding out about Harry’s ‘home schooling’.”

“Do we know if Harry’s going to go back to Hogwarts in September?” Ava asked.

Emma shook her head. “Not definitely, although Hermione didn’t think that it was likely.”

“If that is the case, then your idea may be even more of interest than it even already seems,” Augusta commented. “And as such, might I suggest a few others who might also be interested in that discussion?”

Emma gestured for her to continue.

“Amelia Bones, for one. Not only is she Susan’s aunt, but as the Head of the DMLE, she may have a unique perspective to offer. Another is Cyrus and Penelope Greengrass. Like myself, Cyrus holds a seat on the Wizengamot and knows the pureblood laws inside and out.”

“What about Harry’s guardians?” Beth suggested.

“Yes, I think that it could be quite advantageous to have both Minerva McGonagall and Sirius Black there as well,” Augusta agreed.

“What about our kids?” Ava asked. “Do we tell them what we’re talking about?”

“Not right now, I think,” Emma replied. “Until we know what we’re going to do about their education, let’s leave them in ignorant bliss. They are on holiday, after all.”

“If you would like, I will write the people we suggested and arrange a time to meet,” Augusta offered.
“Thank you, Augusta, that’d be wonderful,” Emma smiled.

Minerva frowned thoughtfully at the letter that had arrived less than an hour ago before dropping it to her desk, rising and striding across to the small cabinet in her personal quarters. Normally, having a drink at this time of day would be unthinkable, however a couple of factors needed to be taken into consideration.

Firstly, it was the holidays. There were no classes to teach later, indeed no students at all in the castle to which she needed to provide as high a standard of role model as she could. And secondly, that sort of letter required a good stiff drink of gillywater before it could even be thought about.

Augusta Longbottom had been her friend for more decades than she’d care to count. Indeed, they’d been friends long before she’d taught Frank, and these days, she was teaching Frank’s son. And in all of that time, through the good, the bad and the pig-headed arguments, their respect for each other had stayed resolute.

It was rare indeed to find a time where the two them had stood diametrically opposed. Rarer still were the times when neither could see the others’ point of view.

This letter, though, had none of that. As she had done many, many times in the past, Augusta had seemed to see a need and proposed a solution. The only difference this time was that never before had Minerva been one of the solutions. Let alone the fact that what Augusta proposed may just be the solution to a problem that Minerva had told no one about, including Augusta Longbottom.

Pouring herself a dram, Minerva cast her eye back in the direction where the letter lay. No, there was no way that she was going to miss that meeting.

The only thing, though, was that she was the Deputy Headmistress of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Head of Gryffindor House and Transfiguration teacher. And what she was now beginning to steel herself to do went against nearly forty years of steadfast loyalty.

And now Augusta had hinted of taking that solution to the extreme. The question was, if she was asked, as she expected that she would be, would she be able to accept, to take that step into the unknown?

Slamming back her glass, Minerva swallowed the gillywater and quickly poured herself another. She had some soul searching to do in the next couple of days and this seemed to be the perfect way to fortify her thoughts.

Harry looked nervously around the main dining table of Potter Haven. He’d never seen it so full – every chair of the sixteen seat table was filled. And for the life of him, he wasn’t sure exactly why he was there, never mind that he owned the place.

After everyone had arrived and had trooped into the room, he’d been placed into one end of the table setting with Sirius and Minerva to either side of him. At the opposite end of the table, Madam Longbottom regally presided over the gathering.

As he waited for whatever this was to begin, he ran his eye around the table. To his left, seated beside Sirius, was Remus. Beside him were Dan and Emma Granger, with Ava Creevey, then, rounding out that side of the table, were Fiona’s parents, Leanne and Julian Spinks.
Seated to Madam Longbottom’s left, were Cyrus and Penelope Greengrass, followed by Lil’s parents, Horatio and Alisa Moon. Next came Beth Pemberton, Amelia Bones and then back to Minerva.

“I’m sure that you’re wondering why we asked to meet here today, Harry,” Augusta began.

Harry gave a cautious nod before glancing to either side at Sirius and Minerva.

“To begin with, Harry, we were hoping to ask you some questions about your ‘self-study’ this past year,” Augusta explained.

“What would you like to know?” he asked.

“How did you find learning magic away from Hogwarts?” Emma asked.

“In some ways it was hard,” he began slowly, “but in other ways, it was much easier.”

“What do you mean?” Cyrus asked, leaning forward.

Harry blinked a number of times as he tried to determine the best way to explain.

“There were times when I was trying to understand how to do some magic, like when I was first learning the *draconifers* spell, where I just wasn’t getting it to work. It wasn’t until I wrote to Minerva and sent along a wizarding photo so that she could see what I was doing wrong that it got sorted out. She was able to explain to me some theory and give me some pointers about how to fix it. So, yeah, I guess that that was the hardest bit – not having someone there to explain things to me.

“But on the other end of things, learning by myself meant that I was learning at my own pace; I wasn’t being held back in learning something like I would be in a full class.”

“I assume that you’re talking about Muggle Studies and History of Magic?” Augusta clarified.

At his nod, she elaborated for those around the table. “Harry has been awarded an Outstanding OWL in Muggle Studies, a full two years early and is considered to be about nine months ahead in History of Magic.”

“I understand that you’ve been studying some subjects that Hogwarts doesn’t offer?” Julian questioned.

Harry nodded. “Yes. Beginning Healing, Enchanting, Mind Arts and Animagus studies.”

The murmur around the table was cut off by Sirius. “I’ve also been helping to develop the swordplay that Harry’s been attempting to learn; and that’s not to mention the archery that he’s been picking up locally as well.”

“So many?” Beth murmured.

“What have you thought of them?” Cyrus asked eagerly.

“I’ve really been enjoying them, especially Enchanting,” Harry smiled.

“What will you do about those subjects next year?” Augusta asked.

Harry glanced at Sirius before replying. “I’ll keep studying them, of course. Well, except for Mind Arts and Muggle Studies.”
He noticed the heads turning all around the table and the smiles being flashed between the adults.

“If we could clarify that, Harry, does this mean that you won’t be re-enrolling in Hogwarts,” Augusta asked.

“No,” Harry replied. “We’ve decided that I’ll keep studying here, but with Remus as my tutor.”

“Alone?” Emma asked.

“If I may,” Minerva spoke up for the first time, “I think that this may be the perfect time to ask what I’ve been contemplating for a couple of weeks’ now.

“Harry has expressed on a number of occasions that the only benefit that he could see for returning to Hogwarts was his friends. And I must say that I agree with him. To that end, I would like to invite all of you, as well as a few others, to consider allowing your children to join Harry here.”

Remus started to such an extent that he all but fell out of his seat.

“What?” he exclaimed. “Tutor Harry, definitely. One or two others, without a question. But a dozen or so?”

“How practical is it to have that many here?” Julian asked.

As unexpected as the idea of having his friends here with him was, Harry very quickly latched on to the idea.

“When the goblins had this place built for me, they included ten bedrooms. And every one of them is easily big enough for two,” he stated eagerly.

“Twenty?” Remus gasped.

“It wouldn’t be twenty, Remus,” Minerva said with a half-smile. “It’d only be sixteen at most. A couple of rooms would have to be put aside for the supervising adults.”

“Adults? Plural?” Remus asked, staring across the table.

“Sixteen or so students, learning together in the one place, away from their parents, doesn’t exactly sound like a simple tutoring situation,” Sirius pointed out.

“Very true, Mister Black,” Augusta replied. “However, before we address that, I believe that it would be beneficial to see exactly how many students we may be talking about.”

“Hermione will be in,” Dan stated.

“As will Daphne and Astoria,” Cyrus agreed.

“We will gladly send Lil,” Horatio promised.

“You can include Colin and Dennis in your numbers,” said Ava.

“Mickey as well,” agreed Beth.

“Susan’ll come if Hannah’s also invited,” Amelia pointed out.

“Hannah is one of the others on my list,” Augusta nodded. “As are Tracey Davis and Luna Lovegood. Neville, of course, will be here.”
“We will commit Fiona as well,” Leanne promised.

“That’s fourteen,” Harry grinned, “if you add me as well.”

“I have an idea for the two remaining places,” Minerva stated.

“I must say that I’m very eager to hear this idea of yours,” Remus stated, looking down the table at Augusta.

“Minerva is already aware of this, as are those of you who met at Emma’s house last week,” Augusta began. “One of the biggest drawcards for doing what we are proposing is that fact that our children will be able to learn extra subjects that Hogwarts currently doesn’t cater for. And for that, we will need qualified teachers, or, at the very least, experienced tutors.

“And in order to entice such persons to us, a tutoring system will not be adequate. Instead, what I am proposing is that we establish a school.”

“A school?” Remus blurted.

Almost everyone else at the table were obviously much more open to the idea. Most were nodding thoughtfully. One or two, like Cyrus, had sat back in their chair and appeared to be contemplating the ceiling with a small smile.

Slowly, one by one, everyone around the table, sans Remus who still appeared to be in shock at the idea, began nodding and smiling as widely as they could at each other.

“I know that there would be many, many details that would need to be thrashed out for such an endeavour,” Augusta continued, “but I would like to make one proposal right now. I would like to nominate Minerva McGonagall as Headmistress of our new school.”
Chapter 5

“I would like to nominate Minerva McGonagall as Headmistress of our new school.”

Harry’s eyes snapped to the right where his guardian sat, the corners of her mouth turned up in a small smile. Harry’s eyes narrowed. Unless he was widely off his mark, then Minerva had been expecting this.

“I’ll second that,” Cyrus Greengrass laughed, slapping his hand on the tabletop in emphasis.

Around the room, murmurs of agreement could be heard racing up and down the table.

“Thank you, Augusta, but need I remind you that I am currently the Deputy Headmaster and Transfiguration teacher of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry?” Minerva asked, tipping her head to the side.

“Then quit,” Madam Longbottom stated flatly. “I’ve already tended my resignation to the Hogwarts Board of Governors. And I don’t mind saying that it comes as a relief, to be honest.”

“We need you here, Minerva,” Sirius stated sincerely.

“As Headmistress of a brand new school, think of all the good you could do: the new classes that you could implement, the standard of education that you could raise in Magical Britain,” Ailsa Moon emphasised.

Minerva held up a hand to stem the mouths opening all around her, all obviously intent on trying to entice her to take the position.

“Thank you all for your confidence in me,” she said. “And to be quite honest, Augusta’s nomination isn’t wholly unexpected. Nor is it unwanted. I would be incredibly honoured to accept and to become the Headmistress. However …”

Here Minerva had to hold up her hands to stop the excited babble that had broken out.

“However,” she continued, “I cannot accept until after I tender my resignation.”

“So?” Sirius prompted.

“Give me a week,” Minerva smiled.

Applause erupted around the table, barely drowning out the cheers that Sirius and Cyrus were giving.

“As soon as you officially accept, Minerva, we’ll go to the Department of Magical Education and get our new school registered,” Cyrus stated once the group had quieted.

“We’ll need a name, though, for when we fill out the forms,” Augusta pointed out.

“And an official address,” Horatio Moon added.

“Potter Haven,” Harry piped up. “That’s where we’ll be studying.”

“True, Harry, but this is your place,” Minerva pointed out, “and really, sixteen students will be pushing the boundaries of comfort as it is.”
“You could build a couple of buildings or something,” Harry suggested.

“That’s very generous of you, Pup, but I don’t think that we want to spoil the land that you have here,” Sirius told him, patting his arm.

“What if we use this coming year as a … a testing ground,” Emma suggested.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Dan agreed. “We use this year to find an appropriate place, build facilities if we need to, and work out a curriculum for the students that will allow them to catch up to the rest of the world.”

“Not to mention find appropriate teachers or tutors,” Amelia added.

“Well, I think that I can start us off there,” Minerva said. “I’m sure that I’m not doing this correctly since I am not yet officially Headmistress, however, Remus, I would like to officially hire you as the first teacher of our new school.

Harry beamed at the sandy haired man blinking owlishly across the table at the new Headmistress.

“I’d be honoured,” he said in his quiet voice. “As long as appropriate precautions are taken to account for my … condition.”

“Don’t worry about it, Moony,” Sirius stated, clapping his friend on the back. “Wolfsbane potion and a … a set of strongrooms will be a part of our new school. That way we can take in werewolf students as well.”

“We’ll need to have a meeting as soon as possible with all of the parents and kids to determine how we’re going to run this year – what subjects the kids want to learn, plus whatever ones we want to add in as compulsory and then find teachers and tutors for those subjects,” Emma pointed out.

“Could we make up a brochure like those other schools do and send that with the letters to the kids?” Ava Creevey asked.

“Definitely!” Emma replied. “What say you, Beth, Penelope and I get together next week and see what we can put together?”

“We still need a name, though,” Beth pointed out.

“Well, we’re a school,” Cyrus pointed out, “so that’s one word sorted.”

Penelope frowned at her husband. “Why do we have to use the word ‘school’? I quite like some of the other words that other schools have used – ‘academy’ or ‘fellowship’ or ‘institute’.”

“‘Academy’ works. The other two sound like they’re some sort of medical hospital,” Dan stated.

“Right, all those in favour of ‘school’, raise your hands,” Sirius instructed. “‘Academy’? ‘Academy’ has it.”

“‘Academy of Magic’?” Horatio clarified.

“Hmm, I think, considering what we’re aiming to do, ‘Academy of Magical Studies’ sounds better,” Minerva pointed out.

“I like that,” Augusta agreed, saying what the nods around the table were indicating.

“Could it have something in front of it?” Harry asked. “It just sounds a bit … bland otherwise.”
“Yes, I think Harry’s right,” Minerva nodded.

“What, though?” Remus asked.

“An animal, maybe?” Sirius tentatively suggested.

“It’d have to be a magical animal,” Horatio stated emphatically.

“What about … what about that dodo that all the kids have been gushing over?” Emma asked. “It’s magical isn’t it?”

“The diricawl?” Harry clarified. “Yeah, everyone in the muggle world thinks that they’re extinct but they’ve got some wicked abilities that have helped them not only survive, but also thrive.”

“Sounds a bit like education in Wizarding Britain and what we’re trying to do,” Sirius pointed out. “The way Hogwarts is going, soon magical education in Britain will be extinct, but we’re aiming to turn things around and help our kids thrive in the world.”

“Diricawl it is, then,” Cyrus nodded.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, I give you the Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies,” Augusta stated proudly, raising the glass of juice that had magically appeared before her.

“The Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies,” fifteen voices echoed, as they, too, raised their glasses.

“Mister Potter,” Minerva stated, her stern demeanour instantly turned on the only student in the room. “Until the letters go out to your friends inviting them to join the school, you are sworn to secrecy. Do you understand?”

“Yes, Ma’am,” he replied, a grin firmly on his face. “I promise that I won’t spoil the surprise.”

-oOoOo-

A gentle warming sensation in the arm of his chair alerted Albus that the gargoyles that guarded the entrance to his office had just let someone pass. Looking up from the parchment detailing the latest happenings in the Wizarding World that he need to be aware of for the upcoming ICW meeting that he’d been engrossed in, Albus blinked at the small photo frame on his desk.

Ordinarily, the image that the innocuous looking silver frame showed was a grouping of three small children, two boys and a girl, from well over a hundred and thirty years ago. Now though, just as it did every time someone approached his door, it morphed into the image that the griffin knocker on his door was seeing.

“Come in, Minerva,” Albus called just as he saw her raise her fist to knock.

The aged Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry chuckled lightly to himself as he saw his longest-serving teacher scowl before she opened the door. Even after all of these decades, his secret remained safe. Which was just as well – any little trick that put his visitors off before they even entered the office was distinctly to his advantage.

“Albus,” Minerva greeted him with a nod, all traces of her annoyance completely masked, just as he’d come to expect from her.

With one hand, Dumbledore invited her to sit, while with the other, he indicated the small crystal
bowl on the corner of his desk.

“Lemon drop?”

“No, thank you,” she replied, as she sat.

Dumbledore noticed that as she did so, an envelope appeared from one of her inner pockets to rest on her lap in her clasped hands.

“To what do I owe the pleasure of this visit?” he asked. “I thought that you’d be off enjoying your holidays away from the school.”

“Ordinarily I would be,” she replied. “But I have an important matter that needs to be addressed.”

“Indeed?” Dumbledore replied, sitting back in his chair and steepling his fingers. “Then it is just as well that you came when you did. I leave for the ICW meeting the day after tomorrow.”

“I’m aware of your schedule, Albus, thus my appearance today,” Minerva stated.

Peering over his half-moon spectacles, he indicated that he was listening.

“Albus … Headmaster Dumbledore. I have come today to tender my resignation from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,” she stated, placing the envelope in the centre of his desk.

Only his decades of political acumen which had taught him to hide every instance of shock or surprise kept Albus from falling off of his chair.

“Forgive me, I’m not sure that I heard you correctly,” he finally managed. “Did you say ‘resign’?”

“I did, Albus,” Minerva replied, her lips as thin as ever.

“But … why?” he asked. “Hogwarts is your home.”

“It has indeed been my home for more decades than I care to remember,” Minerva allowed, “however I feel that it’s time for me to leave.”

“And what will you do?” Albus asked. “Surely you’re not going to simply sit in a rocking chair somewhere and while away your time knitting or some such other pointless task.”

Minerva instantly bristled. “If that was what I chose to do, I think that I’d be well within my rights to do so. After so many long years teaching here at Hogwarts, I think that I’m entitled to do what I will with my time as I see fit. And for your information, I have a project lined up that I believe to be worthy of my time and talents.”

“Of course, my apologies, Minerva,” Dumbledore said softly, trying to placate the irate witch. “I did not mean to belittle your endeavours. It is simply that you have taken me by surprise.”

Minerva nodded stiffly once. “I have left my notes organised for whomever you choose to replace me with as Transfiguration teacher. As far as my Deputy duties is concerned, everything is in readiness for letters to be sent out once the professors have assigned a text for their classes. Might I suggest Filius for the post of Deputy? He has been teaching at the school almost as long as I have been and would make a fine replacement. Pomona would also do a good job, assuming, of course, that you can tear her away from her plants.”

“We will be sorry to lose you, Minerva. You have been an incredible asset to Hogwarts,” Dumbledore stated sadly.
Her face softened slightly as she accepted the compliment.

“And if we have to have you resigning, I appreciate that you did you so early – it will greatly aid in finding someone to take on your classes,” he added.

“Thank you, Albus,” she said, rising from her chair. “I’ll have my things out of the castle by nightfall.”

“Take care, Minerva,” he said in farewell.

The sad expression remained in place until the door closed behind her. As soon as it did, Dumbledore’s face changed into one of immense anger and annoyance.

It was bad enough trying to find a new staff member for DADA every year, but now there were two positions to fill. And the very notion of promoting the half-goblin to the coveted Deputy Head position was untenable, regardless of him having seniority. There was no way that the purebloods of the Board of Governors would accept him, not to mention the fact that the man was far too headstrong to allow Dumbledore to guide him to the proper decisions that needed to be made.

Pushing the report that he had been reading to the side, Dumbledore pulled a fresh sheet of parchment in front of himself – it seemed that there was another advertisement for the Prophet to write.

-oOoOo-

“I take it you know where to go?” Sirius asked as the three approached the doors leading to the Department of Magical Education in the Ministry of Magic.

Augusta Longbottom barely spared her companion a withering glance. “Of course.”

“Really, Sirius, you actually thought that you had to ask?” the last of the three, Cyrus Greengrass, asked from the corner of his mouth.

In response, the dark-haired man in the middle shrugged a shoulder. “Just making sure.”

Reaching the dark wood doors, Sirius stepped to the side, pulling the doors open as he did so. With a small nod of thanks, Augusta strode through. In front of them was an open area with a large counter, behind which sat a bored-looking middle aged witch. Against the wall to the side sat half a dozen uncomfortable-looking wooden chairs.

Seeing Augusta striding forwards, Sirius took the time to look around. A long corridor filled with office doors stretched away to their right. Jutting out into the corridor above each door were small signs – Wizarding Examinations Authority; Hogwarts Board of Governors; Examination Room One; Examination Room Two; and, only just able to be made out from where he stood, Teacher Certifications.

“Good morning,” Augusta’s voice broke into Sirius’ curiosity as she spoke to the secretary behind the counter, bringing him back to the task at hand. “We are here to register a new school.”

The jaw of the witch behind the counter dropped as her face switched back and forth between the three. Sirius grinned lopsidedly at the woman, it was clear that she knew exactly who she was facing.

“Ah, certainly, Madam … Madam Longbottom,” she dithered. “Um, there’s … there’s some forms that’ll need to be … to be filled out.”
Augusta nodded at the woman. “Naturally. If you could produce them for us, we will complete them directly.”

The woman’s head began to nod so quickly that she reminded Sirius of a human version of Dobby the House Elf.

“If you’ll give me a minute, I’ll go and find them. We don’t usually keep them on hand; they’re needed so infrequently, you see.”

At Augusta’s wave of her hand, the woman stumbled from her chair before rushing through the door mostly hidden behind the large filing cabinet. And then they waited. Nearly ten minutes later, the woman returned, a thick folder clutched between her hands.

“Sorry I took so long, Madam Longbottom, Sirs,” she said in a rush as she dove into the folder.

Peering over the counter, Sirius saw that a piece of parchment had been affixed to the inside of the folder. He watched as she ran her hand down the list before beginning to pull out leaf after leaf of parchment. Finally, when the stack appeared to be nearly a dozen pages long, she picked them up and placed them before the three.

“You need to fill out all of these, as well as this one,” here she set an extra small stack off to the side, “in triplicate. Once you’re done, hand them back to me and I’ll take them to the Head of the Department to be signed off. Once Madam Clyde has done that, you’ll be in business.”

“Thank you,” Augusta replied, picking up the two piles. “Gentlemen?”

Together, the three moved across the office space to the chairs, all of which, Sirius now saw, had a small desktop folded away to the side.

“I feel like I’m back in school,” Cyrus remarked as he sat, slid the desk up and took his share of the forms.

“At least between the three of us, this shouldn’t take too long,” Sirius grumbled.

Thus began nearly half an hour of scratching quills. Every now and again, one or the other would lean across to their companions to clarify what they should write.

“What about this one?” Cyrus asked. “School sponsor?”

“Ah, yes, one of the Departments’ little known regulations,” Augusta replied. “A new school needs to be sponsored by one of the Most Ancient and Noble Houses. It’s designed to make it that much harder for muggle-born families to start a new school.”

“Which one of us wants to have the honour?” Cyrus asked.

“Why just one?” Augusta countered. “We represent three Most Ancient and Noble Houses.”

“That’ll put the kneazel among the snidgets when they read that,” Sirius sniggered. “Sponsored by the Most Ancient and Noble Houses of Black, Greengrass and Longbottom, not to mention being founded on land owned by the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter.”

“Your right!” Cyrus laughed. “I’d love to see the look on their faces when they read that.”

Before too much longer, the three were able to put away their quills, gather the parchment and return to the counter. Taking the pile handed to her by Augusta, the secretary scanned through
them all.

“Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies,” she murmured. “Yes, everything looks to be in order. If you’d like to wait a few minutes, I’ll take these to Madam Clyde and get them signed off for you.”

Once again they were forced to wait, although for nowhere near as long as had Sirius expected; she returned, a beaming smile on her face.

“Madam Longbottom, Sirs, here are your copies,” she stated, handing them a stack of parchment. “Your school has been approved and you’re cleared to begin teaching on the first of September.”

-oOoOo-

Beth, Ava and Penelope gasped as they stared at the picture that Emma had just placed in front of them. The charcoal drawing of the diricawl was truly spectacular. Its feathers, even though this was a picture devoid of magic, looked as though they were ruffling in the breeze. One eye gleamed at them, its wings slightly parted from its fat body.

“And this was done by a schoolgirl?” Beth asked.

“Luna, yes,” Emma replied. “She did it for Harry and he passed it on to me. He thought that we could use it as part of Diricawl Academy’s logo.”

“Yes! Yes, we definitely have to use it!” Penelope stated, clapping her hands together. “Can you imagine that on the top of the brochure or on the breasts of the school uniform?”

“Are they going to have a uniform?” Ava asked.

“I don’t think that that’s been decided yet,” Emma replied. “I doubt it for this year, but once we’re up and running properly, it’d be good to have, I think.”

“I’ve brought along the brochures from the other schools to help us get some ideas,” Beth told the other women, pulling out said brochures from her bag.

“Excellent, shall we get to work?” Emma asked.

Together, the four women settled around the Grangers’ dining room table, large sketch pads in front of each of them, a stack of pens in a pot in the centre of the table. Emma smiled to herself as she noticed Penelope studying the pens and paper intently.

“What sections do we need to have?” Beth asked.

“Facilities and grounds, of course,” Ava began.

“Oh, Harry gave me a couple of photos of Potter Haven that he thought that we could use,” Emma started, twisting around to search through her handbag.

“Each of these talk about the Headmaster and staff,” Beth stated, tapping the brochures. “I know that we’ve only got Minerva and Remus at the moment and that all of the kids know them, but we should put them in as well. At the very least, it’ll be good practise for when we do up a new one for next year.”

“What about subjects?” Penelope asked.

“Put in a list of the ones that we know that they’re already studying and some extras that we’d at least like the kids to consider for now,” Emma shrugged.
“Which extra ones?” Penelope asked.

“Enchanting and Basic Healing. Harry’s already doing them and I know most of the others are interested in doing them as well,” Beth stated. “Maybe Magical Cultures of the World. Most of them started that the other year.”

“Yes, I heard about that … wasn’t that guy who taught it the Australian one?” Penelope asked. “Daphne thought that he was hilarious, a complete odd-ball. She still learnt a lot, though.”

“What about Arts?” Ava suggested. “If Luna can draw like this already, imagine what she could do with some instruction?”

“Wonderful idea,” Emma agreed.

The conversation continued for another hour before the four sketch pads and bundles of loose leaf paper were reduced to half a dozen pages that they were happy with.

“Come on, ladies, let’s put this together into something that looks a little more professional,” Emma said, gathering up not only the six loose sheets of paper, but also Luna’s drawing and Harry’s photographs.

She led them through the house and into the down-stairs study. There, she turned on the computer, scanner and printer. Of the three others, Ava was the only one who knew what a computer was, but even then, she’d never used one.

Lifting the lid of the scanner, she placed Luna’s drawing face down and touched the ‘scan’ button.

“What’s it doing?” Beth asked as the scanner whirred into life.

“It’s making a digital copy of Luna’s drawing,” Emma explained. “Once it’s finished, we’ll be able to see it here on the computer screen and then I can use the computer to play with it, add some things to it, like words and extra images until we have something that we like.”

All three women listened attentively as Emma explained every step that she was doing. None of them had ever heard of anything so amazing in their lives and marvelled at the way that Emma turned their scrawling ideas into a professional looking brochure.

In the centre of the front cover, Luna’s drawing of a diricawl, now clutching a quill in its talon, was encircled by the name of their new school: Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies.

“I was thinking that when I take this to the printers, that we could get it done up using a glossy dark green paper and maybe making the logo gold?” Emma suggested.

Excited murmurs of agreement sounded around her.

The rest of the brochure was fairly simple, with each section having its own page. Spaces were left for three of Harry’s photos – one of the Manor itself, another of the library and the last showing the valley in its vast splendour. The crest, name of their location – Potter Haven – and Minerva McGonagall noted as Headmistress were added to the bottom of the back cover to finish it off.

“It looks amazing, Emma,” Penelope breathed. “I never dreamed that muggles could do something like this.”

“Just wait until after we get it back from the printers and the photos have been put in and the colour added,” Emma grinned back.
“How long will that take?” Beth asked.

“A couple of days,” Emma shrugged. “We should definitely have them back and be able to send out the letters by Friday.”

-oOoOo-

Minerva strode confidently into the post office in Diagon Alley, sixteen fat envelopes clutched in her hands. Inside each one was a letter introducing the new school and offering a place to the addressee, one of the new brochures, and an extra letter for the parents of the prospective student, inviting them and their child to a meeting at Potter Haven the following week.

Almost all, she was sure, would be eagerly received and accepted immediately. And, even though most of the parents already knew about next week’s meeting, it was decided to include that extra letter to everyone anyway – no one seemed to want to miss out on the ‘experience’ of getting the invitation.

There were only two whom Minerva was unsure about. Oh, the students she had no doubt would be eager to attend. No, it was the parents that she couldn’t predict. Actually, that wasn’t quite accurate. She thought that she could predict their actions quite accurately. What it came down to, she believed, was which parent heard about the offer first. Unfortunately, Minerva hadn’t been able to work out the best way of approaching them beforehand.

And so, she was falling back on what she knew – send out the letters and wait for the replies.

“Good morning,” she greeted the man behind the counter. “I have some letters that I’d like to send.”

“How many you got?” he asked.

“Sixteen,” Minerva replied, handing them over.

“That’ll be twenty-two sickles, five knuts,” the man said.

Taking out her money pouch, Minerva counted out the money.

“I’ll get them out for ya right away, then,” the man nodded.

Minerva turned away before pausing at the door to look back only to see the man, letters in hand, disappearing through the rear door to the owls in the back shed. Then, with a small smile on her lips, the Headmistress of Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies left – there was much work still to be done, regardless of the small class size of her prospective new pupils.
Chapter 6

The sudden beating of wings through the nearest window and thence across the room jerked Hermione’s head up from the book that she was reading. She blinked rapidly as her eyes fought to focus on the fast approaching owl – a common barn owl, she immediately categorised.

Its great yellow eyes fixed on her as it crossed the lounge and its wings flared out, allowing it to land gracefully on the coffee table in front of her. Regally, it lifted one leg, allowing her to untie the thick envelope that she could see was addressed to her.

Before she even had a chance to thank the owl, let alone to scurry off to find it a treat or two, the barn owl had crouched slightly, then flapped up and back the way that it’d come from.

“Aren’t you going to open it?” her dad asked

From the corner of her eye, Hermione could have sworn that he had the biggest grin that she’d ever seen on his face, but by the time that she’d turned to focus on him properly, he was simply looking bored, without a smile at all.

With a nod, Hermione slid her finger under the flap and tore open the envelope. Inside she found two pieces of parchment and a small booklet or brochure done up in a dark forest green. The hint of gold on the brochure’s cover caught her attention and tempted her curiosity, but she resisted in favour of the letters.

Opening the first piece of parchment, her eyes rounded and she gasped, even as her eyes flew backwards and forwards across the page.

DIRICAWL ACADEMY OF MAGICAL STUDIES

Headmistress: Minerva McGonagall

Dear Miss Granger,

We are pleased to inform you that a place has been reserved for you at Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies. Diricawl Academy is a new school, currently located on the grounds of Potter Haven.

You, along with your parents, are invited to an open day at Diricawl Academy on Monday, July 25, 1994 to meet your fellow prospective students as well as the staff. At the meeting, we will also discuss how Diricawl Academy will run along with the subjects that you might wish to pursue.

Term begins on 1 September.

Yours sincerely,

Minerva McGonagall Headmistress

Dropping the letter to the floor in her haste, Hermione flicked open the second piece of parchment. This, she saw, was a letter addressed to her parents, detailing the offer that she had just received, the invitation to the open day and a little more about the new school.

“Here, this is for you,” Hermione said, practically flinging the parchment at her father.

Her father’s chuckle managed to weave its way into her consciousness, tearing her hungry gaze
away from the gold embossed picture of a diricawl holding a quill, encircled by the name of the new school.

“What?” she asked.

“Oh, nothing, dear,” her father grinned. “It’s just that I don’t remember you getting this excited when Professor McGonagall first told you about your being a witch and offering you a place at Hogwarts.”

“But this is different,” she countered. “This means that I can go to school with Harry again.”

Her voice trailed off again as she realised that the piece of parchment in her father’s hand had yet to be opened. Her eyes narrowed as she flicked between it and her father’s face.

“You knew!” she blurted, then, seeing his grin widen. “Did you and Mum have something to do with this?”

“Maybe,” her father replied, leaving no doubt in her mind that her suspicion was correct.

Questions flittered through her head: When? Why? Professor McGonagall was Headmistress? Did that mean that she’d left Hogwarts? Who else was involved? Sirius, maybe? Did Harry know? That one, she thought, was obvious, seeing as the school was at his house.

The battle to have her questions answered was quickly fought and just as quickly lost.

Scrambling to her feet, the brochure still clutched in her hand, Hermione snatched up her acceptance letter and raced from the room.

“Where are you going?” her father called after her.

“To get my journal,” Hermione replied over her shoulder. “I’ve got to talk to Harry. And probably yell at him a bit, too, I suspect.”

-oOoOo-

“What do you have there, Pumpkin?”

In reply, Luna merely held out the still unread letters that had just come for her in the direction that her father’s voice had come from.

Her attention at that very moment was wholly fixated on the golden diricawl standing serenely on the dark green paper. Her large grey eyes watched as one long finger traced every line of the drawing. She knew this picture; she’d drawn it herself, although she didn’t remember adding the quill that it was holding.

Without breaking her gaze on the diricawl, she told her father all that he needed to know.

“I’m not going back to Hogwarts, Daddy. I’ve found a new school.”

-oOoOo-

“Tell me you didn’t just get a letter!” Daphne demanded, sliding slightly in her sock-covered feet as she entered her sister’s room.

In reply, the younger girl grinned at her, holding up a dark green brochure in one hand and a piece of parchment in the other, causing Daphne to groan.
“Why?” she whined. “Why would they do that? Well, there’s only one thing for it! You’re just going to have to decline.”

“Why would I want to do that?” Astoria asked.

“You’d really want to be stuck in that small house with me for the whole year?” Daphne asked incredulously.

“It’s not a house, it’s a manor!” Astoria retorted. “And apart from the fact that I thought that it was brilliant when we were there the other week, I’d do almost anything to get out of the Slytherin dungeons. You know that it’s been getting worse every year with Malfoy and his cronies strutting around as though they own the place.”

“Don’t remind me, Stori, I’ve been putting up with that idiot for longer than you have,” Daphne replied. “But really, you really want to go to Harry’s new school?”

“Of course I do and you know that Mum and Dad are going to let me,” Astoria grinned.

“We’ll see about that,” Daphne retorted.

And with a swing of her long blonde hair, she spun about and stomped from the room.

-oOoOo-

*Tap tap tap. Tap tap tap.*

George pulled his head out of the box that he was half buried in, looking for one particular specimen jar out of the dozens that were hidden in its extended interior.

“Is that you, Fred?” he asked.

“What? Is what me?” Fred asked, looking up from the plans that he was currently going over in meticulous detail. He knew that there was something missing and he was determined to find what it was.

*Tap tap tap.*

“That. That tapping sound,” George replied.

Cocking his head to the side, Fred waited an instant for it to come again before swivelling his head towards the location of the noise.

“We’ve got mail, brother of mine,” Fred exclaimed as he saw the two owls perched precariously on the slender ledge just outside their bedroom window.

George, being the closer of the two, opened the window, letting in the two mail owls. Immediately, the two owls hopped through the window before simultaneously lifting a leg towards the twin red-heads.

“Here, Fred,” George said, tossing the first of the two envelopes across the room.

The sound of ripping parchment was heard before the room descended in silence for just long enough for the letters to be read and the brochure to be glanced through.

Twin sets of blue eyes, wide with wonder, met each other across the room.
“Cor, blimey!” they said in unison. “That’s some prank Harry’s pulled.”

“How do you reckon he got …”

“McGonagall to be the Headmistress …”

“And leave Hogwarts?”

“Dunno. Although, she is one of his guardians.”

“And it’s at Potter Haven?”

“How many do you reckon got one of these?” Fred asked, flourishing his letter.

“No more than twenty. Probably a lot less.”

“You’re right. Not much room there is there.”

“Pranking could be an issue,” George pointed out.

“Can’t fob stuff off on old Peevesy there.”

“Worth it, though, to get away from Snape …”

“And Binns!”

“I’ll miss nap times, though.”

“Smaller classes’ll make it harder to hide,” Fred stated.

“We’ll have to do our work properly!” George gasped.

“It’d keep Mum happy.”

“Would she let us go?”

“Depends how we market it.”

“Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies.”

“Located at Potter Haven.”

“Headmistress, Minerva McGonagall.”

“Offering the additional subjects of Enchanting, Basic Healing, The Arts, and Magical Cultures of the World, amongst others.”

“These letters and the brochure should help,” George suggested.

“What letters and brochure?” the distinctively loud voice of their mother asked.

Fred and George spun around and immediately stumbled backwards. Their mother, Molly Weasley, was framed in the now-opened doorway, her hands on her hips as her eyes bored into one son after the other over and over again.

“What letters and brochures?” she repeated, voice low and dangerous.
Fred barely allowed himself to glance at his brother before snapping into action. Bouncing forwards, a wide grin plastered on his face, he presented the letters and brochures to his mother with a flourish.

“We just received these letters in the mail,” he told her.

Molly’s eyes narrowed before they snapped to the now-closed window.

“Really?” she asked, her disbelief obvious.

The twins watched nervously as their mother slowly read both letters before opening the brochure and perusing the inside.

“A brand new school with Minerva McGonagall as Headmistress? Just how gullible do you think I am?” Molly asked.

“No, Mum, it’s all true,” George protested.

“We didn’t make this up,” Fred agreed.

“You never made up a new school at someplace called ‘Potter Haven’?” she asked, her eyes narrowed.

“Of course not! And Potter Haven’s real as well,” Fred told her.

“It’s Harry’s place,” George finished.

“Harry? Harry Potter? Are you saying that this is where he studied after he ran away?” Molly asked.

“Exactly, Mum,” George nodded fiercely.

“And now you’re expecting me to believe that he’s started his own school with Minerva McGonagall teaching him?” At their fervent nods, her hands went back to her hips, her fists crushing the parchment and brochure in the process. “And let me guess, the two of you want to go to this ‘school’ with him.”

“That’s right, Mum,” Fred replied for the both of them. “Just imagine how well we could do with Professor McGonagall and only a few other students.”

“Exactly who are these ‘other students’?” she asked.

Fred and George shared a look before sharing simultaneous shrugs.

“We don’t know exactly …”

“But I’m sure that we could guess,” Fred finished.

“And would two of them be your brother and sister?” Molly asked, a dangerous glint beginning to appear in her eyes.

“I … I doubt it,” George stuttered.

“Then what makes you think that I’d ever allow you to go to a different school than your siblings?” Molly asked. “No. No, the two of you are going to Hogwarts. It’s a great school full of history and well-known teaching practises that has kept it at the top of the world for centuries. And what’s
more, Albus Dumbledore is there – the greatest wizard in the world!”

“But …”

“No ‘but’s’, Fred,” Molly interrupted. “You just write back to this ‘school’ and tell them that you’re not going. You’re going to Hogwarts where you belong.”

With that, she strode forward, snatched the second set of letters and brochure out of George’s hands and strode from the room.

-oOoOo-

“Susan!”

The girl with long, dark red hair talking to Harry spun around. “Hannah! You too?”

Harry watched, smiling as the two best friends raced across the Receiving Room of Potter Haven to embrace, laughing and talking a mile a minute together. Hannah’s parents nodded at him over the top of the two girls’ heads.

Behind them, the flames in the fireplace turned green, indicating that the newly connected FLOO connection had just been opened for what must have been the dozenth time that morning. A swirl of colour promptly dissolved into Neville Longbottom stepping gracefully out of the flames.

“Hiya, Harry!” Neville called, sidestepping the two girls, before clasping his hand.

A second later, the regal form of Augusta Longbottom materialised.

“Welcome to Potter Haven, Madam Longbottom,” Harry said, giving a small bow exactly as Sirius had taught him.

“Thank you, Mister Potter, it’s pleasing to be back,” Augusta replied, a hint of a smile on her lips.

“I believe that everyone is here now, so if you’d all like to follow me to the formal sitting room?” Harry said in a slightly raised voice.

Immediately, Hannah and Susan turned to him, linked arms together and skipped across to him.

“Thanks for inviting us to join your school, Harry. We were all wanting to join you last year,” Hannah said as they walked through the manor.

“Especially after finding out where you were,” Susan added.

Harry gave them a lop-sided grin. “As much as I’d like to take the credit, this isn’t actually my school. It’s just being held here. At least for this year.”

“Then whose school is it?” Susan asked.

“I guess that you could call it a ‘community school’,” Harry replied after a moment’s thought. “Most of the parents, along with Professor McGonagall, Sirius and Remus were involved in setting it up and deciding who should be the first students.”

“In that case, I’m glad that they picked us,” Hannah stated.

As Harry, Susan, the Abbots and Longbottoms joined the crowd gathered in the long formal sitting room that took up most of the front western side of the manor, Harry realised just how packed it
was in there. But then, with fourteen students and twenty-one adults, that made for a lot of people.

Their arrival was instantly noted as Harry felt eyes fall on him. Looking across the room, he met Minerva’s eye and gave a slow nod.

“No now that everyone’s here, I think that it’s time to get started,” Minerva’s enhanced voice sounded over the babble. “If everyone could find a seat?”

Ordinarily, the sitting room would only cater for a dozen people. Dobby, though, had done wonders. He’d transferred all of the chairs from the dining room, as well as the stools from the kitchen and even brought in some of the chairs from the library to ensure that there was enough seating for three dozen.

But the little house elf hadn’t stopped there. Ten or twelve small tables had been placed before clusters of chairs and a long table filled with urns of hot water, jugs of juice and cups and mugs was set against the back wall.

A hand wrapped itself around his arm and Harry jerked towards the twin lounger that Hermione had selected for them.

“Welcome, everyone, to this first meeting of the students, parents and staff of the new Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies,” Minerva began, eliciting a huge round of applause, punctuated by whistles from Sirius, Cyrus and Remus.

“As you all know,” Minerva continued, “I am Minerva McGonagall and I have been appointed as Headmistress of our new school. Our only other staff member at the moment is Remus Lupin.”

Here Remus briefly stood, gave a little wave and promptly sat back down.

“Our aim for today is primarily some housekeeping. We have fourteen students who have decided to join our school and those in third year and higher will need to choose their electives. Once we have those, we’ll need to discuss additions to the teaching staff. Also on our agenda today is deciding how our school will be run, at least for this year.

“For those not in the know, our intention is to use this year as a ‘test’ year – a year to determine the best way to run our new school before we invite even more students to join us next year at the new facilities that we hope to find and kit out during the year. Does anyone have any immediate questions?”

“Is it our intention to introduce subjects to the children this year that are not on offer at Hogwarts?” Augusta asked.

“Certainly,” Minerva nodded, “was there a particular subject that you had in mind?”

“While I was reading the brochure about the school that was included in the welcome letter, I noticed that ‘Magical Cultures of the World’ was mentioned,” Augusta stated.

“We included that one as an example since the kids had some instruction in it a couple of years ago,” Emma relayed.

Augusta gave a nod of her head in acknowledgement. “A worthy subject. But may I suggest one that may be even more pertinent? ‘Magical Studies of Great Britain’.”

Harry leant forward in interest as, around him, murmurs broke out around the room.
“What sorts of topics would you envision this subject entailing?” Minerva asked.

“After being a member of the Wizengamot for so many years, it has not failed to come to my attention that almost all muggleborns, not to mention those muggle-raised,” here she gave a small bow in Harry’s direction, “have, in general, a poor understanding of how our world works – the Ministry; the Wizengamot; the appropriate way to interact with Gringotts; magical contracts, to name but a few areas.”

“That sounds brilliant!” Dan exclaimed. “Do you think the parents of muggleborns could get in on some of those lessons to understand the world that we’re sending our children off into?”

“Indeed, an excellent suggestion, Augusta, and Dan, I think that that would be a wonderful idea,” Minerva beamed, “although I suspect that it might be even more beneficial to offer extra lessons just for the parents at different times to the students.”

“Some of that sounds too important to leave until third year,” Cyrus commented. “The sooner the children learn it the better, I think.”

“We could add it as a compulsory first year subject for all – I’m sure that even the magical-raised could do with some formal education in that area as well and after first year, we give the kids the option of continuing with it or dropping it,” Sirius suggested.

“We’d need to find someone willing to teach it,” Minerva stated.

“I would be agreeable to instructing a class in Magical Studies of Great Britain, assuming that it didn’t clash with my Wizengamot duties,” Augusta allowed.

“Thank you, Augusta,” Minerva smiled, “or, should I say, Professor Longbottom?”

A movement in the corner of his eye turned Harry’s head. He barely managed to suppress the laugh that threatened to escape him at the sight of the balding middle-aged man with his hand in the air, as tall and straight as any first year.

“Mister Creevey?” Minerva invited.

“Um, hi,” the clearly nervous man stumbled in being acknowledged. “I … I was just wonderin’ about … about if there was anythin’ in the magical world for … for the kids who want to pass their A-Levels in the … normal world?”

“No, I’m afraid that there isn’t anything like that at the moment,” Minerva frowned.

“That sounds exactly like something Diricawl Academy should be getting behind, though,” Remus said, standing and facing the crowd. “If we want witches and wizards to be able to function in both worlds, then they need not only a magical, but also a ‘normal’ or ‘mundane’ education.”

“What would they need for that?” Julian Spinks asked.

“Basically, some maths, English and science,” Emma replied.

“Basic maths would also be useful as a basis for Arithmancy,” Amelia pointed out.

“If you wanted to add it to the curriculum, Emma and I could work out something at the Surgery and maybe split the teaching of it,” Dan offered. “It wouldn’t be perfect, but it’d give the kids a grounding until you can find proper teachers.”
“Thank you, Dan, Emma, I think that that is an offer that we shouldn’t refuse,” Minerva nodded.

“How are we going to run a timetable with so many new subjects?” Hermione asked from beside Harry.

“Mister Potter?” Minerva invited.

Pushing himself to his feet, Harry manoeuvred through the chairs to the front of the room. Instinctively knowing where to grab, Harry plucked his staff out of the air where it lay disillusioned against the wall. A firm bang onto the ground and it shimmered into view, eliciting the gasps of surprise that he’d hoped for. A second tap, this time onto the wall above his head, revealed a large sheet of paper.

“What you can see above me,” Harry said as he leant on the rowan staff, “is a copy of the timetable that I made up for myself last year. Following this and knowing that I was able to learn at my own pace, allowed me to study not only more subjects than my friends back in Hogwarts, but also to learn them more quickly and at a higher level.

“Knowing my friends, though,” here he firmly met not only Hermione’s eyes, but also Daphne’s, Susan’s, Lil’s and Luna’s, “I know that they’re all just as capable of the same feat.”

Stepping forward, Minerva took over. “It’s our intention to use Harry’s timetable as a model for us all this year. Dennis and Mickey, being first years’, will have a slightly modified timetable that will allow them to concentrate more on the basics. Luna, Colin and Astoria, as new third years’, you three still need to choose your electives. The rest of you, will continue the same electives that you would have done at Hogwarts, along with Magical Cultures of Great Britain and the Mundane Studies that Mister and Mrs Granger will devise. After that, there should be enough time left for you to choose one or two extra subjects if you so wish.”

“You mean that we can learn Enchanting like Harry?” Hermione asked.

“And Basic Healing?” Daphne added eagerly.

“Certainly. Possibly even both,” Minerva told them with a smile. “The last subject that we’d like you to consider, especially as it could be considered both a magical and a mundane subject, is The Arts. This can be in a number of disciplines, for example, drawing, Miss Lovegood.”

Harry saw a slow smile blossom on Luna’s face until she was grinning from ear to ear.

“How about we give you all some time now to choose your subjects?” Minerva suggested.

Turning to the small table behind her, Minerva picked up the small stack of parchment that she quickly tapped with her wand before moving around the room and handing them out.

Harry barely had time to glance at his own timetable, now with Magical Studies of Great Britain, Mundane Studies and The Arts in the places where he’d previously had Mind Arts, Muggle Studies and Animagus Studies, when he was mobbed by his friends all wanting to ask about the extra subjects that he’d been learning.

With the new subjects, he was just glad that he’d OWLed out of Muggle Studies already, as well as completed the other two to the point that he could finish them off with a little extra work in the evenings.
“Ah, Severus, come in, come in,” Albus beamed as his potions master entered the Headmaster’s office.

“Albus,” Severus greeted, inclining his head, only to make twin locks of dark hair fall to either side of his face.

“Take a seat, my boy, there is much to discuss,” Albus invited.

The sallow-faced man strode confidently across the room before sinking into one of the two chairs across the desk from the Headmaster. As always, he declined the offer of a lemon drop from the bowl placed before him.

Knowing that Severus was never one for idle chit-chat, Albus neither expected nor received an inquiry about his time away in Switzerland at the International Confederation of Warlocks conference that he’d been attending for the past two weeks. Instead, the two men got straight down to business.

“The day before I left for my conference,” Albus began, “I received some very unexpected and entirely unwelcome news. Minerva has resigned her post and left Hogwarts.”

The widening of Severus’ eyes at this announcement was equivalent to an ordinary man falling off of their chair in shock.

“Yes, yes, I know,” Albus nodded, “I don’t believe any of us would have thought that anything less than her own death would remove Minerva from amongst us. However, in hindsight, that supposition appears to be in error. Now, as you know, Minerva was, apart from being our Transfiguration teacher, also Hogwarts’ Deputy Headmistress.”

Severus nodded, the slight tightening around his eyes, clearly evident to one who knew him as Albus did, that he knew precisely where this conversation was headed.

“After long deliberation,” Albus continued, “I would like nothing better than for you to take up the mantle of Deputy Headmaster, in addition to your already prestigious positions as Head of Slytherin and Professor of Potions.”

Severus tipped his head back in thought, making his already large, hooked nose stand out even more prominently on his face.

“I would be honoured to accept the position,” he finally replied, the corners of his mouth turning up in a semblance of a smile.

“Excellent, excellent!” Albus exclaimed, clapping his hands together. “Minerva has left all of her notes and information ready for her successor. I’ll see to it that a house elf transfers them to your office immediately. I will be interviewing for a new Transfiguration professor in the coming days. As soon as one is appointed, I’ll send them along to you with their text preference.”

“With Minerva’s loss, I guess that we’ll also be needing a new Head of Gryffindor House,” Severus pointed out. “Who do you have in mind?”

Dumbledore sat back in his chair. “The only Gryffindor alumni that we have are Darius and Bathsheda.”
“Not Elmsworthy,” Severus stated stiffly.

“I believe that you’re correct,” Dumbledore sighed. “Bathsheda it is, then. I’ll speak to her after lunch.”

“Is that all?” Severus asked. “I have much work to do, especially as my duties have just expanded.”

“Of course, of course. Severus,” Albus smiled. “Thank you for taking on this role for me.”

Fluidly, Severus rose to his feet, nodded once and strode from the room, his cloak billowing behind him.

-oOoOo-

Severus Snape frowned at the newest addition to his office: a magical window. As Deputy Headmaster, he needed to be easily accessible for the post owls. Unfortunately, that had meant only one of two options: either change rooms to one higher in the castle or having the window put in. The very notion of moving so far from the dungeons, away from his Slytherins, his classroom and his potions, was unthinkable. Thus, the window.

The window provided light the likes of which had not been seen in any part of the dungeons since the day that they were built. And the view, too was wholly unexpected. Seated at his desk, Severus could look down upon the grounds, the Forest and the lake. From what he could tell, the other end of the window was somewhere near the Owlery.

More times than he could count since he’d had the blasted thing installed, owls had been swooping in through the window, depositing their deliveries and leaving again. At least they’d quickly learnt not to expect treats any more.

The state of his desk, too, was enough to deepen any frown that he had. His usually immaculate office was now piled high with parchment, folders and files. Envelopes galore were piled high on one side of his desk, ready for the parchment that was all but ready on the other to be stuffed inside before they could be sent out. A new tray, devoted entirely to incoming mail, threatened to overflow with unread letters.

It was enough to make Severus’ respect for Minerva grow immeasurably. More than once, he’d even considering owling her himself, to ask her for advice. Only his pride had stayed his hand.

As the latest owl swooped back out the window, Severus threw down the quill, roughly pushed aside the booklist for the seventh years’ that he was working on and faced his overflowing in-tray.

Snatching up the top envelope - a muggle-type one, he grimaced - he ripped it open.

Deputy Headmaster,

I would like to inform you that I am withdrawing my daughter, Hermione Granger, from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Regards,

Dan and Emma Granger.

A smirk appeared on his face and he took the pleasure in reading it through for a second time.

“No doubt she’s gone off to wherever Potter is,” he murmured. “No loss.”
Discarding the letter, he picked up another envelope.

Deputy Headmaster,

I would like to inform you that I am withdrawing my grandson, Neville, from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Regards,

Augusta Longbottom

Regent for the Most Ancient and Noble House of Longbottom.

It seemed that Christmas had come early. Two Gryffindors were now gone, three if you counted Potter, and Severus allowed himself a proper smile for the first time in years.

The next, though, wiped the smile from his face.

Deputy Headmaster,

I would like to inform you that I am withdrawing my daughters, Daphne and Astoria, from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Regards,

Cyrus Greengrass

Head of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Greengrass.

By the time his quick, nimble fingers had opened the next dozen letters, he knew the extent of the damage that Potter had caused. Slumping back in his chair, Severus wiped his face with his hands. Dumbledore was not going to like this. And then an even worse thought occurred: it was now his job to inform the Headmaster of these sorts of problems. And then deal with them.

-oOoOo-

“Welcome back everyone to another year at Hogwarts!” Dumbledore greeted warmly. “And an especial welcome to our newest members of staff, Alastor Moody who will be taking on Defence Against the Dark Arts, and Miss Veronica Channing who takes up the post of Transfiguration teacher.”

Small applause swept the teacher’s staff room as the incumbent teachers took in their newest members.

Alaster Moody was known to many of them. The old, scarred warrior had seen better days. But then, decades of being the Ministry’s number one auror was always going to leave a mark on a body. And on Moody, it’d left more than his fair share – one leg gone, replaced by a wooden one with a clawed foot; an eye missing, its place now taken by a magical one that revolved constantly in his head, causing anyone who looked at it for more than a few minutes to become sick. And a face and arms covered with more scars than any sane person would care to count.

Veronica, was as different from Moody as it was possible to get. She was considered young by her new peers, indeed, most could remember teaching her barely half a dozen years ago. She was only a small woman, and her demure, midnight blue robes simply screamed that she would easily be overwhelmed or lost with a crowd, let alone a classroom. It was fortunate, then, that those that
remembered her from her days at Hogwarts knew that her temper could be as fiery as her mahogany hair was long and that, once lit, her ire could last for days. More than one couldn’t wait to see what was left of the first student to try to put one over on her.

“As one would expect with the loss of Minerva,” Dumbledore continued, “there have been two other staff changes. Severus has consented to take on the role of Deputy Headmaster, while Bathesda has agreed to take up the mantle of Head of Gryffindor in addition to her duties as Professor of Ancient Runes.”

Once again, a small smattering of applause came from the assembled staff.

“For the most part, things will remain the same at Hogwarts, this year, however …”

Severus leant forward, cutting off the Headmaster in mid-speech.

“Severus?” Dumbledore asked.

“It would seem that student numbers are not what we were expecting,” he drawled. “I have had letters from the parents of eleven current students, stating that their children were withdrawing from Hogwarts. In addition, a further two first years, both muggleborns, have indicated that they will not be taking up their place here.”

Gasps and muttering swept the room. No student had voluntarily withdrawn from Hogwarts in decades.

“Who?” Filius squeaked.

“What years?” Pomona asked, nearly over the top of her friend.

Snape met each of their eyes across the table before referring to the notes in front of him, not that he didn’t already have it memorised.

“Eight fourth years – Granger, Longbottom, Moon, Abbot, Bones, Greengrass, Spinks and Davis; and three third years – Lovegood, Greengrass and Creevey. The first years who’ve declined are Dennis Creevey and Michael Pemberton.”

Noting the look that Filius and Pomona shared, Severus was certain that they, at least, had already seen the common element.

“That’s nearly a quarter of our fourth years;” Aurora pointed out. “Will that affect the class groupings?”

“I see no reason to alter the class structure,” Snape replied.

“Where have they all gone?” Poppy asked, one hand clutched to her chest.

Snape shook his head. “They did not say.”

“I dare say that it’s not as though it’ll be hard to find them,” Rolanda stated. Then, seeing her colleagues all looking at her, she elaborated. “Just look for Mister Potter. Wherever he is, they’re sure to be there as well.”

Only the force of his vast decades of experience kept the scowl of annoyance from Dumbledore’s face. Placing his hands in his lap, he took fistfuls of his robes and squeezed until his hands hurt – anything to stop himself from taking his glass and throwing it against the wall in his anger. He’d
deal with that later.

“Moving on,” he said, forcing his jaw to unclench. “Argus, how are the preparations coming for our guests?”

The ancient squib straightened slightly in his chair. “Comin’ along, comin’ along. Mind you, they’d go much quicker if’n you banish that bleeding poltergeist!”

“Now, Argus, you know that Peeves is as much a part of Hogwarts as any of the ghosts are,” Dumbledore countered gently.

Filch huffed. “Yer, well, he ain’t helping. Don’t worry though. We’ll have the castle gleamin’ by the end of October.”

“Very well, does anyone have any questions about the coming year?” Dumbledore asked.

“Are you sure about your idea to cancel quidditch this year, Albus? The children aren’t going to like that one bit,” Rolanda asked.

-Albus Dumbledore stormed back into his office after the staff meeting, slamming the door behind him in his anger. Immediately, a chorus of protests broke out among the portraits of past Headmasters. With a scowl and a sharp swish of his wand, Dumbledore silenced the lot of them.

Rounding his desk, he fell into his chair, only to, seconds later, push himself back up again with a huff. No, his mind was too full, too overworked for mere sitting. Clasping his hands behind him, he began pacing the room.

Backwards and forwards he went, going over and over everything that Severus had told him. Fourteen students. Fourteen, including Harry Potter! A quarter of his incoming fourth years. And not the ones that he would have easily waved off. The ones that, in a years’ time after their OWLS, were sure to push Hogwarts’ scores that little bit higher in comparison to the rest of the world.

And not just Harry’s friends, either, but he’d taken their siblings as well. The youngest Greengrass girl and the younger Creevey boy had both gone with their siblings. But gone where? That was the big question. The obvious answer, of course, was wherever Harry was.

Rounding once again, Dumbledore stormed across to the small spindly table that he kept in the corner. Its top was filled with delicate silver objects that, once upon a time, had kept a merry tune in his office with the way they puffed and spun and whirled. Every one was tied in some way to Harry. At least, they used to be. Now they were simply what they appeared to be – interesting, but ultimately worthless, trinkets.

Whatever Harry had done after he’d fled from that fiasco at King’s Cross a year ago, had silenced them all. And, try as he might, Dumbledore still hadn’t been able to find out where the blasted boy had been hiding. The best that he’d managed was either northern England or southern Scotland. And now he was no longer alone.

Granger. Longbottom. Greengrass. Lovegood. Davis. Abbot. Bones. Moon. Spinks. Creevey. And most likely the other first year who had declined: Pemberton. Even that one could be explained away. If his memory served him, Pemberton was the name of the woman who ran that book store that Harry had opened in Diagon Alley.

Suddenly, Dumbledore froze. The names ran through his mind again and again until, with an
urgent spin, he leapt towards the fireplace. There was one name missing. One that he should have expected, perhaps even hoped for.

Throwing a handful of powder into the flames, Dumbledore dropped to his knees, stuck his head in the now green flames and called, “The Burrow!”

The whirling sensation stopped, only for him to see a cluster of tables and chairs in front of him. A sound to his right, had him angling his head to find a plump woman up to her elbows in the nearby sink.

“Ah, Molly, my dear, would you have a moment at all?” he asked.

Molly Weasley turned in surprise before bustling towards him, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Albus! How good to see you. Would you like to come through?” she asked.

“Thank you, no,” he replied. “I’m afraid that I don’t have a lot of time. I simply had a question that I needed to ask.”

“Of course. What is it, Albus?” Molly asked, curiosity evident on her round face.

“I was wondering if any of your boys had heard from young Harry of late?”

Instantly Molly’s face darkened. “You could say that, Albus.”

Dumbledore cocked his head, well, at least as much as he could in the fireplace. “Would you mind telling me about it?”

“They say that they received some letters and a brochure in the mail the other day. But if you ask me, I’d say that it was one of their pranks that they’d cooked up and conned the poor boy into participating in.”

It took all of Dumbledore’s experience to not narrow his eyes and to keep his voice light, airy even. “What was the nature of these letters and brochures?”

“Oh,” Molly replied, throwing her arms in the air, “something about offering the boys, and that was only Fred and George, mind you, a place at some new school.”

Dumbledore’s face paled, not that it was noticeable in the green flames. A new school, especially with that group of students, including The-Boy-Who-Lived attending it, could be disastrous for Hogwarts’ reputation. And attendance numbers.

“You wouldn’t by any chance have kept those letters and brochure, would you, Molly?” he asked.

“Goodness me, no, Albus. I threw them in the fire the moment that I confiscated them,” Molly replied proudly.

“Just out of curiosity, do you remember the name of this ‘school’?” he asked.

Molly’s eyebrows puckered in thought. “Diri … Digi … Dici … well, something that started like that, anyway, Academy, I think it was. Oh, and it was supposedly located at some place called ‘Potter Haven’, I do remember that. The boys said that that was Harry’s place. I’m sorry, Albus, I didn’t really pay too much attention. I find that it’s best not to when it comes to one of the twins’ pranks.”

“Thank you, Molly, you’ve been more than helpful as usual,” Dumbledore smiled. “I must be off –
“Very well, Albus. Do drop by for tea sometime soon,” Molly replied.

With a nod, he pulled his head back. The instant that he was fully in his office, he rose, grabbed another handful of powder from the pot on the mantle and threw it into the fire, turning the flames green once more.

This time, Dumbledore stepped into the FLOOR.

“Ministry of Magic!” he called before being whisked away.

-oOoOo-

It’d been a slow news week. Actually, if Rita was being honest, it’d been a slow couple of months. Nothing noteworthy had happened since the end of March when Harry Potter had finally come out of the woodwork for his trial. But the year previous to that had been a goldmine.

Nearly every day a new article presented itself – public opinions on The-Boy-Who-Lived disappearing after practically blowing up the Chief Warlock; speculations of where Harry Potter was hiding; the Ministry’s latest charges against the boy hero; not to mention the goings-on at Hogwarts with his friends.

Lately, Rita had taken to loitering around the Ministry of Magic, sniffing about for something, anything newsworthy: some scandal, some legislation, Merlin, she’d even take an office romance at this point.

So, when she saw Albus Dumbledore emerge from the FLOOR, a fierce, dare she say angry expression on his face, she knew that a story had finally arrived. Quickly glancing around her, Rita made sure that no one was paying her any attention before she sidled into the deep shadows of the pillar that she’d been leaning against before transforming.

This was her greatest secret. The one thing that ensured that she was able to get the inside scoop on all of her rivals.

Flapping her wings, the small water beetle buzzed through the hall looking for her quarry. Bodies passed in front of her sending her zigzagging to the left and right, up and down, her path constantly erratic. Finally, she caught up to her prey and dodged in front of him. Then, folding her wings against her fat body, she landed in the middle of his long white beard before worming her way in and out of sight.

When Dumbledore veered towards the Department of Magical Education, Rita began to wonder if she’d made a mistake. She was almost prepared to make a break for it and go look for another story when Dumbledore’s question froze her into place.

“Good morning,” he said to the secretary behind the counter. “I was hoping that you could help me. I’ve heard that there has been a new school started in Britain and I was wanting to contact my counterpart. Would you, by any chance, have the file so that I can find out who I need to address my mail to?”

“Oh, of course, you want to know about Diricawl Academy,” the woman exclaimed.

“Yes, that’s it, Diricawl Academy,” Dumbledore smiled and Rita could imagine that infamous eye twinkle of his blazing away.
“Sure, just give me a moment,” she said before turning away to rummage about in a filing cabinet behind her.

“Here you go,” she said, placing a thin folder on the counter.

Rita inched her way forward so that she, too, could read the contents of the file.

“You don’t get many new schools started,” the woman stated conversationally. “It took me ages to find the parchment work for them. Of course, I was a bit flustered when Lords Black and Greengrass and Madam Longbottom were asking for it, and that didn’t help my nerves at all, let me tell you!”

Running her eyes down the paper, Rita quickly found the three names grouped together under the question of ‘sponsors’. And beside each name, the mark of their House crests.

Rita’s eyes bugged at detail after detail. The Headmistress was listed as Minerva McGonagall. That was one piece of information that she hadn’t heard: that the renowned Minerva McGonagall had left Hogwarts. And the location of Diricawl Academy was full of juicy titbits simply waiting to be explored: Potter Haven.

“Initial enrolment numbers,” Dumbledore murmured. “Fourteen.”

Even this, Rita saw, was interesting, for fourteen wasn’t the first number written there. No, the original number had been sixteen, but that had been crossed out and ‘fourteen’ written in its place, most likely on a different day, judging by the different coloured ink that’d been used.

“I see that Diricawl Academy is slated to begin on September the first,” Dumbledore pointed out. “Do you know what type of transportation the students will be using to get to school that day?”

“Sorry, Headmaster,” the woman replied. “All I know is what’s in the file there.”

Rita watched as the file was flipped back to the start and read through again. Twice the old wrinkly finger paused to tap on a particular piece of information. The first was on Minerva McGonagall’s name; the second on the name ‘Potter Haven’.

Finally, the file was closed with a sharp snap.

“Thank you, my dear, you’ve been most helpful,” Dumbledore stated before turning away from the counter.

The second that Dumbledore was out of the office, Rita flittered away. There were people to interview and a new story to write.
Chapter 8

“Harry,” Sirius’ urgent voice caught him as he stepped into the dining room for breakfast, “tell me the wards around the valley are fully charged and that you’ve set the grate in the FLOO.”

Harry blinked behind his glasses at his godfather and, seated beside him, Remus, both looking at him with the most intense expression that he’d ever seen them wear.

“Of course,” he replied. “The wards are always charged up and you know that we only take the grate down when we’re expecting someone or when someone we trust calls ahead first and asks us if they can come through.”

“Good,” Sirius breathed. “I was sure that that was the case, but as the Master of Potter Haven, only you have access to the ward and FLOO books.”

Sliding into his seat, Harry surveyed the two men. Both were hunched over copies of *The Daily Prophet* and he wondered if that was what had them on edge so early in the morning.

“What’s happened?” he asked.

The two Marauders shared a look before Remus slid his paper across the table.

“Rita Skeeter’s found out about Diricawl. The *Prophet*’s full of articles,” he stated.

Spinning the paper around, Harry took in the front page. Instead of one or two lead articles like they would normally have, it seemed as though the *Prophet* hadn’t known which of the many headlines that they liked the best. Ignoring the smaller than usual body of text and pictures for the moment, he read each of the headlines:

*Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies – Britain’s Newest School!*

*Boy-Who-Lived Refuses Hogwarts!*

*From Deputy to Headmistress, But Not of Hogwarts!*

*Students Abandon Hogwarts!*

*Ancient and Noble Houses Failing Faith in Hogwarts!*

*Hogwarts Falling Standards – The Truth Revealed!*

*Dumbledore Dithers As School Implodes!*

*Minister’s Official Response to the Education Revolution!*

Harry’s eyes bugged out further and further as he read each one. As soon as his eyes hit the bottom of the page, they raced back to the top. Underneath each sensational Headline, the shortest of paragraphs enticed the reader in before pointing the way further inside the *Prophet* for the full story.

“Looks like Rita’s really done a number,” Sirius commented. “Her name’s over every single article. And surprisingly, it even looks like she’s done her homework for once.”
“How’d she find out?” Harry asked, skipping across to page three to read Rita’s speculation about himself.

It seemed that somehow, Rita’d found out that Diricawl Academy was on Potter land, in fact, ‘Potter Haven’ itself was even mentioned. And that, combined with the well-known rift between Dumbledore and himself, led Rita to speculate that his self-study from last year had turned into a full-blown school. It was all guess-work, filled with phrases like ‘this writer believes’ and ‘one would expect’, but for all that, it was surprisingly accurate.

“We don’t know,” Remus shrugged, answering his question, “but it’s not as though the records in the Department of Magical Education are top secret. Any member of the public could access it simply by asking the right questions.”

“Is this good or bad for us?” Harry asked, moving across to page five and the revelation that Minerva had left Hogwarts and become Diricawl Academy’s very first Headmistress.

“Bit of both, really,” Sirius replied. “We were going to go public about the school before the school year began, but we would have done it in a controlled way.”

“At the very least after we had the new subjects and teachers sorted out,” Remus added.

“The fact that someone from the Prophet actually did some research and found out about Hogwarts offering so few subjects in comparison to other schools is surprising, though,” Sirius stated.

Their conversation was interrupted by Minerva striding into the dining room, trailing a house elf who obviously wanted to get past her in order to announce her properly.

“Good, you’ve seen it,” Minerva stated, throwing her own copy of the paper onto the tabletop as she plonked into the chair at the head of the table.

Absently, Harry reached out and patted Dobby’s shoulder.

“Can Dobby be asking Master Harry Potter Sir a question?”

Harry turned a frowning face on his friend. Seeing the little guy tugging and twisting his ears, Harry reached out and pulled his hands away.

“Don’t do that, Dobby,” he instructed. “And you can ask me anything, remember? And it’s Harry, Dobby, just Harry.”

Dobby nodded his large head slowly. “Yes, Master Harry Sir.”

“Now, is this question urgent or can it wait until after breakfast?” Harry asked.

“It can wait, Master Harry Sir.”

“Okay, Dobby. After breakfast, then,” Harry told the elf before tuning back into the conversation between the adults.

“The fact that they’ve linked Harry to Diricawl already is going to cause us a few problems,” Minerva was saying.

“Why’s that?” Harry asked.

“Simply because you’re you, Harry,” Minerva stated. “I wouldn’t be surprised if we’re inundated with letters later today from parents wanting their child to go to the same school as The-Boy-Who-
Sirius barked with laughter at the sight of his face from Minerva’s prediction.

“We’re going to have to do some damage control. And the sooner the better,” Remus said quietly.

“I assume you mean inviting Ms Skeeter here for an interview and a tour?” Minerva clarified.

At Remus’ nod, Sirius sat up straighter in his chair.

“I’ve got a meeting with the dwarves today. It’s the last one before they begin remodelling the bedrooms, the basement and the library.”

“Can’t be helped,” Minerva replied. “Although you’ll probably want to make yourself scarce, Harry, otherwise the whole article will be taken up with you instead of the school.”

Harry nodded at the suggestion. “Let me know when it’ll be and I’ll get out of here.”

“Excuse me, Master Harry Sir,” Dobby said, popping back into the room, “but Minister Fudgey’s head be in the fire.”

-Ah, Harry, my boy,” Minister for Magic Cornelius Fudge exclaimed as the four of them entered the Receiving Room.

Harry smiled weakly at the green-tinted head floating in the flames. A shimmering golden grid obstructed some of Fudge’s head, but that was one safety feature that Harry had no interest in disabling at that moment. Especially after nearly a year of having the Ministry try to throw him in gaol.

“Minister,” Minerva greeted with a sharp nod. “Is there something that we can do for you?”

“A few things, yes, Professor McGonagall, the least of which you’ve already done by simply answering my call,” Fudge stated.

“What was that?” Sirius asked.

“Well, finding out that ‘Potter Haven’ actually exists,” Fudge beamed.

“Of course it exists, Minister,” Minerva said, exactly the same way that Harry’d heard her reply to a particularly stupid question by a first year. “There are a number of records within the Ministry that would have confirmed that for you without you interrupting our breakfast.”

“Yes, well, sorry about that,” he replied, “it’s just these articles in the Prophet.”

“What about them, Minister?” Remus asked.

“Rita caught me off-guard yesterday when she asked me about this business about a new school and I need to find out the facts,” Fudge replied.

“Yes?” Sirius asked.

After a few seconds pause where Fudge was obviously waiting for answers, while Harry and his guardians were waiting for actual questions, Fudge huffed.
“Well? Is it true? Are you starting a new school there?”

“Do you not talk to your Department Heads?” Sirius scathingly asked. “We filed the correct paperwork weeks ago.”

“So, it’s true?”

“Yes, Minister,” Minerva answered slowly and clearly. “A new school, Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies, has been established here and will be opening on September first.”


“We didn’t feel as though Hogwarts offered all of the educational opportunities that we required,” Harry replied.

“Very well, very well,” Fudge huffed. “I’d like a full report about your school and what it offers that Hogwarts doesn’t as soon as possible.”

“Excuse me, Minister, but Diricawl is a \textit{privately funded} and \textit{privately run} school,” Sirius stated emphatically. “It doesn’t answer to the Ministry.”

Fudge glared at them all for a moment before relenting. “Of course. Still, I’d like a meeting with you, Headmistress, if I may to … discuss your school?”

Minerva nodded once. “We’ll see what we can do.”

At that, Fudge took his leave, extinguishing the flames in the process.

“Ass,” Sirius muttered, “expecting to throw his weight around because he’s been made to look like a fool.”

“Will you grant him a meeting?” Remus asked.

“Most likely,” Minerva frowned, “although, I dare say that by the time that I do, he would have found out all that he needs to by reading the article from the interview that we’re going to give.”

She turned to Harry before continuing.

“If you would be so kind as to open the grate, I’ll see about contacting Ms Skeeter and setting up that interview.”

-oOoOo-

“Does Master Harry Potter have time for Dobby’s question now?”

Harry smiled as he looked at the clearly nervous house elf. “Of course, Dobby. What can I help you with?”

Dobby bounced from foot to foot, his hands drifting upwards towards his ears again, his eyes darting around the room.

“Spit it out, Dobby, I’m not going to bite,” Harry told him.

After a few more minutes of stalling, Dobby finally began.

“Dobby knows that Master Harry’s friends be coming to Potter Haven soon.”

“Does Master Harry Potter have time for Dobby’s question now?”

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After a few more minutes of stalling, Dobby finally began.

“Dobby knows that Master Harry’s friends be coming to Potter Haven soon.”
“We’re starting a school, yes,” Harry nodded.

“And they be living here. And Professor Minnie and Wolfie too,” he stated.

Harry nodded. “That’s right.”

“There be lots for Dobby to be doing. All the cooking and keeping the manor clean and looking after the beasties and the gardens too.”

Suddenly, Harry blinked. He hadn’t thought about Dobby. The little house elf had been more than enough to look after his small needs all last year when it’d just been the two of them. But with sixteen people living in the manor, not to mention the numerous visiting teachers, Dobby was likely to be run off of his feet.

“Dobby, is it going to be too much for you to do all of that all by yourself?” Harry asked.

“Dobby could do it,” the house elf said, reaching up to tug on one ear.

“But it’d be easier if you had some help, right?” Harry guessed.

Dobby scuffed one boot, even as he looked at the ground and nodded.

“That’s fine, Dobby. I don’t want you to kill yourself with overwork,” Harry told him, using one hand to lift his head up. “If you think that we need to get an extra house elf or two, we can do that. We’ll just make sure that he or she or they know that you’re Head Elf.”

Dobby’s great green tennis-ball eyes widened. “H…Head Elf? Oh, Master Harry Sir is too kind! Such a wonderful master! The bestest master in the world!”

Harry awkwardly patted the sobbing elf who’d somehow ended up in his arms.

“So, what do you think, Dobby? How many extra house elves do you think we’ll need?” Harry asked after Dobby’d calmed down enough to talk once more.

“Two, Master Harry Sir, if that’s alright,” Dobby replied. “One extra for inside and one for the gardens and beasties.”

“Two it is, then, Dobby,” Harry smiled. “If you know where we need to go, then we can go this afternoon.”


-oOoOo-

Harry and Hermione popped into existence just outside a large iron gate. To either side, stretching into the distance until they were covered by thick trees, were the two arms of the stone wall that encompassed the heavily warded property. The very air crackled around them, indicating just how strong the wards were that extended up from the seven foot high stone wall.

Dropping Dobby’s hand, Harry took a half step forward.

“This is the place?” he asked.

Dobby stood even straighter, looking every inch the Head Elf that he was. Even his clothing choice had had an upgrade since that morning when he was given his new position. Only his ever present belt of a thousand pouches remained.
His usual grey-green cargo pants had been replaced with matte black ones, complementing his
boots that had been shined until they reflected as easily as glass. A shirt of deep forest green
covered his upper body and, while it still contained multiple pockets, there were nowhere near as
many as his regular shirt had. The new Head Elf had even had time to find a new beret – this one
black with the Potter crest embroidered in gold thread upon its front.

“House elves can be bought here,” Dobby replied.

“Who owns this place?” Hermione asked.

“Lord Mackleway of the Ancient and Noble House of Mackleway,” Harry replied. “Apparently his
family has been in the ‘business’ of breeding house elves and selling them for centuries.”

“Remember, Dobby,” Harry continued, “once we’re in there, I’ll be relying on you to make sure
that we acquire elves who not only can do the job that we want them to, but who you think that you
can work with.”

Dobby nodded emphatically, making Harry wonder, not for the first time, how his berets never
seemed to fall off.

“Dobby understands, Master Harry Sir.”

With that, Harry stepped forward and ‘rang the bell’ by touching his staff to the crest on the gate.

A small pop heralded the arrival of an elderly elf with tuffs of long grey hairs protruding from his
ears in front of them. He wore a blood red toga emblazoned with the same crest from the gate on
the front of it.

“What can Kental be doing for young Sir and Miss today?” the elf asked, bowing slightly at the
waist.

“Hi, I’m Harry Potter and this is Hermione Granger and Dobby. We were hoping to purchase a
couple of house elves,” Harry said.

The elf stared at each of them with his deep grey eyes, pausing longest on Dobby before nodding
slightly, lifting up one hand and snapping his fingers. Silently, the great gate parted in the middle
before swinging inwards.

“You will be following Kental, please,” the elf said.

A warm hand slipped into his before they even reached the gate and Harry smiled at Hermione.
Together, they, trailed by Dobby, followed the old elf up the long curving drive. The manor before
them was several times larger than Potter Haven. It stretched five stories high and the curtains of
ivy that covered the twin wings and front of the house spoke volumes about how old the manor
was.

As they ascended the stairs leading towards the front doors, Harry set his eyes on the man waiting
for them. He guessed he was in his late middle age – certainly older than Sirius, judging by the
flecks of grey in his black hair. The dark blue robes that he wore were simple, but obviously made
from the finest of materials.

“Harry Potter, Hermione Granger and Dobby come to buy house elves,” Kental introduced, bowing
so low that his long nose nearly touched the man’s shoes.

“Welcome to Mackleway, Mister Potter, Miss Granger. I’m Owen Mackleway,” he said, offering
his hand to first Harry and then Hermione.

“It’s nice to meet you, Lord Mackleway,” Harry replied with a smile.

The man laughed, “oh, no, I’m not Lord Mackleway yet and hopefully not for a long time to come. Can you imagine having to sit in that stuffy Wizengamot chamber nearly every day? No, my dad’s the Lord around here, I just run the business.”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Mister Mackleway,” Harry apologised, “I didn’t realise.”

“Don’t worry about it. And call my Owen,” he said, waving the apology aside. “Now, you’re after some house elves?”

“Yes, Dobby here needs a bit of extra help,” Harry said.

“It’s because there’s going to be a lot more people staying in Harry’s manor and it’s just not fair to ask the one elf to look after so many,” Hermione explained.

“I’ll take it from here, Kental,” Owen said, releasing the old elf who gave a small bow before popping away. Then, gesturing towards the left, “how about you tell me more about your needs while we walk?”

“Dobby suggested that we’d need an extra two elves,” Harry stated.

“For indoor work?” Owen asked.

“One, yes, the other we’d like to assign to the grounds. The gardens around my home are only new and still need a fair bit of work and I’d like it if the elf knew something about magical creatures as well,” Harry said.

“I take it you’re offering Care of Magical Creatures at this new school of yours then?” Owen asked.

Harry and Hermione shared a look, a look that was obviously seen, judging by the chuckles coming from their companion.

“Half of today’s Daily Prophet is taken up with this new school of yours,” Owen stated. “What was it called again? Diricawl Academy?”

“Of Magical Studies, yes,” Hermione finished for him. “And yes, Harry had the goblins create a magical dome that’s large enough for dozens of different types of creatures.”

“Well, we’ve got house elves who specialise in all types of jobs and I think we can find a couple that’ll be right for you,” Owen declared.

It was then that they rounded the far wing of the manor to be faced with a most unexpected sight.

A motley collection of buildings, all elf-sized, were strewn across nearly an acre of land behind the manor. Most were long rectangular structures built of stone and thatch, not unlike hundreds of other houses that they’d seen before. Interspersed with these, were houses made of thick, rounded logs, like smaller, elf-sized cabins.

A half-dozen hillocks surrounded the village and it wasn’t until Hermione gasped and squeezed his hand while at the same time grabbing his bicep with her other hand that Harry realised what had her so excited. There were large, round wooden doors in the side of the mounds and, now that
Harry looked, wisps of smoke could be seen drifting up from what were obviously chimneys.

“It’s just like in the Hobbit,” Hermione breathed.

Harry could only nod, intent on not letting the hiss of pain escape him.

“Are you ready to meet our house elves?” Owen asked.

“Dobby?” Harry managed while loosening Hermione’s grip on his arm.

Instantly, Dobby trotted off.

“I trust Dobby to find the right two for Potter Haven,” Harry explained.

They watched as Dobby was quickly surrounded by dozens of house elves of all ages and sizes. His black and green clothes were swallowed by a sea of pale yellow togas, all standing nearly motionless.

Nearly ten minutes later, the crowd parted and Dobby, with an elf to either side of him, returned.

The one to Dobby’s left was slightly smaller than him, with a softer grey-green skin and large light blue eyes. Her, for it was obviously a female elf, ears were also slightly smaller and her nose was tiny, only slightly larger than a button mushroom. The other elf, a male, was taller than Dobby by half a head. Stains of green and brown on his toga attested to the fact that he’d obviously been in contact with plants quite recently. His large bronze coloured eyes were fixed on Harry’s own, as though he were measuring the worth of him.

“Dobby has found house elves,” Dobby exclaimed proudly. “This be Jaxom. He be good with plantsies and beasties. And this be Nerri. She be trained in looking after big houses.”

“Thanks, Dobby,” Harry smiled. “Hello, Jaxom, Nerri. Did Dobby explain to you what your duties would be?”

Nerri nodded eagerly. “Dobby did. Nerri likes the idea of looking after lots of young ones.”

Jaxom settled for merely nodding, although there was an air of eagerness about him as well.

“I take it you’d both like to work for me then?” Harry asked.

“Nerri would! Nerri would!” she exclaimed, bobbing her head even more.

“Jaxom is willing,” he said.

“In that case, I’ll take them,” Harry smiled at Owen.

“Excellent! Then how about we go inside, get the payment sorted out and then you can bond them to you,” Owen declared.

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“‘Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies’,” Rita Skeeter said as she fingered the brochure in her hands. “Where did the name come from?”

Minerva sighed inwardly. Already this interview had been going on for nearly half an hour and the tour that she’d planned of the manor and grounds had yet to even start. And the entire time, that infernal green-feathered quill of Rita’s had been taking copious amounts of notes.
“Actually,” Minerva replied. “It was a group decision.”

“Oh? The students or the group of parents that you were telling me about?” Rita asked.

“The parents. I believe it was Penelope Greengrass who suggested the ‘Academy’ part and Emma Granger who suggested that we use the diricawl as our ‘mascot,’” Minerva explained. “After all, we do have a pair in our magical enclosure.”

“You have a pair of diricawls here?” Rita asked incredulously.

Minerva nodded. “We do. Harry procured them last year when he was studying by himself.”

“Now this I have to see,” Rita announced, standing suddenly.

Feeling as though this interview might finally be heading somewhere, Minerva led the reporter from the library where they’d been sitting, through the front sitting room and then out to the Entrance Hall. Unfortunately, the Entrance Hall wasn’t as empty as Minerva had expected.

“Four days work. Eight thousand, two hundred galleons,” the short, round bellied, bearded dwarf grunted.

“That’s twice what I was originally quoted,” Sirius protested.

“You want silver in the door to the strongroom in the basement. Be thankful it’s not more,” the dwarf snapped.

“Fine, fine. Eight thousand, two hundred,” Sirius reluctantly agreed. “When can you start?”

Minerva and Rita watched the dwarf’s hand disappear in his thick copper hair as he scratched his head.

“In two days for the bedrooms. Three days to get the excavation crew for the strongroom and the new basement level for the library.”

“Sounds good,” Sirius smiled. “We’ll see you and your crew in two days then.”

With a final grunt, the dwarf ripped open the front door and strode out.

“You’re having extension work done?” Rita asked.

“Naturally,” Minerva replied. “Potter Haven was originally built by the goblins for Harry. Adding in a group of students and teachers requires some modifications to be carried out.”

“Miss Skeeter,” Sirius greeted, stepping forward to shake her hand.

“Lord Black,” Rita replied. “If I may ask, why such expensive extensions if it’s your intention to move to different facilities from next year?”

“As you say, that’s not until next year. There’s still this year that we need to prepare for now and if that means upgrading Potter Haven, then that’s what we’ll do,” Sirius told her.

“Miss Skeeter, if you’d care to come this way, I’ll show you to our magical creature’s enclosure and you can meet our diricawls,” Minerva interrupted, pointing the way towards the back of the manor.

“Lead the way, Headmistress McGonagall,” Rita replied with a tight-lipped smile.
At the door, Minerva paused to look back at Sirius.

“If you’ve got a couple of spare minutes, Sirius, the Goblin Postal Box is nearly overflowing with incoming mail. Do try to deal with it before I finish up with Miss Skeeter.”

She made sure to follow their guest through the door before the old Marauder could protest.
We’ve all heard the rumours; now this reporter has been given an exclusive interview with Headmistress McGonagall along with a tour of Potter Haven.

Yes, dear readers, you read correctly, that first rumour is completely true: Minerva McGonagall, after forty-one years of dedicated service to Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry has abandoned her post to take up the mantle of Headmistress of Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies.

“Over the years, I’ve seen the educational opportunities that Hogwarts has offered slowly being eroded away,” Headmistress McGonagall stated when asked why she accepted this new role. “And when I was offered the post of Headmistress of Diricawl Academy, along with the chance to introduce new subjects that haven’t been offered in Britain in decades, I leapt at the opportunity. Diricawl Academy represents an exciting time for students – the opportunity to study and learn new subjects and topics, in an environment that emphasises individual achievements, at a pace that suits the student.”

I’m certain that you, like me, are intrigued by this notion of new subjects. I asked Headmistress McGonagall what these new subjects on offer were.

“Being a brand new school, we aim to only slowly introduce the new subjects,” she said. “Along with all of the current subjects that Hogwarts offers, this year, the students at Diricawl, will be offered Enchanting; Basic Healing; Magical Studies of Great Britain; various elements of The Arts; and the basic muggle subjects of English, Mathematics and Science. All of these subjects are only a tiny fraction of subjects on offer at magical schools around the world. As the years progress, we aim to introduce even more subjects to our students.”

When I asked about the students who are being offered these intriguing subjects, I was told that, for this year at least, the number of students has been capped at fourteen. The most prominent of these is indeed The-Boy-Who-Lived, Harry Potter, himself.

“As much as we’d love to take in more students, at the moment we simply do not have the facilities to house any others,” Headmistress McGonagall stated. “Therefore, we will be using this year to help refine our teaching methods and our curriculum while we search for larger, more appropriate facilities ready for a larger complement of students from next year.”

Exactly how many this ‘larger complement’ will consist of is anyone’s guess.

Potter Haven is, as one would expect, owned by none other than Harry Potter. Interestingly, the young Potter scion was conspicuously absent from the tour that I was offered. As a school, the manor is well set up for learning, a fact that seemed to have been confirmed some months ago when Harry Potter achieved an Outstanding OWL two years early while studying there by himself.

There are half a dozen classrooms, a fully stocked potions lab, a telescope in the attic and a duelling area in the basement. Even the valley that the manor sits in has been set up for learning with a pair of large greenhouses, a loch filled with magical water-based plants and an enormous domed area filled with dozens of different magical creatures, including a pair of the school’s namesake: the diricawl.
Apart from Headmistress McGonagall, the only staff member that has been hired so far is the known werewolf Remus Lupin. Lord Black allayed my fears for the students’ safety somewhat by the fact that he was meeting with some dwarven contractors to have a ‘strongroom’, including a door inlaid with silver, constructed on the grounds. I’m assured that other teachers are currently being sought.

Headmistress McGonagall is well-known as being a strong-willed witch who accepts no nonsense, a feeling that she continued to exude during my time with her. The current facilities, too, are quite impressive and a must see for any who can manage it.

My only question is whether this is enough to ensure that this new school can deliver what it is proposing. It sounds ambitious and, if it is successful, then this reporter believes that it has the potential to revolutionise education within Britain. On the other hand, if it fails, at least the number of children it can damage is limited. It’s just a pity that The-Boy-Who-Lived happens to be one of the guinea pigs of this endeavour.

This reporter can assure our readers that she will be keeping a close eye on this new school and will bring any and all developments to you as quickly as possible.

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“Well hopefully that’ll put an end to the letters from those parents wanting their kid to go to the same school as the ‘Boy-Who-Lived’,” Sirius commented, dropping the paper into his lap.

Remus snorted, lifting his head and quill from the parchment in front of him. “Ten galleons says that we get at least another half dozen letters.”

“That’s a mug’s bet, Moony,” Sirius shot back. “How many’ve we gotten so far anyway?”

“The last time I counted, sixty-one,” Remus replied. “Which reminds me – why am I currently writing the rejection letters? You know Minerva assigned you that task.”

“Ah, the answer to that, my good man, is quite simple,” Sirius stated. At Remus’ piercing stare, he elaborated. “You are a Diricawl professor. I am not.”

“No, we’re both professors,” Remus countered, “the only difference is that I’ll be living here and getting paid for it. You get to go home every night and only have to be here once a week to teach Potions.”

“Hmph, who knew that making and inventing all of those prank potions over the years would pay off like that?” Sirius grunted.

“Well, what’d you expect?” Remus asked, “After Severus and Lily, you were one of the top potioneers in our year.”

The small pop of an appearing house elf interrupted their banter.

“More letters, Professor Wolfie Sir,” Dobby said, holding out the bundle of envelopes in his hand.

“I’ll take them, Dobby,” Sirius stated.

As soon as they were handed over, the Head Elf of Potter Haven popped off once more.

“You’re kidding me,” Sirius groaned, holding the first of the letters open.
“Don’t tell me,” Remus replied, not even looking up from the letter that he was writing, “someone else asking if their child can attend Diricawl Academy?”

“Not quite,” Sirius replied. “It seems as though that part about only taking fourteen students for now was actually listened to. No, now they’re asking if their kid can be put at the top of our lists for next year when we take in more.”

“I’ll let you answer that one,” Remus chuckled.

“No way, Moony. *This* sort of letter goes straight to the boss. Headmistress McGonagall can deal with that request.”

“Headmistress McGonagall can deal with what request?” the woman in question asked from the library doorway.

In reply, Sirius simply held up the new letter for her to take.

“Well, at least Ms Skeeter’s article didn’t do us any harm,” Minerva commented after reading the letter.

“There’s another four like that one,” Sirius informed her. “And two others who think that we can squeeze in their kids anyway.”

Before the three adults could decide the appropriate way to respond to the letters, they were interrupted by a tussled black haired boy poking his head in the door.

“Hey Padfoot, Moony, I’m heading off now,” Harry called.

“Where are you going, Harry?” Minerva asked, turning to face him.

“Oh, hi Minerva,” Harry said, appearing fully in the door. “I’m meeting some of the others in Diagon Alley. We’re doing our school shopping today. There’s no telling how long the World Cup Final’ll last next week and that way we won’t have to worry about it afterwards.”

Minerva nodded. “Be back by six.”

“Yes, Ma’am,” Harry replied before promptly disappearing.

“I still say that you’re mad taking so many of them to the Final,” Remus stated, shaking his head at his best friend.

“Nah, they’re all good kids and it’s not like I’ll be the only adult there,” Sirius replied.

An unexpected snort from Minerva spun the two Marauders’ heads around.

“More like Cyrus, Penelope, Julius and Dan will have an extra child to watch,” she dead-panned.

Remus burst out into laughter, causing Sirius’ sour face to deepen.

“I don’t know what you’re laughing at, Moony. *I’m* not the one who’s going to be living in this small house with someone who knows all of the tricks that you used to get up to in school.”

This time it was Sirius’ turn to laugh at the expression on his friend’s face.

-oOoOo-
As the green flames released him, Harry stumbled forward before falling painfully onto the rough wooden floor of The Leaky Cauldron. Grumbling to himself, he adjusted his glasses so that they were once again sitting properly on his nose before beginning to push himself to his feet.

Twin pairs of hands caught him around both arms, pulling him up even faster. Looking quickly to the left and right, he found the bemused Daphne and Tracey, obviously both fighting the urge to laugh at him.

“I’m gonna work out how to exit the FLOO on my feet one of these days,” he groused.

“Sure you are, Harry,” Tracey smirked.

“You just keep telling yourself that,” Daphne agreed, patting him on the back.

Harry glared at the two before attempting to change the topic away from his obvious failings.

“Is anyone else here yet?”

Daphne nodded. “Neville, Hermione, Tori, Colin and his brother are all waiting for us at Fortescue’s. We’re still waiting for Susan and Hannah.”

“That was everyone who could come, wasn’t it?” Harry asked.

“Yeah, everyone else was busy,” Tracey replied.

A green tint appearing on his glasses, along with the whoosh of flames alerted them to the FLOO flaring into life. Harry turned to watch Susan, quickly followed by Hannah, appear in the fireplace. His eyes narrowed at the pair as they both calmly walked out of the flames.

Why is it always only me? he wondered.

When greetings had been exchanged, including hugs all round between the four girls, the five of them wove their way through the cluttered tables and chairs of the pub to reach the back. There, Harry flicked his hand to release his wand (his staff had been left back at the manor), before tapping the bricks in the appropriate order.

Their entrance into Diagon Alley or, more accurately, Harry’s entrance into Diagon Alley was quickly noticed. Heads turned to stare at them before groups of gossiping witches and wizards quickly formed. Harry found his pace increasing, causing the others to hurry to keep up.

If he’d realised what shopping in the Alley was likely to be like, he probably would have thought twice about coming today. It was bad enough at the best of times, simply as The-Boy-Who-Lived, but after all of the articles in the Prophet about him and Diricawl Academy lately, interest in him seemed to have increased tenfold.

“Harry!” Colin yelled, half standing from his seat at the table outside Fortescue’s and waving an arm madly in the air.

Harry raised a hand in response, glad that Colin seemed to have left his camera behind today.

“Hey, guys,” Harry said, giving a nod to each of the five around the table.

Hermione, of course, didn’t seem content with that simple greeting. Instead, she shot out of her seat to wrap him in one of her patented Hermione-hugs.

“Everyone ready for a day of fun-filled shopping?” Hannah asked eagerly.
Harry’s and Neville’s eyes met, widening in mutual horror.

“Ah, ‘day of shopping’?” Neville asked.

“Of course,” Susan replied. “Auntie said that we didn’t have to be back until five.”

It was quickly found that all except Colin and Dennis had similar permission to stay out for the day. In their case, they only had until four o’clock. But even that meant that they had six hours to spend in the Alley.

“So, where to first?” Tracey asked.

“The Book Nook,” Harry stated making Hermione’s eyes light up. “I told Beth that we’d pick up Micky from there before we started.”

“Come on, then,” Hermione said eagerly.

The group of ten set out in a pack to wander to the far end of the Alley. As they walked, their conversations remained fairly fluid, as did who they were currently walking beside. Before too long, the sign proclaiming Hermione’s Book Nook came into sight.

“Whatever made you name it after Hermione?” Neville asked sotto voce.

Harry shrugged. “Seemed a good idea at the time.”

The instant that they were through the doors, Hermione disappeared into the shelves.

“Micky!” Beth called from where she stood behind the counter.

A tussled brown head appeared over the railing on the upper level before it was quickly withdrawn and the sound of pounding footsteps could be heard on the spiral staircase.

“How are you all today?” Beth smiled to the group as they waited for her son to join them.

“Good, thanks, Mrs Pemberton,” Daphne answered.

“How’s business?” Harry asked.

“Good. Very busy at the moment. But then, it usually is in the couple of weeks before term starts,” Beth replied.

A beaming Micky appeared in the midst of the group. “Are we going now?”

“How’s business?” Harry asked.

“Abe we going now?”

“Do you have the money pouch that I gave you?” Beth asked her son.

“Yes, Ma,” Micky replied, rolling his eyes. “It’s in my zipped up pocket, right where you told me to put it.”

“Well, if he’s ready, let’s go,” Astoria said, moving towards the door.

“Wait up, Tori,” Daphne said, grabbing a hold of her sister’s shoulder. “We’re missing Hermione.”

“Hermione!” Harry called. “We’re leaving!”

A smiling Hermione bustled out from between the shelves, her arms laden with half a dozen books.

“Just let me get these first,” she said, plonking the pile onto the counter.
“Just the bare minimum today?” Beth smiled as she began ringing up the total. “I swear that some days I’m sure that I only stay in business because of all of the books that you buy.”

Harry smiled to himself as Hermione blushed at the teasing she was receiving, especially after the others saw the sign behind Beth indicating that, as she shared the same name as the store, she was entitled to a twenty-five percent discount.

A tap of Beth’s wand shrinking Hermione’s purchases completed the transaction.

“Are you sure that we need to stop at _Flourish and Blotts_ later?” Harry asked Hermione, continuing the tease as they once more stood in the Alley.

Hermione’s hand slapped him on the arm even as she frowned at him. “Of course we do! We _always_ need to stop in every bookstore, Harry. You should know that by now.”

Harry’s grin at her statement was quickly matched by her own.

“Neville! Hermione! Harry!” a calling voice interrupted.

Harry looked up and around to see a pair of boys that he hadn’t seen in over a year rushing towards them.

“Hey, Dean. Seamus,” Neville replied, waving to the two.

“Hey, guys. It’s good to see you. What are you doing here?” Harry asked his former dorm-mates.

“Hogwarts shopping, what else?” Dean replied.

“We’re doing our school shopping, too,” Neville told them.

“For that new school? Diricawl, wasn’t it? Are you all going there?” Dean asked.

“Yeah, we are,” Harry replied, as they others all nodded.

“Cor, you lot are lucky,” Seamus told them. “Me Mam sent a letter to old McGonagall askin’ if’n I could go there.”

“You and about sixty others,” Harry replied. “Unfortunately, there simply isn’t room for any more at the moment.”

“Yeah, I read that,” Dean nodded. “But the _Prophet_ said something about taking in more people next year?”

“That’s what Professor McGonagall, Remus and the others hope,” Harry confirmed.

“You can get us in then, can’t you Harry?” Seamus asked hopefully. “I’d give anything to get away from Snape, Filch and Binns.”

“I can’t promise anything, guys, but I’ll see what I can do once the school’s built some new buildings,” Harry replied.

“Where are you guys off to now?” Dean asked.

“Scrivenshafts,” Tracey stated firmly.

“We haven’t been there yet. Mind if we join you?” Dean asked.
“Come on, the more the merrier,” Harry grinned.

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“Wotcher, Harry.”

“Hey, Tonks,” Harry replied.

“Ready for another fun-filled lesson?” the bubble-gum pink haired girl asked.

Harry nodded, before gesturing to the door that he’d entered through.

In reply, Tonks twirled her wand in an intricate pattern causing a squishing sound to be heard as the door melted into its frame.

“There. Happy now?” Tonks asked. “Not that you’ve got anything to hide, you know. It’s perfectly natural.”

“I know,’ Harry sighed. “But until I get this down, I don’t want anyone to see the bizarre results that I come up with.”

“What about me? You don’t mind me seeing you like that?” Tonks asked, failing in her attempt to sound hurt.

Harry pulled a face at her. “You know it’s different with you, Tonks. You’ve already been through this.”

“Right then. Put that overgrown stick of yours down and let’s get to work,” she commanded.

Harry leant his staff up against the far wall before imitating his teacher by hoisting himself up on top of one of the desks and crossing his legs.

“Let’s see what you’ve been practising. Watch me and do what I do. Hair first,” Tonks stated.

Harry stared at Tonks, watching as her hair changed from her favourite bubble-gum pink to vibrant blue. A few seconds later, she nodded and changed her hair to platinum blonde, almost the exact shade as Draco Malfoy’s. And it went on from there, all the way through the spectrum – yellow, red, mousy brown, emerald green, purple and finally black.

“Brilliant, Harry. You’ve obviously been practising,” Tonks beamed. “Now, try this.”

Tonks’ hair suddenly doubled, then quadrupled in length until it was hanging half-way down her back. Screwing up his face in effort, Harry followed suit. And then Tonks’ hair began to lengthen and shorten, becoming spiky, then wavy and straight before completely disappearing, leaving a bizarre-looking, bald Tonks sitting before him.

“That’s hard,” Harry panted.

“Yeah, well, it’ll get easier,” Tonks reassured him. “You’ve only been at this for a couple of months. Me, I’ve been at it for years. If whatever it was about that bloody scar of yours hadn’t been blocking your ability for most of your life, you’d be able to do this by now too.”

Harry nodded. Whatever that thing was that had been destroyed by Lucius Malfoy when he’d hit Harry with his killing curse back in March, it’d been leaching some of his magical ability ever since he’d been one year old. The best that the Healers were able to come up with was that it was some kind of unfinished curse. Not that they’d ever been able to tell him what that curse was or
how Malfoy’s killing curse had gotten rid of it.

On the up side, at least he’d only had the one ability blocked by it. And it explained why he’d been having so much trouble doing human transfiguration on his own body: his natural metamorphmagus ability had been fighting against any change. Now though, with Tonks’ help, he was overcoming that particular obstacle.

“Right. Now that you’ve got that down,” Tonks said, allowing her hair to return to its normal length once more, while retaining her favourite bubble-gum pink colouring, “let’s try one last hair change before we move onto noses.”

“Okay,” Harry agreed, allowing his own hair to return to its natural state.

“Try this,” Tonks smirked.

Harry watched as thin dark blue streaks appeared in her pink hair, slowly growing out from the roots down to the tips of her hair.

Staring hard at the image before him, Harry concentrated on his hair. Suddenly, Tonks burst out laughing and began wobbling around so much that she nearly fell off of the desk. Harry’s eyes narrowed as he stared at his teacher.

Finally getting a hold of herself, Tonks conjured a mirror for him before handing it over. The image looking back at him was anything but what it was supposed to be. Instead he saw a head of hair that was mostly varying shades of blue, from the palest duck shell, ranging up to nearly indigo with every shade in between, including one or two patches of florescent blue. And in amongst this were random strands of pink.

“It’s not funny, Tonks!” Harry told her fiercely, as he shook his head, making the colours recede until his hair was back to its natural inky black.

“It was, though, Harry,” Tonks grinned back. “Mind you, not a bad first go at multiple colours. Just a few more shades than I was wanting. Never mind. Something for you to practice between now and next week. Let’s move on to noses. Have a think about different shaped noses that you’ve seen and we’ll have a go at getting your nose to change to match it. So, which nose would you like to pick first?”

Without thinking, Harry blurted the first thing that came into his mind. “What about Dumbledore’s?”

Tonks promptly fell off the table she was laughing so hard.
Chapter 10

Twin cracks rent the air almost simultaneously, depositing two muggle hula-hoops, each surrounded by a multitude of people, upon the grassy knoll.

“E-leven ah em from Pot-tah Hav-en,” Harry heard an officious voice announce.

Extracting himself from the various arms, legs and bodies lying around him where they’d all crash-landed, Harry climbed to his feet. Sirius and the other adults, he noticed to his annoyance, all seemed to have landed on their feet, smirking at the dozen teens who’d arrived with them.

“Lord Black’s party?” the voice asked.

“Yep, that’s us,” Sirius replied, bounding across to the man with the quill and clipboard.

As Harry helped Hermione to her feet, he saw the feathered end of the quill quickly counting heads.

“Five adults and twelve minors. All correct there. If you’ll kindly step to the left, my associate will get you sorted out and the space will be clear for our e-leven ten from Greenock,” the man said.

“Chuck us those hoops,” said associate – a short, dumpy man wearing an odd combination of tweed jacket, fishing overalls and fedora – instructed.

Colin and Neville did as instructed before the two hoops were thrown into a box which looked far too small to accommodate them.

“Right then, you lot are in Area C,” here he looked up and around speculatively at them. “One of the deluxe cabins, I see. Follow that path down and around the base of the hill and Mister Foggarty will look after you.”

As the group wound their way down the path, Harry overheard Dan whispering to Sirius.

“Why was he dressed like … that?”

Sirius looked back at the man before his barking laugh began to echo around the hill.

“He’s a pureblood,” Sirius stated, “and a Ministry one at that. That means that he has absolutely no idea how a muggle dresses while being ordered to dress ‘as inconspicuously as possible’.”

“That’s inconspicuous!” Dan spluttered.

“Well, you’ve got to remember that most purebloods have never encountered a muggle in their life,” Sirius replied. “If it wasn’t for Lily, Harry’s mum, drumming it into my head years ago, I reckon I’d be just as clueless.”

“He probably ventured into the first muggle store that he could find and bought the first things that he liked the look of,” Cyrus agreed.

Harry could only shake his head, an action that Dan was also making.

As they rounded the far side of the hill, the path dipped into a shallow valley. Before them, a long, low ramshackle stone wall spread to either side. Almost directly in front of them, a wooden stile was manned by a man seated in a camp chair.
“Hello, there!” Sirius greeted him. “Are you Mister Foggarty?”

Pushing himself up, the muggle farmer, judging by his clothes, reached out and clasped Sirius’ hand before nodding at the rest of them.

“I am. I take it you’re here for a spot of camping?” he asked.

“We are, we are,” Sirius replied. “Looks a good spot.”

“That it is, that it is,” Mister Foggarty replied. “We’re quite close to the forest here if you’re interested in a spot of walking or bird watching, mind you, with the numbers that’ve arrived in the past day, you’ll be lucky to spot anything. ’Course, you could always try a bit of fishin’ if’n you’ve a mind. The creek ain’t big, but there’s trout in there.”

“Sounds perfect,” Sirius beamed.

“Right then. That’ll be five pounds for each adult, two pounds fifty for the young’uns,” Mister Foggarty told them.

Harry sighed in relief as he released that this part had been anticipated – Dan had immediately stepped forward to handle the money.”

“Have a good time,” Mister Foggarty called, handing Sirius a map as they passed through.

“Oh, don’t you worry about that,” Sirius replied. “We will.”

Hitching his pack a little higher on his back, Harry followed along, wondering where all of the witches and wizards were that he’d been told about. The way Sirius and Remus had gone on about it, he expected a sea of tents with hundreds of magical people all crowded around a vast stadium. Instead, all that he could see was a mostly flat paddock with the edge of the forest that they’d been told about off to their right.

The tingling sensation that washed over his body, reminiscent of the feeling he got every time that he entered Potter Haven’s wards after being in the village, snapped his head up. His eyes widened and he gasped.

The view before him had radically transformed into something wondrous.

Tents of every shape and size, some that were so obviously magical that he couldn’t help but simply grin at them had suddenly appeared. Bright, gauzy fabrics in every colour of the rainbow created not the sea that he’d been told about, but an entire ocean of wizarding accommodation. Some were even double storied with balconies that witches and wizards were lounging about on.

Sparks of every colour were being shot into the sky to intermingle with the plumes of green, purple and orange smoke. One entire area, not far from where he was currently standing, looked as though a mountain of green had simply exploded over everything from the tents to the flags to the very clothes that the people were wearing.

A sharp tug on his hand got his feet moving, but his eyes remained fixed on the amazing sight in front of him.

“Come on, Harry. We can explore later,” a clearly amused Hermione told him.

“But … ,” he protested, gesturing weakly towards the magical tent city.
A huff followed by Hermione’s arm slipping into the crook of his elbow stilled his protest. The slight stumble on the uneven ground forced his eyes back to the path and to the backs of the rest of the group now nearly fifty metres ahead of them.

“I love magic,” Harry grinned to Hermione as they hurried to catch up.

The path wound its way closer and closer to the edge of the forest before it suddenly veered off to the left before morphing into a broad gravel road. A blinking signpost pointing back to the right caused Sirius and Cyrus to ‘ahh’ before they led the group down a narrower side street, for want of a better term.

They were led between a pair of bushy trees before Harry found another sight that, had it not been for Hermione’s arm, would have pulled him up short.

A set of a dozen small garden sheds lined each side of the path. Harry frowned at the small, two metre by one and a half metre aluminium sheds. They looked so out of place that Harry simply couldn’t fathom why they were there.

“This one’s ours,” Penelope called from half-way down the lane.

Harry could see her tapping something on the door with her hand, the same thing that Sirius tapped with his wand seconds later before opening the door.

“Come on, everyone, the sooner we’re settled, the sooner we can go explore,” Sirius called.

This time, it was Hermione who was rooted to the spot as Sirius, Cyrus, Penelope, Julius, Dan, Neville, Daphne, Fiona, Tracey, Astoria, Colin, Dennis, Mickey, Susan and Hannah all trooped into the tiny shed.

“How … how’d they all … fit?” Hermione murmured.

With a shrug and a shake of his head, Harry pulled her along with him.

The two stopped at the door, staring in. From the door, they could see a large sitting room, complete with half a dozen lounge chairs, a kitchen on one side and a dining room on the other. At the back of the enormous room were a further six doors.

Harry stumbled backwards, his eyes still glued to the impossible sight inside the shed. Tearing his eyes away, he dropped Hermione’s arm and placed his hand on the side of the shed. Then, in a slow walk, keeping the hand on the aluminium, he circled the shed, a journey that took him less than a minute.

Reaching the door once more, he dazedly walked inside.

“It’s bigger on the inside,” he murmured.


“What?” Harry asked.

“You haven’t seen Doctor Who?” Hermione asked incredulously. As the shake of his head, she huffed, “remind me to show you some time.”

“Come on, you two!” Sirius called. “Pick a bed already so that we can go. Girls are in the two rooms on the left, boys on the right, adults in the middle.”
Doing as he was told, Harry crossed the room and stuck his head in the first room that Sirius had indicated were for the boys. A bunk bed was against each side wall and, from what he could see from the door that Mickey had opened in the far wall, it had its own small bathroom.

The next room along was where he found Neville. This room was set up identically to the room beside it. As there was only the two of them, both he and Neville simply chose bottom bunks each, slinging their packs onto them.

“What about a spot of tea before we head out?” Penelope was asking when Harry and Neville emerged from their room.

“There’s no water here, but I’m sure that I saw a tap marked on the map that Sirius was given,” Hermione stated.

Daphne huffed as she crossed the room to the kitchen and picked up the kettle. “I thought that you were a witch, Hermione. Mother?”

Poking the tip of her wand into the spout of the kettle, Penelope incanted, “*aguamenti!*”

Harry grinned at the abashed look on Hermione’s face. It wasn’t often that she was caught out like that.

“Where’s the stadium?” Colin asked, “I thought that we’d see it coming in. I wanted to get a photo.”

“It’s just the other side of the forest,” Julius replied. “We were a little too close to the trees to be able to see it coming in. We’ll go see it later.”

“And we’ll be *in* it tonight!” Mickey agreed, almost bouncing in his excitement.

After a somewhat rushed cup of tea and a set of instructions which included the rule that they had to be in a minimum group of three at all times, the group left their temporary home behind.

Regardless of their instructions, the group actually stuck together for most of the afternoon. Of course, it helped that the vendors were roaming the grounds and it only made sense to stick together if they wanted to find them.

Harry started the day with a fairly full money bag, but by the time that he returned to the shed, it was all but empty. Most of it went on a couple of pairs of omnioculars for him and Hermione. These were small brass magical binoculars that allowed you to zoom in and out at ridiculous levels, slow down and replay the action, make night time seem as bright as daytime and had even been charmed to give commentary of each quidditch play displayed as text on the lenses.

Then there was the emerald green jersey, an exact replica even down to the name on its back, Lynch the Irish Seeker, that he was quick to put on; a top hat that squirted green dye out of its shamrock at any passing Bulgarian supporter; and a miniature Firebolt that really zoomed around.

His last few sickles and knuts were spent on a bag of hot chips, a hamburger and a choc mint thick-shake.

But it wasn’t just the souvenirs that had Harry so excited for the coming match. The very air seemed to be thick with anticipation and excitement. Everywhere he looked, witches and wizards of all ages and sizes and, he quickly realised, nationalities, were partying hard. Legions of green-clad Ireland supporters danced and sang along to their favourite tunes and chants, while, across the way, deep bass voices seeped into the ground and up into their feet in support of the red, green and
white clad Bulgarians.

“Sirius Black as I live and breathe!” a loud cheerful voice called.

As one, the group paused and once again, Harry’s eyes bugged out. The man striding towards them, his hand raised in greeting, wore the most outlandish robes of yellow and black. The colours by themselves may not have been too bad, if it wasn’t for the fact that they travelled in thick horizontal bands and were adorned with a large wasp in the centre of a chest that pulled the robes far too tight. Harry knew that these were the man’s original robes, robes that he no longer exactly fit.

“Ludo Bagman,” Sirius returned. “How are you?”

“As right as a niffler in a gold mine,” Bagman replied. “Enjoying yourself?”

“We are. Everyone, this is Ludo Bagman, one of the main organisers for the Cup itself,” Sirius introduced.

Harry saw the man’s smile freeze slightly before widening as his gaze came to rest on himself, along with the ever expected flick of the eyes up to his scar.

“Wonderful to meet you all,” Bagman exclaimed, before flinging an arm across Sirius’ shoulders. “Now, I don’t suppose that you’d be interested in a little flutter on the match at all? I’ve already got Roddy Pontner betting that Bulgaria will score first and Arthur Weasley down for a galleon for Ireland to win. Even those twins of Arthur’s got in on the action. Offered them good odds on Ireland to win but with Krum catching the snitch.”

“Well, why not? It’s all part of the fun,” Sirius grinned. “Put me down for ten galleons for Ireland to win and another ten that Krum ploughs Lynch into the dirt at least once.”

Harry stared at his godfather as Bagman took the money and wrote out the slip for Sirius from the little book that had magically appeared in his hand. He’d seen Seekers crashing into the ground when he was back at Hogwarts and it was never a pretty sight. Come to that, he’d fallen off his broom more than once, but to bet on it happening just seemed a little macabre.

“Anyone else?” Bagman asked hopefully, looking around the group.

“The kids are all too young,” Cyrus stated forcefully, then, after a nervous glance at his wife, continued. “Put me down for the same bets as Sirius.”

Harry grinned at Penelope’s obvious show of ignoring what her husband was up to by the simple method of turning around to examine a tray of rosettes that a vendor had just approached with.

Once Cyrus had his slip, Penelope turned back and rather forcefully suggested that it was time for them to be getting back to the shed so that they could get ready for the big match.

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“Did you see Lynch smash into the ground? That must have hurt,” Harry noted as they sat around the lounge going over the match nearly blow by blow.

“Which time?” Julius grinned.

“Doesn’t matter, really,” Sirius replied. “Any time you hit the ground at that speed’s going to hurt bad.”
“What was that move called again? The one the other Seeker did to make him fly into the ground? A wonky faint?” Dan asked, still obviously on a high from seeing his very first quidditch match.

“Wronski feint,” Cyrus corrected. “But to fall for it twice! Just wait until we see Ludo Bagman.”

Harry couldn’t help but grin along with his godfather.

“Must you go on and on about poor Lynch?” Penelope asked. “Didn’t you see him on the screen in the top box after the match? It looked as though the poor guy could hardly stand.”

“He won’t care, Mum, not after winning the World Cup,” Daphne stated.

“That is once he’s coherent enough to realise the fact,” Tracey snorted.

“Hey! My gold just disappeared!” Mickey shouted.

“Gold? What gold?” Harry asked, automatically searching his pockets for his own money pouch.

“You didn’t pick up some of that leprechaun gold, did you?” Neville asked. “It only lasts for a couple of hours before disappearing.”

“Aw, but I had plans for that money,” Mickey pouted.

For the first time since they’d returned to the shed, the room quieted. They’d all been up early that morning and then they’d had a full day, not to mention the buzz of excitement from the World Cup itself. Now, the room was filled with people lounging on the various chairs or the floor, sipping the last of the hot chocolate that they’d made to finish off the evening.

Beside him, Harry felt Hermione stiffen. Her head raised off of his shoulder slightly and she looked this way and that.

“What’s up, Hermione?” he asked.

“Did you feel something at all?” she asked.

“No,” he replied slowly.

“There it is again,” she stated.

Noting that her eyes were fixed on the half-full cup on the coffee table in front of them, Harry’s eyes followed hers, only to suddenly widen. Ripples marred the surface of the hot chocolate, a surface that should have been absolutely still.

“What …?” he began.

The feeling of a slight tremor in the ground interrupted him.

“Did anyone else feel that?” Hermione asked.

Sirius was already getting to his feet. “Think I’ll take a look outside.”

Harry watched Sirius, Cyrus and Julius open the door and step outside. A few seconds later, Sirius stuck his head back in.

“Does anyone have a pair of omnioculars handy?” he asked.
Grabbing up his pair that he’d left on the ground beside him, Harry shot to his feet. “Here.”

“Stay inside,” Sirius commanded, taking the glasses.

The murmured voices between the three men outside were too low for those inside to hear. A few minutes later, the three returned, all with their wands drawn. As soon as the door was shut, Cyrus performed a spell on it, causing it to momentarily glow blue.

“There’s trouble outside,” Sirius stated grimly. “I want all of you to make sure that you’ve got your wands handy.”

“Cyrus, Sirius, what’s going on?” Penelope asked, rising and crossing the room towards her husband.

“Death Eaters,” Cyrus stated darkly. “Looks like they’re having a party.”

A gasp shuddered through all of the purebloods in the room, causing those not in the know to stare at their friends as they shifted closer to each other.

“What are Death Eaters?” Harry asked.

Sirius glanced back from the window that he was looking out of to reply. “Voldemort’s followers. It’s what they called themselves. They dress up in black robes with bone white masks and deal out death to whoever they feel like.”

“There’s people out there being killed right now?” Hermione asked.

“We’ve got to do something!” Harry stated, drawing his wand and starting for the door.

“Hold it right there, Pup!” Sirius commanded. “You’re too young, too untrained and too much of a target to go out there right now.”

“He’s right, Harry,” Cyrus agreed. “Remember, you’re responsible for getting rid of their Master all those years ago. They’d like nothing better than to get some revenge.”

“Riddle’s not gone,” Harry replied. “You know that.”

“We do, but while he doesn’t have a body, he’s as good as. He can’t do much without one,” Cyrus replied.

“He could do a fair bit when he was possessing Quirrell,” Hermione countered.

“Are we at risk here?” Penelope interjected. “Should we try to find somewhere safer?”

“No, we’re safe here,” Sirius stated with a half-smile. “Only the old pureblood families would have been able to afford to hire one of these sheds. Which means that this is the last place that the Death Eaters will come. They’ll be after the muggleborns and half-bloods.”

A sudden eerie green light lit up the sky outside the windows, cutting off conversation as everyone eased closer to try to see what was causing it.

“The Dark Mark,” Julius breathed.

“Voldemort’s mark,” Sirius clarified for those didn’t know. “It’s what he and his followers used in the last war to show that they’d killed.”
Harry edged forward slightly and craned his neck. His eyes widened and he felt his mouth go instantly dry at what he saw. There, probably fifty feet in the air, hung an enormous green skull with a great snake coming out of its mouth like a grotesque tongue.

The slight shaking of the ground from what Harry guessed had been explosions ceased at the casting of the Dark Mark. And what little noise of panic and screams of the crowd also cut off. A short time later, it was clear that someone had obviously cast something to dispel the Mark as it quickly began breaking up into thousands of tiny green pinpricks of light before they dissipated and vanished.

“I’m guessing the aurors finally have everything under control,” Cyrus remarked.

“Alright, you lot, off to bed and we’ll aim to get an early portkey out of here in the morning,” Sirius stated.

A knock at the door froze the teens half-way across the room.

Pulling his wand from where he’d just stowed it, Sirius slid against the wall beside the door. Harry saw Cyrus, Julius and Penelope nod to him. Without conscious thought, Harry’s wand slid into his hand, an action that was repeated by most of his friends.

“Who is it?” Sirius called gruffly.

“Sirius! It’s Amelia Bones. Open up!”

“Aunty Amelia?” Susan called.

The door glowed blue from Cyrus’ spell before Sirius cautiously opened the door.

“Amelia,” he greeted.

“Good, you’re all alright,” Amelia stated an instant before a girl with long red hair impacted with her.

“What happened out there?” Sirius asked,

“Seems a bunch of idiots thought that it’d be fun to harass people tonight,” Amelia replied.

“How many were killed?” Penelope asked.

Amelia shook her head. “As far as we know, no one. Don’t get me wrong, it was no picnic out there. The muggles are going to need to be obliviated after what they went through and dozens were injured, of course.”

“But we saw the Dark Mark,” a confused Cyrus stated.

“Yes, but the Death Eaters seemed more frightened of that than we were,” Amelia replied.

“Then who cast it?” Sirius asked.

“Would you believe a house elf?” Amelia replied.

“What?” a half dozen disbelieving voices shouted at once.

“No, I don’t believe it either,” Amelia shook her head. “Unfortunately, we found Barty Crouch’s elf at the scene holding the wand that had cast the Mark. Barty of course fired the elf the instant
that he heard. Listen, I only popped by to make sure that you were all okay. I’ve got to get back. I doubt that I’ll be getting to bed at all tonight.”

“We’ll look after Susan until you’ve got everything sorted,” Penelope promised.

“Thanks, I appreciate that,” Amelia smiled before giving her niece one last squeeze and disappearing back into the night.

“Right, you lot, I think that you were in the process of heading to bed, weren’t you?” Sirius reminded them as he closed and sealed the door once more.
Chapter 11

“Welcome, everyone, to the very first day for Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies!” Headmistress Minerva McGonagall stated.

Harry, along with those around him, clapped and cheered, filling the sitting room of the manor with boisterous noise.

The fourteen new students were seated in a mishmash of comfortable armchairs and sofas that had been arranged in a gentle arc facing the front windows. Directly in front of the group stood their Headmistress, with Professor Lupin slightly behind and to her right, leaning up against the small table that held a surprising amount of parchment. Against the wall in the back of the room stood the group of adults that Harry knew would be their new part-time teachers.

“Each of you have been here numerous times and know the manor and grounds well, so we’ll forego taking a tour of the school,” Minerva continued once the celebrating had calmed. “The only difference in the manor that most of you would not have yet seen is in the modifications to the bedrooms, which we’ll discuss later.

“For now, we’ll begin with introducing you to the staff, handing out your timetables and making sure that you know what is expected of you.

“You all know me and Professor Lupin,” Headmistress McGonagall said, indicating the man behind her. “We will be the only two adults that stay here permanently, although there’ll be others of the teachers around most days. The last of the permanent staff are our elves.”

Triple *pops* announced the arrival of said elves. Dobby, with his cargo pants, shirt and belt of many pockets stood in the centre, his ears nearly quivering with pride. To either side of him stood the newest elves, both wearing outfits of dark green, with a golden Diricawl logo stitched onto their breast.

“You all know Dobby,” Headmistress McGonagall said before indicating each of the other two. “And this is Jaxom. He’ll primarily be working with the plants and animals. And this is Nerri. She will be responsible for preparing our dinners and some of the cleaning.

“That’s probably a good place to mention that Diricawl is going to be slightly different than what you’d expect at Hogwarts. You will all be responsible for keeping your own rooms clean; the elves will not do it for you nor will they pick up after you if you leave something lying around the manor. You’ll each be given a roster for tidying up the library and the sitting room. There’ll be no lazy students allowed in this school.”

At that announcement, Harry shrugged. He’d always been rather neat, a fact that’d been installed in him quite forcefully at the Dursleys and something that he’d automatically continued after he’d escaped. Others, though, had a different reaction. Neville, Hannah and Mickey all groaned aloud, while Tracey and Susan flopped their heads forward into their hands before shaking their heads rather violently.

“Professor Lupin, if you would be so kind as to hand out the timetables, we’ll go through them and introduce the teachers for each subject at the same time,” Headmistress McGonagall instructed.

As Remus handed him his timetable, Harry eagerly scanned it. His eyes widened as he realised that it was even more crowded than the one that he’d made for himself the year before.
“Now, as all of you except for Mister Pemberton and the younger Mister Creevey are in third year and above, your timetables are nearly identical,” Headmistress McGonagall pointed out. “Your teachers will modify the work for Miss Lovegood, Miss Greengrass and Mister Creevey who are all in third year, even though you’ll be in the same classroom at the same time as our fourth years.”

While she was talking, the group of adults at the back had come around from the back to stand in a cluster off to the side but in a position that all of the students could see them. Harry, of course, had met all of them, including the four new faces. The three women and one man had visited the manor on a number of occasions to talk to Minerva, Remus and Sirius and he’d been introduced to them.

“The first class of each day will be from nine until eleven in the morning. The afternoon classes will be from one o’clock until three o’clock and then from half past three until half past five. Wednesday night’s Astronomy class will be held from eight until ten,” Headmistress McGonagall explained.

“As I’m sure that you expect, I will be your Transfiguration teacher. I, along with Mister Black, will also be teaching the combined electives of Mind Arts and Animagus studies. Both Mister Black and I are experts at these subjects; we had to be in order to attain our animal forms.

“Mister Black will also be your Potions teacher and will teach swordplay on Sunday afternoons for those interested. Professor Lupin will teach the subjects of Defence Against the Dark Arts, Ancient Runes and History of Magic.

“Jaxom,” here Headmistress McGonagall indicated the older, taller house elf who still stood beside Dobby, “will be your instructor for Care of Magical Creatures and Herbology. I expect you to treat him as you would any professor.”

Harry smiled and nodded to the elf whose gruff demeanour indicated that, house elf or not, he wouldn’t brook any nonsense in his classes.

“Madam Longbottom will be your instructor for Magical Studies of Great Britain and Ms Pemberton will be teaching Muggle Studies. We have decided that this will be a mandatory subject for all of you, except for Mister Potter who already has his OWL in the subject. That includes the first years, so you will all be in the same class at the same time. As Ms Pemberton still has her own business to run, Muggle studies will only be a one hour lesson. The second hour of that block will be dedicated to The Arts for those of you taking that elective. For this subject, we have hired Master Leonard Flanagan.”

At his name, a small, thin man with thinning grey hair and a neat moustache stepped forward and gave the students a short bow. Underneath his shabby cloak, he looked to be immaculately dressed – it was just a pity that the multi-pocketed and slightly fraying light grey cloak with specks of paint in all spectrums of the rainbow was what drew the eye when one looked at him.

“Master Flanagan owns and runs Leonardo’s Fine Arts in Diagon Alley. He is a master artist, particularly in the areas of magical portraits and landscapes. He also has numerous contacts in the magical world that will allow him to help those of you who are undertaking a different form of art.”

From the corner of his eye, Harry noticed Colin’s face light up as he nodded eagerly. It didn’t take a second guess to know what form of art he was pursuing.

“Both Charms and Enchanting will be taught by Mistress Sharon Miller.”

The shorter, plump witch with the enormous smile and an enormous pointed hat stepped forward
and waved at them all.

“Mistress Miller holds a Mastery in both fields and we can consider ourselves extremely lucky to have her. Behind her, is Mistress Scarlett Tuck. Mistress Tuck will be both your Arithmancy and your Astronomy teacher.”

Mistress Tuck was an extremely tall, thin woman. Her deep blue eyes ranged over them all and Harry shivered slightly. He was certain that he’d just been evaluated and he wasn’t sure that he wanted to know what his score had been.

“For Beginning Healing, St. Mungo’s has very kindly leant us Healer Jeffries. Healer Jeffries will only be here on Thursdays, so if you’d be so kind as to limit any injuries to that day, I’d very much appreciate it.”

Harry started as he realised that suddenly everyone was looking at him.

“What? I don’t get injured that often!” he protested, eliciting a laugh from all those that knew him.

“Of course not, Mister Potter,” Headmistress McGonagall replied dryly. “Lastly, for our Mundane subjects, we have Mister and Mrs Granger. At the moment, we’re still trying to find our feet with this subject, so I’d ask you to bear with us. There are quite a number of subjects in the muggle world that you’d need to learn in order to pass your muggle A-level tests. For now, Mister Granger will teach you mathematics and Mrs Granger will teach you English on alternating weeks.

“Does anyone have any questions about their timetable?”

Harry looked around only to see everyone shaking their heads.

“Very well. In that case, I suggest that we adjourn to the second level of the manor,” Headmistress McGonagall announced before turning to the other adults. “We’d be delighted if you’d stay for lunch. It’d give the students a chance to get to know you all a little better before classes begin tomorrow.”

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Headmistress McGonagall and Professor Lupin led the entourage up the stairs to the second floor landing where they stopped and turned to the assembled fourteen students before them ranged on the stairs.

“Now, as you know, there are ten bedrooms on this level of the manor,” Headmistress McGonagall began. “Over the last couple of weeks, we’ve had some dwarven contractors in here making some alterations to them. They’ve all been expanded with a private bathroom added.

“As Professor Lupin and I are also going to be living here, two of those bedrooms are reserved for our use. Of the others, most have been redesigned to accommodate two people. Only one bedroom on either wing of the manor has remained set up for an individual.”

Picking up a box that had lain against the far wall, Professor Lupin began moving amongst the students.

“These are your name plaques,” he said as he began handing out a polished piece of oak, each decorated with an elegantly carved name on them. “A sticking charm has already been applied to the back of them for you. What you will do is attach your name plaque onto the door of your room.”
“How do we know which one that is, Professor?” Hermione asked.

“That is for you to decide,” Professor Lupin smiled. “Boys rooms are to my left; girls to my right. As soon as you’ve attached your plaque, the elves will send your trunks up to you.”

“Well, off you go,” Headmistress McGonagall encouraged when the fourteen had still been standing there staring at each other after a minute.

In a mad dash, the five boys and nine girls separated to either side of the professors.

There were four rooms along the side of the manor that Harry, Neville, Colin, Dennis and Mickey raced down before the corridor led to the second level of library. The first room to the left was already labelled – the plaque stating that Professor Lupin had claimed that room.

“This one’s ours!” Mickey and Dennis exclaimed, as they dashed into the room directly opposite Professor Lupin’s.

The remaining three boys opened the other two doors before standing in the corridor swivelling their heads backwards and forwards as they compared the two rooms.

The one on the right had been enlarged so that there was room for a bed in each of the far corners; a large cupboard set at the end of the bed and, set under the window, were two good-sized wooden desks. Harry knew that just to the left of the door, was a second door that led to the private bathroom.

The room to the left of the hallway Harry knew extremely well as it had been his bedroom for over a year.

“You take your room, Harry; Colin and I’ll share,” Neville said.

“Are you sure, Nev? I don’t mind bunking with either of you,” Harry asked.

Snatching Colin’s plaque out of his hand, Neville whirled around and stuck them both to the door of the twin room.

“There,” Neville nodded decisively. “Can’t change now.”

“Best get your plaque on your door, Harry,” Colin pointed out. “Hermione and Daphne are coming and neither of them looks happy.”

Seeing the two girls with determined looks rapidly advancing, Harry did as he was told.

“They’re probably just annoyed that we’re closer to the library than they are,” he grinned.

-oOoOo-

“Righto, you lot, gather round,” Sirius grinned.

Harry smiled to himself, knowing what was coming.

After a lunch filled with laughter and amazing food, Sirius had led them outside and around the corner of the manor to a pair of simple lawn lockers, not dissimilar to the ones at the Quidditch World Cup.

Rubbing his hands together, Sirius swept his gaze around the gathered teens.
“Now, I know that this isn’t Hogwarts with its quidditch pitch and flying instructors, not to mention that the loch’s a lot further away than the Black Lake is to the castle for the occasional stroll,” Sirius began, “but I didn’t want you lot to miss out on the good stuff, so I’ve filled these lockers with some things that I thought you could use to amuse yourself with when you’re not studying.”

The excited murmuring seemed to boost Sirius’ own excitement as he grabbed hold of the door to the first of the lockers.

“I give you … your own flying gear!” Sirius announced, pulling the door open with a flourish.

As was to be expected, the inside of the locker was much bigger than the outside indicated. Oohs and aahs, particularly from Dennis and Mickey, echoed around the locker as everyone filed inside. Both side walls were filled with racks of half a dozen brooms and the back wall also had racks for brooms, although only the top two positions were currently filled.

“Half a dozen Nimbus Two Thousand and Ones, and half a dozen Cleansweep Elevens,” Sirius stated, indicating both sets of brooms.

“Are these for us to use too?” Mickey asked, running his hand reverently along the polished handle of a brand new Firebolt.

“’Fraid not. Those are Harry’s. That’s his old Nimbus Two Thousand and I gave him that Firebolt just last week,” Sirius explained. “Anyone else who’s got a broom, feel free to store it in here, too.”

Harry bumped shoulders with Hermione and she smiled at him. Before the end of the day her Cleansweep Ten would be down here too.

“And that crate there contains a full set of quidditch balls,” Sirius said as he kicked said box on his way back out of the locker.

“So, what’s in the other locker, Mister Black?” Dennis asked eagerly.

“Well, why don’t we take a look?” Sirius replied and subsequently pulled the door to the second locker open.

Inside, up on pegs against each wall were bicycles. Each wall held six – three above a matching one below. Along the back wall were an additional four, including Harry’s. In one corner, was a set of pigeon holes, each with a helmet in it, waiting for a rider. In the other, was a bin filled with various sized balls, from tennis balls to footballs, to rugby balls and even a volleyball.

“There’s still a few hours until dinner,” Sirius suggested.

“Anyone want to come check out the village?” Harry asked, lifting his bike down from its rack.

-Albus Dumbledore strode up the corridor between the Great Hall and his office. A scowl marred his face as his mind fixated on the empty seats that he’d just been forced to stare at. The Sorting of new year was usually a wonderful occasion where he got to see all of the new faces that looked up at him in awe and wonder, not to mention all of the older faces doing the same.

But this year was different. This time, there were faces missing. Fourteen of them in fact. Admittedly, fourteen in a school the size of Hogwarts was hardly anything, less than five percent, when it came down to it. But it was the knowledge that they weren’t there. Those damnable empty chairs. And not just that they were empty, but who they represented. Harry Potter. Neville
Longbottom. Susan Bones. Hannah Abbot. The Greengrass sisters. Members of Ancient families who should never have been enticed or allowed to be away from the castle.

And to make things worse, the seat beside his elegant gold throne was no longer filled, as it had been for the past four decades, with the woman who he would have considered one of his staunchest allies. Her betrayal had been a low blow.

No, Albus decided, this wouldn’t do. He had to find a way to bring them all back to where they belonged. Especially Potter. The boy was far too important to his plans to be allowed to be away from his careful … guidance. It was bad enough last year when the boy had gone missing, but he’d been sure that he’d be back at the castle this year. Until those bloody withdrawal letters had started coming in.

“Albus, I want a word with you!”

Grimacing slightly at the sound of the gruff voice magically amplified down the corridor, Albus brought himself to a halt. He was not looking forward to this confrontation. Slowly, he turned around, forcing a smile onto his face and a twinkle to his eye.

From the far end of the corridor, Alastor ‘Mad Eye’ Moody stomped towards him, the clunk of his wooden leg making a distinct counterpoint to the thump of his staff. His scarred face was set in a determined scowl, his one good eye fixated on the Headmaster even as his magical blue eye continued to spin, obviously assessing the corridor for any potential threats.

“What can I do for you, Alastor?” Dumbledore asked.

Moody came to a halt just outside of arm’s reach. His dark grey travelling cloak swirled around him until he pulled it close around him, as though shutting out the outside world.

“You promised me Potter and correct me if I’m wrong, but I didn’t see the boy in that hall,” Moody accused.

“You’re right, Alastor, young Harry isn’t currently at Hogwarts,” Dumbledore conceded.

“Well?” Moody asked, magical eye whizzing even faster in its socket.

“Well, what?” Dumbledore asked, although he was positive that he already knew what his old friend was asking.

“Well, when’s the boy getting here? I’m looking forward to putting him through his paces, especially with that staff of his,” Moody pointed out.

Dumbledore’s mind was working in overdrive. Potter was one of the major drawcards that Alastor had needed to agree to take up the post of Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor. It was imperative that he find some way to get the blasted boy here and to keep his DADA professor in place.

“At the moment, young Harry is enrolled in Diricawl Academy …” Dumbledore began.

“I thought that you were going to take care of that,” Moody cut in.

“Unfortunately, my endeavours to rectify that did not go as planned.”

“So, what are you going to do about it?” Moody challenged.
“Alastor, do you really think that I don’t have a plan?” Dumbledore said in his best grandfatherly voice.

“Don’t give me that crap, Albus, I’m not one of your bloody students,” Moody growled.

Dumbledore sighed. “I promise you, Alastor. Not only young Harry, but all those that should be here will be here by Halloween.”

Both eyes, magical and natural, fixed on the Headmaster. “I’ll hold you to that.”

And before Dumbledore could reply, the aged ex-auror spun on his heel and stomped away.

Turning back towards his office, Albus Dumbledore strode down the corridor – he had a particularly important letter to write.
“The morning mail, Headmistress,” Dobby stated.

Replacing her china cup on its saucer with a soft *clink*, Minerva took the small bundle of letters from the elf. After a brief nod of her head in thanks, the elf sketched a quick bow before popping away.

As was expected, a good half dozen of the letters looked to be correspondence from even more parents trying to convince her to allow their child to attend the Academy. She really wished that they’d take the hint and give up. It seemed that nothing, not ads in the *Daily Prophet*, not individual replies, were enough to make some people understand that they simply had no room for any other students this year.

Loopy writing done up in brilliant emerald green ink caught her attention and her lips pursed. She’d know that writing anywhere. Of late, it had never boded well. Flicking her eyes up and around the table, she noted that neither Remus nor any of the students were paying her any kind of attention.

Picking up her butter knife, she slipped its edge under the waxed seal and flicked, opening the envelope. A thick piece of parchment slipped into her hand.

*To the Headmistress of Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies,* she read.

*Dear Minerva,*

*As I am sure that you are aware, this year Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry will be hosting an International event that has not been seen for many hundreds of years. I am, of course, referring to the TriWizard Tournament.*

*The three largest and most prestigious magical schools within Europe, namely Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, Beaubaton’s Academie of Magic and The Durmstrang Institute will be gathering to compete for everlasting fame and glory.*

*In a show of goodwill, I would like to invite the staff and students of our country’s newest and smallest school, Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies, to come to Hogwarts to watch all aspects of this momentous event.*

*There will be three main Tasks that encompass the TriWizard Tournament, along with the Choosing of the Champions and the Yule Ball. The first of these, the Choosing of the Champions, will be held during our Halloween Feast on October thirty-one. We would like to invite you to arrive the day before, the same day that the delegations from Beaubaton’s and Durmstrang will also arrive.*

*I await your owl at the earliest opportunity.*

*Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore*

*Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry; Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot; Supreme Mugwump of the International Confederation of Wizards; Order of Merlin, First Class.*

*This,* Minerva decided, was definitely something that needed careful consideration. On the one hand, she was tempted to simply dismiss anything to do with Dumbledore at first sight. But then,
she wondered what sort of educator that would make her for ensuring that her students missed out on an experience that they’d be unlikely to ever seen again in their lifetime.

Tapping the now folded letter against her chin, she let her eyes survey the students around her.

Hermione and Daphne were deep in conversation, a book propped up between them, the short spat from yesterday having thankfully been quickly overcome. But then, she blamed Harry for that. He’d insisted that, even though the manor was his home, that he be treated exactly like any of the others, even to the point of giving up all claims on his room and stating rather emphatically that the choice of rooms should be left up to the individual students. That had led to Daphne and Hermione each attempting to claim the single female room for themselves. In the end, it’d come down to a coin toss, with Hermione being the winner.

Hannah, Neville, Susan and Lil were all laughing, obviously sharing some joke or other. Harry and Colin had their heads bent over a camera of all things, but then, after their Hogwarts Photography Club, she guessed that she shouldn’t be surprised.

Books were piled on the back table, ready for the third and fourth years to go to their very first lesson – Defence Against the Dark Arts, a subject that Remus’ sparkling eyes indicated that even the teacher was eager for.

“Remus,” Minerva said, breaking the man’s attention from his notes. “I think that we need to call a staff meeting for after lessons tonight.”

At his enquiring look, she passed over the letter.

“I see,” he replied after having read it through. “Did you want everyone here?”


“Sirius’ll be here after lunch. I can’t imagine him complaining about sticking around,” Remus allowed.

Minerva nodded. “I’ll speak to the others after breakfast before I have Transfiguration with our first years’.”

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“Well, I must say that I’m impressed that all of you turned up for this elective,” Sirius began the lesson.

“As you all know, this is an elective that combines two disciplines – the Mind Arts and animagus training,” Professor McGonagall continued. “As this is the introductory lesson, Professor Black and I will be explaining more about what each of these disciplines involves and what you can expect to learn and experience.”

“Professor McGonagall and I decided to combine these electives into one simply because they overlap quite well,” Sirius picked up. “Saying that, though, both of these are incredibly hard to learn and it takes years to master them both. After today, you can decide whether you’d like to discontinue this elective, or if you’d simply like to learn one discipline instead of both or if you’d like to go the hard way and incorporate both disciplines into your learning.”

“Before we continue, does anyone have any questions?” Professor McGonagall asked.

“Why’s Harry here? Hasn’t he already learnt all of this?” Lil asked.
“Harry? Do you want to answer that?” Sirius asked.

Harry straightened in his seat before looking across the room to Lil.

“Yes, I’ve been studying both Mind Arts and animagus training for over a year,” he said, letting his eyes shift to each of the other eleven students in the room with him, “but I’m by no means a Master. You’ve got to remember that I spent most of that time learning them by myself which means that there’s still an awful lot to learn.”

“As these disciplines haven’t been taught at Hogwarts for decades, you third and fourth years will be learning together, while Harry will be brushing up on his techniques with us and continuing at his own pace,” Professor McGonagall continued.

“Why hasn’t Hogwarts taught Mind Arts and animagus training in such a long time?” Hermione asked.

“There’s no easy answer to that,” Professor McGonagall replied. “The best that I can do is to say that decades ago, the Ministry frowned on the practice, forcing it out of the curriculum and by the time that the Ministry’s stance had changed, the Hogwarts Board saw no need to employ additional staff to teach the subjects.”

“How long will they take to learn?” Luna asked.

“To be honest, there’s no easy answer to that question,” Sirius replied. “In general, it can take years to master occlumency, less to learn legilimency – the two disciplines within the Mind Arts – and about two years to learn how to be an animagus. But there’s a lot of factors in that – some people simply have a natural ability which cuts down on their timeframe, but we’ll cover that in more detail when we explain the disciplines.”

“If there are no other questions,” here Professor McGonagall paused to survey the class before continuing. “Let’s begin with the Mind Arts.

“As Professor Black has already alluded to, the Mind Arts encompasses two disciplines – occlumency and legilimency. These go hand in hand together; one attacks the mind to discover thoughts, memories and secrets, while the other shields the mind from such attacks.”

“Mind reading?” Colin asked.

“Nothing so precise as being able to pluck individual thoughts from an unprotected mind,” Professor McGonagall explained, “more … scanning images and feelings to cobble together a usually accurate impression of what is going through a person’s mind at that moment or the experiences that that individual has in their past.”

“It takes a particularly skilled and experienced legilimens – that’s the branch that attacks the mind – to be able to understand what they are seeing in a person’s mind,” Sirius continued. “But even the most experienced legilimens can be blocked by strong occlumency shields.”

“Will we be learning them both at the same time?” Daphne asked.

“There’s actually a fair bit of work to do before we reach the point where you’ll be learning either,” Sirius replied, “but once we do, we’ll start with occlumency. The main reason being that I’m sure that you all have certain things swimming around in those heads of yours that you’d rather not have others seeing, hmm?”

A slight twittering swept the room, emphasising that Sirius was indeed correct.
“Before you can truly begin learning how to shield your minds, you’ll be learning to understand yourself and how your mind actually works,” Professor McGonagall stated. “And, before you ask, no two minds are exactly the same. The best that we can do for you is to teach you and guide you in some exercises and spend time talking with you.”

“I think that that’s enough of an overview of Mind Arts for now,” Sirius said. “Now, animagus training. Can anyone tell me what an animagus actually is?”

Hermione’s hand shot up. “An animagus is a witch or wizard who can transform into an animal.”

“Exactly,” Sirius grinned. “And the bonus that you have is that there are two animagi in this room. Professor?”

And in the blink of an eye, where once there had been two professors, there now stood two animals: a ginger tabby cat and a great black grim. At once, the dog swung its great head, what could only be called a mischievous grin on its face, towards the cat. Its hind legs bunched up as it shuffled around to face the cat that was slowly padding along the line of students. A flick of a ginger ear towards the grim froze it in place.

“Professor Black!” Professor McGonagall snapped after transforming back, her lips a thin line. The head of the grim dropped, causing snickers to erupt through the classroom.

“While my fellow teacher transforms back,” Professor McGonagall said pointedly, “I’ll let you know that there are currently only nine registered animagi in the country.”

“That’s registered,” Sirius emphasised. “Until a couple of years ago, it was thought that there were only seven. That was until both I and Pettigrew were revealed to be animagus. Harry’s dad was also an animagus and he was never registered.”

“Your dad was an animagus?” Hermione asked Harry.

“What could he turn into?” Neville asked.

“My dad was a stag,” Harry relied proudly.

“So, as you can tell, there could be dozens of others out there that simply haven’t registered,” Sirius stated.

“Rest assured, though, that if you achieve your own form, you will be getting registered with the Ministry,” Professor McGonagall told them.

“What does becoming an animagus involve?” Susan asked.

“The first, and perhaps the longest part, is understanding yourself,” Sirius began. “You need to be incredibly honest with yourself, both the good and the bad, what makes you tick and what influences the decisions you make. In that part, it’s very similar to Mind Arts.”

“Added to that is teaching your body that it is okay to transform into different shapes,” Professor McGonagall continued. “We do this through human transfiguration. This is generally NEWT-level transfiguration and even then it can take at least a year. For you who are still a long way from being NEWT level students, expect that this might take you two or more years. Mister Potter may be ready by Christmas, but he has a slight advantage that none of you have.”

“What’s that, Harry?” Neville asked.
In reply, Harry changed his hair from its usual messy black mop into a vibrant blue buzz cut.

“I’m a metamorphmagus,” he shrugged.

“Wow, Harry! That’s so cool!” Neville gasped.

“Why didn’t you tell us?” Daphne asked.

“Can you change other parts of your body as well?” Susan wanted to know.

“Is that what Tonks has been teaching you?” Hermione guessed.

“Show us some other morphs, Harry,” Colin insisted.

Harry held up his hands, stifling the eager questions of his friends. “The short version is that I didn’t know that I was one until a couple of months ago and I’ve still got a lot to learn. I’ll tell you more about it later after class if you’d like.”

“You’d better,” Hermione stated, staring hard at him, her eyes narrowed, clearly unimpressed that he’d been keeping secrets from her.

“Once you understand what makes you you and are confident with your human transfigurations,” Sirius said, bringing the class back on track, “there’s an *animagus revealor* potion that will show you your form in a dream-like state. That part of the potion alone takes about four months to brew. And, once you know your form, we continue with the brewing for another two months before it will force your body into its very first change. After that, it’s the simple matter of teaching your body its new shape.”

“Yes, a simple matter that can easily take three to six months,” Professor McGonagall clarified. “So, as you can see, becoming an animagus is not an easy matter and is likely to take you upwards of three years of dedicated work. However, if you’re willing to learn, it is an accomplishment that you can enjoy for the rest of your life.”

“So, if you’re ready, we’ll begin our very first lesson,” Sirius said, rubbing his hands together. “For today, we’ll be teaching you the first step in a relaxation exercise. It’s called the Rainbow. Just like in a rainbow, there are seven steps, each tied to a colour. As you allow your body to relax, each step will take you deeper into your consciousness, allowing you to understand your mind better. It’s not an easy thing to learn, but it’s incredibly beneficial.”

“Mister Potter has agreed to take a small group and guide them through today’s exercise,” Professor McGonagall stated. “So, if four of you will come with me, four go with Professor Black and the remaining three of you go with Mister Potter, we’ll begin.”

Harry immediately found himself surrounded by Hermione, Neville and Hannah.

“Come on, guys, let’s go to the back of the room,” Harry said.

There, they found a small pile of exercise mats piled in the corner that Harry had them lay out before he sat cross-legged on his own mat in front of them.

“For this, you need to lie down,” Harry began. “Make sure that you’re comfortable. Rest your hands either on your stomach or beside you, whichever you’d prefer. Close your eyes and simply listen to my voice. My voice is all that there is for you while we do this. Everything else, all other sounds, are simply distractions to ignore.”
Harry continued talking softly, rhythmically, to the three, watching their breathing as they slowly began to relax.

“Okay. Now we’re going to begin the Rainbow,” he told them soothingly. “The first step in the Rainbow is the colour red. I want you to picture just the colour red and only the colour red …”

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“Thank you all for coming,” Minerva said to those gathered around the table of the small dining room.

She’d picked this room primarily because it was on the opposite side of the manor from the library where she knew that most of the students had gathered, whether to work on homework or simply to chat, she wasn’t sure. Fortunately, all of those that she had contacted that morning had been able to attend tonight – Sirius, Augusta, Dan and Emma. Along with herself and Remus, that meant that it was going to be the six of them that would be responsible for deciding the Academy’s response.

Passing the letter that she’d received that morning to Augusta, Minerva began the meeting.

“This morning I received a letter from Albus Dumbledore. You will all get a chance to read it, but in summary, he has invited the Academy to Hogwarts to watch the TriWizard Tournament that will be taking place there this year.”

“What’s the TriWizard Tournament?” Emma asked over Sirius’ low whistle.

“Basically, it’s where a champion from each of the three major magical schools in Europe competes against each other in three tasks,” Minerva stated.

“Three bloody dangerous tasks,” Sirius cut in.

“Didn’t they stop holding it because the death toll got too high?” Remus asked.

“They did indeed,” Augusta replied, passing the letter along to Dan. “If memory serves, the last time the Tournament was held, back in the late 1700s I believe, two of the champions were killed, the other seriously injured along with three of the judges and a score of spectators.”

“And they’re bringing this back?” Dan asked incredulously.

“The Ministry has decreed that it’ll be much safer this time,” Minerva said, the distaste in her voice speaking volumes about what she thought about that.

“Why would we want to send our kids to that?” Emma asked. “If it’s dangerous, I don’t think that I’d want any of them anywhere near it.”

“Ordinarily I’d agree with you,” Minerva stated, “however, there would be a number of benefits. For one, it’d give the students a chance to meet, mingle with and learn about magical children from other countries. They’d also be sure to see some amazing magic being performed.”

“Not to mention the deaths,” Sirius snorted.

“I contacted the Ministry today and one of the new rules that they’ve instated for the Tournament is declaring that only ‘of-age’ students will be allowed to participate. With competitors that are more fully trained, there should be much less risk of injury, let alone fatalities,” Minerva replied.

“We could, of course, simply take each event as it comes,” Augusta suggested. “The Choosing and
the Yule Ball would be perfectly safe to attend and, depending on how the First Task goes, we could decide after that whether or not we attend either of the two remaining tasks.”

“That makes sense,” Dan nodded. “Any idea what these tasks involve?”

“No,” Minerva frowned. “The Ministry was being incredibly tight-lipped when I asked.”

“Makes sense. They wouldn’t want the champions getting any unfair advantage,” Remus mused.

Once again, Sirius snorted. “I thought you were our History teacher, Moony? This thing has always been rife with cheating.”

“You seem to know a great deal about the Tournament, Sirius” Augusta pointed out.

“Yeah, well, I’m a Black, aren’t I? If it involves death, destruction and mayhem, I grew up hearing about it,” Sirius shrugged.

“The girls wouldn’t forgive us if they heard that there was Ball that they could attend and then we made them miss out on it,” Emma pointed out.

Minerva smiled slightly. “I believe that you would be correct on that.” She paused as she looked around the table. “I’m inclined towards Augusta’s suggestion of taking one task at a time and deciding on the others as we go. The Yule Ball and the Choosing I see no harm in attending. Do you all agree?”

Remus, Augusta and Emma all nodded; Dan’s nod appeared to be slightly more reluctant; while Sirius merely shrugged, appearing content with going along with the majority.

“Very well,” Minerva nodded once in decision. “I’ll write to Hogwarts and let them know our decision.”

“You know that this is going to mean uniforms and such,” Sirius pointed out. “You know what magical folk get like in these sorts of situations – they simply can’t help but try to outdo each other.”

“He’s right, you know,” Remus agreed. “We’re going to have to at least look the part.”

“Uniforms?” Emma perked up. “I can get together with Beth and Penelope if you like and come up with something.”

“That’d be good, thank you,” Minerva nodded. “And I think Mister Black just volunteered to handle our transportation and entrance, since he seems to know the magical world so well.”

“Hey now, just wait one minute!” Sirius protested, snapping up in his seat. “When did I volunteer for that?”

Across the table from him, Dan snickered at his predicament, causing Sirius’ eyes to narrow and his lips to twitch into a feral grin.

“Well, in that case, as Diricawl is attempting to incorporate some muggle attributes, I’m going to need someone knowledgeable in muggle transportation to help me. And I think I’ve just found the perfect candidate,” he declared.
“We’ll need to pick the flowers and fruit of the rue bush within the next couple of days,” Neville was saying as he walked into the dining room.

Beside him, Jaxom, the stocky house elf in charge of the greenhouses, nodded sagely. “The day after tomorrow would be best, but it can probably wait until Tuesday. It can be the lesson for the day.”

As Neville pulled out his chair to sit, Jaxom gave a brief nod to the room before popping away.

“Morning, Neville,” Harry greeted. “I thought you were still in bed.”

“Nah, been out with Jaxom in Greenhouse One the last couple of hours,” Neville replied. “That elf sure knows his plants.”

“That’s why I hired him,” Harry smiled.

Movement from the head of the table drew Harry’s eye and he turned to see Headmistress McGonagall standing at her place, her hands resting on the tabletop.

“No that you are all here,” she began, “I have an announcement to make.”

Harry straightened slightly in his chair even as he shared a look with those around him. Neville and Colin only looked slightly interested, while Hermione, Daphne and Fiona all looked to be intensely staring at their Headmistress. Luna, on the other hand, seemed to find something outside the window of more interest.

“Yesterday, I received an invitation for our school to attend the TriWizard Tournament,” Headmistress McGonagall announced.

“The TriWizard Tournament,” she continued, “is a contest held between the three largest magic schools in Europe: Hogwarts, Beauxbatons Academie of Magic and The Durmstrang Institute. Each school is represented by a single Champion who competes in three tasks which test their bravery, courage, ingenuity, intelligence, and of course, their magical ability. The winner is generally awarded a trophy and a sum of money and the winning school gains significant notoriety.”

Neville’s hand rose uncertainly and, at the Headmistress’ nod, he nervously voiced the question that had his face so puzzled.

“I didn’t think the TriWizard Tournament happened anymore.”

“You’re correct, Mister Longbottom, in that the TriWizard Tournament hasn’t been held for quite a number of centuries,” Headmistress McGonagall replied. “However, traditionally, it was held every six years.”

“If it’s for the three largest schools, then why were we invited?” Susan asked.

“We’ve been invited to watch,” Headmistress McGonagall replied. “None of you need have any fear that any of you will be competing. The Ministry has added a new rule with this revival of the Tournament – that only those of legal age, that is to say, at least the age of seventeen, will be permitted to even enter their names, let alone compete. Our involvement will strictly be as part of...
the audience.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed slightly. The instant that Minerva had mentioned Hogwarts, the hairs on the back of his neck had risen and he’d felt his body tense as though either ready to fight or to flee.

“So we’d only be going to watch three events?” he clarified.

Headmistress McGonagall nodded. “Yes, along with the Choosing of the Champions and the Yule Ball, which you should all enjoy.”

At the mention of a ball, the girls around the table all began grinning while several of them quickly bent their heads together causing a susurration to break out around the room.

Ignoring the girls, Harry kept his narrowed eyes focussed on Minerva. “And where will this Tournament be happening?”

“The Tournament is being hosted by Hogwarts,” she said, confirming the dreaded feeling that had already settled into the pit of his stomach.

A sharp rap of her knuckles on the tabletop brought everyone’s attention back onto her.

“The first event that we will be attending will be the Choosing, scheduled for Halloween,” Headmistress McGonagall announced. “We will arrive at Hogwarts on the Sunday, the day before Halloween and come home on the first.”

Once again, excited murmuring broke out around the table, this time over the idea of getting to see friends who were still at Hogwarts, like Fred and George and Su Li, Justin, Ernie and the rest of the fourth years’ old study group. Harry, though, simply sat back in his chair, staring at his Headmistress who had resumed her seat. He had a bad feeling about this.

-oOoOo-

“Hey, Remus, can I talk to you for a minute?” Harry asked as he poked his head into his honorary uncle’s bedroom.

Remus looked up from the book that he was reading. “Sure, Harry, come on in.”

When the dwarves had revamped the manor’s bedrooms, they’d put a little extra effort into the two designated for Remus and Minerva. Instead of a single room with its own private bathroom like all of the other rooms had been given, those two had been enhanced with extra space charms, turning the single room into two good sized rooms.

The bedroom and its connecting bathroom, Harry knew, were through the sliding wooden door to the right. This part of Remus’ room was a combination sitting room and office. A large mahogany desk, piled high with reams of parchment and folders and books, quills and ink bottles was set under the window, while closer to the door, a small three piece lounge suite done in dark brown leather, was placed, a coffee table set in between them on the thick red and white rug.

At Remus’ gesture, Harry took the remaining single chair. The rich upholstery and soft cushions had him sinking back in the chair, only for him to immediately slide forward again and his left leg to begin a slight jig at the thought of what had brought him here.

“What can I do for you, Harry?” Remus asked, laying his book aside.

“It’s … it’s this TriWizard business,” he began hesitantly.
“What about it?” Remus asked.

“Do we have to go?” Harry blurted.

Remus’ eyebrows nearly disappeared under his thinning brown hair. “Don’t you want to go, Harry? You’d get to see all of your Hogwarts friends again, not to mention meeting some witches and wizards from other countries and getting to see something that hasn’t been seen in hundreds of years.”

“When you put it like that, sure I’d love to go,” Harry replied.

“Then what’s the problem?” Remus asked.

“It’s … it’s,” Harry sighed, dropped his gaze and finished in a near-whisper. “It’s Dumbledore.”

“Ah,” Remus said, sitting back in the chair from where he’d crept forward to. “I think I understand. You’re afraid of being too close to the Headmaster after your last encounters.”

Harry nodded. “The last time I saw him, he tried to dictate where and how I should be learning. He even tried to manipulate me into re-enrolling in Hogwarts. And the time before that he tried to kidnap me and send me back to the Dursleys!”

“You don’t think that we’ve already thought of this, Harry?” Remus asked, but Harry wasn’t listening, instead continuing on the rant that he was finally allowing himself to vent.

“He spent an entire year trying to find me! Do you have any idea of the number of letters that I found in my Postal Box last year from him with notes on them telling me of the charms, enchantments and portkeys that had been found on them? One student leaves his school and it seems as though all he can fixate on is that one instead of the other four hundred! And don’t think I don’t know that he’s been behind all of the Ministry’s interference since Diricawl started being set up, especially with how often we’ve been asked to tell exactly where the manor is!”

“Harry, Harry, calm down!” Remus said, leaning forward to place his hands on Harry’s knees, his sharp brown eyes fixating on the emerald ones across from him.

Slowly, Harry’s breathing changed from short sharp breathes to longer, calmer ones. With Remus’ calming tones and caring eyes, he allowed himself to relax backwards into the chair.

Keeping his hands resting on Harry’s knees, Remus began speaking in a firm but reassuring voice.

“Every single thing that you’ve brought up, we’ve thought about. Yes, Albus Dumbledore seems rather fixated upon you and for the life of us, we can’t work out why. Not even Minerva knows and she’s worked with him for longer than I’ve been alive. We know that you won’t want to get anywhere near the old man and, quite frankly, we won’t let him get anywhere near you.

“Yes, this whole invitation is most likely a ploy for him to get close to you, but it is not going to work. We simply will not allow it. Minerva, Sirius and I will be there. Most likely Augusta as well, not to mention Dobby and Jaxom. Every single one of us will be watching him like a hawk and if there’s the slightest inkling that something’s going awry, then we’ll pull all of you out of Hogwarts so fast, it’d make a diricawl’s reflexes seem slow.

“But saying all that, we really think that the positives outweigh the negatives here. You all have been invited to watch something amazing, something historic and we don’t want you missing out simply because of one old man.”
Slowly, Remus sat back, watching him.

Harry’s mind was buzzing with the forcefulness of what Remus had said. It was kinda nice to know that he and Minerva and Sirius had been thinking the same things that he had. And not just thinking about them, but weighing up the pros and cons. It was also really different, strange even. For so long he’d had no one to rely on, and especially not adults that cared. Slowly he began nodding to the man across from him. If they’d thought that much about it and his safety, then he was willing to trust him.

“All right, Remus, I’ll go,” he said with a half-smile.

“Good, Harry, good,” Remus smiled back. “Now, put the old man out of your mind for now and allow us to worry about him. Now, off you scoot.”

“Thanks, Remus,” Harry said, pushing himself to his feet. “I’ll see you at dinner.”

-oOoOo-

The Ministry delegation had been stuck in the small room for close to half an hour already. Of the three men, two looked irate and ready to kill the next person to come through the only door. The other, though, looked resigned and perhaps even a touch chagrined.

They had been ordered there by no less a person than the Minister of Magic himself. His orders had been clear: they were to bring the upstart school to heel. Hogwarts, and by extension, the Ministry, had been made to look like a fool long enough. The school had had the audacity to not only challenge Hogwarts standing in the magical world, but publically point out its many perceived failings.

And to add insult to injury, the instant that it was known that The-Boy-Who-Lived-Again had completely withdrawn from Hogwarts, the Ministry had been inundated with others wishing to withdraw from Hogwarts in favour of Diricawl Academy. And not just one or two either, but dozens of letters and howlers had been sent to the Ministry’s Department of Magical Education.

Arthur Weasley, Head of the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts Office, sat forward in his chair, wringing his hands together between his knees. To be honest, while he completely disagreed with his being sent here for what he perceived as a colossal waste of time – the nerve of the Ministry, trying to interfere with a privately run ‘business’ – he was glad to be there. His wife, Molly, had been making a right nuisance of herself, despite him telling her to leave it be. Perhaps, just perhaps, he could get a chance to apologise?

The door opening snapped Arthur’s head up and the corners of his mouth turned up slightly. He knew the two people who stepped into the room. Minerva McGonagall and Remus Lupin were fair-minded people who cared a lot about children. Certainly, they could be tough and strict as well, but that’s exactly the type of person that you’d want in charge of a school full of teenagers.

“Gentlemen,” Minerva stated, “I’d apologise for keeping you waiting, but as it stands, I’m not sorry in the slightest. This is a school. We have children to teach and that must come before any ‘Ministry delegation’ that suddenly appears unannounced.”

“I don’t think you realise exactly who you’re speaking to!” the oldest of the three men bristled.

“Tiberius Sheppardton, Head of the Department of Magical Education,” Minerva shot back before nodding at each of the other two men. “Walden MacNair, Head of the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures; Arthur Weasley, Head of Department for the Misuse of Muggle Artefacts.”
“What is it we can do for you, gentlemen?” Remus Lupin asked, his face set, hard.

“We’re here to inspect your school,” Tiberius spat.

“And what makes you think that you’ll even be allowed through that door?” Headmistress McGonagall asked, one eyebrow cocked.

“We’re from the Ministry!” Tiberius spluttered, as though that was all the justification they needed.

Behind them, still seated, Arthur supressed a sigh and shook his head.

“This is a privately funded and run school,” Headmistress McGonagall retorted. “You have absolutely no business here. In fact, the only reason I let you through the FLOO in the first place was so that I could tell you to your face; none of you seem to understand the written word anymore.”

“Gentlemen,” Remus continued, “you aren’t going to get what you came for. Go back to the Ministry and let us teach in peace.”

“There will be repercussions for this affront!” Tiberius vowed before storming for the FLOO, throwing the powder into the flames and disappearing.

Arthur waited until MacNair had also gone before rising.

“For what it’s worth,” he said quietly, “I think you’re right. And I’d like to apologise.”

Minerva’s raised eyebrow had him continuing in a rush. “Not just for the Ministry trying to interfere, but also for Molly. She’s had no right to be pestering you about taking our four into your school. Fred and George were offered a place and she refused. That should have been the end of the matter. I promise to do my best to keep her from bugging you, even if I have to start taking our owl to work with me.”

“Thank you, Arthur, I appreciate it,” Minerva replied with a nod.

With a nod of his own, Arthur stepped up to the fire and FLOOed away.

-oOoOo-

Sirius flopped into one of the rich brown leather couches in the Grangers’ den, snagging the top magazine from the pile on the coffee table as he did so.

“So these have all the different types of muggle transport available?” he asked.

Across from him, Dan spun his office chair around and raised an eyebrow at the wizard.

“Nowhere near it,” he stated. “They do, however, have a fairly broad selection.”

Sirius grunted before flipping through the magazine in his hand.

This one, at least, seemed to be filled with something that he was intimately familiar with, albeit in a more modern style. Fond memories of his old bike flooded his mind as his eyes roamed over chrome and leather creations. Those were the days. He was young and carefree then. More nights than he could count, there were either delicious hands wrapped around his waist or there was a girl in the sidecar. Sometimes both at once.

Idly, he wondered what had happened to his baby. He’d lent it to Hagrid that night but he never
took the time to find out what Hagrid had done with it before he went to Romania. Maybe he should write a letter to the big fella and ask.

Knowing that motorbikes weren’t what they were looking for, he threw the magazine back onto the table before snatching up the next in the pile.

“Exactly what are we looking for?” Dan asked from in front of the glowing box on his desk. “I know it’s got to be pretty big to hold everyone, but what other requirements are there?”

Sirius’ magazine lowered as he looked up at Dan.

“It’s got to be big? Dan, don’t you remember those cabins we stayed in at the World Cup?” he deadpanned.

Dan spun his chair around, a chagrined look on his face. “Yeah, I guess I kinda forgot what you wizardry types can do. So, size doesn’t matter?”

“Now, I wouldn’t say that,” Sirius countered. “Again, think back to the World Cup. When we ‘wizardry types’ get together, we simply can’t help showing off.”

“Yeah, a two-storied tent with a chimney and a balcony proved that,” Dan chuckled.

Sirius nodded. “What we’re looking for is something with style. I can charm whatever we find with space expansion charms that’ll give us enough rooms for all of the kids plus a bunch of us adults. Bathrooms and kitchens are a snap to add in as well. Heck, I could make the thing fly if we have enough time.”


“Sure. I’ve done it before. I used to have a motorbike that flew and rumour has it that Arthur Weasley charmed a car to fly as well.”

“So we’re thinking of flying there?” Dan clarified.

“Well, maybe,” Sirius allowed. “Although one of the other schools’ll probably take that route and I’d rather that we did something different.”

“So we’ll go in by land then,” Dan stated.

At that, Sirius shrugged. “The only problem there is that there’re no roads that lead from the muggle world to either Hogsmeade or Hogwarts.”

“But I thought that that bus, the, er … Knight Bus that the kids took to get to Potter Haven last year left from Hogsmeade,” Dan said, sounding confused.

“They did,” Sirius nodded, “but the usual rules don’t apply to the Knight Bus. Actually, I don’t think that any rules apply to that thing.”

“So we’re looking for something with style that can get us from Potter Haven to Hogwarts across land where there’s no roads. Unless we decide to fly, that is,” Dan stated.

“Got it in one!” Sirius beamed.

The next ten minutes or so passed in silence as Sirius perused magazine after magazine while Dan sat engrossed with his glowing box.
“I think I’ve got it!” Dan called suddenly, startling the old marauder.

“What?” he asked, bending to pick up the magazine from the floor where he dropped it.

“I think I’ve found what we’re looking for, assuming that we can afford it, that is,” Dan repeated.

“If it does the job, then the Black fortune can afford it,” Sirius declared. “Now, show me what you’ve got.”

“Come up here to the computer,” Dan beckoned with a jerk of his head.

“What in the world is that?” Sirius asked as he stared at a picture of … something … on the tiny screen.

“That can carry us across any type of land, even without roads,” Dan beamed. “Oh, and it also goes on water as well.”

“It does?” Sirius asked, his eyes alight with the possibilities.

By the time that Dan had taken Sirius through a couple of dozen screens of pictures and information, the decision had been made.

“It’ll need some charming, of course, but nothing that’ll be too hard to handle,” Sirius commented, clapping his partner on the shoulder. “You contact this place about buying one and I’ll get the elves building us a shed of some kind for us to portkey it into. We wouldn’t want to give away the surprise before it’s ready, after all.”
Harry walked into the classroom to find his teacher in her usual position: seated cross-legged on top of one of the desks.

“Wotcher, Harry,” Tonks greeted.

“Hey, Tonks,” Harry replied with a smile as he perched on the desk directly opposite her.

“Right, I haven’t got a lot of time tonight – old Scrimgeor’s given me an extra shift starting in about two hours,” Tonks informed him.

“You sure you want to do this tonight, then?” Harry asked. “We can always skip.”

“Yeah, not a problem,” Tonks smiled. “I’ve got a couple of hours to kill. Might as well be here with you than sittin’ around at home twiddling my thumbs.”

Harry gave her a nod of gratitude.

“Right, then, you been keeping up with your practices?” Tonks asked.

In reply, Harry began morphing his head through the various contortions that Tonks had assigned him.

Starting with his hair, he changed it from its usual black to red to white to green and then blue, followed by an attempt at changing just the tips of his hair into a bright silver while the rest of his hair reverted to its natural black. For the most part, he was successful. At least, it was the closest that he’d ever come to getting it exactly how he imagined it. There was just that one patch in the middle of the top of his head that never seemed to do as it was told. This time, its tips changed, but to a light blue instead of silver.

Leaving his hair with its changed tips, Harry focussed on his nose. Peering down at it with his crossed eyes, he watched it elongate, then turn bulbous before spreading out into something that looked as though he’d just been punched and finished with shrinking it and turning it up and making it slightly more pointy.

Morphing his ears was next. This was the feature that he’d been practicing the shortest length of time, so changing his ears into large flappy things, followed by returning them to normal except with points didn’t take long.

He demonstrated his final morph by poking his now forked tongue out at his metamorph teacher.

“That’s excellent work, Harry!” Tonks praised. “I can really see a huge improvement since last week.”

“Thanks, Tonks,” Harry beamed.

“Since you’re doing so well, how about we move on to the next phase,” she suggested. “Changing the colour of your skin.”

To emphasise this idea, Tonks slowly morphed her skin from a pale white through to a tanned golden colour and then continued through to a deep mocha and finished with turning her skin a deep mottled green before she allowed it to fade back to its natural colour.
“Wow, Tonks, I didn’t know that you could do that,” Harry stated, staring hard.

“Yeah, well, it’s not something that I need to do very often, unless I’m undercover or have been sitting at a desk too long and need a good all over tan,” she smiled impishly.

“You really think that I can do that, too?” Harry asked.

“Of course you will, Harry,” Tonks told him. “By the time I’m finished with you, you’ll be able to change every single part of your body. At least on the outside.”

“So what’s left after I master this?” Harry asked.

“Height, weight, eye colour,” Tonks replied, ticking them off on her fingers, “then changing just a single part of you, like a finger or other appendage.”

“So, still a lot to go then,” Harry commented.

“Yeah, but you knew that when we started,” Tonks replied. “Give it another six months and it’ll almost be as natural to you as it is to me. Now, you ready?”

At Harry’s nod, she continued.

“Okay, hold up your hand in front of your face. We’re going to concentrate on it for now. I want you to really take in what it looks like – get a picture of its colour firmly in your head, know it …

-oOoOo-

A slight tapping sound finally penetrated Hermione’s concentration as she approached the shelves in the Potter Haven library. Lifting her nose from the ancient runes text that she had been absorbed in, she blinked hard. Yes, she was exactly where she expected to be – the top level of the library.

Being able to walk from her room to the library while reading and without paying any attention to her surroundings had taken very little time to learn. But then, she had expected nothing less. She’d been able to do it at home and that had involved negotiating the stairs and multiple corners. Here all her feet had had to learn was to go in a straight line and allow her peripheral vision to note any closed doors in front of her, and considering that the library door always remained open, then that wasn’t a problem.

Letting the book slip down until it was tight against chest, Hermione looked around in search of the strange tapping sound. It didn’t take long for her to determine that it was coming from the level below. A half dozen quick steps brought her to the balcony where she could look down.

What she saw caused her eyes to widen in astonishment before her lips curled upwards in a barely suppressed giggle.

Below her, standing at one of the tables, was Harry. What had particularly caught her attention was the fact that jutting out from his dark green T-shirt were two arms of widely different colours. His left arm was almost jet black, except for two of his fingers which appeared more golden as they rested on a pile of books. His right arm, by contrast, was a shocking white from elbow to wrist with a blood red hand.

The back of his neck and what she could see of his face appeared to be his normal colouring at least.

Shaking her head, she moved towards the spiral staircase. Harry’d told her about Tonks’ lesson the
previous evening on changing skin colour before bed last night. As this was the first time that she’d seen him today, she could only assume that he’d been practicing that morning.

“Hi, Harry,” she greeted brightly.

The continuous tapping of Harry’s wand between a large leather bound book set before him on the table and the stack of books in front of it came to a halt as he looked up. She saw his eyes flick to each arm and a rosy blush blossom on his cheeks before both arms snapped behind him as he turned to face her.

“Hey, Hermione,” he said warily.

“How’s things?” she asked with a smile, wondering if he really thought that he could hide the state of his arms from her.

“Good. You?” he asked as his eyes darted around the library.

“I’m well, Harry,” she replied before cocking her head. “What are you working on?”

A small smile escaped her as she saw his arms twitch before he settled on nodding his head towards the piles of books on the table.

“Enchanting assignment,” he replied.

“Ooh, really? Can you show me?” Hermione asked eagerly.

“Uh, maybe later,” Harry stuttered. “I’m, uh, right in the middle of it at the moment and I, uh, don’t want to lose my concentration.”

With a sigh, Hermione decided to take pity on the boy and stop teasing him. Reaching out and around him, Hermione grasped his hand and pulled it towards her.

“I saw you from up there, Harry. I know that your hands are different colours,” she told him.

Harry’s head dropped and his feet shuffled as he slowly brought his other hand into view.

With a soft smile, Hermione reached out one finger, slipped it under his chin and lifted his head until his emerald eyes met her own.

“What happened?” she asked softly.

“I was practicing what Tonks taught me last night,” Harry sighed. “But I accidentally made this arm,” here he lifted his left arm, “black instead of tanned. And when I tried to use the colouring of my right hand as a template for turning the left one back … I sort of mucked it up.”

“And now you can’t change either arm back?” Hermione guessed.

Another sigh accompanied his head shake.

“Well, let’s see what we can do together,” she suggested. “We just need to get you calmed down and not so worked up about it. And I promise that no matter what happens, that I won’t laugh at you.

Entwining her fingers with his black and tan ones, she lifted their combined hands until they were right between their eyes.
“Now, how about you concentrate on my hand and see if you can get your hand and arm to match,” she said. “Just look at our hands and concentrate, Harry. Make them the same.”

At first nothing happened, but then, after nearly a minute of the two standing with their hands joined and Hermione softly encouraging him, the very tips of his fingers began to change. A healthy pale brown slowly began to spread down past his fingernails, over his knuckles and then faster up to Harry’s wrist before racing up his arm.

“Well done, Harry,” Hermione beamed at him. Then, after capturing the bizarre blood red and white hand in her own, she lifted it up. “Now, let’s do the other one.”

A minute later a normal looking Harry Potter was standing beaming at his best friend, their fingers still interlocked as they held hands.

“Thanks, Hermione,” Harry beamed. “I was sure that I was going to be stuck like that until Tonks could come back next week. You’re absolutely brilliant.”

“You’re welcome, Harry,” she smiled back before lifting one delicate eyebrow. “And now you know what to do if you get stuck again, don’t you?”

“Come straight to you,” he replied with a small smile.

“Exactly. Now, as payment, you can show me what you’re doing for your enchanting assignment,” Hermione stated.

Letting go of Hermione’s hands, Harry turned back to the library table that he’d been working at. A large leather-bound book was opened in front of him, with a stack of two dozen other books piled up around it.

“I’m trying to create an index for the library,” Harry told her.

Hermione cocked her head at him. “Like a filing system?”

“Yeah. You remember how hard it was to find books back at Hogwarts?” Harry asked, and, seeing her nod, continued. “Well, I figured that there’s already three levels to the library here and, even though a lot of the shelves still have a lot of space on them, if we keep buying books, soon enough we’ll have the same problem here.”

“That’s a good idea, Harry,” Hermione replied, impressed with the idea.

Harry nodded. “Thanks, I thought so. So, I came up with the idea of magically tying all of the books in the library to a master book.” He shrugged then. “Although apparently, it’s not that original an idea.”

“What do you mean?” Hermione asked.

“Professor Miller tells me that most of the old families in the magical world will have something like that in their personal libraries,” Harry explained, remembering back to the discussion that he’d had with his Enchanting teacher a couple of weeks beforehand.

“Then why wasn’t there one at Hogwarts?” Hermione nearly demanded, frustration etched on her face with the thought of how much help it would have been to her studies.

“Dunno,” Harry shrugged, “although, Professor Miller did say that with so few enchanters in Great Britain, that they tended to focus more on jewellery and trinkets rather than some of the older
objects that would hardly ever be purchased. Guess it simply comes down to making what brings
in the money.”

“I guess that makes sense,” Hermione agreed. “So, what do you need to do to make yours work?”

“I think that I’ve already completed the runes that I need to make the book remember information
and recall it at a later date,” Harry said, flipping to the inside front and back covers of the large
book before him to show her. “At the moment I’m simply testing that part out.”

“How?” Hermione asked, her fingers running over the runes that she recognised.

“I’m copying the title, author and subject of each of these books into the master book and tying
them to a particular page,” Harry explained. “Eventually I want to have an index in the front of the
master book that will let you rearrange and display that information anyway that you want, as well
as tie a luminescence spell into each book and the master book so that when you find a book that
you want, it’ll display what level of the library and the shelf number and you can go there and see
the book itself glowing until you take it off of the shelf.”

“Wow, Harry, that sounds amazing and dead useful,” Hermione exclaimed.

“Yeah, only Professor Miller thinks that I might have bitten off more than I can chew,” Harry
grinned. “But either way, I’ve got all year to work on it and it’ll be worth fifty percent of my total
grade. Even if I can’t get it to do everything that I want it to, Professor Miller assures me that I’ll
learn a lot just in the attempt.”

“And I thought that my Enchanting project was ambitious,” Hermione groused good-naturedly.

“Why, what are you doing?” Harry asked.

“I was hoping to see if I could find a way to make a muggle torch work in a magical environment
by using runes and enchanting to dampen the magical output around it and allowing the battery to
work,” Hermione explained.

“That is ambitious,” Harry agreed, “and if you succeed, the implications could be staggering.”

“I know,” Hermione replied, her excitement fuelling the speed of her speech. “If we can get
muggle batteries to work, then we could have muggle cameras and stereos and watches and maybe
even computers and tellies. That’s actually why I came down here; I was looking for a more
advanced runes book.”

“Would you like some help finding one?” Harry offered.

“I’d love some, Harry,” Hermione smiled.

“Come on, then, the best runes books are down this way,” he replied, pointing off to the left.

-oOoOo-
A resounding *clang* echoed across the valley as the ball ricocheted off of the side of the building
for what must have been the tenth or eleventh time since the three boys had started playing.

“What’d they have to build it there?” Colin complained as his brother, Dennis, raced off to fetch
the errant ball.

“I know. The one decent flat piece of ground close to the manor and they put a whopping big
building on it,” Mickey agreed.

The three youngest boys in Potter Haven had had this discussion more times than they could count over the last couple of weeks. As far as they could tell, they were the ones most affected by the building of the eyesore.

Most of Diricawl Academy’s students were girls and none had shown much interest in the idea of physical activity, unless you counted walking down to the loch for a swim, of course. And of the two older boys, any time that Neville had spare, he disappeared into one of the greenhouses and as for Harry, well, he simply went flying or took himself off to a secluded part of the valley to practice archery.

But for the Creevey brothers and Mickey Pemberton, they loved running. And they especially loved football, that is, when the younger two could force Colin to put his ever-present camera down. When they’d first come to Diricawl and discovered their shared passion, they’d staked their claim on the one large flat piece of ground near the manor where they could play – either simply passing the ball around or setting up some small goals for a two on one game.

But now, their space had been seriously impinged upon. And by no less a person than Professor Black.

“What do ya reckon he’s doin’ in there?” Mickey asked, not for the first time.

Colin simply shook his head as he trapped the ball that Dennis kicked back to him. “No idea.”

The steel grey building that seemed to have been built almost overnight was huge. It was easily thirty yards long and half that wide. Most of the wall at one end actually seemed to be a pair of massive sliding doors that Colin thought that two of his Da’s old milk trucks could drive through side by side with plenty of room to spare. What windows there were were all placed up high, far too high to see into, even if they weren’t all blacked out.

“Did we tell you that Professor Black nearly forgot to come to potions yesterday?” Dennis asked as he re-joined the other two.

Colin looked up sharply at his brother before passing the ball on to Mickey. “You didn’t tell me that.”

“Yeah, we had to call for Nerri to go and find him for us,” Dennis related.

“It’s a good thing that the elves can get in there at least,” Mickey stated.

“Not that they’ll tell us what’s actually in there,” Dennis complained.

“Hiya, boys,” a cheery voice interrupted. “How are you all today?”

The three spun around to smile and wave at Doctor Granger.

“We’re good, thanks,” Colin answered for them all.

“Glad to hear it,” Doctor Granger replied as he strode across the grass.

The three boys watched him reach the small door in the side of the building before he rapped sharply upon it. A few seconds later, the dark head of Professor Black poked out. Seeing who it was, the door opened wider, allowing Doctor Granger to join his co-conspirator inside.
“Do you reckon that they’ll ever tell us what they’re doing in there?” Dennis asked.

“They’ll have to, won’t they?” Colin stated. “I know that Harry’s been pestering them and this is his place.”

“Yeah, but Professor Black’s even stopped coming to dinner lately,” Mickey pointed out. “Says that he has ‘too much to do’, whatever that means.”

Taking a glance up at the sinking sun, Colin placed his foot on top of the ball. “What do you say to a little two on one before we’re called in to dinner? Do you think you two can actually beat me today?”

Mickey and Dennis shared a grin.

“Bet you a box of chocolate frogs that we can,” Mickey challenged.

“You’re on!” Colin agreed before dribbling the ball towards their traditional half-way mark.
Chapter 15

“As you all know, we’re due to go to Hogwarts in a little over a week’s time to watch the choosing ceremony for the TriWizard Tournament,” Headmistress McGonagall began to the assembled group.

Harry shifted slightly in his seat to get a bit more comfortable, inadvertently allowing him the chance to gaze around the large sitting room of the manor. Apart from the fourteen students, all of the Academy’s regular teachers were in attendance. Most of them were spread along the back wall. Only Beth, Mrs Granger and Madam Longbottom were positioned closer to the front, bracketing a sheet-covered something that no-one had been able to get a peek underneath of.

“In order to facilitate an impression of respectability,” Headmistress McGonagall continued, “Professors Pemberton, Granger and Longbottom, in conjunction with a number of your parents, have designed a uniform that you will all be required to wear while we are away from Potter Haven or at any other official functions. Ladies?”

At her invitation, the three women moved to replace Headmistress McGonagall at the front, Madam Longbottom levitating the sheet-covered display to join them.

“Good afternoon, everyone,” Mrs Granger began with what looked to be a nervous but excited smile. “As Headmistress McGonagall indicated, we have here a new uniform for Diricawl Academy that we’d like to present you with. So, without further ado, I give you your new uniforms!”

An easy swish and wave from Madam Longbottom’s wand wafted the sheet upwards before it vanished. When Harry next blinked, he saw a pair of mannequins, male and female, displaying the uniforms.

Both were very similar, apart from the long skirt on the female mannequin. A dark green robe, with a silver clasp at the throat and the golden badge of Diricawl Academy on the cloak’s left breast was the first and most noticeable piece of clothing. The skirt and long pants were both jet black, matching the rich dragon-hide boots. A white button-up shirt, topped with a forest green tie with slim golden diagonal strips completed the outfit.

Mounted on a board to the side were the optional accessories: a sweater vest done up in a matching green as the cloak, the Diricawl logo on its left breast; a green and gold scarf; black gloves with dark green edging around the cuffs; beanies in either dark green with gold trim or gold with dark green trim; and lastly, a pair of black stockings that Harry hoped were aimed at the girls.

As Harry leaned forward to get a better look, he noted the excited whispers breaking out around him.

“As you can see, we’ve tried to keep it fairly close to what you already know, just with some colouring differentiations that more match our school,” Mrs Granger stated.

“We’re also considering having some book-bags in Diricawl’s colours and with our logo on the flap made up,” Beth commented, “but they won’t be ready before we go next week.”

“The main uniform that you can see on the mannequins will be required for each of you,” Madam Longbottom instructed. “I would suggest that you each get a minimum of three. The accessories will be by personal preference.”
Running his eyes over the display board again, he knew that he’d be getting one of everything, except the stockings, of course. And probably even a beany in each colour. Glancing to either side of him, he suspected that he wouldn’t be the only one.

“Before we can order what uniform parts that you’d like, we’ll need to get your measurements,” Mrs Granger stated.

Her comment was obviously a cue for the house elves, for Dobby, Jaxom and Nerri popped in in front of her. Harry blinked hard at the sight of them before he broke into a wide smile. Each elf was adorned in a miniature Diricawl uniform, although Dobby had made some typical alterations to his. Instead of the traditional black pants, his were more like black cargo pants with at least half a dozen pockets that Harry could see. And instead of a beany on his head, Dobby had a new dark green beret with the gold Diricawl badge on the front.

A stray thought shot Harry’s hand up.

“Harry?” Beth asked.

“Can I get pants like Dobby’s instead of the normal ones?” he asked.

“And we’d like a beret like he has as well,” Susan piped up, indicating herself, Hannah and Lil.

The three women looked back and forth between each other while seemingly holding a silent conversation.

“I don’t think that that would be a problem,” Mrs Granger shrugged. “We’ll just have to add it to the order form for those who’d like it.”

A sharp snap of Dobby’s fingers preceded him looking up at the three women with a massive grin on his face and waving the sheaf of parchment in his hand. “Dobby has done that for you, Mrs Mione’s Mum.”

“Thank you, Dobby,” she replied with her eyes closed.

Harry grinned to himself, knowing that Mrs Granger was still trying to get Dobby to stop calling her that and failing abysmally at it.

“As you can see, Dobby has the forms and Jaxom and Nerri are ready to take your measurements,” Beth informed them all. “So, come on, hop to it. The sooner we get this done, the sooner we can get the order in and you can have your new uniforms.”

Jumping to his feet, Harry noticed lines already forming in front of Jaxom and Nerri. Instead, he went to collect his form from Dobby, pulling a pen from his pocket as he did so.

-oOoOo-

Sirius Black peered up from his bowed head and grinned. For once he was actually taking a meal at the dining table instead of hunkering over a plate perched precariously on his knee.

For more than three weeks, he’d been almost constantly locked up in the shed that he’d had the elves build for him – there’d even been many a night when he’d ended up falling asleep on a transfigured camp bed off to one side. But it was his own fault really. Oh, and Dan’s. Well, sort of. At least, Dan could be blamed as being the one to first come up with the idea.

But it had been Sirius who had declared with too much of his usual arrogance that it’d be easy to
charm the thing to hell and back. And, admittedly, it was. The only problem was with how big the thing was, not to mention that he’d had to add so many space expansion charms and then furnishings. Just the thought of what he’d had to do sent a shudder through him. Give him a bike any day.

The one big advantage of spending so much time locked away in the shed was that it got him away from the kids. They’d been constantly pestering him for details on what he was doing. At first, the Marauder in him had loved the secrecy and playing with their questions, giving them nonsensical answers. But the more that time passed, and the closer it got to the day that they’d have to leave, the less fun it’d been having to answer all of those questions.

The problem wasn’t so much the work itself, or even what he knew was going to be the end result. No, what had Sirius seriously worried had been the timeframe. He simply didn’t want to let them all down and he’d begun to worry that he’d bitten off more than he could chew. Thankfully, though, his worries had been unfounded. They were due to leave tomorrow afternoon and his project was now finally complete.

Peering up through the bangs of his hair where he was bowed over his bowl of porridge, Sirius, Padfoot of the Marauders, surveyed his vic … er, tablemates. As expected, even without saying anything, he was the centre of attention.

Harry was pointedly staring at him while holding a conversation with Neville, who also just happened to be sitting directly across the table from Sirius so that he didn’t even have to turn his head to watch him. The three younger boys were constantly shooting glances at him, to the extent that at least two of them had their eyes trained on him at all times. Lil and Fiona had their heads bent together, whispering about something while looking in his direction.

Even Hermione couldn’t seem to keep her eyes on her breakfast and off of him. Only Daphne and Tracey, the two ex-Slytherins, seemed to be ignoring Sirius’ presence at the table, but he could tell that it was a feigned ignorance – the slightest movement from him caused their heads to jerk as though they had to stop themselves from spinning around to stare at him.

And then there were his fellow adults at the table.

Minerva had her lips thinned so much that it almost looked as though they’d disappeared, while her eyes were fixated upon his dark head. It was almost like being back in school again, only without James and Peter around to run interference for one of their pranks. For a fraction of a second, Sirius wondered about the wisdom of refusing to tell the Headmistress what he’d been up to. It seemed that only assuring her that ‘their transportation was all taken care of’ might not have been enough.

Moony had been the only one not to ask him what he was creating. Sirius figured that he’d recognised a prank in the works and simply decided to leave it be. Right now, he was innocently sipping a cup of tea, but inside, Sirius knew that he’d been dying to know as well.

Lifting his head, Sirius reached for his own cup before pausing with it half-way to his mouth.

“Minerva,” he said, stopping all conversation in the room as heads up and down the table whipped towards him. “Minerva, I was wondering how you’d feel about a late start to lessons today?”

“If it is for the reason that I sincerely hope that it is, then I have no problem with it,” she replied, her eyes flashing to indicate that it better jolly well be for the reason that she thought it was.

A touch of a smile curved Sirius’ lips before he could contain it. “I thought that, if anyone was interested, I could show them how we’re getting to Hogwarts, now that I’ve finally finished it.”
An excited babble broke out around him, including an ‘about time’ from Harry.

“Straight after breakfast then,” Minerva declared.

Instantly fourteen chairs shot backwards as every single one of Diricawl’s students jumped from the table.

“We’re done,” they declared as one.

Sirius grinned at the exuberant expressions around the room. Draining the last of his tea, Sirius calmly wiped his mouth with his napkin before also rising.

“If you’ll excuse me, then, I’ll just go and see if Dan’s free. He really should be here for the grand unveiling, after all,” he stated before nonchalantly strolling from the room.

A quick call later using the charmed mirrors that Sirius had given Dan so that they could keep in contact produced a pair of bodies materialising in the reception room right in front of him. After so many portkey rides to and from the manor, both Emma and Dan now knew exactly how to land lightly on their feet.

“I take it today’s the day?” Dan asked.

“Yes,” Sirius grinned.

“About bloody time, you two. Do you have any idea how hard it’s been pretending that I had no idea what you’ve been up to?” Emma groused.

“And whose fault is that?” Dan retorted. “Hopefully now you’ve learnt an important lesson about snooping through my computer’s history tab.”

Emma’s scowl and slap to her husband’s arm was so similar to an action that Sirius had seen so many times around the manor that he couldn’t help but let loose with his barking laugh.

“Come on, let’s get to the unveiling before this woman turns me black and blue,” Dan said playfully as he attempted to dance his way out of his wife’s reach.

-oOoOo-

Fred and George Weasley shuffled into place outside the castle. The whole school was in attendance, from the students to the professors and even the ghosts, although they could hardly be seen in the late afternoon sunlight. The only resident of the castle missing was Peeves, a decision deemed appropriate by unanimous decision.

All of the students had been split up into their Houses and then formed into lines, from the first years in the front to the seventh years at the back. Two Houses stood to either side of the stairs leading to the great doors of the castle, a pathway lined with prefects and the Head Boy and Girl waiting for the visitors to enter. At the very front of the assembly stood Headmaster Dumbledore, resplendent in sparkling silver robes patterned with golden shooting stars whizzing around the hemline.

To the twins’ left was there friend Lee Jordan, while to their right was stood Angelina Johnson and Alicia Spinnet. Katie Bell, their fellow member of the Gryffindor quidditch team, had managed to snag a place right in front of them in the fifth year’s row. The row in front of that, designated for the Gryffindor fourth years, was the smallest row in the entire school consisting of just five people.
And that was a major part of what was causing the twins’ excitement.

Life at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry was never dull, especially when you were the Masters of Pranking, the Heirs of the Marauders, the fun-filled fiends full of frankly outlandish fun. But even the mayhem that they were able to pull on their best day was nothing compared to Harry Potter. And worse yet, he did it without even trying!

Ever since the day that Harry had arrived at Hogwarts as a first year, he caused a certain buzz. Events happened and piled up, all centred around The-Boy-Who-Lived. Even when he ditched school the year before – a feat that the twins wished they had the guts to follow – he’d still been causing mayhem around the castle.

And then he, along with thirteen of his closest friends, had left to start up their own school. A school that, by rights, Fred and George should have been at as well. Their mother, of course, had put her foot down on that one. Even to this day, the twins wished that they’d been able to take that invitation to the father before their mother had found out about it.

But now, today, their younger friends were about to return to Hogwarts.

The day that Dumbledore had announced that Diricawl Academy had accepted the invitation to come to Hogwarts to watch the TriWizard Tournament, both Fred and George had had only one thing on their mind – getting a chance to talk to Harry and getting out of Hogwarts. And if they could wing it, they’d be taking Lee, Angelina, Alicia and Katie with them.

Diricawl, they’d decided, would be a much better place for them: there was no quidditch this year, and even if there was, with Oliver having just graduated and no Harry anchoring the seeker position, it simply wouldn’t have been the same.

One of the very best teachers had left Hogwarts to become Headmistress alongside not one but two of the original gods of pranking themselves, leaving behind an even more out-of-control greasy git. If that wasn’t bad enough, Professor Burbage, the Muggle Studies teacher, had become Head of Gryffindor and while the twins had nothing against the woman, there was no way that she’d ever be able to stand up to Snape.

No, as far as they were concerned, the sooner that they were out of Hogwarts the better. And, if the amount of excitement that was generated in the Great Hall when Dumbledore announced that the school that Harry Potter had founded was coming, they suspected that they wouldn’t be the only ones wanting to have a word with Harry.

“There!” a voice crying out from somewhere in the Ravenclaw lines interrupted the gentle jostling that was happening between Fred, George and Lee as they attempted to get their surprise ready for Harry and the others.

Looking up and around, Fred followed the fingers that were lifting throughout the students to point at a dark spot in the sky.

“It’s a dragon!” a little Hufflepuff first year screeched.

“Be cool if it is,” George commented.

“Pity Hagrid’s not still here, he would have loved that,” Lee agreed.

With the three of them now sorted out, Fred and George were able to concentrate more fully on the speck in the sky that was no longer a speck. Instead, a dozen giant winged horses appeared to be pulling a pale blue carriage the size of a small house.
As they watched slack-jawed, the horses swerved across the sky before sinking lower and lower until, with a thump that shook the very ground that they were standing upon, the horses touched down. As they raced across the lawn, the enormous wheels of the carriage hit the ground behind them, bounced once, twice and finally settled.

The front two rows of the assembled students pulled backwards into the rows behind as the carriage continued to roll towards them. Finally, the horses came to rest, stopping with the door to the carriage perfectly lined up with the path to the front doors of the castle.

By the time that Fred and George had manoeuvred to see through the heads in front of them, the door to the carriage had been opened, gilded golden steps had appeared and the largest woman that either of them had ever seen before was standing surveying the crowd.

“Whoa, that’s one big woman,” Lee stated sotto voice.

Fred and George could only nod in agreement.

After sharing some words with Dumbledore that no one in the sixth year rows could hear, the large woman turned and lifted one enormous arm towards the carriage. That was obviously the cue for those inside as a dozen or so boys and girls, all obviously in either sixth or seventh year, emerged.

“Reckon they’re going to be a bit cold if that’s all they brought to wear,” Fred commented, eying the flimsy looking pale blue uniform that the foreigners were wearing.

“I don’t know, brother, I can think of a few benefits to there being some cold witches that need warming up,” George grinned, before nearly doubling over after the elbow to the ribs that Angelina delivered.

“I was only joking,” he wheezed up at her.

“No more jokes like that or it could be you who needs the warming,” she retorted.

“Yes, dear,” he retorted, ignoring the grin that his brother was giving him.

By this time, the students from Beauxbatons Academie of Magic, along with their Headmistress, had disappeared inside the castle.

“Hope we don’t have to wait too long,” Katie commented a few minutes later, “that wind is kinda cold.”

“There! The lake! Look at the lake!” Lee interjected before anyone could reply.

The usually smooth black surface of the lake had suddenly become filled with great swirls of water out in the middle of it. Something was obviously happening under its surface and, a minute or so later, what that was was revealed.

A long, black pole began to rise from the depths of the lake.

“That’s a ship’s mast!” Alicia exclaimed.

And sure enough, a great sailing ship broke through the surface before slowly beginning to glide towards the dock. But this was no ordinary sailing ship – it was straight out of the depths of a story about Davy Jones’ Locker. Tatty remnants of black cloth hung from each of the three masts and seaweed and barnacles clung to its sides. It honestly looked as though it had been sitting at the bottom of the ocean for the last hundred years and had only surfaced under great protest.
As they watched, people began coming up onto its deck from below before disembarking onto the dock. Each of the dozen or so people appeared to be big and bulky, the smallest easily out-muscling even Flint, the largest of the Slytherin trolls. It wasn’t until they were closer that Fred and George realised that their size was more due to the enormous fur cloaks that they were all wearing.

The group paused at the front for the Headmaster of Dumstrang Institute to talk with Dumbledore before they, too, began to walk up the path between the students of Hogwarts.

“That’s Krum!” a whispered voice exclaimed.

Soon dozens of voices were whispering the same thing. Fred and George shared a look – they’d both recognised the star seeker from when they’d seen him in the Minister’s box at the Quidditch World Cup Final.

“Well, that just leaves Harry,” George commented once the second set of foreigners had joined their counterparts inside the castle.

“I don’t think we’re going to have long to wait,” Fred commented, pointed out something that he’d just noticed. “Look!”

Heads in their general area swivelled towards the hills on the far side of the Black Lake. There, twin pinpoints of light highlighted what Fred had spotted on the darkening hillside.

A darkish blur sped down the hillside, zigging and zagging from side to side like some mad shalom skier. Occasionally clumps of trees hid the lights making the watchers have to guess where it would next be seen. A larger blur emerged onto the flatter ground next to the lake before zooming off along the water’s edge.

As the craft had edged closer, a dull humming noise had increased to a deep thrumming. This, though, changed to a slightly higher note when the object veered sharply towards them and out into the Black Lake. Gasps were heard throughout the student population as everyone expected whatever it was to simply sink under the water.

Their assumptions, though, were wrong. The craft, which had now taken on hints of gold along its edges, settled on top of the water before rapidly increasing speed. Its bow lifted ever so slightly as it ploughed over the water, leaving great swirls of water behind it.

Suddenly, the setting sun hit it as it emerged out of the shadows.

Fred’s jaw dropped as he beheld the … object. A small house-like compartment painted a deep forest green and edged in gleaming gold sat high above a curtain of the deepest black. Dark smoky windows covered a large part of its front as well as down each side. At its back, two huge metal circles sat high above the house-like structure.

Tearing his gaze from … it …, Fred checked in with his brother. It was obvious by the expression of wonder on his face that he had no idea what it was either.

Fred managed to look back in time to see the craft approaching the shoreline closest to the castle. At first, he assumed that it would simply stop at the dock next to the Durmstrang’s sailing ship. Instead, though, the thing sped up. Its thrum deepened once again as it moved effortlessly from the surface of the water to the grass covered lawn.

The craft slowed as it approached the gathered students before spinning a complete one eighty and stopping right in front of them. Fred blinked and then broke out into a massive grin at the sight of
the great golden diricawl clutching a quill painted against the forest green background of its door.

“I don’t believe it,” Katie whispered, shaking her head.

“What? What is it?” Angelina asked.

“A hovercraft. They came in a freaking hovercraft,” Lee, the only other muggle-born in hearing, answered for her.

Fred and George had no idea what a ‘hovercraft’ was. But it didn’t matter to them, there was only one appropriate response.

“Wicked!” they grinned at each other.

Harry only just managed to stop his eyes from rolling. Minerva had said the same thing, in a dozen different ways, more times than he could count in the past hour. It was simply nerves, he knew, something that he suspected most of them were experiencing, including him. This was going to be the first time he’d been back to the castle in sixteen months and the first time that he’d seen many of his friends since then as well.

At the Headmistress’ nod, Jaxom pressed the button beside the hovercraft’s main door. The late afternoon sun streamed in through the gap causing Harry to blink profusely. A break in the sunlight indicated Minerva exiting. She was quickly followed by Remus before the students of Diricawl Academy began their egress. Sirius and Madam Longbottom, he knew, would be bringing up the rear. Extra eyes would be provided by Jaxom and Dobby who had both been instructed to remain invisible.

Harry emerged onto the upper deck of the forest green hovercraft beside Hermione, his staff clicking on the metal deck with each step that he took. Around him, his friends shifted sidewards, allowing a path to form to the stairs. Taking the hint, Harry stepped forward.

A sharp whizzing sound split the air, quickly followed by two more and Harry looked up in concern. Streaks of light shot high above the castle before triple simultaneous explosions erupted. Harry’s lips curled upwards at the sight of the … unique fireworks display. Two enormous green and gold birds soared through the sky. Their wings were short and dumpy, and their squat beaks playfully snapped away at the dancing letters that had appeared between them.

“The twins?” Harry guessed to Hermione, indicating the message above.

**WE MISS YOU! TAKE US TOO?**

For a few more minutes, he blocked the stairs, allowing everyone to watch the antics of the flying diricawls, then, finally noting Minerva’s gesture, he led the way down to the awaiting Hogwarts students.

“Ah, Minerva, how lovely to see you. Welcome home,” Dumbledore cooed, spreading his arms wide.

“Albus,” Minerva nodded. “Thank you for inviting us.”

“My pleasure, my pleasure,” Dumbledore smiled, his bright blue eyes twinkling away behind his half-moon spectacles. “We have quarters prepared for you all, unless the students would like to re-join their Housemates?”

With her back to him, Harry could only guess at the thinness of his Headmistress’ lips. The icy cold tone, though, left no doubt as to her feelings right then.

“As I told you in my last letter, we have our own accommodations. And, as the students now attend Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies, they can no longer be classified as being Housemates to any student of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. If you are going to persist in this foolishness, then we will simply board our hovercraft and go home this instant!”

“I assure you I meant no offence,” the grandfatherly voice of Albus Dumbledore replied. “I was
only thinking of the children and how they must miss their friends and how they might like a chance to spend some time with them while they are here.”

“That is what meals and time outside the castle is for,” Minerva countered. “No Diricawl student will set foot in any of the private common rooms of Hogwarts. Now, if you’re finished trying to get us to go where we do not wish to go, we would be delighted to enter the castle. I see that Maxine and Igor are already here?”

“Yes, yes, they arrived just before you made your most spectacular entrance,” Dumbledore replied, before indicating the path between the students leading to the front doors of the castle.

Harry allowed the others to pull ahead so that he could speak to Sirius.

“I’m even more convinced that this is a bad idea,” Harry stated.

“You may be right, Harry,” Sirius mused. “I think that I’ll be recommending that we don’t come back to see the tasks if Dumbledore’s going to keep on like he’s already started.”

Harry nodded his head, breathing a sigh of relief. Simply the thought of two nights and a day in the castle had him on edge but at least now there was hope that that would be it.

Faces waving and smiling at him lined the path that led to the castle doors and he made sure to take the time to wave back. Two, though, were never going to be content with just a wave.

“Harry!” Fred and George Weasley exclaimed, arms opened wide.

“Hey guys,” Harry smiled, moving close.

Simultaneously, the twin red-headed menaces reached forward and pulled him into a massive hug, one that was quickly joined by three girls, a beaming Lee Jordan standing off to the side. Being surrounded by his old quidditch team again made Harry burst into laughter.

“Harry, it’s so good to see you again,” Katie Bell grinned.

“I’ve missed you all as well,” Harry replied, stepping out of the group hug. “Loved the fireworks.”

Twin maniacal grins erupted. “Enough to take us with you when you leave?”

Darting his eyes around, Harry noticed a massive number of people hanging on his answer. “We’ll talk about it later.”

“Potter,” a voice that Harry instantly recognised interrupted. “I suggest that you move along. No one else can enter the castle until all of our visitors are all inside.”

Turning, Harry found Professor Snape looming behind him. Harry had to blink twice to confirm that the sneer that he’d habitually worn during his two years in the castle was missing.

Not wanting to be the cause of it making a reappearance, he did the only thing that he could.

“Certainly, Professor,” he replied. “See you guys inside.”

Lengthening his stride, Harry hurried past the remaining students and up the stairs into the castle. There, milling about in the Entrance Hall, he found a sea of green.

“Looks like the Beauxbatons lot are sitting at the Ravenclaw table and the group from Durmstrang are at the Slytherin table,” Neville stated. “Which table do we want to sit at?”
“Anyone have a problem with the Gryffindor table?” Harry asked, looking around at his friends.

Headshakes all around settled Harry’s stomach. Between them, the ex-Hogwarts students had members from all of the Houses and it was conceivable that some would have wanted to catch up with their old friends. But it’d been pressed into them quite forcefully that they were to stick together as much as possible by all of the Diricawl adults.

Leading the pack, Harry settled them near the middle of the elongated Gryffindor table. Just as they finished sorting themselves out, a sea of black swept into the room. Bodies were jostled among the Gryffindors as they worked out who was going to get to sit closest to the green-robed Diricawls. In the end, it was the quidditch team who took their left and a grouping of Colin’s old year-mates on their right.

Talk had barely begun before it was interrupted by Dumbledore standing at the great eagle-winged, golden podium in front of the teacher’s table.

“Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, ghosts and – most particularly – guests!” he beamed. “I have great pleasure in welcoming you all here to Hogwarts. I hope and trust that for those of you staying here, it will be both comfortable and pleasurable.

“The Tournament will be officially opened at the end of the feast, so, for now, we will content ourselves with introducing those who are supping with us tonight. May I present Madam Olympe Maxine, Headmistress of Beauxbatons Academie of Magic and her students who are hoping to become their Champion.”

The largest woman that Harry had ever seen rose from her chair and gave a short bow. The instant that she’d started to move, the dozen or so teens in sky blue uniforms shot to their feet and remained standing until their Headmistress had resumed her seat. Madam Maxine, Harry decided, had to be at least as tall as Hagrid, if not even taller. Idly, he wondered what his first friend would have thought of her if he was still in the castle.

“Also here, all the way from the north and hoping for eternal glory,” Dumbledore continued after the applause for the Beauxbatons contingent had concluded, “are the students from Dumstrang Institute, along with their Headmaster, Igor Karkaroff.”

As with their fellow school, as they were introduced the students in the great grey cloaks snapped to their feet. With the warmer weather inside the Hall, most had unfastened their cloaks, revealing that a blood red uniform had been hidden underneath. Karkaroff, a tall thin man who looked to be able to challenge either Snape or Lucius Malfoy in the sneering department stood from his place and gave a short bow.

“From the Ministry of Magic, we are pleased to have with us the organisers, and co-incidentally fellow Tournament judges, Mister Bartemius Crouch, Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation and Mister Ludo Bagman, Head of Magical Games and Sports.”

Two men of contrasting looks and demeanours rose from their places near the end of the table. Where one simply nodded in acknowledgment of the polite applause, the other was beaming and waving merrily away. The dour one gave the impression that he was a stickler for the rules. Everything from his pin-striped suit to his ruler straight part in his greying hair and the tiny manicured moustache screamed that he loved to be in control.

His colleague, in contrast, wore old faded quidditch robes. If he had to guess, Harry would have said ‘beater’. This man had obviously been someone back in his day, or at least he liked to think so. Now, though, the way that the horizontal black and yellow stripes were stretched across his
paunch, it was obvious that he’d let himself go.

The Ministry positions that Dumbledore said that these two men held sounded incredibly important and Harry couldn’t tell which one he preferred to have which position. It was a shame that they weren’t introduced one at a time so that he could tell who was in charge of what.

“And lastly,” Dumbledore continued, “we would like to extend a warm welcome to the staff and students of the newest and smallest school in not only Great Britain, but also of Europe, people whom I am sure that you all remember quite fondly, Headmistress Minerva McGonagall and her students from Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies.”

As Harry, Hermione, Neville and the others rose, a thunderous applause accompanied by a pair of whistles far too close to Harry’s ear, erupted around the room. The fourteen students smiled shyly around them before quickly dropping back onto their seats.

“And now that the introductions are completed, I do believe that it is time to eat. Let the feast begin!”

And as Dumbledore waved his arms theatrically, the tables filled with plates, platters and bowls of steaming food.

“So what’s it like at Diricawl?” Angelina Johnson asked as plates were being filled.

“Really great!” Hermione replied enthusiastically, “there’re so many more subjects to learn and the smaller class sizes mean that we’re learning at a faster rate as well.”


“Magical studies, Mundane studies, beginning healing, enchanting, …” Hermione began to list.

“Wait! Enchanting? You’re learning how to enchant?” George cut in.

“Yeah,” Daphne replied. “It’s not easy but the potential is amazing.”

Fred and George’s eyes locked and Harry could see their minds whirling.

“Can you imagine …” Fred began.

“The pranking potential …” George continued.

“With enchanting added …” nodded Fred

“To what we already know?” George added.

“The sky’d be the limit!” the finished together with identical grins.

“And probably not even that, hey guys,” Harry grinned.

“I’m not too sure that I want to see what you two could come up with if you could enchant as well,” Angelina stated.

“What about quidditch? Do you have a pitch there?” Lee asked.

Harry shook his head with a grimace. “No. Got a shed full of broom and other gear, though, so it’s
not like we can’t fly when we want to.”

“We’ll have to have a pick-up game while you’re here,” Alicia stated, emphasising her point with a chicken leg.

“I bet there’d be a bunch of ‘Puffs and ’Claws who’d be interested,” Angelina agreed.

“Especially with there being no quidditch here this year,” George stated grimly.

“No quidditch? Are you serious?” Harry asked. “In that case, count me in.”

“What else is different about Diricawl?” Lee asked, changing the topic back.

“Well, we don’t really have a curfew as such,” Harry mused.

“There’s more sports that we can do,” Colin piped up. “There’s all types of balls in the shed, not to mention archery if we want to try. Oh, and the bikes for when we want to ride into town on the weekend.”

“We don’t have to wear uniforms, either,” Hermione stated.

Fred deliberately slid his eyes up and down Harry’s body before moving on to each of the other forest-green clad Diricawl students.

“You guys have a really weird idea of a relaxed dress code,” he stated dryly.

“Oh, this is the first time that we’ve ever worn these,” Hermione replied. “We had them made especially for coming here.”

“I’ve got to say, they’re a lot better than ours,” Alicia said, leaning over closer to Hermione. “Much more form fitting and the fact that it’s not straight black is really nice.”

“I wonder what it’d take to get us cute hats like those?” Katie mused, indicating the berets that all of the Diricawl contingent had chosen to wear.

“Cute?” Harry asked incredulously.

“Well, they are!” Katie shot back.

“But they look right good on you, though, Harrikins,” Fred nodded seriously.

“Almost as good as they’ll look on us, right, brother of mine?” George agreed.

“Exactly,” Fred stated before leaning in with as serious an expression on his face as Harry had ever seen. “So, back to our question from before: what do we need to do to make sure that you take us with you when you leave?”

“Hey, if you’re going to take those two idiots, then you’re taking us, too!” Alicia stated emphatically.

“And me,” Lee added.

That was the cue for a wave of Gryffindors to indicate their willingness to leave Hogwarts for the sunny pastures of Diricawl Academy. That willingness also came with numerous complaints about their current school: from greasy gits who failed to teach but made up for it with exuberantly doling out punishments; to a ghost whose only claim to fame was putting his entire class to sleep; and
what were undoubtedly others lost in the clamour of voices wanting to be heard.

After a quick, exasperated look with his fellow Diricawls, Harry raised both hands to still the Gryffindors.

“Look, guys, as much as we’d love to have you, Diricawl’s not really set up for any more students at the moment,” Harry attempted to explain. “Our school consists of my manor and it’s already pretty well packed to the rafters with all of us plus Headmistress McGonagall and Professor Lupin, not to mention that some of our other teachers often stay over as well.

“I know that McGonagall and the board are looking to find somewhere larger for us and once they do, they’ll open the school to more students. You’re just going to have to be patient if switching schools to Diricawl is really what you want to do. I think that they’re hoping to have something sorted out by the beginning of the next school year,” he finished, hoping that that would be enough to placate them.

The grumbling that sounded around them seemed to contain enough of an acceptance for Harry to assume that they wouldn’t be bugged about it again. Or, at least, not too much.

There were at least two, though, who were apparently not completely satisfied. Fred leaned in close to make sure that he wasn’t likely to be overheard.

“We got invitations, though, not like them,” he said, jerking his head at the others further down the table. “That must mean that you’ve got room for us.”

Harry was saved from having to answer that by Dumbledore moving to the podium once more and calling for attention.

The instant that the aged wizard started gathering attention, an excited buzz began sweeping through the Hall. Everyone was eagerly leaning forward, hanging on what he was about to say.

With an exaggerated sweep of Dumbledore’s hand, the golden plates, bowls, platters and silverware were instantly cleaned and left sparkling in the light of the hundreds of candles floating about the room.

“The moment has come,” Dumbledore began, smiling and twinkling at his captivated audience. “The moment has come for the TriWizard Tournament to begin. But before we bring in the casket, I would like to say a few words.”

Those words were interrupted as a susurration swept through the hall.

“Did he just say he was bringing in a casket?” Daphne asked in disbelief.

Harry could only shrug in reply. That’s what it sounded like and knowing the Headmaster like he did, nothing would greatly surprise him.

“I would like to clarify the procedure that we will be following for this year’s Tournament,” Dumbledore continued. “Each Champion will be required to compete in the Tournament and their performance will be judged by the Heads of each of the schools, along with Mister Crouch and Mister Bagman.”

This time, Harry was able to work out which one each was by the slight pause between each man rising slightly to acknowledge their part in the Tournament – Mister Crouch was the serious looking one, while Mister Bagman was the ex-quidditch star.
After a pause to sweep his gaze over the assembled crowd, Dumbledore gestured off to his right.

“The casket, then, if you please, Mister Filch.”

Harry’s head swivelled to find the old caretaker of the school wheezing heavily as he carried a great jewel-encrusted casket towards the front of the Hall. The box was obviously incredibly old.

“The instructions for each of the tasks have already been decided upon and deemed appropriate by both Mister Crouch and Mister Bagman representing the Ministry of Magic of Great Britain. All of the arrangements have been organised for each challenge. There will be three great tasks that the Champions will be required to compete in, spaced throughout the school year and are designed to test the Champions in many different ways – their magical prowess; their daring; their powers of deduction; and, of course, their ability to cope with danger.”

The silence in the hall was now absolute. A mouse scurrying inside the walls would have been easily heard by everyone, Harry was sure.

“As you know, three Champions will be selected to compete in the TriWizard Tournament – one from each of the three schools – Hogwarts, Beauxbatons and Durmstrang. They will be marked on how well they have done in each of the tasks and the Champion with the highest total after the three tasks will be declared the winner of the TriWizard Cup.

“Now, I guess, all we need now are the Champions,” Dumbledore smiled.

Stepping forward from the podium, Dumbledore tapped the side of the casket that Filch had placed on the provided table. On the third tap, the lid slowly creaked open, allowing Dumbledore to reach in. When he straightened he was holding a large, roughly hewn wooden cup. It would have been entirely unremarkable if it had not been full to the brim with dancing, blue-white flames.

After closing the casket’s lid, Dumbledore placed the cup onto the top of the casket where it was easy for everyone in the hall to see.

“Anyone wishing to submit themselves as a Champion,” Dumbledore said after stepping back behind the podium, “simply needs to write their name and school onto a piece of parchment and to drop it into the cup. Aspiring Champions will have twenty-four hours to do so, at which time the Goblet of Fire will choose those it deems worthy of the honour of becoming a TriWizard Champion.

“I must warn you, though, of the seriousness of this decision. Becoming a TriWizard Champion is not to be taken lightly. Peril awaits every Champion at every task. And entering your name constitutes you entering into a magically binding agreement. Once you are chosen, there is no backing out. To this end, the Ministry of Magic has added an extra rule to this year’s Tournament: only those who are of-age are eligible to compete in the TriWizard Tournament. No underage student will be a Champion.

“To aid in the execution of this new rule,” Dumbledore continued, “I shall be adding an Age Line around the Goblet of Fire before anyone shall be allowed to place their name within it. Please be very sure that entering is what you want to do; no change of heart later will be permitted.”

“An Age Line!” Fred exclaimed, a sentiment eagerly echoed by George and Lee.

“That’s not fair!” George continued. “We’ll be seventeen before it’s over!”

“I don’t think he’s going to change his mind for you two,” Angelina commented.
“Yeah, but it’s alright for you,” Fred retorted, “you turned seventeen last week.”

“Then you’ll know who to cheer for, won’t you?” Alicia smiled.

The twins grumbling acknowledgement of that was enough to placate the girls, but Harry was sure that there was a gleam growing in each of their eyes. He suspected that they weren’t going to take a little thing like an Age Line lightly.

“No quidditch and now no chance to become Hogwarts’ Champion,” Lee groused. “Why is it that we’re still here?”

Harry spared a look on the other side of him, eminently pleased that he’d be going back to Potter Haven with his friends where it seemed that a lot more fun was to be had. Turning his head back, Harry was forced to amend his thought: he’d be going home with most of his friends. There wasn’t much he could do about the fact that others were forced to stay somewhere they weren’t exactly enjoying.

With a sigh, he leant into Fred and George and threw them what little encouragement he could.

“Listen guys, I know that you want to come to Diricawl, but I just own the place. Your best bet is to talk to McGonagall. She’s the Headmistress. She’s the one you’ll have to convince.”
Chapter 17

A green and gold blur shot past where Hermione was sitting high in the quidditch stands, causing her to smile softly to herself. Harry’d missed this. Not that he’d ever complained or even hinted at anything of the like, but she’d known nonetheless. Flying was one thing, being up there, chasing that infernal tiny golden ball with friends, was another.

Perhaps, she mused, I should suggest to Dobby the idea of putting in some hoops somewhere in the valley. Maybe not a full-sized pitch, a small one should be good enough.

“Hermione?” Su Li asked, touching her lightly on her arm.

“Sorry, got a bit distracted there,” she replied, focussing back on the girls surrounding her.

They’d been waiting just to the side of the hovercraft that morning. When Hermione and the others had emerged, they’d found most of their old study group, or at least the ones that hadn’t come with them to Diricawl Academy, well the girls, anyway – Megan, Sally-Anne, Lisa and Su.

They’d breakfasted together in the Great Hall as they had done so many times the year before, only this time, Harry had been with them instead of being lost somewhere where they had no clue about. Before the meal had ended, the old Gryffindor Quidditch Team had descended and scooped Harry up before laughing and joking their way towards the pitch, joined as they were along the way by others who were interested in playing a pick-up game.

It hadn’t taken much for the girls to follow along. And now, here they were, sitting high above the pitch, trading stories about what life was like in their respective schools.

“Distracted, huh?” Sally-Anne asked with a knowing smile. “I wonder what by?”

“Oh, you know Hermione,” Hannah replied airily, “there’s only ever been one thing that can distract her.”

“How bad has she got it?” Lisa asked, leaning forward to so that she could talk past the girl in question.

“You remember what she used to be like?” Tracey asked, then, at the answering nods, “double it.”

“Just double? I’d say a lot more than that,” Susan argued.

“Yeah, easily ten times that much,” Daphne nodded. “You should see what it’s like around Potter Haven.”

“What are you all talking about?” Hermione interrupted, looking backwards and forwards between the girls to either side of her.

“Just how much you’re in love with Harry,” Lil stated simply.

Hermione’s mouth opened and closed with no sound coming out.

“But, I don’t…” she began.

“Sure you do, Hermione. It’s so obvious,” Tracey countered.

“What about Harry?” Megan asked.
“Oh, he’s just as in love with her,” Daphne replied with a wave of her hand, drawing attention to the green-eyed seeker flying past them at that moment.

Hermione could only smile as she saw a laughing Harry whiz past, only slowing slightly to wave at them as he did.

“See? He’s only got eyes for her,” Lil pointed out. “I doubt he even realised the rest of us were here.”

“Judging by the way Hermione’s still looking bewildered by this conversation; I’m guessing that neither of them have figured it out for themselves yet?” Lisa asked.

“Nope,” Susan replied. “Right annoying it is, too, at times.”

“But great entertainment value and gossip material,” Tracey countered.

“I’m … I’m not … I’m not in love with Harry,” Hermione began before tapering off as her eyes lost focus.

Her mind whirled back through the years, searching for all of those times that she’d been with him, trying to determine her feelings.

There was the troll in the bathroom where Harry had burst in, saving her from certain death; the way that she’d been able to figure out where he’d been hiding himself away during first year; the secrets about his home life that he’d whispered to her; finding a messy-haired boy asleep on her porch swing; the fact that he named a bookshop after her; all of the hours that she’d lain awake, worrying about him when he was on the run; learning to fly a broom together, her wrapped up in his arms as they soared through the sky; writing to him with her enchanted diary; and then seeing him get hit with that killing curse by Lucius Malfoy.

Her eyes shot wide and she stared around at the girls surrounding her. The truth of it was that they were constantly together at the manor and when they were apart, whether this year or in the past, she knew that he was always on her mind. The way he doted on her told her that he was the same way.

And then she remembered that nearly-kiss at King’s Cross Station after second year. If it hadn’t been for Dumbledore …

“I think that she’s finally starting to get it,” Hannah pointed out, amusement clear in her voice.

“Now all we have to do is get Harry to realise the same thing,” Daphne stated.

Hermione’s head shot to her friend, a slightly pleading look on her face, even if she didn’t realise it.

-oOoOo-

Minerva strolled out of the doors to the castle after lunch, with no other thought in mind than taking a stroll around the grounds. She found it slightly unnerving to be back here, a place where she’d spent over half of her life time. Memories of events past cropped up wherever she looked and a feeling of nostalgia had settled within her.

She loved Hogwarts; she knew that she always would. And she missed her friends. She’d sat up until far too late the night before, sharing more than a dram or two with Filius, Pomona, Poppy and Septima. More than just memories were traded as the educators discussed the happenings of their respective schools.
It was then that Minerva had realised that, while she missed Hogwarts, it was no longer her home. Potter Haven and the students that belonged to Diricawl Academy were her home now.

Her rambling thoughts were brought up short by the spectacle that had materialised in front of her. Twin red heads, now sporting very impressive long white beards, stood quietly together, their hands clasped behind their backs. One look at their eyes told her that they were waiting for her. And as much as she wasn’t looking forward to this conversation, she couldn’t help but laugh.

“What happened to you two?” she chuckled at her former Gryffindor cubs.

“Dumbledore’s Age Line,” Fred answered simply.

“We thought that a few drops of …”

“Aging potion would do the trick, …”

“After all, …”

“We are going to be seventeen …”

“Before the Tournament is over, …”

“But when we crossed the line, …”

“We were blasted back and given these …”

“Impressive, …”

“Stupendous, …”

“Amazing …”

“Beards,” they finished together.

“Didn’t you ask Madam Pomphrey to get rid of them for you?” Minerva asked, realising just how much she had missed twin-speak.

“Well, we could have,” George nodded.

“But why would we …”

“Want to get rid of …”

“Something that only …”

“Enhances our natural handsomeness?”

Minerva found herself laughing again and couldn’t help her next statement.

“You have no idea how I’ve missed you two,” and then she hit them with her most serious of gazes. “But if you ever repeat that, I’ll deny it and hunt you down and transfigure your brooms into flying pigs.”

Identical maniacal grins bloomed on the boys’ faces before they began bouncing ideas off of each other, ideas that only caused Minerva’s jaw to drop and her head to shake.
“A gag broom …”

“That turns into a flying pig? …”

“We’ve already got wands …”

“That turn into rubber chickens, …”

“Or haddocks. …”

“Could be a real …”

“Money spinner.”

“It’d need a lot of work, …”

“Especially to get the pig …”

“To stay in the air.”

They turned back then and bowed with a flourish. “Thanks for the idea, Professor.”

“But putting that aside for now, you’ve brought a problem to our attention that we’d be happy to help you with,” Fred stated with more seriousness than Minerva could ever remember seeing in either twin, and that counted while they were in her classroom.

“And what problem is that?” she asked.

“The fact that you miss us?” George replied happily.

“Oh?” Minerva asked, already knowing what was coming.

“Yes,” Fred nodded. “And the simple solution is for you to take us with you when you go.”

“We’ve already asked Harry,” George cut in before she could reply, “but he said that we’d have to talk to you.”

“And we know that you’ve got room for us. You did send us that invitation over the summer, after all,” Fred stated.

Minerva sighed. “I’m sorry boys; it’s just not going to be possible. Your mother has already said ‘no’.”

“But we’re sure that Dad’ll say ‘yes’,” George retorted.

“Be that as it may, is this really something that you want to challenge your mother about when she’s already put her foot down? And you are still underage, after all, no matter for how short of a time that it still is.”

Fred and George shared a look.

“What about next year, then? We’ll both be of-age then and be able to make our own decisions. Can we come to Diricawl for our last year of schooling?” George asked excitedly.

“If that is what you wish, then we’d be delighted to have you,” Minerva smiled.

“What about our friends –”
“Lee … ,”

“Angelina … ,”

“Alicia, …”

“Katie …”

“Can they come, too,” they finished hopefully.

Minerva gave a tentative nod, before raising a cautious finger. “Assuming that we’ve found new facilities by then that can house more students and if their parents give them permission.”

Twin bodies shot towards her and gave her a brief hug before stepping back.

“Thanks, Professor,” they beamed at her.

“At least we now have …”

“Something to look forward to …”

“Stuck inside these drab, …”

“Dreary walls.”

“Well, must be off, …”

“Got some people to find …”

“And good news to spread,” they finished together.

Minerva watched the two of them skip off, wondering just what the following year was going to bring and just how much she was going to regret saying what she just did.

-oOoOo-

Speculation was rife at the Gryffindor table that evening. While the feast was being eaten with gusto, names of possible Champions were bandied about, the merits of each one dissected without impunity.

Currently, the favourites seemed to be either Angelina from Gryffindor or Cedric Diggory from Hufflepuff, with Cassius Warrington from Slytherin considered too thick even be in the running.

Finally, the golden plates were magically cleaned, leaving them sparkling and all attention was centred on Dumbledore standing at the front, directly behind the Goblet of Fire.

“Well, I suspect that the Goblet of Fire is almost ready to make its decision,” Dumbledore declared, seeing that he had the Hall’s undivided attention. “I estimate only another minute or two. While we’re waiting, I would like to tell the successful Champions that when your name is called, you are to come up to the front and then go through that door.” Here he pointed to a small door to the side of the staff table. “There you will be given the instructions that you need for the first task.”

Then, in a show of great theatrics, Dumbledore took out his wand and gave it a long, slow wave across the Hall, extinguishing all of the candles except for those inside the pumpkins that were providing the appropriate Halloween-themed atmosphere. This allowed the Goblet of Fire’s blue-white light to shine even more brightly.
Everyone in the hall sat transfixed, waiting in eager anticipation for something to happen.

And then it did. The flames inside the Goblet suddenly changed to a red-gold. Sparks began to fly from the Goblet. The next moment, a long tongue of flames shot into the air, a charred piece of parchment fluttered out of it and Dumbledore reached out and snagged it before its falling arc had even begun.

“The Champion for Durmstrang Institute,” Dumbledore called out in a strong, clear voice, “will be Victor Krum!”

Excited cheers and applause which echoed around the Hall rang out for the popular Quidditch star.

Harry clapped along as the extremely confident-looking young man acknowledged the crowd with a small bow and strode confidently up the aisle. If he had to guess, Harry would have said that Krum had expected no other outcome.

As soon as Krum had disappeared through the door, the Hall grew silent once again, all awaiting the next Champion to be named.

Seconds later, a second piece of parchment was shot out of the Goblet on a long tongue of reddish-gold flames. Once again, Dumbledore caught it with ease.

“The Champion for Beauxbatons Academie of Magic will be Fleur Delacour!”

The clapping and cheering this time, while still loud, was slightly less exuberant. Harry watched as a slim girl with long silver hair rose haughtily from her seat and followed after the Dumstrang Champion.

And then the Hall descended into absolute silence. The moment had come for the final Champion to be announced – something that all Hogwarts, as well as all Diricawl students, were eagerly anticipating.

For the third time, a piece of parchment was expelled.

This time, Dumbledore paused before reading out the name, drawing out the anticipation.

“The Champion for Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry will be … Cedric Diggory!”

A roar of approval resounded from the assembled crowd, and nowhere more especially than from the Hufflepuff table. Every single one of Cedric’s housemates had jumped to their feet, clapping and cheering ecstatically. As the tall Champion began to make his way towards the Head Table and the indicated door, he was high-fived and slapped on the back so many times that Harry was sure that he was going to need Madam Pomphrey’s ministrations later to take away the bruises.

“Excellent! Excellent!” Dumbledore declared after Cedric had disappeared. “We now have our three Champions. I am sure that I can count upon you all, including the remaining students from Durmstrang and Beauxbatons and our guests from Diricawl, to give the Champions every ounce of support that you can muster. Every event will be greatly enhanced by you cheering on their efforts – ”

But Dumbledore had suddenly stopped talking and it took Harry and his friends a moment to realise that his focus was completely on the Goblet of Fire beside him.

Harry watched in wonder as the dancing blue-white flames turned the now familiar red-gold and sparks began to fly.
Beside him, Hermione’s whisper of, “oh, no,” wasn’t quite enough to take his focus away from what was happening.

Then, as had already happened three times that night, a long tongue of flames spat out a piece of parchment.

A fourth piece of parchment.

Almost automatically, Dumbledore plucked it out of the air before adjusting his spectacles to read it.

The Headmaster’s eyes scanned the room before coming to rest upon the Gryffindor Table.

“Harry Potter!”

Harry froze in place, the gasps of those around him failing to even enter his brain. A feeling of cold dread swept over him.

He’d known that something was going to happen. He’d known it and still he’d allowed himself to be brought here. Minerva, Remus, Sirius, they’d all sworn to him that nothing would happen, that him coming to Hogwarts would be perfectly safe; that they’d protect him.

And now this.

His name had just come out of that bloody cup.

“Harry Potter!” Dumbledore repeated, this time slightly louder, an edge beginning to sound in his voice with the fact that he’d had to repeat himself, something that Harry suspected he’d not had to do too many times before, and especially not here in the Great Hall of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

A nudge from his side caught his attention and he slowly turned his head to see a scared-looking Hermione staring back at him.

He looked to either side and then across the table. Every forest green clad student was staring back at him, most in open-mouthed shock, some, like Hermione, with either scared or indignant looks on their faces.

“Harry Potter!” Dumbledore basically snapped for a third time.

Ever so slowly, Harry rose from his seat at the Gryffindor table. As expected every eye from every table, from every school, not to mention all of the adults was on him.

“I didn’t enter!” he declared as loudly as possible.

This response didn’t seem to faze the Hogwarts Headmaster.

“Nevertheless, your name has come out of the Goblet, Mister Potter,” he said. “Come up the front and follow the other Champions through that door.”

His mind whirling as it attempted to find a way out of this predicament, Harry stumbled up the aisle between the Gryffindor and Ravenclaw tables.

It of course started at the Slytherin table, as Harry knew it was.

“You’re a cheat, Scarhead!” Draco Malfoy shouted across the room.
And Harry’d thought that he’d been doing so well avoiding the blonde-haired ponce since they’d arrived. Malfoy, though, was simply the catalyst. Within seconds, jeers and taunts were raining down on him from every table, including from the students wearing pale blue and blood red.

“Cheat!”

“Honourless!”

“How does such a little boy think that he’ll do any good?”

“Glory Hound!”

Once before Harry had been accused of being a liar and a glory hound. Then, it’d been leading up to his trial at the Ministry. Thinking of that, though, gave him an idea.

Stopping in front of the staff table, Harry turned so that he was facing the assembled students from four schools and pulled out his wand.

“I, Harry James Potter, do solemnly swear upon my very magic that I did not enter myself into the TriWizard Tournament. So mote it be,” he stated in as loud a voice as he could. Then, after pausing a second, he cast a *lumos*, thus proving that he still had his magic.

“Probably just got an older student or teacher to put his name in, then!”

Rolling his eyes at the anonymous voice, Harry once more lifted his wand.

“I, Harry James Potter, do solemnly swear upon my very magic that I did not ask, coerce, trick or dupe any person of legal age to enter my name into the Goblet of Fire. I further swear that I have absolutely no knowledge of how my name got into the Goblet of Fire or how it came out of it. So mote it be.”

“Satisfied?” he glared after proving that he still had his magic by once again lighting the tip of his wand.

“As interesting as your pronouncements are, Harry, I shall, once again, ask you to join your fellow Champions in the room provided,” Dumbledore stated in a grandfatherly-type voice.

“No. I will not compete!” Harry forcefully declared.

“You heard Mister Potter’s vow, Albus!” Minerva stated from where she now stood behind her chair. “He did not enter his name! He will not be competing!”

“The boy’s name came out of the Goblet of Fire,” Mister Crouch stated simply. “He is now a part of a magically binding contract. He must compete.”

“No!” Harry growled.

“He will not!” Minerva stated at the same time, emphasising her point with a slap to the table.

“You heard them, Barty; Harry will not be competing!” Sirius added, jumping to his feet so forcefully that his chair was sent skidding backwards before toppling to the floor.

Now Mister Crouch was on his feet as well. “The boy will compete! His name came out of the Goblet of Fire. He is a Champion. If he fails to compete, then it is deemed that he has broken the rules of the Tournament. And the penalty for breaking the rules of the TriWizard Tournament is losing your magic.”
Harry turned his piercing eyes on the man, not realizing that they were beginning to glow a dull green.

“That’s bollocks! You’re saying that just because my name came out of that thing, even when I didn’t put it in there that I have to compete or I’m going to lose my magic?”

“That is correct,” Mister Crouch replied. “Those are the rules.”

“Hang on,” Harry said, having to raise his voice over those of the Diricawl teachers. “Let me get this straight. If I break any of the rules of the Tournament, then I lose my magic?”

Crouch nodded his head. “Correct.”

“Every single rule?” Harry persisted.

“Yes,” a now clearly exasperated Crouch replied.

“If I don’t compete, then I lose my magic because my name came out of the Goblet of Fire?” Harry continued.

“For the last time, yes!” Crouch near-growled.

Harry nodded. “Okay, just one more question then. Wasn’t there a rule saying that only of age students are allowed to compete in the TriWizard Tournament?”

This time Crouch’s eyes narrowed. “That rule was added to this year’s Tournament, yes.”

“Well then,” Harry continued, the menace clear in his voice for all to hear. “I’m not ‘of age’, am I? Therefore, by your very own rules, if I compete, I’ll be breaking the rules, won’t I?”

Gasps were heard around the Great Hall, particularly from the Ravenclaw table where those smart enough to figure out what Harry was driving at had already reached the same conclusion that he had.

“I’m sorry, Harry, but you must compete,” Dumbledore broke into the debate after so long being silent.

“But the rules say that if I compete, because I’m not ‘of age’, then I’ll lose my magic,” Harry snapped, rounding on the aged wizard. “Seems to me that I’m damned if I do and I’m damned if I don’t!”

A pin could have been heard throughout the Hall as everyone waited on the decision that was about to be made.

“Well then,” Harry continued. “Since I’m going to lose my magic whether I compete or not, then I choose … not!”

Before the spluttering judges could form a coherent reply, Harry rounded on the Head of Magical Games and Sports.

“So when is this First Task supposed to take place?”

“November twenty-four,” Ludo Bagman replied automatically.

“Well, I guess that that’s when I’ll lose my magic then,” Harry replied. “Three and a half weeks’, huh? Not much point sticking around here then is there? If that’s all the time I’ve got left to enjoy
my magic, then I’m going to go somewhere where I can enjoy using it.”

Then, whirling about, Harry began striding up the aisle towards the exit. The hasty scraping of benches told him that his friends were following; the rapid footsteps from directly behind indicated that the adults were hot on their heels.
The owl was expected, its arrival bringing a sigh of relief to the man waiting to take its burden. It was never good to keep the Master waiting and his eagerness to hear this news had not produced a… comfortable evening for the man.

After taking the piece of parchment, the man released the owl to hunt, after all, a response might well need to be sent. And if it happened to be bad news, then even the most stupid of people knew that owls couldn’t fly when they were dead.

The man indulged himself for a minute, savouring the clear, evening air. For after all, if it was bad news, then the Master would need someone to punish. Finally, he turned, deliberately retracing his steps.

More times than he could count, he’d wanted to run, disappear from here and reappear … elsewhere, a place where he could begin to recover what he’d once been. Not that he could ever completely do that. Even his once fine distinguished features were no longer. His platinum hair was longer, dirtier and more tangled than it had ever been in his life. Likewise, his once proud features were now marred by a long ugly scar that ran from the middle of his left cheek up and past what remained of his ear.

“News, my slippery friend?” the high waspish voice asked lightly the instant that he stepped into the dank, dingy room.

“Indeed, Master,” the man replied, sketching a bow.

“Read it to me,” he was instructed.

Opening the parchment, the man skimmed it, hoping for a clue as to his fate this evening. It seemed to bode well, but one never could completely be sure.

“The cup did as expected. The boy, though, has refused to compete. If he doesn’t, I’m assured that he’ll lose his magic. We’ll know for certain on the twenty-fourth.”

Silence stretched between Master and servant until sweat had broken out on the man’s forehead.

“Not ideal, but more than acceptable,” the Master finally stated. “Monitor the situation, closely.”

“Yes, My Lord,” the man bowed in obedience.

-oOoOo-

Harry Potter was in a rage. A blind towering rage that needed an outlet. And he was not shy in giving voice to his thoughts and feelings. Only the strong silencing charms that Sirius had placed on every room within the Dircawl hovercraft and then upon the hovercraft in its entirety stopped the castle beyond their doors from hearing every word that he vented.

“You promised me! You promised me that I’d be safe! Nothing will happen, you said. We’ll be there, you said! There’s no way that Dumbledore will ever be allowed to get anywhere near you, you said!”

Harry spun about the lounge room, piercing each of the adults in the room with his gaze. And every single one of them dropped their eyes from meeting his shining green eyes. Magic swirled
around him, but he didn’t care, he had no intention of reining it in.

“And now look what’s happened! Some stupid, bloody cup has spat my name out! Did I put my name in it? N-ooo. Not that that means anything anyway. Every bloody thing always seems to happen to me and it’s that bloody stupid crooked nosed wizard that’s always there when it does.

“So now what? Instead of staying and challenging the decision, you’ve all followed me back here! How’s that supposed to help me? You should be up there, getting me out of this bloody stupid Tournament!

“I tell you now, I’m not competing. No matter what it means, what it costs, I’m not going to play to their tune!”

He was on a roll now, so much so that the whispered conversation taking place on the sofa to his right didn’t even penetrate his consciousness.

“Can you feel the waves of energy rolling off of him?” Lil asked. “I had no idea Harry was that powerful.”

“Yes, but if he doesn’t calm down soon, then I’m betting that there won’t be much left of our new hovercraft,” Susan agreed.

“You best do something, Hermione,” Tracey said, nudging said girl in the side.

“Me? What am I supposed to do?” she whispered incredulously. “I’ve never seen Harry so angry before. I’ve got no idea what’d make him calm down.”

“He’ll calm for you, Hermione,” Susan smirked.

“What? How?” she retorted, staring at the strawberry blonde.

Another nudge from Tracey, turned her around. “Go and calm him down. And if you need inspiration, just remember our conversation from this afternoon.”

After staring at her friend for longer than she knew, Hermione gathered herself and stood up. Nervously, she stepped towards him.

“Harry?” she tried.

Her voice was enough to get him to turn slightly towards her, although his tirade and wild, gesturing hands never ceased.

“I want whoever put my name in that bloody Goblet to pay!” Harry was near-growling. “Let them play whatever stupid game they’ve got cooked up!”

“Harry!” Hermione tried again, with similar results.

“Surely the damned tin pot can tell the difference between the person putting the piece of paper in it and a different person’s name being on that paper,” Harry continued.

Refusing to look back at the girls who she knew would be staring at her, most likely with smirk-like expressions, Hermione took a deep breath. Then, before she could rationalise her way out of it, she stepped forward, grabbed Harry’s head with both of her hands and kissed him.

Harry froze, not as though a bucket of cold water had been thrown over him, but more like he’d just been dumped into the Artic Sea. In the middle of winter. His eyes widened as those warm, moist
lips pressed against his own. Slowly, his eyes closed and his arms reached out to lightly clasp her waist. And then, just when he was starting to think about kissing this wonderful girl back, Hermione took half a step back.

“You kissed me,” Harry croaked, blinking in astonishment at his best friend.

“Yes,” she returned with a small smile, her chocolate brown eyes locked onto his own. “You needed to calm down. Your magic was getting out of control and you were liable to perform some accidental magic.”

“You kissed me,” Harry repeated, this time with the beginnings of a goofy grin forming on his face.

“Yes, and that’s something for us to talk about later,” she smiled. “Now, it’s time to decide what we’re going to do about the mess that you’ve gotten yourself into this time.”

“I didn’t get myself into any mess,” he retorted, his brows instantly coming together. “It always simply happens to me.” His expression changed then, softening, “but I like the idea of talking about what just happened between us later.”

“Good,” she replied.

“Now why didn’t I think of that?” Sirius mused, clearly amused with Hermione’s way of calming his godson down.

“Because I suspect if you kissed Harry like that, his uncontrolled magic would have turned you into a flobberworm,” Moony retorted.

Sirius grimaced. “Yeah, you’re probably right. Just like Lily and James, though. Backwards, of course.”

Remus nodded. “You’re right. It was only James that could calm Lily’s fiery temper, assuming that it wasn’t James that caused it in the first place, of course.”

The entrance of four people brought the Marauder’s nervous banter to a halt and caused the two teens in the centre of the room to turn away from staring at each other.

The first through the door was Madam Bones, her red auror robes crisp. She took in the room at a glance, before focussing first on Susan and then on Harry and Hermione. Right behind her was a Julius Tentridge. Harry blinked at that, not expecting his lawyer to turn up, but the instant that he thought about it, he knew that it made immense sense and he felt a modicum of tension leave him.

If the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and his personal lawyer helped Harry feel as though there was hope for the situation, then the final two people that walked through the door almost had him sagging in relief. The sight of two goblins, especially when one of them was Slipshard, his account manager, was welcome indeed. Harry didn’t know who the second goblin was, but he assumed that, with the Goblet of Fire being goblin made, then he could be some sort of expert.

“Thank you for coming so quickly,” Minerva said, rising from her couch.

Harry quirked an eyebrow at his Headmistress.

Thankfully, she seemed to know exactly what he was asking.
“While you were burning off some of your anger,” she said, “I contacted some people who I thought might be able to help. Hopefully now when we confront Albus and the others responsible for this fiasco, we’ll be able to hear ourselves talk instead of just you yelling.”

Harry gave a nod in response. Initially, he’d had the urge to apologise for the way that he’d been carrying on, but, on second thought, he wasn’t sorry in the slightest. It’d felt good to finally be able to vent for once. And even better to be cooled off in such a wonderful way.

“I take it something happened at the choosing ceremony?” Amelia asked.

“Indeed,” Minerva replied, before giving a recap of the night’s events so that everyone was on the same page. “This evening the Champions for the TriWizard Tournament were picked. What was most unexpected was the fact that there happened to be four Champions chosen, with Harry being that fourth.”

“I’m assuming that you did not enter your name for consideration into this Tournament?” Julius asked Harry.

Harry shook his head emphatically. “No way. I even took a couple of magical vows to that effect in the Great Hall in front of everybody, about the fact that I didn’t put my name into the Goblet or ask anyone else to put my name into it.”

“What has complicated matters greatly is the fact that the Ministry has added an extra rule for this year’s Tournament,” Minerva continued, “the rule that only ‘of-age’ wizards and witches are eligible to compete in the Tournament.”

The low growl from the unknown goblin barely caused her to pause.

“And as Harry so eloquently pointed out earlier, the penalty for breaking any of the rules of the Tournament is the loss of one’s magic and his name coming out means that if he competes, as an underage wizard, he’ll lose his magic. Conversely, because he is an underage wizard, he shouldn’t compete and not doing so will also mean that he will lose his magic.”

“And this is why humans should not tamper with goblin enchantments,” that same goblin groused.

“This is Darkness,” Slipshard introduced. “He is one of the Goblin Nation’s premier experts in goblin made and goblin enchanted items. As this problem centres around a goblin object, I thought that he might be of some use.”

“I’m seeing a host of factors indicating that my particular investigative skillset will be needed this evening,” the Head of the DMLE stated, “and that’s before we even get to the main discussions.”

“I will need you to follow my lead tonight, Harry,” Julius stated. “Agreed?”

“You’ve never yet steered me wrong,” Harry grinned back.

Minerva turned back to the assembled students strewn on couches around the room. “I would send you all to bed, but I suspect that that would be an exercise in futility. Instead, I will leave Dobby and Jaxom in charge. No one is to leave this hovercraft. Understood?”

“Yes, ma’am,” was echoed all around her.

“Um, Headmistress McGonagall, Harry, I’ve almost finished working on the first part of an article for my dad for the Quibbler. Do you think that I could have an interview once you get back?” Luna asked, a pen poised above a notepad in her hand.
“Definitely, Luna,” Harry grinned.

“In that case, ladies and gentlemen, shall we?” Minerva asked, indicating the door. She had only gone two steps before turning back, her narrowed eyes pinning Harry with a steely glare. “Miss Granger, it might be best if you come along as well.”

“I didn’t think otherwise, Ma’am,” Hermione told her.

Grabbing her right hand with his left, Harry strode towards the door. As he did so, he thrust out his right hand. Seconds later, his rowan staff flew across the room, smacking into his palm with a meaty thwack.

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Harry blinked in surprise to find Professor Flitwick waiting for them at the bottom of the stairs to the Headmaster’s office.

“Thank you for coming, Filius,” Minerva greeted him.

“Flitwick,” Slipshard also greeted, before switching to gobbledegook.

With barely a pause, Minerva led their entourage up the spiral staircase where an open door awaited them.

“Ah, I see our expected guests have arrived,” Dumbledore remarked in the grandfatherly-type voice that Harry so hated.

As the four Diricawl teachers, Madam Bones, Julius, the three goblins and Harry and Hermione filed through the door, they got a look of exactly who it was that was waiting for them. Harry had expected Dumbledore, Crouch and Bagman. Snape being there, standing half-hidden in the shadows of one corner, wasn’t overly surprising. The Minister for Magic, though, was completely unexpected.

“We’re here to get this mess sorted out, Albus,” Minerva stated.

“It has indeed been a most unexpected evening, hasn’t it?” Dumbledore smiled.

“That’s not the word, I’d use,” Harry shot back, only Hermione squeezing his hand stopping him from extolling exactly which word he would use and at great volume at that.

“Ah, our fourth Champion,” Minister Fudge beamed, opening his arms wide in greeting, that ridiculous green bowler hat of his waving from one hand.


“As I told you, Cornelius,” Dumbledore said lightly.

“In that case, we have just the thing to help you keep your magic,” Minister Fudge declared before turning and snatching up a rolled up piece of parchment from Dumbledore’s desk.

Harry eyed the scroll that Fudge now held out to him warily. Thankfully, he wasn’t obligated to take it; Julius stepped forward and took care of that detail for him.

“Emancipation papers?” Julius asked, his eyebrows nearly disappearing into what was left of his hairline. “You’re declaring him an adult? Both of you even, I see.”
Julius tilted the unfurled parchment so that Harry could see both the Minister for Magic and the Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot’s signatures.

“Yes, yes,” Fudge replied, rocking backwards and forwards on his feet. “Dumbledore and Barty told me about the conflicting rules and how they pertain to young Harry here. And we can’t have The-Boy-Who-Lived-Again losing his magic, so the easiest way around that was to declare him an adult.”

“You want a fourteen year old to compete in your blasted Tournament? Is that simply some kind of bribe to try to convince him to compete?” Sirius asked incredulously, pointing at the scroll in Julius’ hand.

“Of course not, but well, his name did come out of the Goblet, after all,” Fudge blustered.

“Where is the Goblet?” Slipshard demanded.

When Dumbledore indicated a side table, the two full goblins and one half goblin bustled over. Harry watched, intrigued as the three spoke in rapid gobbledegook, quickly followed by some wand waving, hands moving in intricate patterns in conjunction with something that sounded like chanting and some extremely long noses nearly touching the Goblet as they examined the runes etched on its sides.

After nearly ten minutes, Darknest broke out in what sounded suspiciously like a string of vehemently strong curses before all three turned back to regard the witches and wizards awaiting their verdict.

“Wizards are idiots,” Darknest summed up before crossing his arms and glaring at them all.

“We found the new rules that the Ministry layered onto the Goblet,” Professor Flitwick, Charms Master of Hogwarts, began, “and I must say that it is incredibly sloppy work. There was no subtlety of the charm work, no working it into the other enchantments to give it the fullest effect.”

He shook his head before continuing. “We also found a powerful *confundus* charm. It would have had to have been in order to confuse the Goblet into thinking that there were four schools instead of the three that there have been for centuries.”

“Do you have the parchment with Mister Potter’s name on it that came out of the Goblet?” Slipshard asked.

After Dumbledore handed it over, a small amount of goblin magic and chanting revealed the missing part of the parchment: the name of Diricawl Academy that had originally been rendered invisible.

“There is no doubt that the one responsible for confounding the Goblet and for concealing the name of Mister Potter’s school are one and the same,” Slipshard stated.

“Magical signatures are near impossible to fake,” Darknest stated before launching himself into action.

Harry involuntarily stepped backwards as the angry little goblin rounded the room, waving his hands and chanting as he went. Shortly, he was back in his original position, arms once more crossed against his breast.

“Whoever is responsible for this fiasco is not in this room,” he stated.
“But what does that mean for Mister Potter?” Amelia asked. “Will he lose his magic if he refuses to compete in the Tournament?”

Whatever the phrase was that Darknest spat at his fellow goblins, Harry was glad that he couldn’t understand it, even if it did cause Flitwick and Slipshard to grin ferally.

“No,” Slipshard stated.

Professor Flitwick, though, seemed to take pity on the staring witches and wizards and provided a more elaborate explanation.

“If something can be made into a weapon, then you can be assured that goblins have already either worked out how to make it even more dangerous or how to counter it. Sometimes both,” he began.

“And an object that forces a person to compete in what is often a deadly Tournament is no exception. Just imagine what having the ability to force anyone, even the youngest child of your enemy into a contest for their very life on the pain of losing their magic could accomplish.

“The Goblet of Fire is no exception. That is why when it was created, it was enchanted in such a way as to ensure that it only accepted the magical signature of the person placing the parchment into it, not the name upon that very same parchment.”

“So, I won’t lose my magic if I don’t compete?” Harry asked, wanting to be absolutely sure.

“No, Mister Potter, you will not,” Professor Flitwick confirmed.

Harry nearly collapsed as the tension of the last few hours simply evaporated. It was only by leaning into Hermione that he was able to stay upright.

“The magic of the person who tried to force you into this Tournament, though,” Slipshard grinned, “now, that is another question.”

“So what was all of this, then?” Sirius asked, waving his hands around, “simply some kind of an elaborate trap for Harry?”

“I don’t see what else it could be,” Madam Bones agreed.

“If this was some kind of trap aimed at young Harry, perhaps we should continue the ruse that he is going to compete until we can flush the perpetrator out,” Dumbledore suggested.

“No! No way!” Harry protested, feeling that tension rush right back into every part of his body.

“We’re not going to use a boy as … as some kind of macabre bait in a plot just as elaborate!” Minerva stated, slapping a nearby side table with her hand in emphasis.

“We will announce exactly what has happened and what will happen,” Madam Longbottom declared. “If it is known that the perpetrator of this ploy has entered themselves into the Tournament and that the penalty of losing their magic by not competing now hangs over their head …”

“Then they’ll likely do something rash …” Dumbledore interjected.

“Or they’ll turn up wanting to compete themselves,” Remus murmured.

Amelia stared at the man before laughing. “If they do that, then I’ll have aurors there ready to arrest them. And I’ll make sure that they do it before they compete.”
“Well, it seems that this fiasco has been settled much quicker than I anticipated,” Minerva declared before turning to the three goblins and bowing to them. “Our thanks, Master goblins.”

Slipshard nodded in acknowledgement. “I am pleased that we were able to help clear up this misunderstanding.”

“If you aren’t going to be competing, Mister Potter, I’ll take that back,” Minister Fudge stated, reaching towards the scroll that Julius still held.

“I don’t think so, Minister,” the lawyer replied, moving the scroll to an inside pocket of his robe. “As I’m sure that you’re aware, once something like this has been signed by both the Minister for Magic and the Chief Warlock, the magic of the document seals it, making it irrevocable.”

Harry wasn’t completely sure what had just happened, but the dual scowls that had appeared on both Dumbledore and Fudge’s faces, even if the one that Dumbledore gave was incredibly fleeting, had made him sure that whatever it was, was bound to be a good thing.
Chapter 19

Harry breathed a sigh of relief as the hovercraft pulled up in front of its shed in Potter Haven. Being back in the valley was a load off of his mind. It was so much safer and a heck of a lot saner.

The idea of having breakfast in Hogwarts’ Great Hall before they left had only been marginally passed and none of them lingered overly long. Eyes everywhere had watched him, especially after the Daily Prophet had arrived, even if it was half an hour later than usual.

For once, it seemed that the Prophet had been fairly accurate, mirroring Xenophilius Lovegood’s, well, Luna’s, article in The Quibbler. Each of the three Champions had been named before the piece delved into the fiasco of the fourth name, his name, coming out of the cup. The vows that he’d made about not entering his name had been reported upon before the writer had delved into speculation about what that meant in regards to whether or not he would have to compete.

Unfortunately, nothing from the late night meeting had made its way to Prophet in time for that edition. Harry hoped that after he and the other Diricawl students had told their Hogwarts friends what had happened, that it’d get put through the usual Hogwarts rumour mill. Which meant that it should have been all over the school and winging its way to parents clutched in the talons of an owl, long before they’d finally left.

“Alright, folks, end of the line,” Sirius stated cheerfully as he entered the hovercraft’s sitting room.

His announcement was fairly redundant as most of them were already on their feet. Harry headed for the door and followed along down the corridor, past the small galley before stopping at the door to the main deck. He glanced at his pack, mentally cataloguing that he had everything and didn’t need to continue down the corridor to the bunk room that he’d stayed in. Each room held beds for four and, with there being half a dozen rooms, Sirius had made sure that the hovercraft could hold everyone.

Reaching the ground, Harry made to follow the others towards the manor when he felt a hand touch his.

“Would you care to take a walk, Harry?” Hermione smiled shyly.

“Yeah, I think that I’d like that,” Harry replied.

He’d barely glanced at his pack before he felt it disappear; it seemed that Dobby was on the ball today.

Feeling bold, Harry took Hermione’s hand as he led her off onto the path that led down to the loch. A couple of whistles followed them, but Harry ignored them, not even bothering with working out who’d made them. His whole focus right then was the feeling of the small, soft hand in his and the girl walking beside him.

They walked in silence and the longer that they did so, the more uncomfortable Harry began to feel. It was a puzzling sensation. Hermione, he knew, was the one that he always felt more comfortable with before this. She was the one who knew him best, just as he knew her best. They fit together, he felt, complemented each other and were always able to work together.

Hermione was, without a doubt, Harry’s very best friend, the one he cherished above all others.

But that kiss the night before had changed things.
And that was what was making Harry so uncomfortable now.

He didn’t want things to change. Well, if he was being honest, it was more that he didn’t want to mess anything up. What he wanted was for them to always be best friends.

A small hillock overlooking the loch caught his attention and he led her off the path to a place that they could sit together and enjoy the view.

As they sat, the silence began to stretch and Harry found that he couldn’t take it any longer.

“You kissed me,” he blurted.

Hermione looked at him, before she dropped her eyes. “Yes.”

“Why?” he asked, although he was sure that he already knew. It was more that he had to hear it.

“It was the only way that I could think of to calm you down,” she finally replied.

“Oh,” Harry said, not sure what to say to that.

He’d hoped that there might have been another reason.

“I … I liked it,” Harry admitted in a near whisper.

From the corner of his eye, he saw a small smile appear on her face.

“I did too,” she told him.

“How did you know that it’d work?” Harry asked, dancing around the subject that he really wanted, and was desperately afraid, to talk about.

“Let’s just say that I was assured that I was the only one who it could work for,” Hermione replied cryptically.

Harry cocked an eyebrow at that which caused her cheeks to flush and for her to turn her head away.

For a time, there was silence between them. This time, it was slightly less awkward, but only just.

“Is this going to change things between us?” Hermione eventually asked.

“Do you want it to?” Harry countered.

She turned back then and copied his questioning technique from before. Hardly ever had he ever gotten away with answering one of her questions with one of his own.

He sighed, afraid of what his answer was going to be and how she might react.

“I want us to always be best friends, Hermione. I don’t think I could take it if we weren’t. But that kiss did change things. At least it did for me. I think … I think that I’d like us to be … to be more than friends.”

Her face lit up then as the widest smile blossomed on her face and her eyes sparkled with excitement.

“It changed things for me, too, Harry, well, more like it clarified things for me,” Hermione told
him, grasping one of his hands between both of hers. “I think that I’ve been wanting things to change between us for a while now. I just haven’t known how that should happen.”

A lop-sided grin appeared on Harry’s face as he considered what she’d said.

She wanted things to change. Hermione wanted things to change between them. He wanted things to change. He and Hermione. He and Hermione. Thoughts were whirling though his head faster than he could catch them, but there was one that stood out. If things were to change between them, and in the direction that that kiss indicated that they could, then there was only one thing that seemed right to do.

“Hermione,” he asked, disregarding the irrational urge to kneel, “would you … would you be my girlfriend?”

“Yes, Harry! Yes!” Hermione squealed with happiness before pouncing at him and wrapping him in one of her wonderful hugs.

Harry’s arms automatically wrapped around her and he buried his face in her hair, his eyes closed as he breathed deeply of the vanilla shampoo that she used.

Releasing his hold slightly, she reciprocated until, still with arms around each other, they came face to face.

Harry’s eyes darted from her sparkling chocolate brown eyes to her lips, lips that she’d just moistened with the tip of her tongue. Looking back into her eyes, he tilted his head slightly before slowly moving forward, only to find that Hermione was coming to meet him half-way.

Their lips touched tentatively, briefly, before they pulled back slightly, to check that this really was what the other wanted. Seeing confirmation in each other’s eyes, they dipped back in towards each other, this time savouring the feeling of warm lips on warm lips, rejoicing in something new, something exciting.

It’d be some time before they eventually wandered back to the manor, fingers interlocked together, ridiculously wide smiles plastered on their faces.

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“And where have you two been?” Sirius asked mischievously, his eyebrows wiggling suggestively.

His comment, though, was enough to draw the eyes of everyone in the library to the pair. Milliseconds later, triple squeals erupted and four bodies flew across the room.

Harry found himself almost pushed to the side as Hannah, Susan, Lil and Tracey swamped Hermione, dragging her off to a secluded corner where a whispered conversation, punctuated by dozens of glances in his direction and even more squeals, abounded.

“Well?” Sirius asked, drawing Harry’s attention.

“We went for a walk down by the loch,” Harry shrugged.

“And what happened while you were on this so called ‘walk’?” Sirius asked suggestively.

Harry pinned his godfather with his gaze. “That is none of your business. And for your information, I’m not someone who kisses and tells.”
“Oh, ho,” Sirius pounced, his eyes shining in merriment. “So, there was kissing was there?”

“I just told you that I don’t kiss and tell,” Harry glared.

“Good for you,” Sirius replied, suddenly going, well, serious. “And for the record, I approve and simply have to say, ‘about jolly time’.”

With a nod of thanks accompanied by a satisfied smile, Harry looked around the room. Apart from the girls, Sirius was the only one on this level. Half-hanging over the balcony above, though, were Mickey, Colin and Dennis, massive grins on their faces. Seeing him looking, they waved before racing off.

Harry shook his head. Between Sirius and those three, it was a foregone conclusion that the fact that Harry and Hermione were now a couple would be all over the manor within the hour. Probably less, considering how few people actually lived here.

“What are you working on, anyway?” Harry asked, wandering closer and peering over Sirius’ shoulder at the book he was holding.

“Law,” Sirius replied simply. “Had to end up going back to Grimmauld and grabbing some books from there – Potter Haven really is deficient in that area.”

Harry shrugged. “Not really much call for magical law books. At least not yet. Madam Longbottom did say something about having a magical law component in her Magical Studies class, but I don’t think she wants to start that until next year. We’ll probably buy some then.”

Sirius looked up at him in surprise. “I would have thought that you would have needed some with all of that trouble last year.”

“Nah, left all of that to Julius,” Harry replied.

“That brings me to why I’m going through all of this,” Sirius explained, indicating not only the book in his lap, but also the stack that rose from the floor beside his chair to higher than his armrest.

Harry cocked his head.

“You remember that little piece of paper that Fudge gave you last night?”

“The emancipation papers?” Harry nodded.

“That’s right,” Sirius nodded. “Well, I was looking to see what that meant for you. Especially with you still only being fourteen.”

“And?” Harry asked, extremely interested.

Sirius shrugged. “Near as I can tell, it elevates your status to the equivalent of you turning seventeen. We’d have to ask Julius for more details. It’s just so rare that none of these have anything about it in it.”

“Should we make an appointment to go see him then?” Harry asked.

“Already done,” Sirius replied. “And one to see Slipshard as well. Being ‘of-age’ now will also give you control of the full Potter accounts and there could be stuff in there that you’ll need to deal with sooner rather than later.”
“Thanks, Sirius. When are the appointments?” Harry asked.

“Tomorrow. Julius at nine; Slipshard at ten.”

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“Thank you all for coming,” Minerva said, beginning the meeting.

This was one of the very few full staff meetings that had actually taken place at Diricawl Academy, but after what had happened at Hogwarts, Minerva felt that she really needed to call it before they decided how to proceed.

The table was more than half full with twelve of them there. Down the left side of the table sat Augusta, Remus and Sirius, together with an almost reluctant Jaxom and Leonard Flanagan, their Arts teacher. On the right hand side were Dan and Emma, Beth and then their remaining part-time teachers – Sharon Miller, their Charms teacher, Scarlett Tuck for Arithmancy and lastly, Healer Bianca Jeffries.

“After the fiasco that our Hogwarts experience turned out to be, I wanted to get all of your input into whether or not Diricawl Academy should continue to attend the events of the TriWizaard Tournament,” Minerva stated.

“How likely are the children to be impacted again?” Beth asked.

“That’s just it, we cannot be sure,” Remus replied.

“I’d bet my last knut that almost all of them wouldn’t be impacted in the slightest,” Sirius stated.

“Yes, Harry’s experience really was the worst of all of the children,” Minerva agreed.

“Have you heard from Amelia what her investigation has revealed?” Augusta asked.

Minerva shook her head. “No. The most that she’s said is that there’s no physical evidence that supports her even having a suspect in mind. For now, she is simply going to increase the auror presence at each event.”

“If there are more aurors, won’t that make it safer for the children?” Scarlett asked.

“One would hope so,” Sirius nodded grimly, before shrugging. “In practice, though?”

“My main concern is the fact that the culprit clearly targeted Harry,” Remus pointed out. “By attending any of the events, especially the First Task, we could be putting him at more risk.”

“I agree,” Minerva stated. “And after his reaction to his name coming out of that blasted Goblet, I’m not inclined to put him anywhere even near the semblance of danger.”

“It’s not just Harry that you have to worry about, either,” Emma pointed out. “Any one of those kids would do anything to support him.”

Dan snorted. “That’s putting it mildly. They snuck out of school and convinced us to drive across the country to meet them before meeting with a ‘wanted felon’ last year. And they’re even closer now.”

“Hermione especially,” Emma agreed. “If there was even a hint of danger, I don’t think that we’d be able to keep her from being by his side the whole time.”
“About time those two became a couple,” Leonard mentioned offhandedly. “Since the day I met them I knew that their connection was too strong to ignore.”

Smiles flashed around the table as each person there thought about Diricawl’s newest couple.

“I’m inclined to treat this on a case by case basis,” Remus stated, getting them back on topic. “We know that whoever put Harry’s name into that goblet is the one now bound by the magical contract. We also know that that means that they either compete in the First Task or they lose their magic. That is going to make them want to be there, no matter what.”

“And Amelia has vowed to be there with a full complement of aurors to take them into custody,” Minerva agreed.

“Can’t say I’ll be sorry to see the bastard lose his magic when they do,” Sirius growled.

“That, I believe, is something that we can all agree on,” Augusta stated.

“As much of an educational benefit that there could be in attending the First Task, I think that it’s too dangerous,” Beth stated, looking around the table to see if others agreed with her.

Any worries that she may have held were quickly dispelled as it become very obvious that it was a unanimous decision.

“Then it is agreed that Diricawl Academy will not attend the First Task of the TriWizard Tournament,” Minerva summed up. “I’ll send our apologies stating that we believe that it is too dangerous for our students to Albus in the morning. Now, what about the other events?”

“The girls would be extremely disappointed to miss out on the Yule Ball,” Emma pointed out.

“I’d rather that they be disappointed than potentially hurt,” Bianca commented, her Healer’s predisposition coming to the fore.

“Agreed,” Minerva sighed.

“I think that we could leave that decision open,” Augusta suggested. “If the perpetrator is caught at the First Task, then that should negate the danger to our students.”

“And then our boys and girls can go and enjoy the ball with the students from the other schools,” Emma beamed.

Minerva nodded. “That makes sense. All those in favour?”

A quick show of hands proved that this was another unanimous decision.

“And while it’d be nice to be able to give a decision about the remaining two tasks to the organisers when they ask, I think that it would be wiser to leave off on making a decision about them until closer to the time.”

Nods around the table showed that her staff agreed with her.

“Now, while I have you all here, perhaps this would be a good time for each of us to give a report about how each of our subjects are progressing and how the students are faring in Diricawl Academy. If there is anything that you would like changed or aspects that you would like enhanced or dropped, please say so and we can discuss them,” Minerva stated. “Augusta, how about we start with you?”
Albus Dumbledore glanced down once more at the missive in his hand. To be honest, it wasn’t completely unexpected. Unwelcome, yes; unexpected, no.

He had suspected that the fact that Harry Potter and Diricawl Academy was going to be at Hogwarts for the opening ceremony would be a tempting target for Tom. Why else would he not only have made the invitation, but also very publicly announced that they would be there for the Choosing Ceremony.

And his assumptions, once again, had proven accurate. Harry’s name had been placed into the Goblet and had subsequently been drawn out. Under the auspices of a fourth school, no less. Not that the details bothered him overly much. It was enough that it had occurred.

His plan had been coming together perfectly: Harry was going to be back in the castle under his watchful eye where he could once more get close to the boy, for the very least during the tasks, longer if he could manage it. Tom had fallen into planning something that would draw him out into the open; all of which would lead to Tom being captured and either rehabilitated or incarcerated. Either way, he, Albus Dumbledore could only come out ahead.

What was to become of Harry in all of that wasn’t his concern. Only the boy’s usefulness was of importance.

The other advantage to having the boy in the castle had been to confirm Dumbledore’s suspicions. The tale of Harry surviving another killing curse had been well publicised. And there was only one way that that particular feat could have occurred, a theory proven by the greatly diminished scar that now resided upon his head. That part of Tom’s soul was now taken care of.

Harry’s insubordination at the Choosing ceremony was most unexpected. It’d been all Dumbledore could do not to curse the boy in the back when he’d made those vows and walked out.

A semblance of hope had returned when the Diricawl party had met with him in his office that night. Fudge had played his part, negating the possible effects of Harry competing in the Tournament with the rules in play. Dumbledore had been so sure that he’d have been able to talk them all around to what was for the Greater Good.

But that was before those blasted goblins had interfered. Worse still was that Filius had joined in. And once Harry, Minerva and Amelia had heard that Harry wasn’t bound by the Goblet, then there had been next to no chance that Harry would do as he was told.

And now there was this.

Slowly, Albus’ hand closed, scrunching the piece of parchment in a ragged, misshapen clump.

Minerva had the audacity that to say that it was too dangerous at Hogwarts for her to bring Harry and the others here for the First Task?

How this would affect his plans, Albus wasn’t sure. He needed Harry Potter here at Hogwarts. It was vital to his capturing Tom and learning all of his secrets.

The only consolation was that Minerva allowed that Diricawl may bring its students to Hogwarts for the Yule Ball and the other Tasks if the danger had abated by then.

With a low roar of frustration, Dumbledore spun and pitched the ball of parchment into the fireplace. His wand was drawn in the blink of an eye, the silent incendio incinerating the
parchment to ash in a fraction of a second.

But even that wasn’t enough to calm Dumbledore. With a sigh, he called for a Hogwarts house elf. It simply wouldn’t do for the students to see him in such a rage; it’d ruin the grandfatherly image that he’d worked so hard to cultivate. Something that he’d never allow to happen.
Harry snickered softly as he and Sirius were led along the narrow rock corridor within Gringotts.

A grunt of pain from behind him caused his snicker to morph into more of a chuckle. And then he was the one grunting in pain as he put a hand up to the back of his head where he’d just been slapped.

“What’d you do that for?” Harry groused glancing behind him.

“It’s not polite to laugh at your elders,” Sirius declared haughtily, although the effect was negated somewhat by the fact that he was walking with a distinct stoop in an effort to not hit his head on the low rock ceiling.

“Sorry, old man, I’ll try to remember that,” Harry retorted, only to have to duck to evade the second swat. “What? You’re the one who said you were my elder.”

“Account Manager Slipshard is ready for you,” the goblin broke in, clearly displeased with the air of non-professionalism the two were displaying.

“Thank you,” Harry replied, sketching a half-bow in a show of respect.

After straightening with a pointed grin over his shoulder, Harry strode into the room. Behind him, he heard Sirius muttering something about waiting until Harry’d had his next growth spurt, a sentiment that he dutifully ignored.

The small cave-like room was exactly as Harry remembered it from his last visit. Shelves and pigeon holes full of books, weapons and trinkets were carved into the very walls to either side of the room. Behind the enormous rich desk, were floor to ceiling bookshelves, laden with books, files and folders. And behind the desk, sitting regally with his fingers steepled, was Slipshard.

“Greetings, Slipshard. It is good to see you again,” Harry smiled, offering the bow of respect that he’d learnt so long ago from the book on goblin etiquette that Slipshard had once gifted him.

“Mister Potter,” Slipshard returned with a heavy nod of his head. “Lord Black. You are both exactly on time.”

Harry grinned at the elderly goblin and offered a truism in both the goblin and muggle societies. “Time is money, after all.”

“Indeed, indeed,” Slipshard agreed. “I believe that you have something for me?”

“We do,” Sirius replied before pulling a scroll out of his robes and handing it over.

Long goblin fingers accepted it, unrolled it and began waving over it in an intricate pattern.

“Congratulations, Mister Potter. It appears that you have managed to attain your majority nearly three years early,” Slipshard said, his eyes piercing the boy across the desk. “Much responsibility comes with this. I trust that you are up to the task?”

“I hope so, too, Slipshard,” Harry replied. “Especially if I can count on you and Sirius and even Mister Tentridge to advise me, that is.”

“Still the unusual wizard,” Slipshard noted. “One who is still aware of his limitations and works to
find others to counter those limitations and to teach him what he needs to know.”

Harry ducked his head, remembering something similar that Slipshard said to him the very first time that they had met.

“Gringotts accepts this Ministerial decree of Harry James Potter’s emancipation,” Slipshard stated formally. “Within Gringotts, you are now seen as being eligible to control all vaults, investments and properties that you are entitled to.”

Harry nodded, recognising the full weight of what Slipshard was stating.

“Shall we see exactly what that entails?” Slipshard asked.

Without waiting for a reply, he lifted one hand, causing a stone bowl, silver knife, potion vial and a piece of parchment to float from one of the nooks carved into his wall across to his desk. With a backhand wave, the piece of parchment was banished to the opposite side of the room where it promptly stuck to the wall before enlarging until it filled two-thirds of the wall.

The instant that the vial touched down onto Slipshard’s desk, it was snatched up and its contents poured into the stone bowl. The bowl itself wasn’t as crude as Harry had first thought. What he’d originally taken as scratches, he now saw were some type of rune, but of a language that he was unfamiliar with. If he had to guess, he’d say gobbledegook, which made sense, considering that it was a goblin artefact.

As he watched Slipshard prepare … whatever it was that he was doing, Harry made a mental note to ask about language lessons being added to the Diricawl subject load. He particularly thought that it’d be kind of cool to learn to speak and read the goblin language.

“I shall need seven drops of your blood, Mister Potter,” Slipshard stated, interrupting his thoughts.

Resisting the urge to grimace, Harry leant forward and took the handle of the silver knife that was offered to him. Steeling himself, he then quickly cut his thumb and held it over the bowl to allow the blood to drip into it. After the required amount had been added, Harry pulled his hand back and held it out towards Sirius for him to heal.

By the time Harry looked back, it was only to find Slipshard’s chair empty. Looking around, he found the elderly goblin knelt on the ground in front of the massive piece of parchment stuck to the wall. Once Slipshard had stood and moved back, Harry was able to see what he had been doing.

His brows crinkled together as he saw the bowl now sitting at the base of the parchment with part of it lying in the potion. Before he could ask about it, his eyes widened: the potion was being absorbed by the parchment. Once the bowl was empty, the parchment pulsed a pale gold before deep red writing began to appear near the bottom.

Harry slid out of his chair and knelt to get a better look. There, at the very bottom, in elaborately curly writing, was his own name. A single line rose from it before splitting off at the names of his parents – James Charlus Potter and Lily Evans. Again single lines rose from each before splitting off towards two new names.

Harry gasped at what he was seeing. This was his family tree. His eyes drank in the sight of every name greedily. Higher and higher the names rose, through generation after generation. Once the entire wall of parchment had been filled, three smaller pulses of bright gold, almost the size of pinpricks, shone from three spots on the parchment that Harry was unable to pinpoint.

“As expected,” Slipshard noted, almost to himself.
Once more a pulse of gold light erupted, this time from one of the nooks in the wall. When his eyes focussed on that spot, Harry found a stack of folders, folders which Slipshard was already reaching for.

“Let us begin,” Slipshard said as he once more took his seat behind the great desk.

“It would appear that you are entitled to claim the vaults, properties and investments of three family lines,” Slipshard stated.

“Three!” Sirius exclaimed, then elaborated seeing the other two staring at him. “But James was only eligible for two.”

“Be that as it may, Harry is eligible for three,” Slipshard reiterated.

Then, taking the top, and coincidentally the thickest of four folders from the pile that he’d placed to the side, he began to peruse it.

“The Potter account is quite extensive, although not as extensive as it once was. Between the last war among wizards and the fact that there has been no Head of Family for the past thirteen years, the account has been allowed to diminish.

“You are already aware of the three vaults that you control.”

Harry nodded in agreement. “My Education Vault; the Investment Vault; and the one that we set up with the money that we got for selling that basilisk.”

“Indeed. Those vaults are now eligible to be rolled into the main Potter vaults if you so desire. But that is a matter that can be decided upon later.

“As the recognised Head of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter, you gain access to an additional two vaults. The first is the main Potter Vault. In it, you will find the majority of your disposable monies, as well as a collection of prized possessions that your ancestors have stored there over the centuries. The second vault was opened in your name by the Ministry of Magic. Its holds the contents that were salvaged from your family home in Godric’s Hollow after the events of October thirty-one, nineteen eighty-one.

“These contain an itemised account of each vault,” Slipshard stated, handing over a stack of parchment.

“Next, we come to Potter investments. The vast majority of these are based in the magical world. This,” Slipshard said, handing over another, even large stack of parchment, “outlines the businesses that the Potters have invested in, the percentage of the business that they hold and the profits or losses from each business for the past ten years. I would like to point out, though, the businesses that you hold total ownership thereof. The largest and most profitable is *Pottarius Magical Plants and Menagerie*. This company is based in the depths of the jungles of Brazil. Within Britain, you also wholly own *Terraca’s Pottery Barn* and *Obscurus Books and Printery*.

“Your father, on the word of your mother, also had me investing in the muggle world. Only a few purchases were made before he passed away. You will find those businesses listed at the end of the sheets that I just gave you.”

“We now move on to properties,” Slipshard said, shuffling the parchment in front of him. “Any property that is covered under a business agreement, has been highlighted in the information that you have already been given. This leaves you with an additional five properties, not counting Potter Haven.
“I own five other properties?” Harry asked incredulously, already feeling overwhelmed with everything that Slipshard had been bombarding him with.

“Indeed,” Slipshard nodded. “Only two of these are within Britain. Godric’s Hollow, of course, which I have already mentioned. Unfortunately, although you own the deed to this place, the Ministry of Magic has appropriated it and turned it into a memorial to you and your parents. This means that, at this time, you cannot touch it.”

“I can’t touch a property that I own? That doesn’t sound right,” Harry commented. “Can we do something about that?”

“Possibly,” Sirius replied. “I’ll do some snooping around the Ministry for you, if you like.”

“Thanks,” Harry replied before turning his attention back to his account manager.

“The other property is Ynys Crochenydd, which includes a small parcel of land on the Welsh shore, closest to the island itself,” Slipshard stated.

Harry stared at him. “What?”

“Ynys Crochenydd is Gaelic,” Slipshard supplied. “It means ‘Potter Island’. This is an island just off the coast of Wales that your ancestors claimed. It was given the best in muggle-repelling wards and made unplottable as well.”

Sirius snorted. “Not that it did much good. Sorry, Harry, I was just remembering when I was there when I was still just a kid, about your age. Potter Island was dominated by your ancestral manor. It’s where all the Potters grew up and lived. Until Voldemort, that is. He and his Death Eaters managed to breach its defences after your parents had gone into hiding at Godric’s Hollow. Voldemort personally killed your grandparents there before they burnt the manor to the ground.”

“Your father set up a fund to rebuild the manor, but it was never put into effect,” Slipshard supplied.

“That’s something that you can do, if you like,” Sirius suggested lightly.

Harry nodded. “I’ll think about it. I … I think I’d like to see it before I decide.”

“Not a problem, kiddo,” Sirius said, ruffling his hair affectionately. “Just tell me when and you and I’ll take a trip to see it.”

“The three remaining properties that you now own and have access to are a chateau in the Andorran mountains; a house and property in Ontario, Canada; and a large parcel of land on the shores of the Whitsundays on the Great Barrier Reef in Australia.”

“Wow!” Harry replied. “Sounds like I’ve got my next few holiday destinations decided.”

Having finished with the Potter file, Slipshard moved that folder to his right before picking up the top of the remaining three folders.

“We now move on to the Ancient House of Peverell,” Slipshard stated. “This House ceased being an entity of its own many generations ago and passed into the safe-keeping of the House of Potter. Each generation of Potter Heads has decided to keep the House of Peverell separate instead of merging the two.

“The Peverell estate is quite small, consisting of a single vault containing money and a number of
heirlooms. There is also a single property and dwelling on the outskirts of Gosforth, Cumbria that has been maintained for the House of Peverell.”

Slipshard passed across the relevant piece of parchment before closing the file and setting it aside.

“This final inheritance that you are entitled to comes via your mother,” Slipshard stated, moving the relevant file in front of him.

“But my mother was a muggle-born!” Harry exclaimed.

Sirius eyed the file speculatively, before turning in his chair to look at the family tree adorning the great piece of parchment.

“Maybe not, Harry,” he mused. “The goblins are never wrong in this sort of thing. The only thing that I can think of is that your mother comes from a line of squibs.”

“You are in fact correct, Lord Black,” Slipshard stated, inking his head. “In fact, it was your mother’s great-grandfather who was born a squib. According to Goblin Law, a vault may only lay dormant for five generations. If you, Mister Potter, had not claimed this vault, then it would have been surrendered to the Goblin Nation upon your death.”

“There’s another vault?” Harry asked, counting in his head how many he now had access to and coming up with the astonishing figure of seven.

“Indeed. Vault two seven nine. Vault of Clan Lomas,” Slipshard informed him. “There is only a very small amount of money in it, but it now belongs to you.”

“Clan?” Harry asked Sirius. “Not House?”

Sirius nodded thoughtfully. “It basically means that they were only a very young family; maybe two or three generations of magicals at most. It’s what Hermione or the Creeveys could become in a couple of generations. Assuming that they don’t become a part of another House,” he finished with a playful nudge of his shoulder and a suggestive wiggle of his eyebrows.

With the completion of the third folder, Slipshard tapped a particular spot of his desk and sat back. A minute later, a sharp rap indicated that there was someone at the door. Upon Slipshard’s call, a young goblin scurried in, placed two small ring boxes on the desk, bowed and scurried back out.

“These, Mister Potter, are your Head of House rings,” Slipshard said, indicating the two boxes. “Unfortunately, the Peverell ring is not the original – it was lost centuries ago and a replacement was commissioned by your ancestor, Tomos Potter.”

“Just two?” Harry asked as he cautiously leant forward and slid the two boxes closer to him.

“Clans don’t rate high enough to warrant a ring,” Sirius said simply.

Cautiously, Harry opened the first box. Inside he found a sparkling platinum ring. The face of the ring was encircled by a slim gold band around an image of a small bushy tree growing from a pot, a griffin in full flight above it, its eye created by a tiny emerald.

“That’s the Potter ring,” Sirius said softly.

With a nod, Harry opened the second box. Like the first, this ring was also made of the finest platinum. The design on this ring, the Peverell ring, was a strange symbol etched in black. It appeared to be circle inside a triangle, split by a vertical line.
“What does it mean wearing these?” Harry asked suspiciously. “Will they make me a Lord like you?”

Sirius shrugged. “In the long run, sure. The honorific ‘Lord’ that I’ve been saddled with just means that I’m a member of the Wizengamot. The fact that you can basically only get on the Wizengamot by holding a family seat and the fact that those seats are traditionally held by the Ancient Houses, I’m sure is a coincidence. Both the Potters and Peverells being Ancient Houses mean that there are two Wizengamot seats waiting for you; but you can’t take them up until you’re twenty-one. So, as you can see, you will be a Lord, but just not yet.”

Harry nodded slowly. “And there aren’t any catches that I should be aware of? Being the Head of two Houses isn’t going to force me to marry two girls or something stupid like that, is it?”

Sirius’ barking laughter echoed throughout the chamber and it lasted so long that by the time Sirius finally began to settle down to just the occasional chuckle, he had tears in his eyes.

“What is something I said?” Harry deadpanned.

“Whatever gave you such a daft idea?” Sirius chuckled. “More than one wife! I’ve never heard anything so funny in my life and considering who my best friends have been, that’s saying something. Look, if it means that much to you, simply make sure that you have two kids and name one Potter and the other Peverell. Hell, have a third and name them Lomas if you want. Two, wives, hah!”

“So, that’s a no then?” Harry clarified.

Ignoring Sirius’ continued chuckles, Harry turned to the rings and one after the other, picked them up and slipped them on the ring fingers of either hand: Potter on his right; Peverell on his left. A brief flash of white light shone as each resized itself to his fingers.

“That just leaves this final folder,” Slipshard stated.

“What is that one for?” Sirius asked, mirth still in his eyes even though his laughter had finally subsided.

“This folder contains any outstanding contracts that Mister Potter may have inherited as Head of the Ancient and Noble House of Potter; the Head of the Ancient House of Peverell; or the Head of Clan Lomas,” Slipshard stated.

“I really hope that that thing is empty,” a suddenly sombre Sirius stated.

Harry shivered in trepidation as Slipshard opened the folder to show a single piece of parchment. Picking it up, the goblin perused its contents quickly. It wasn’t until he got to the bottom of the page that a vicious grin quickly appeared, sending Harry’s pulse-rate rocketing.

“This,” Slipshard stated, placing the parchment back upon the desk, “is a betrothal contract.”

“What!” Sirius exploded.

Harry meanwhile slumped backwards in his chair. Betrothal. That meant marriage. His mind spun to Hermione and the kiss that they’d shared before he and Sirius had left that morning. Betrothal. There was a betrothal contract and he’d only just gotten a girlfriend.

“Who’s it between?” Sirius asked, drawing Harry’s attention back to the here and now.
“This contract is between Mister Harry James Potter and Miss Ginerva Molly Weasley,” Slipshard stated.

Harry’s face scrunched up with distaste as his mind supplied the image of the red-haired fangirl who had an annoying habit of following him around Hogwarts whenever he’d been there.

“Who created it?” Sirius asked, anger clear in his voice.

“This contract was signed between Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, acting as magical guardian for Harry James Potter, and Molly Muriel Weasley, mother of Ginerva Molly Weasley,” Slipshard read, “and was signed on January two, nineteen ninety-three.”

Sirius’ face, if possible grew even darker with anger before it suddenly went blank and he blinked, as though rebooting his brain.

“What was that date again?” Sirius asked.

“January two, nineteen ninety-three,” Slipshard replied, a clear grin on his face.

“January two, nineteen ninety-thee,” Sirius repeated, before turning to Harry and slapping him on the arm with a laugh. “Then we don’t have to worry about it.”

“What? We don’t?” a clearly confused Harry asked. “Why not?”

“Because Minerva and I became your official guardians on December twenty-seven, nineteen ninety-two,” Sirius declared. “Dumbledore signed this after that date. He wasn’t your guardian at the time. The thing’s completely invalid!”

“That is indeed correct,” Slipshard said and promptly picked up the contract and prepared to tear it in two.

“Wait!” Sirius half-yelled, throwing out a hand at the same time. “Don’t destroy it.”

Slipshard cocked his head at the wizard. “Why not? It is nothing less than it deserves.”

“Oh, I know that,” Sirius replied, “but it might be handy to have on hand to use against the two meddling fools later.”

“I don’t know what you’re thinking, Sirius, but count me in,” Harry declared.
Eating breakfast one-handed was a little more awkward than Harry had anticipated, but all in all, he wasn’t complaining. And who could blame him? Holding the hand of his best friend, his girlfriend, under the table while they ate was wonderful. And the little glances that they shared, the way that they’d started leaning in towards each other to share some comment or other had plastered an almost perpetual grin across his face.

For once, Harry was incredibly glad of his metamorphmagus ability. Without it, he knew that his face and, more than likely his neck as well, would be eternally brilliant red, not unlike Hermione’s for that matter. But with the constant ‘oohs’ and ‘aahs’ and teasing that they were being subjected to, embarrassment was inevitable.

“Letter for you, Master Harry Sir,” Dobby said, popping in beside Harry’s chair.

“Thank you, Dobby,” Harry said, freeing up his hand to take the envelope.

“It be from your Twin Red-Head Menace friends,” Dobby added.

Harry guffawed, the image of their faces appearing in his mind if the twins ever found out what Dobby called them. He couldn’t work out if they’d be insulted or impressed. Either way, he decided that there had to be some prank-worthy mischief that he could find to subtly, or perhaps, not so subtly, drop the name on them.

“Dobby, their names are Fred and George; you shouldn’t call them that,” Hermione admonished.

“Oh, I don’t know, Miss Granger. It sounded rather accurate to me,” Minerva said offhandedly between sips of her tea.

This, of course, produced laughs around the table, no more so than the great barking laugh of Sirius.

“I think we’ve created a monster, Moony,” Sirius observed, wiping the tears from his eyes.

“Then our job is done,” Remus agreed, saluting his partner in pranks with his cup.

“What do the twins have to say?” Hermione asked.

Harry tilted the freshly opened parchment towards her so that they could both read it at the same time.

Hi Harrikins (and probably Hermione, too, reading over Harry’s shoulder),

We just heard some very interesting news that we thought that you might appreciate knowing. More for the sake of how it now doesn’t affect you.

You see, you’ll never guess who’s just turned up here at Hogwarts for the TriWiz. Our brother Charlie and Hagrid, that’s who! We managed to have a chat with them this afternoon and we reckon that we’ve worked out what the First Task is.

As you know, Charlie and Hagrid both work at the Romanian Dragon Reserve and apparently Hagrid is considered the best dragon handler when it comes to nesting mothers. So much so, according to Charlie, that he’s not allowed to be away from them in case they get a bit ‘excited’.
And guess when dragon breeding season is? If you were to say that it begins in November, then you’d be spot on, mate.

So, just put the clues together and the task is worked out. Aren’t you glad you’re not a Champion? I know we are. Don’t know what we were thinking wanting to go in the TriWiz and we’re doubly glad that Angelina’s name never came out either.

Anyway, best go,

Prank you later,

Forge and Gred.

By the time that Harry’d finished reading the letter his eyes had expanded to saucer size and all of the colour had completely drained from his face. He would have had to face dragons?

“Pup? Are you alright?” a concerned sounding Sirius asked.

His head shifted towards the sound of the voice, but he never saw his godfather. Automatically, he reached out, handing the letter over.

A minute later, Harry was aware enough to note the odd way that his godfather neatly folded the parchment back up, placed it beside his plate and looked across the table at his best friend.

“Moony, old pal, would you do me the courtesy of hexing me with your strongest silencing charm?” Sirius asked.

Without pause, the old Marauder’s wand was up and casting.

The instant that it was in place, Sirius let loose. His mouth opened and closed rapidly, hands gestured wildly and his face began turning shades of red and purple that Harry thought would put his Uncle Venon to shame. Every eye at the table snapped to the clearly irate man; knives, forks and glasses were frozen mid-air at the spectacle.

Finally, after a nearly ten minute tirade, Sirius refolded his hands gently in his lap, looked across the table at his friend and lifted one eyebrow.

“Are you sure you’re finished?” Remus asked cautiously.

A scowl of annoyance seemed to satisfy Remus enough to lift the silencing charm.

“May I ask what in Merlin’s Name that was about?” Minerva asked, her tone indicating that full-grown man or not, the Headmistress was seconds away from putting him in detention for the rest of his life.

“I just got a letter from Fred and George,” Harry told not only her, but everyone at the table.

“They’ve found out what the First Task is, what it is that I would have had to do if we couldn’t get me out of being a Champion. It’s dragons. They brought in dragons for the Champions to face.”

-oOoOo-

“Have I told you how glad I am that you aren’t a Champion recently?” Hermione asked, snuggling deeper into the side of her boyfriend.

Harry’s arm squeezed her briefly. “Not in the past ten minutes or so. Before that, only about two or three dozen times so far today.”
“Well, I am,” Hermione insisted.

They were currently curled up together on a lounge in the sitting room. The two books that they’d been reading had been discarded on the low table in front of them beside Harry’s feet. He was currently sitting against the end of the couch, one arm draped around Hermione as she cuddled up to him, her head on his shoulder.

“I can’t believe that they brought in dragons,” Harry stated, not for the first time either. “Dragons. Who do they think the Champions are? Saint George or something?”

Hermione giggled, picturing Harry dressed as a knight striding towards a waiting dragon.

“And they wanted me, a fourteen year old, to face one? It’s bad enough that they’re getting seventeen year olds to do it,” Harry’s rant continued. “How do you reckon Cedric’s going to go?”

Hermione bit her lip in thought, eliciting a quick kiss from Harry when he saw her do it. Just as she’d expected. He’d already confessed that he found that particular habit of hers exceedingly cute. Of course, that had absolutely nothing to do with why she’d been doing it so much this past week.

“Well,” she mused, “they wouldn’t get them to kill the dragons. You’d need a team of people to accomplish that. More likely they’ll just need to get past the dragon or collect something that the dragon is guarding. I’m sure that there would be ways to do that. It’d simply be a matter of thinking creatively.”

“You mean like distracting the dragon or something?” Harry asked.

“That’d probably be the easiest way, although I’m sure that there are others. I’d need to research it to come up with possibilities,” Hermione admitted.

“At least Cedric and the others are supposed to be the best of the best,” Harry mused. “Could you imaging if the judges had to compete in the same task?”

“Madam Maxine’d probably do alright,” Hermione giggled.

“Ludo Bagman’d end up being a snack for the dragon, I suspect,” Harry added before beginning to chuckle.

“What?” Hermione asked, looking up at him.

“I was just thinking about Dumbledore,” Harry admitted, “with that long beard of his. How likely would it be to catch on fire if he had to face a dragon?”

“I think that’s one bet that I wouldn’t take,” Hermione replied, her chuckles now matching her boyfriend’s.

Eventually, their laughter subsided and they were silent for a time as they enjoyed their time alone together.

“I must admit to being worried about our friends back at Hogwarts, though,” Hermione admitted.

She felt Harry nodding in agreement. “If the Headmaster is willing to pit a student against a dragon, and a nesting mother dragon at that, what else is he capable of?”

“I wish we could have brought all of our friends with us here to Diricawl,” Hermione sighed.

“I know,” Harry agreed, “but Potter Haven’s just not big enough.”
A slight stiffening in her boyfriend had her tilting her head back to study his face. There was something there, something that she recognised.

“What are you thinking?” she asked suspiciously.

Sparkling emerald eyes looked down at her, a lop-sided grin firmly in place on his face.

“Have you heard anything about how the search for somewhere to build a new school is going?” he asked.

Hermione frowned. “I haven’t heard anything, which I take to mean that it isn’t going well. And frankly, I’m not surprised. Finding a large enough piece of ground, secluded enough from the muggles that can be built upon and warded isn’t going to be an easy task, not in this day and age. Not to mention that they’ve only been looking for a couple of months.”

“That’s what I thought,” Harry said before twitching. “Come on, let’s go find Sirius. He promised to take me somewhere and it’s time that I had him fulfil that promise.”

“Where?” Hermione asked, curiosity welling up in her.

“Don’t worry, I’ll make sure that he takes you as well,” Harry promised.

-oOoOo-

A group of adults and teens materialised out of thin air sending over half of them crashing to the ground in a tangle of arms and legs.

“Oi, you two, this is a field trip, not a make out session,” a clearly amused Sirius said.

A tousle-headed Harry poked his head out from underneath Hermione.

“Magical travel hates me,” Harry groused. “And apparently anyone travelling with me as well.”

“I agree with Harry,” Susan stated, standing up and dusting herself off.

Other grumbles and groans also gave Harry enough vindication to smile impishly at his godfather

“Where are we anyway?” Harry asked, eyeing the gravel road that they’d landed beside. “This doesn’t look like an uninhabited island.”

“That’s because we’re still on the mainland,” Sirius replied, breaking away from the hushed discussion that he was having with Remus.

Harry, along with Hermione, Susan, Hannah and Lil, the four who had chosen to come along for the adventure, looked around. They were standing beside a gravel road that ran through a rather desolate sort of area. What bushes and trees there were were rather scraggly and mixed in amongst the rocks. To their right, the land rose in a small hillock, blocking their view.

Seeing that their two teachers had quickly worked their way to the top of the hill, the five teens also began climbing.

The view from the top of the hill was almost completely unexpected. They’d known that they were travelling to an island, but to come upon a view of the ocean so quickly took their breath away. The sea stretched away into the distance, starting from the small shoreline almost at their feet.

To their left, maybe a hundred yards away or so, a pier stretched out into the blue-brown water. It
looked old and, even though it’d obviously been abandoned for countless years, still in good repair. Not far from the end of the pier, the water changed to a deep blue-green, except in those places where the clouds passed overhead. There, the water was almost black the blue was so dark. Today, what waves there were were were small; barely a swell marred the amazing sight.

“Where’s Ynys Crochenydd?” Harry asked, using the island’s proper Gaelic name.

“It’s about three miles off-shore,” Sirius replied.

“So what are we doing here, then?” Harry wondered.

“We’re here to check what wards are still in place,” Remus replied, never straying from the intricate patterns that his wand was waving towards the ocean. “We figured that it was better to stop here and check things than to find that there was a ward in place that would fling us a hundred miles out to sea if it didn’t like our portkey.”

“Good thinking,” Hannah stated, shivering at the thought of landing in the cold, dark water.

“And the Potters own this section of the mainland as well,” Sirius commented, “including that pier down there.

“Muggle-repelling and unplotable,” Remus declared.

“That’s all I can find as well,” Sirius stated grimly, sharing a pointed look with his friend.

Harry swallowed and squeezed Hermione’s hand for reassurance. Once, he now knew, there would have been a lot more wards and protections in place. It seemed that, as well as destroying his grandparents’ manor, the Death Eaters had also ripped the wards to shreds.

“Okay, everyone grab hold again,” Sirius instructed, picking up the hula-hoop from the ground where it had fallen.

Once everyone had one hand on it, he tapped his wand and they were off with a feeling of being hooked through their belly-button.

Once again, Harry, Hermione and Susan landed sprawled on their faces. Lil only managed to fall to her knees, while the remaining three landed on their feet, grinning down at their companions.

“Welcome to Potter Island,” Sirius exclaimed, spreading his arms wide.

Harry spun slowly in a complete circle, drinking in the sight.

They were currently standing in the middle of a great field of grass. Wild flowers and roses of many colours dotted the landscape, the only evidence of what were once glorious gardens. The land arcing around from the east to the north was bordered by a thick, dense wood. But this wasn’t a forest like the one surrounding Hogwarts; this one felt friendlier somehow, as though nothing in it would harm anyone.

The ruins of a once great manor house sat forlornly directly to the west of where they’d landed. Parts of half a dozen walls still stood, rising from the rubble that was all that remained of their brethren. Clumps of grasses and weeds were working hard at covering these sad remains and, given not so much longer, would complete their chosen task.

Harry profusely blinked away the tears that had formed in his eyes as he turned to the south. Concentrating on the here and now, he pushed what might have been from his mind.
The land before him now rolled away over the undulating ground. Small clumps of trees were
dotted about here and there. Hints of blue could be seen peeking through some of the trees,
reminding him that the sea wasn’t that far away.

“How big is this place?” he asked after a couple of tries and a great clearing of his throat.

“The main part of the island’s a bit over five hundred acres, I think,” Remus replied.

“Something like that,” Sirius shrugged, “I more remember it as being more than enough for a stag
and a grim to have a rollicking good time more than anything else.

Deliberately keeping his head turned away from the ruins of his grandparent’s house, Harry began
walking.

“Are there any animals here?” Hermione asked.

“The usual rabbits, squirrels and other small animals, sure,” Sirius replied.

“But if you mean magical animals, then I’m not sure,” Remus added. “I know that there used to be
a small herd of hippogriffs and another or unicorns that lived on one end of the island and a couple
of nifflers as well, I think. But whether or not they’re still here is anyone’s guess.”

A burst of giggles off to the side caught Harry’s attention and he looked to see the other three girls
gathered about a stand of vibrant purple flowers. By the fact that both Lil and Hannah had
bouquets in their hands, it was easy to guess what they were doing.

A beaming Susan looked around and waved to them, “there’re some fairies here!”

“Well, that answers that question,” Hermione stated.

A good fifteen minute walk brought them to the edge of a straggly stand of trees. To either side,
the land abruptly cut off and dropped away in cliff edges. Before them, though, the land continued.
Harry paused, resting one hand against the trunk of a tree.

By leaning down and slightly to the left, he could see that the ground continued on, becoming
narrower and narrower until it was barely wide enough for two to walk abreast before abruptly
expanding again.

“It’s almost another island over there,” Sirius stated, stopping on the other side of Hermione. “Best
not to go there today. Once upon a time there were a whole host of safety wards and charms across
that spit of land. But who knows if they’re even still there these days and how safe it’d be to
cross.”

“How big is it?” Harry asked.

Sirius paused in thought, obviously thinking back across the years. “Maybe another fifty or sixty
acres. Most of it’s heavily wooded from what I remember, although there were a couple of
clearings. Oh, and a small stream as well, but don’t ask me where the water came from.”

“Probably an underground spring,” Hermione told him.

Sirius shrugged, clearly indicating that it wasn’t high on his list of things that he needed to know.

Turning back around, Harry cast his gaze over the island, the island that was once the seat of the
House of Potter. Now, all that was left was him. It had potential, vast potential in fact. And it was
more than big enough to do anything that he wanted.

Plus there was that extra land over on the mainland. That was an unexpected bonus that could come in handy. He’d have to find out more about that – how big it was, how much access there was to the nearest town, what sort of magical protection it had on it …

“What do you think?” Hermione asked quietly, slipping an arm around him.

“It’ll do,” he replied and he knew that she knew exactly what he meant.
A sea of dark red uniforms filled the room, their badges in the shape of a golden shield glittering from multiple breasts. Amelia Bones, Head of the Magical Law Enforcement Division surveyed her officers, checking and double checking that every one that she’d tapped for this mission was there. Finally, she was satisfied.

“Alright, people, listen up!” she bellowed, causing instant silence and all eyes to snap to hers.

“As you all know, the First Task of the TriWizard Tournament is today. Four names came out of the Goblet of Fire – three Champions plus the one that had Harry Potter’s name on it. The experts have agreed that the magical contract that the Goblet has enacted will be between itself and the person that signed that piece of parchment, not Harry Potter. Our job today is to capture that person.

“With all of the media coverage this has garnered, you can be assured that our perpetrator knows that their magic is on the line. It’s either be there and compete or become a squib. There is no other option for them.

“And the second that they reveal themselves, I want them taken down. I don’t care if that means that they fail to compete and that they lose their magic. Get them secured and back here as soon as possible so that we can fill them to the gills with veritaserum and find out the full extent of the plot.

“And questions?”

A soft rustling indicated the dozens of aurors shifting slightly, but no hands were raised or voices called out.

“Alright,” Madam Bones continued. “You’ll be split into four teams. Team One. Shaklebolt, I want your team around the Champions’ tent. More than likely, that’s where the target will turn up. Team Two. Dawlish. Your team will patrol the dragon pens. Team Three. Jacobs. Take your team undercover into the stands. Keep an eye on the crowd and watching for trouble from that direction. I will lead Team Four. We’ll be roving the entire stadium, free to move about and help wherever it’s needed.”

She watched carefully, making sure that all knew their assignments for the day.

“Grab your equipment,” she ordered. “We move out in twenty minutes.”

-oOoOo-

He’d been feeling their eyes on him all day. Ever since he’d walked out of his room, they’d been there, watching him from the corner of his eye, turning away whenever he looked at them, and going back to whispering amongst themselves the second that he turned away. But he knew. And it was making him jittery.

Today was the First Task at Hogwarts. The Task that Dumbledore and the other idiots from the Ministry had wanted him in. As bait, no less. A way to flush out the git who’d put his name in the blasted Goblet. It was impossible not to know what was either happening or about to happen – he had no way of knowing what time the event was supposed to start. Oh, sure, he could have asked, but the words had always died in his throat anytime that he’d considered voicing his question.

Currently, he was sitting on one of the chairs in the library, a book held in his hands so that the
words actually stayed still. He’d tried resting it on his knee, but the way that it was bouncing with
nervous anticipation, it’d been a bad idea. He was supposed to be studying for a Potions pop quiz.
At least, he thought that that was what the book was about. But really, it could have been about
anything, it wasn’t like he’d been able to actually read any of it.

Slow, gradual movement in his direction snapped his head up and he squashed the urge to jump up
and run. It was only Hermione. One hand reached out and took the book from him, closed it and
placed it on the table beside him. Then, just as cautiously, she turned him in his chair until there
was enough room for her to sit in his lap.

Automatically, his hands came up around her waist. Her weight stilled his knee and he blew out the
breath that he didn’t know that he’d been holding.

“Do you want to talk to me about it?” she asked, capturing his eyes with her own.

Harry’s mouth opened and closed and he shook his head before squeezing his eyes closed.

“No. Yes. Oh, I don’t know,” he finally managed.

“Well, at least I have my choice of answers to choose from,” she replied, forcing an involuntary
smile from him.

She waited then, just holding him, one hand running through his unruly locks. A soft sigh escaped
him and he dropped his head to her shoulder.

“I’m just worried about today,” he finally admitted.

“What particularly?” she asked.

“Whether we’re right about who the Goblet bound itself to,” he stated almost too quietly for her to
hear.

“Harry, Slipshard, Professor Flitwick and Darknest all agreed that the Goblet was designed to bind
the magical signatures of the person doing the entering into the Competition to the contract, not the
particular name on the piece of parchment,” she reminded him, after lifting his head so that he
could see the sincerity in her eyes.

“I know, I know, it’s just …” he trailed off.

“You have nothing to worry about, Harry, You’ll see. Madam Bones will turn up tonight, telling us
all about how Cedric and the others went and who they captured and why,” Hermione stated.

“It’s just …” he tried again.

She leant forward and gave him a soft kiss on his forehead.

“It’s just that you can’t help but worry,” she finished for him. “And you wouldn’t be you if you
weren’t worried about some plot.”

Harry nodded his head, extremely glad that she understood how he was feeling without him having
to say it.

“How about you and I take a walk and forget about it?” she suggested.

“Actually, a walk sounds kinda good,” Harry agreed. “But would you mind if I went by myself for
a bit? I think I just need some time alone.”
“Sure, Harry,” she replied. “I’ll be here when you get back, okay?”

He nodded and, after she’d hopped up from his lap, he strode from the room, eager to work off some of that excess energy.

-oOoOo-

“Welcome ladies and gentlemen, students, staff and special guests,” Ludo Bagman’s magically enhanced voice bellowed around the specially built stadium, “welcome to the First Task of the TriWizard Tournament!”

A great roar of applause, accompanied by countless whistles and cheers for the Champions responded, echoing from one side of the great stadium to the other.

Fred and George Weasley, together with Angelina, Alicia, Katie and Lee had managed to score perfect seats right near the front of one side of the stadium. The judges table was about a third of the way around from where they were, affording them the perfect view for when the points were awarded. In front of them, right at the very front of the stadium, were their brother Charlie and Hagrid. The only downside to these seats, at least from their perspective, was the fact that their youngest brother happened to be half a dozen seats to their right.

The stadium itself was an amazing piece of engineering. It was situated just inside the Forbidden Forest in a clearing that the twins would have sworn didn’t exist last year. Now, a massive rock quarry, filled with an appropriate amount of loose rubble, was surrounded by enough stands to easily fit a thousand people. On one side of the stadium, two large tents had been erected – one for the Champions and the other, a hospital just in case.

“Our Champions,” Bagman continued, “Cedric Diggory from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry; Fleur Delacour from Beauxbatons Academie of Magic; and Victor Krum representing The Durmstrang Institute, are in the Champions’ Tent awaiting their turn to compete in today’s task.

“Each Champion today will be displaying their daring and nerve, their magical strength and their ability to think on their feet against an opponent magically stronger than they are, but also one of the most vicious opponents that they will ever have to face in their lives.

“Their task today will be to retrieve a golden egg.”

Here Bagman paused as he held a large egg the size of his head for all to see. Slowly, he turned in a circle, ensuring that everyone in the stadium got a good look at the Champion’s goal.

“But what, I hear you ask, will they be facing? What is it that they will have to at the very least get passed, if not outright defeat? The answer is … a dragon!”

A great susurration swept around the stadium like a great wind as everyone turned to the people around them, repeating what they’d just heard.

“That’s right, ladies and gentlemen,” Bagman continued, “a dragon! Each Champion will be pitted against a dragon. Their task will be to retrieve a golden egg just like this one from within the very nest of a nesting mother dragon!”

“Cor, no wonder Potter chickened out, knew that he’d have no chance of doing that,” Ron was heard to say to his companions.

A lazy flick from Fred’s wand directed at his brother, caused said younger red-head to start
spouting nonsense.

“Our youngest brother appears to be suffering from a babbling hex,” George commented dryly.

“Really?” Fred replied in astonishment. He cupped one ear to hear his younger brother more clearly. “Are you sure? I can’t hear anything different coming from him.”

“Shut it, you two, we’re trying to listen,” Alicia stated, accompanying it with a jab to George’s ribs with her elbow, a feat that was duplicated by Angelina on his twin.

“And here comes our first dragon!” Bagman declared, pointing towards the opening that had been left in the stadium’s walls for the dragons. “A Swedish Short-Snout!”

“Cool!” the twins chorused as the enormous dragon was carefully manoeuvred into place by the team of twelve dragon handlers.

A second team of seven dragon handlers, each carrying large pinkish egg followed them. Once the eggs were in place, including the great golden egg, and the dragon chained to the massive stake in the ground by its rear left leg, the men escaped.

“Now that we have our first dragon in place, all we need is a Champion!” Bagman declared. “So, put your hands together for the Champion representing Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry: Cedric Diggory!”

-oOoOo-

As much as Harry tried to keep his mind away from what was happening at Hogwarts, he was failing abysmally. From Fred and George, he knew that the First Task involved dragons and from what they’d been able to piece together from Charlie and Hagrid, nesting mother dragons at that.

Harry had spent hours in his library learning about dragons. He’d even had Dobby pop him off to that valley somewhere in Wales where they’d actually seen some dragons that day last year when the two of them were popping all over the country looking for plants and animals to fill the greenhouses and the animal enclosure with.

All of that knowledge led him to one incontrovertible thought: the organisers of the TriWiz had to be insane! Dragons were just about the most powerful animals on the planet, magical or mundane. They were highly spell resistant and could dish out far more damage than they were ever likely to take. In fact, from what he’d read, it took a team of seven to fourteen dragon handlers to subdue a dragon. And some of those species required even more, like the Hungarian Horntail that he’d read about.

Nesting mothers, he was sure, would probably equal that, if not surpass it – mothers of any species were always considered the most vicious. Taking that line of thought further, it seemed most likely that the TriWiz organisers had decided that the Champions would have to get past the dragons. Or perhaps retrieve something that they were guarding.

Harry wondered if the First Task was some type of maze or perhaps an arena? Both seemed possible. Shrugging, he guessed that he’d find out later that night once Madam Bones came over.

*That* thought, of course, took him full circle and he was back thinking about *his* name coming out of the Goblet of Fire. If it hadn’t been for the goblins, then *he* would be preparing to face off against a dragon.

He paused, his unseeing eyes gazing over the uninhabited part of the valley that he was currently
He imagined the scenario: he was at Hogwarts. He was a Champion. He was about to be thrown to the dragons. How would he do?

It was surely a question that he was forever going to wonder. Exactly how would he have done if he’d been forced to compete, if they hadn’t been able to get him out of the contract?

A frown marred his face even as his eyes suddenly focussed on the rocks around him.

Slowly, he lifted his staff and pointed it at one of the medium sized rocks.

“Draconifors!” he intoned.

Immediately, a jet of golden light shot from his rowan staff, impacted upon the rock and morphed it into a miniature dragon.

Harry cocked his head at the small dark green dragon. Common Welsh Green, if he was to guess. The dragon, roughly the size of a Labrador, sat back on its haunches and lifted its snout, sniffing the air.

Shifting his staff’s aim, he shot a colour changing spell at the closest rock the size of his fist to the dragon. With a nod of satisfaction, Harry tied the brilliant red rock to the dragon with a compulsion charm for the dragon to guard it.

But it still wasn’t quite right. Shifting aim back to the dragon once more, Harry pushed his magic into a spell.

“Engorgio!”

Twice more he used the same spell on the dragon. “Engorgio! Engorgio!”

Harry’s eyes narrowed at the now elephant sized dragon. Its swirling yellow eyes fixed on the wizard before it and it lumbered to its feet, it wings half unfurling as smoke began to pour from its nostrils.

“All right,” Harry muttered. “Let’s do this.”

Madam Bones’ eyes never rested as she strode around the perimeter of the stadium. She knew that trouble was coming: she’d felt it in her bones, an expression that she’d learnt from her father. And one that was coincidentally quite accurate.

The six aurors in her Team were spread around her, none overly close to provide for a massed target, but not too far apart either in case back up was needed. It was a fine line and one that it took trainee aurors years to master.

From all reports so far, there had been no unexpected or unauthorised personnel around the dragon enclosure. Shaklebolt at the Champion’s Tent had also had nothing to report the last time that she’d been by that area. Unfortunately, it was impossible to check in with the undercover aurors in the stands without giving away their identities. The fact that none had sent up the signal requesting backup meant that she had to assume that it was all quiet there as well.

“Oh, I’m not sure that was wise!” Bagman’s amplified voice floated out to her.
The second Champion, Miss Delacour from Beauxbatons, was now in the area and, from what little she could tell, was putting up an interesting performance. But Amelia had no time for that now, not with a job to do. She’d get the highlights later, or if she was lucky, perhaps even a pensieve memory to watch.

Reaching the top of her arc, she turned back, only to hear Ludo burst forth with, “good Lord, I thought she’d had it then!”

So, the second Champion was still going, although if Amelia’s timescale was accurate, she knew that Miss Delacour must be coming up on the time that Cedric Diggory managed the feat in.

Movement well off in the distance caught her attention and she dismissed Ludo and the Task from her concentration. A fast moving speck sped from the castle towards the arena.

Amelia’s strides lengthened as she moved to intercept the unknown person. There was no way that she was going to get anywhere near them, though, judging by how fast they were moving. And then she realised why: the person was flying on a broom.

She kept her eyes focussed on him and her brows creased in confusion as she recognised the dark green and gold of a Diricawl uniform. There shouldn’t, she knew, be anyone from Diricawl within a hundred miles of Hogwarts. That was enough to have her break into a run.

-oOoOo-

A feint to the left was enough to have Harry diving to the right, desperately trying to avoid the great gout of red-hot fire that had just been shot at him.

His jeans were torn at the knees and the left-hand side of his shirt was singed where he hadn’t managed to get out of the way in time to avoid a different burst of fire not that long ago. Sweat streamed down his back, his hair was plastered to his head and his palms were slick, making holding on to his staff difficult to say the least.

Ducking low, Harry hid behind a convenient rock as he considered strategies.

“Rooaarr!”

The dragon’s near constant bellowing was getting tiring and he considered trying a silencing hex. But, of course, he didn’t want to do anything that would make this less realistic than it really was. This wasn’t a real dragon, after all, only a transfigured one and its skin wasn’t as strong or as magically resistant as a real dragon.

He’d been steadily making his way around the dragon in a circle for close to ten minutes now. Or it could have been longer, it wasn’t like he was looking at his watch, after all. Finally, he was in position. He’d given the dragon the low ground, allowing the rocks around him to provide extra cover.

Bobbing his head up, Harry took a quick look, only to duck smartly out of the way as another burst of flame shot overhead.

With a frown he considered his options.

His constant moving had forced the dragon some three or four metres to the right of the bright red rock which he was targeting. What he needed was a distraction to … encourage … it to move further away.
He considered transfiguring a dog, but he didn’t think that a dragon would consider a dog much of a threat. The idea of an avalanche slipped in and quickly out of his mind, not even worth the time it took to consider the word, let alone the concept.

“Harry!” a high pitched terrified voice screamed.

With a frown of near annoyance, Harry stuck his head out from behind the rock. Further down the valley, running full tilt towards him, were Hermione, Daphne and Remus. What they thought they were going to do against a dragon, he had no idea.

Unfortunately, the distraction that Harry’d wanted had arrived, but there was no way that he was going to use his friends as bait for a dragon. The great green head snapped around, focussing in on the new threats.

“Rooaarrrr!”

Of course, the dragon’s challenge was considered accepted when the three didn’t stop their charge.

Knowing that it was now or never, Harry leant out and decided to go with what he considered a dragon’s greatest threat would be: another dragon.

“Draconifors. Draconifors. Draconifers.”

Three new small dragons appeared along the hill line in place of three boulders. A series of engorgement charms changed them from terrier-size to panther size. Their appearance had the exact effect that Harry’d wanted.

The great dragon that he’d been trying to get passed took four quick steps towards the three new interlopers, roaring a challenge at them. The tiny dragons, though, weren’t going to take that lightly and broke into a lumbering run.

Seeing the four dragons distracted, Harry leapt from his hiding place and began racing down the hill. The uneven footing shifted under his feet and he fell, sliding down the hill. His eyes, though, never left his target as his left hand shot out to snag the red rock as he tumbled passed.

Skidding to a halt, Harry grinned down at his prize.

“Rooaarrr!”

That was enough to bring him back to the here and now.

“Finite incantatem!” he yelled, his wand pointed at the mass of dragons, the three smaller dragons now dangling from the neck and wings of their larger cousin.

Immediately, four great Common Welsh Green dragons shrank and turned back into the rocks that they’d started their day as.

“What in Merlin’s name did you think that you were doing?” a clearly angry Remus asked, his eyes flashing a dangerous gold.

Harry looked up at the three staring down at him.

“I needed to know,” he said simply. “I needed to know if I could if things had been different.”

The fact that three pairs of eyes lost some of their worry and anger told him that, while he was still
in for a major tongue-lashing, it might not be as bad as it might have been.

-oOoOo-

A sweaty, nervous, Harry Potter burst through the flaps of the Champions Tent.

“Am I too late?” he asked anxiously, looking around at the almost empty tent.

“Mister Potter?” a puzzled red-head that he thought was named Percy Weatherby or perhaps Weasley asked.

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s me. Harry Potter. Am I too late for the First Task?”

“You want to compete?” a clearly confused Percy asked. “I thought that it was decided that you didn’t have to compete.

“Apparently, we were wrong,” Harry stated, his eyes darting about. “So, am I too late?”

“Just let me go check,” Percy told him before rushing out of the tent.

Percy returned a few minutes later to find Harry taking a drink from a flask, obviously to rehydrate from his rush to get there.

“The judges said that you can compete,” Percy told him. “Mister Krum is currently taking his turn and then we’ll need to swap … er … you’d better draw out a … a model of what you’ll have to face.”

Picking up the discarded bag from the nearby table, Percy held it out to him. Harry stuck his hand in and pulled out the only thing inside: a tiny model of a dragon. This one was black with yellow eyes, bronze coloured horns and a tail filled with vicious looking spikes.

“A Hungarian Horntail,” Percy stated. “Your task will be to collect the golden egg.”

Harry nodded nervously and licked his lips.

“Mister Krum should be finished soon and then we’ll get the stadium set up,” Percy told him. “You should be able to start your turn in twenty minutes or so, I would guess.”

“Right, right, twenty minutes,” Harry Potter repeated.

An indignant voice sounded from outside just then, interrupting Percy and making him frown.

“I’ll just go and see what that is,” Percy stated before striding out of the tent.

As the tent flap opened, Harry had a glimpse of Amelia Bones talking with some big, black, bald auror. Twenty minutes. That’s all he needed to wait. He just hoped that he’d be left alone in the meantime.

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“And it seems, ladies and gentlemen, that as outstanding as this morning has already been, our entertainment is not finished yet,” Ludo Bagman’s booming voice announced. “As I’m sure that you’re all aware, at the Choosing Ceremony, a fourth name came out of the Goblet of Fire. That name was, of course, Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Lived-Again. After some confusion, it has been decided that young Harry will be competing as well today.”
“What!” Angelina gasped.

“Harry’s going to be going in there and facing a dragon?” Katie Bell asked, horror etched on her face.

Fred and George’s heads were swivelling this way and that. When they couldn’t find what they were looking for, they stood up and started looking around. After that, they climbed up onto their seats to continue the search. Then, with simultaneous shrugs and identical frowns, they dropped back down.

“What is it?” Lee asked.

“If Harry’s here to compete …” George began.

“Where’s the rest of Diricawl?” Fred finished.

“Maybe I shoul’ go down thar and give ’em a ’and,” a booming voice interrupted.

The group turned to see Hagrid rising to his feet, his head turned to face the two dozen dragon handlers wrestling the biggest dragon yet into the arena. This one was easily twice as big as the Welsh Green that Fleur Delacour had had to face. Its scales were jet black while its horns and the spikes that covered its tail were bronze. Its angry yellow eyes were whirling away as it struggled against its bonds.

“They’ve got it in hand, Hagrid,” Charlie reassured his big friend, one hand stretched up to rest on his shoulder.

“Still don’ think it’s righ’ ta be usin’ the dragons like this,” Hagrid muttered. “’Ems proud creatures, they don’ like games.”

“I know, Hagrid, but with the amount that we’re being paid to provide them, just think of all the good we can do around the Reserve,” Charlie replied.

With a huff, Hagrid dropped back to his seat, shaking its structural integrity. Thankfully, though, it’d been specially made for the large man and held its shape.

After an inordinately long time, the Hungarian Horntail was in place. She stalked protectively around the eleven murky grey eggs and one golden one, smoke billowing from her nostrils as she hissed her displeasure at the world at large.

“Sorry for the delay, folks, but it seems that we’re finally ready,” Bagman announced. “So, without further ado, I give you your Fourth TriWizard Champion, Harry Potter.”

At the sound of a cannon blast, a tiny green and gold clad figure stepped through the flaps of the Champion’s Tent and surveyed what he was up against.

“Go Harry!” Fred yelled, a call that was immediately picked up and echoed not only around him, but in other parts of the stadium as well.

“What’s he doing?” Alicia asked a few minutes later when all Harry’d done was to raise his wand for a second before dropping it and remaining standing perfectly still.

The answer in the form of a speeding broom came before anyone could voice their theories. The broom paused mid-air allowing Harry to mount it. And then he was off, soaring straight up into the sky. His trajectory wobbled about a bit, but his strategy was easy to see: get some height and
control the airspace around the dragon.

“I wonder what’s wrong with him?” Fred commented.

“Yeah, I’ve never seen him so unsteady on a broom before,” George agreed.

The tiny figure stopped just out of range from the great bursts of fire that the Hungarian Horntail had sent in his direction to warn him off.

“He’s mad,” Charlie breathed. “Nothing can outfly a dragon.”

“Yeah, but the dragon can’t fly, can it? Not while it’s tethered to the ground,” Fred countered.

“Maybe,” Charlie allowed doubtfully.

Once again, they saw Harry raise his wand, this time to tap himself on the head.

“A disillusionment charm!” Angelina exclaimed. “I wonder why none of the others thought to try that?”

“Because it won’ work,” Hagrid stated flatly. “We’ve tried ’em before again’ dragons and they simply see through ’em.”

“I’m not sure what it is, can’t be smell though,” Charlie agreed. “Even with the most powerful silencing and scent suppressing charms in place, dragons still know exactly where a disillusioned person is.”

And they were right. Even though the audience could no longer see the flying Harry Potter, they could tell exactly where he was by the way that the dragon’s head moved about. A great quiet had descended over the stadium as the youngest Champion attempted to get close enough to the dragon to take the golden egg nestled in its nest.

A sudden swipe of one massive forepaw, followed up by a great bellow of roaring fire showed exactly where Harry was – the broomstick that was now on fire was a dead giveaway. They watched horrified as the disillusionment charm disintegrated, leaving a badly charred and smouldering Harry to fall eight or nine feet to the ground, only to begin rolling about to extinguish the flames.

“It’s going to kill him!” Katie shrieked, covering her face with her hands.

And for an instant, it appeared that that was exactly what was about to happen. One massive paw slammed down hard right where Harry was, its razor sharp claws digging deep into the earth that Harry had just rolled away from.

The injured boy staggered away and managed to find a modicum of cover behind a group of rocks.

The audience poised on the edge of their seats watched as a panting Harry peeked over the rocks before whirling away to safety before the next burst of flames could set him on fire again. Then, without even looking at his target, Harry poked his wand into a tiny crack between two rocks and began firing.

Stream after stream of orange fire-like magic poured out of Harry’s wand. Confringo, the exploding curse, was one of the most powerful curses known to wizard-kind. But against a dragon, it was next to useless.
Four massive explosions erupted against the dragon’s chest, enraging it further, but when the dragon moved away from the line of fire, momentarily exposing its nest, the result was horrendous.

Two explosions erupted in the very centre of the dragon’s nest, obliterating the eleven eggs completely. The dragon’s long sinewy neck swung around to survey the damage before letting out the loudest, most ear-shattering roar of rage that had everyone in attendance clamping hands over their ears against.

And then the dragon charged.

Quick lumbering strides took it away from the nest that it no longer had to protect, flecks of red now visible in its great yellow eyes as it tested the very limits of its shackles. But it wasn’t enough for the dragon.

Harry, meanwhile, seemed oblivious to what he’d just done. He still hadn’t looked to see the impact of his magic and that was his undoing.

Ignoring the magic still pouring from the tiny stick, the dragon leapt high, stretched forth both paws and came down, just in reach of the rocks that was hiding its prey. The very rocks themselves were powdered into dust with the force of the dragon’s weight coming down upon them

And one razor sharp claw reached its target.

This time it was Harry Potter bellowing in pain and fear as he was lifted bodily from the ground by the claw that had pierced his shoulder. The dragon eyed its capture briefly before flicking its paw, shaking Harry up and away.

Before he could hit the ground once more, the dragon had swung around, its tail full of razor sharp spikes swinging like a bat to impact the falling body. What was left of Harry flew off in two directions as one leg went left and the rest of him went right, a fountain of crimson blood arcing across the sky between the two.

Gasps and cries of fear and panic had erupted all over the stadium before this, but now the yells and screams were punctuated by horrified cries of ‘No!’ as well.

But after landing, Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Lived-Again, once more seemingly defied the odds by raising the wand still clutched in his hand to send one last burst of magic before slumping back to the ground.

A burst of grey-green light hit the very shackle that tethered the dragon to the ground, unlocking it and releasing the dragon.

The whole stadium, dragon as well as witches and wizards froze for one terrifying moment. And then pandemonium erupted.

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Nearly forty minutes later, a dishevelled and slightly singed Amelia Bones, her ever present monocle now nowhere to be seen, rushed across the remains of the stadium floor. Beside her was a trainee healer. There was no one else to spare, especially for a boy who all knew was most likely long dead by now.

The intervening forty minutes had been a horrifying nightmare that was sure to haunt everyone there for days if not weeks or months to come.
The dragons’ retribution had been terrible. It had been chained up, brought to a place that it didn’t know or understand, forced to compete against a wizard and then watched as its eggs were destroyed. There had been no stopping its rampage.

Hundreds were hurt as it tore the stadium to shred. Dozens were killed and Amelia had no idea how many more were still likely to join them.

In the end, it’d taken the combined might of nearly four dozen witches and wizards to kill the beast. There simply hadn’t been any other option.

And now they were here to see about the one who had caused it all. Harry Potter.

The small figure still lay where he’d landed. His green and golden clothes now barely retained only the slightest hint of their original colour. Instead, they were a mess of charred remains. A massive pool of blood stained the ground below where his right leg had once been. More blood had drained away from his shoulder wound.

There was no way that the boy could have survived such blood lose.

And now she’d never know why. Why he competed when he didn’t have to nor why he set the dragon loose.

But it was when Amelia got close enough to see the boy’s face that she was pulled up short. Her eyes widened so much that, if she’d still had her monocle, it would have fallen from its place.

This was not a boy’s face; it was that of a man. A man easily twenty years older. A face that she hadn’t seen for over a dozen years and one that should have been dead for almost as long.

“That’s not Harry Potter?” the trainee gasped.

“No. It’s not. That is Bartemius Crouch Jr,” Amelia replied grimly.

And with his death, she very much doubted that she’d ever find the answers that she craved.
Both students and staff of Diricawl Academy of Magic stayed up much later than what was considered normal in the manor the night of the First Task of the TriWizard Tournament. Every single one of them were eager to hear what had happened at Hogwarts that day, be it the results of the three Champions or if the fourth person had turned up in the hope of competing and keeping their magic.

Their hopes, though, were in vain: Amelia Bones, who’d promised to come over that night to give them all the details, failed to show up.

It was unsurprising, then, that the breakfast table was full earlier than usual. It was also unsurprising that a crowd quickly gathered around the copy of *The Daily Prophet* the instant that it turned up.

What was surprising, though, was the contents of that paper.

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**Potter Imposter Incites Dragon Rampage**  
by Markus Waynesbury

*Yesterday marked the day that the First Task of the TriWizard Tournament was held at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. This day should have been a day filled with challenges, extraordinary magical deeds and daring bravery. And indeed, that is exactly what the spectators received. The only difference being that they expected to be watching it, not participating in it themselves, with devastating results.*

*The First Task consisted of each Champion facing off against a dragon in an effort to collect a magical golden egg from the nest of a nesting mother. It was the fourth ‘Champion’, though, that caused an exciting event to change into a horrifying nightmare for everyone when he set loose an enraged Hungarian Horntail on the spectators.*

*This ‘Champion’, who *The Daily Prophet* can exclusively confirm was Death Eater Bartemius Crouch Junior, polyjuiced to look like Harry Potter, failed abysmally at the set Task.*

*After arriving late and convincing the judges that he was in fact The-Boy-Who-Lived-Again come to compete, Crouch took on a Hungarian Horntail. His tactics of broomstick flying while disillusioned failed from the start when the dragon set his broom on fire, causing him to fall to the ground, where his disillusionment charm failed.*

*Crouch’s tactic then appeared to be to subdue the dragon with superior fire power. This approach failed spectacularly when his confingo curse impacted the dragon’s eggs, obliterating them and enraging the most dangerous type of dragon known to wizards.*

*The enraged dragon captured Crouch and tore him in two, leaving him for dead. Unfortunately, though, Crouch was able to manage one final piece of magic: unlocking the dragon’s shackles.*

*For the next forty minutes, the spectators were terrorised by an unrestrained, incensed dragon who took her revenge on the wizarding population in attendance. With relative ease, she tore down stands full of people. Dragon fire spread through those few remaining stands, engulfing adult and student alike.*
This reporter witnessed countless acts of true heroism and sacrifice in that short span of time: friends pushing friends out of the way of dragon fire; children pulling adults from the rubble of the stands; former Hogwarts’ groundskeeper and current dragon keeper, Rubeus Hagrid deliberately drawing the enraged dragon’s attention to himself and away from a group of terrified students.

By the time the Horntail was subdued and consequently killed by a team of forty-five dragon handlers, teachers and other like-minded citizens, the death toll had reached thirty-seven. Another two hundred and six were reported injured by the dragon’s rampage; eight of whom are considered to be in critical condition.

This reporter can only thank those brave witches and wizards who put their very lives on the line to save the rest of us from certain death. To the numerous Healers who responded, we salute you. And to all those who are touched by this tragedy, know that we grieve with you.

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Hogwarts Death Toll Expected to Rise
by Bianca Ravenhurst

37 dead.
206 injured.
8 critical patients.

That is the current toll of injured and killed from yesterday’s tragedy at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Saint Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries was almost overwhelmed by the sheer scope of the injuries after the First Task of the TriWizard Tournament. Many of the less severe injuries were treated at Hogwarts itself, but even still, our nation’s Healers were almost no match for such a large volume of patients.

Most of the deaths and injuries were from the result of falling debris, but some were the result of a much more unpleasant encounter with the Hungarian Horntail that ran rampant around the stadium.

One of the most severely injured by said dragon was Rubeus Hagrid (64), dragon keeper, who selflessly put his own life on the line in a valiant effort to draw the dragon’s attention away from a group of defenceless children. His sacrifice has left the well-loved man with the loss of his left arm to his elbow and massive scarring to the left side of his body and face.

Another noteworthy causality of the event was Hogwarts’ Charms Professor Filius Flitwick (51) who defiantly held his position as he levitated a large section of stands holding nearly a hundred students, keeping it from collapsing from under them while the dragon advanced upon him. Professor Flitwick is one of those in critical condition at Saint Mungo’s with a broken back, fractured skull and internal damage after he was caught by a swipe of the dragon’s paw.

One of the fatalities of the tragic event was Durmstrang Headmaster Igor Karkaroff (42) who was crushed when the judge’s stand was smashed as the dragon landed upon its roof.

Saint Mungo’s and the Ministry of Magic are currently withholding the names of all others who were killed in this tragedy until their relatives have been notified. The Daily Prophet understands that this includes thirty-two students, although how many are from Hogwarts, Beauxbatons and
Durmstrang is unclear at this time.

The Daily Prophet promises to keep you updated on the condition of these valiant witches and wizards as information comes to hand.

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Master Auror Held Prisoner In His Own Trunk
by Markus Waynesbury

In an incident related to the tragedy at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry yesterday, it has been confirmed that Defence Against the Dark Arts Professor Alastor Moody (83) was found locked within a compartment of his own trunk.

Alastor Moody, a retired Master Auror, is renowned for his many arrests of dark witches and wizards as well as his extreme paranoia.

What makes this incident even more unusual is the fact that Moody’s condition immediately warranted his admittance into Saint Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries.

How he came to be locked in his own trunk currently remains a mystery, although The Daily Prophet understands that the Department of Magical Law Enforcement is currently investigating.

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Remaining Judges: TriWizard Tournament Will Go On!
by Rita Skeeter

When this reporter researched the history of the TriWizard Tournament when it was first announced, I was appalled by what I found. The Tournament has an incredibly high death and injury toll. In fact, after the previous Tournament, held all the way back in 1792 where three judges, two Champions and scores of others were killed, the Tournament as a concept was completely abandoned.

Thus, I was incredibly wary of what was going to happen here. My fears, though, dear readers were allayed by Albus Dumbledore himself when he claimed that he, alongside the other Headmasters and the Ministry of Magic itself had worked tirelessly to ensure that this revitalised Tournament would be free of its past dark and deadly history.

Well, I think that we can all see how much faith we should have put in those assurances!

With two more Tasks remaining, I sought out Headmaster Dumbledore after the terrible, terrible events of today in an effort to have my fears relieved.

Albus Dumbledore (127), who some consider to be the most powerful wizard of our time, looked as though he’d just emerged from some muggle war. The bandage around his head was stained red with blood, his left arm was in a sling, he was walking with a limp and more than half of his trademark beard had been seared off.

“I, along with all those at Hogwarts, and I’m sure all within the Wizarding world itself, grieve for what has happened here today,” the aged wizard said. “What happened today could not have been foreseen and it was only by the efforts of an evil man long thought dead that they were brought about.”

When I asked whether this tragedy meant that the Tournament would be abandoned, Dumbledore
had this to say:

“The TriWizard Tournament will continue. In fact, it must. The three Champions are still under a magical contract, which means that it is our duty to ensure that it continues or they would be forced into a position that might cause them to lose their magic.”

Hearing this, dear readers, I asked the question that I know is on all of our lips: what assurances do we have that there will be no repeat of this devastating event?

“This was always the Task with the most potential for danger,” Dumbledore assured us, his trademark twinkle firmly in place, not that I was taken in by such theatrics. “The remaining two Tasks have already been decided and the remaining judges and I will be reassessing those details to ensure that no harm can befall any Champion or spectator again.”

The ‘remaining judges’ remark refers, of course, to the fact that the Headmaster of Durmstrang, Igor Karkaroff was killed today, as well as Bartemius Crouch who was seen being arrested by the Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement herself, Amelia Bones.

Whether or not Dumbledore’s words are enough to reassure you, dear readers, is for you to decide. For myself, I think that I will be thinking long and hard before I decide to attend any more Tasks of this fateful TriWizard Tournament.

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TriWiz Champions Strut Their Stuff: The Full Results of The First Task
by Jarrod Kewel

The First Task of the TriWizard Tournament involved each Champion being faced against a nesting mother dragon and tasked with retrieving a golden egg that had been placed within her nest.

The first Champion to compete yesterday was Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry’s Cedric Diggory. Diggory’s magic of choice for this task was transfiguration. His use of transfiguring a boulder into a Labrador as a diversionary tactic looked at first glance to be a resounding success. Unfortunately, the Swedish Short-Snout changed its mind just as Diggory managed to collect his egg and sent a jet of fire which scorched the Hogwarts Champion somewhat, costing him valuable points.

Next into the area was the Beauxbatons beauty, Fleur Delacour. Charms was her method of operandi, and most particularly a very effective sleep charm that, while taking longer, was eminently safer for the young witch. Unfortunately, the Common Welsh Green snorted in its sleep, causing Delacour’s robes to be set on fire just as she achieved her goal.

The legendary quidditch star and Champion of Durmstrang Institute, Victor Krum, was third into the stadium, being pitted against a Chinese Fireball. It is commonly known that the weakest part of any dragon is its eyes and Krum used this knowledge to his advantage, hitting the dragon with a well-placed Conjunctivitus Curse. This had the unfortunate consequences of making the dragon stomp around in its blindness, smashing half of its real eggs in the process, something that cost the Champion points.

In the end, it was a beautiful thing to watch three very different approaches to the Task, each utilizing different branches of magic to achieve the same results.

The current point standings are:
Victor Kum: 40 points
Cedric Diggory: 38 points
Fleur Delacour: 37 points

The Second Task is scheduled for February 24.

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**Dircawl Academy v Hogwarts: Just Where is the Safest Place For Our Children to Learn?**
by Markus Waynesbury

Long has it been purported that Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is the safest place in all of Britain. And enhancing this reputation for the past fifty years is the fact that the strongest wizard in the world has been its Headmaster.

But after yesterday’s fiasco that saw thirty-seven killed, most of them students, along with over two hundred others injured, one must wonder at that claim.

What is even more interesting is the fact that the newest school in Britain, Dircawl Academy of Magical Studies, refused to attend the event that they were specifically invited to. And their sole reason for staying away from Hogwarts? The claim that it was potentially too dangerous a situation for them to subject their students to.

One must wonder, if a tiny school with only fourteen students places their safety above everything else, what does that say about the premier magic school in our country?

Does our blind faith in the reputation of Hogwarts and her Headmaster mean that we are willingly placing our children into dangerous situations that no child should be subjected to?

And from what The Daily Prophet has heard, it may not just be in the safety department that Dircawl Academy is seriously challenging its larger and older counterpart. Our understanding is that the students of Dircawl are also offered more subject choices than have been seen at Hogwarts for centuries.

Perhaps there is a lesson or two that can be learnt from this small school.

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**The Death Eater Who Died, Dies Again**
by Rita Skeeter

Bartemius Crouch Jr. Convicted Death Eater. We all thought that he’d died in Azkaban in 1982. How very wrong we were.

This was the man responsible for yesterday’s tragedy when, after destroying the Hungarian Horntail’s nest of eggs, he then, with his dying breath, cast the charm that unlocked the dragon’s shackles and started her rampage.

But this wasn’t his first act of carnage. Oh, no, dear readers, this convicted Death Eater had done more, far more.

When young Barty originally became a Death Eater, no one can say for certain. That he was involved in He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’s reign of terror is a given. I’m sure that countless
deaths and tortures were from his very wand.

And he, along with the infamous Bellatrix Lestrange, her husband and brother-in-law, were responsible for torturing renowned aurors Frank and Alice Longbottom into insanity, a state that they remain in to this day. That was, in fact, the very crime that young Barty’s very own father convicted him of and sentenced him to Azkaban to life for.

How he escaped the prison is not known. Even when he did so is a mystery. The only clue that we have is that his death was reported twelve years ago. A death that was obviously faked.

These facts bring a very shiver to this reporter, knowing that convicted murderers can escape the supposedly inescapable prison. And this was no ordinary prisoner, my dear readers. For his crimes, young Barty would have been held in the maximum security wing.

I just hope that there aren’t any other murderers out there biding their time, laughing at us as we think that they’re safely behind bars. I hope that the Ministry of Magic investigates exactly how this happened.

For now, all I can say is that, with Barty’s death at the hands of that dragon, I’m glad that there’s one less murderer for me to have to worry about.

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Dragons In Peril: Are We Destroying A Once Noble Species?
by Zander Douglas

Much has already been said of the terrible, terrible fiasco that became of yesterday’s TriWizard Tournament. The loss of life, as well as the multiple injuries is a tragedy that will haunt us all for years to come. But little has been said of one particular life that was also claimed yesterday: that of the Hungarian Horntail that had to be put down to end its rampage.

This dragon, a mother no less, was subjected to treatment that no mother ever should be: that of watching her babies be killed. It is no wonder that her rage knew no bounds. And even more than that, she was subjected to being uprooted from her native lands and transported hundreds of miles for sport.

Once upon a time, dragons roamed the Earth, living as the apex creatures of nature that they are. No longer is this the case. It is estimated that only about one percent of all dragons worldwide are free to live as they once did. The rest we have caged in ‘Dragon Reserves’.

These ‘Reserves’ are purported to be for the dragon’s safety. But are they?

Dragon numbers are dwindling rapidly, in fact there are a number of species, including the Ukrainian Ironbelly, that are on the brink of extinction.

And the question has to be asked, whose fault is that?

We say that we are keeping them safe, but how many uses have witches and wizards found for their carcasses? Armour from their skin; twelve different uses for their blood; untold numbers of wand cores are made from their heart strings. The list could go on for rolls of parchment.

And now we’re parading them around for sport, putting them and their precious eggs in danger for our own amusement.

I declare that it has to stop! These practices need to be rethought or we will soon lose these most
Ministry Official Arrested, Questioned
by Rita Skeeter

The aftermath of the dragon’s rampage after the First Task of the TriWizard Tournament was confusing to say the least. What was even more confusing, at least to this reporter, was seeing one of the judges for the Tournament arrested.

Bartemius Crouch Sr (52), Head of the Department of International Magical Cooperation, was seen being arrested by the Head of Magical Law Enforcement, Amelia Bones.

The exact nature of the charges levelled against Crouch Sr are at this time unknown, but this reporter has a hunch that it revolves around the fact that Crouch’s son, Bartemius Crouch Jr, who was thought to have died in Azkaban twelve years ago, was the one responsible for setting the dragon loose on the spectators of the First Task.

Rest assured, dear readers, that I will bring you all the details as soon as they are known.
Chapter 24

An exhausted Amelia Bones stepped out of the FLOO. Her legs wobbled as she determinedly strode forward. Just as she reached the door, a red-haired teen rushed through it and slammed into her.

“Auntie! You’re here! You’re alright!” Susan near sobbed into her shoulder.

“Of course I’m alright. And it’s very good to see you, too,” Amelia smiled, patting her niece on the back. “But if you don’t mind, I think I’d like to find somewhere to sit down.”

“Oh, of course,” Susan said, stepping back. “Everyone’s still in the dining room.”

Wearily, Amelia followed her niece through the manor. At the entrance to the room, she swayed slightly. She’d been up for well over twenty-four hours now and it was starting to tell on her.

“Amelia!” Minerva exclaimed seeing her. “Come sit down before you fall down.”

With a small smile, she complied, taking the seat immediately to her old friend’s left and thanking Dobby with a nod as he handed her a cup of tea.

“What’s been going on?” Sirius demanded.

“May I?” she asked, indicating the paper that lay on the table.

Taking it, she skimmed through the various articles, searching for what was said, what was unsaid and what had been blatantly made up. Around her, the entire population of Diricawl Academy – students and teachers alike – waited as patiently as they could, but she could tell that it was a close won thing.

Finally, she closed the paper and settled back in her chair, the cup of tea cradled in her hands.

“For the most part, it’s all true,” she stated. “There’s one or two extra things that we’ve been able to piece together, but nothing fabricated in any of the articles.”

“Perhaps it would be best if you told us everything that you can,” Minerva suggested.

Lifting one eyebrow, she indicated the children in the room.

“No, I think that they deserve to know,” Minerva replied. “After all, with slightly different circumstances, they could have been there to witness it all.”

“The day started off well,” Amelia related. “Diggory, Delacour and Krum all had their turns and there was nothing amiss. That was when ‘Harry Potter’ turned up, claiming that there’d been a new examination of the Goblet and that he was the one needed to compete or else he’d lose his magic.”

“The Prophet said that that guy looked like me,” Harry broke in. “How’d he manage that?”

“Polyjuice,” Amelia stated succinctly.

“That’s a controlled substance,” Sirius pointed out. “Where in the world did he get it and for that matter, how’s a dead Death Eater get a bit of Harry to change into?”

“Controlled or not, it’s not that difficult to make. Merlin, you can buy the stuff by the gallon on the
black market in Knockturn,” Amelia stated. “As for how he managed to masquerade as Harry, well that probably wasn’t all that difficult. It seems that Barty Jr has been masquerading as old Mad Eye Moody since the start of the school year. He’d been keeping Moody locked in his trunk so that he’d have easy access to Moody’s hair. It would have been child’s play to get a piece of Harry’s hair while you were all at Hogwarts.”

“He captured Alastor?” Minerva exclaimed. “I wouldn’t have thought such a feat were possible.”

“You and me both,” Amelia agreed. “Anyway, Barty, disguised as Harry, managed to convince the people in charge of his story before I could get there and he was out in the arena without me getting a chance to talk to him.

“The next part the Prophet got right. He tried to outfly the dragon – stupidest idea that I’ve ever heard of – before he got nailed by the beast. Barty then tried to take the dragon down singlehandedly, but only managed to destroy the nest and enrage the dragon in the process.

“By the time that the dragon had finished with him, he was in two pieces and casting the charm that set the dragon loose with his dying breath.”

She paused here to pierce Harry with her tired gaze. “Everyone thought that it was you, Harry. Can you imagine what everyone was thinking and feeling seeing you killed like that and then knowing that you’d let the dragon loose?” She shook her head. “We actually had to do a fair bit of damage control when it was all over and even had to show the reporters Barty’s body before they’d finally believe that it wasn’t you.”

“What about the crowd? How many people were hurt that we know?” Susan asked in a small voice.

“I don’t know, Susan,” Amelia replied, shaking her head. “I’ve seen the numbers, but not the names, I think that of the thirty-seven dead, six were from Beaubatons, five were from Durmstrang, and, of the remaining twenty-six, twenty were Hogwarts students, most upper year Ravenclaws. What I can tell you is that by the time we managed to kill the dragon, the stadium looked like a war zone. There were so, so many hurt people.”

“I am so glad that we decided not to go,” Minerva stated hollowly.

“Do we know why Crouch Jr did it?” Remus almost growled.

“Unfortunately not,” Amelia replied. “He died before anyone could question him. It’s fairly clear that he was the one to put Harry’s name in the Goblet; that’s why he tried to compete – he knew that he was facing becoming a squib. But whether he was following someone else’s orders or simply had made the plan up on his own, I doubt we’ll ever know.”

“What’s happening at Hogwarts now?” Minerva asked.

“The school will be temporarily closed,” Amelia stated. “I don’t know for how long, but with so many staff and students injured, let alone the ones that died, everyone’s being sent home as soon as they’ve healed.”

“What about Filius?” Remus asked.

“And Hagrid?” Harry added.

“Unfortunately, you know as much as I do. I’ve been stuck either at the remains of the stadium or back in the Ministry of Magic,” Amelia replied.
“Hopefully they recover quickly,” Minerva stated, voicing the thoughts of everyone there.

“It sounds as though only the only good thing that the *Prophet* had to say was about Diricawl,” Luna remarked, rereading that page while she listened.

“You got that right,” Sirius agreed. “Somehow I think that we’d better prepare for a fresh wave of owls from parents wanting their kids to come here.”

“I don’t think that it’ll just be the parents,” Harry stated. “If I was a Hogwarts student and I knew about another school that refused to go somewhere because it could be too dangerous and something like this happened, then I’d be sending a letter to that school myself.”

“Unfortunately, we just don’t have the room to take any more,” Minerva stated frustratedly. “If we did, we’d take as many in as we could.”

Even in her tired state, Amelia didn’t miss the pointed look that Harry and Hermione shared. Somehow, just seeing that look lifted her spirits. Whatever the two had in mind simply had to be something good.

-oOoOo-

It took quite a bit of convincing for Harry to get permission to go to Diagon Alley later that day. Sirius particularly was quite vexing. He seemed to think that now was the time to become the protective guardian. In the end, though, he’d managed it. All that it’d taken was a promise that he was simply going to FLOO to The Leaky Cauldron and then go straight to Gringotts and back again.

Getting permission for Hermione to accompany him had been almost as hard. The fact that classes had been cancelled for the day had helped, as had an impromptu visit by her mother after reading the news in the *Prophet*. Promising to stay by Harry’s side the entire time seemed to be enough for her mother, ensuring that Minerva and Sirius gave grudging permission.

After tumbling out of the fireplace in the Leaky Cauldron, the pair moved swiftly between the tables and out to the rear courtyard. Thankfully, the old pub had been fairly empty, meaning that it was only old Tom who’d noted their passage.

Their trip through the Alley to the grand marble building that was Gringotts was also conducted as swiftly as they could manage.

Stepping into the lobby of the bank, Harry threw back the hood to his cloak, an action that Hermione repeated before once again grasping his hand. A quick look around at the tellers had them deciding on the shortest line to join.

“Next?” the goblin eventually called after seeing off the witch that had been ahead of them.

“Good morning,” Harry said, sketching a shallow bow. “I would like to visit my vaults, please?”

“Keys, please,” the goblin intoned, peering down at them over his pince-nez glasses.

Slipping his hand into the inside pocket of his cloak, Harry brought forth the seven tiny golden keys and placed them on the desk before the teller. The goblin’s eyes widened slightly as he began picking them up one by one, examining them and laying them in a row in front of him.

“These seem to be in order,” the goblin stated.
Harry nodded as he retrieved his keys. “I would also like to make an appointment to see Slipshard after I have been to my vaults.”

“I will arrange it,” the goblin assured him. “Thrork will escort you.”

At the goblin’s gesture, Harry and Hermione turned to see a younger looking goblin approaching. Thrork seemed incredibly eager, trotting towards them from the direction of the mineshaft. As soon as he realised that the two humans had started towards him, he did an abrupt one-eighty before trotting back the way that he’d come.

“At least once we’re in the carts he can’t run off without us,” Harry commented.

“What are these mine carts like again, Harry?” Hermione asked nervously.

“Have you ever been on a rollercoaster?” he asked, shooting a look at her.

Her eyes widened slightly as she nodded.

“Well, I think it’s something like that,” Harry replied. “At least, that’s what it looked like from the ads that I saw on TV once.”

“I’ve never really liked roller coasters,” Hermione admitted.

Harry gave her hand a gentle squeeze. “There’s nothing to worry about; I’ll be right there beside you the entire time.”

By this time, they’d caught up with Thrork who directed them into the back part of the cart before jumping into the driver’s seat.

“What vault?” Thrork asked in a slightly higher voice than any goblin that they’d ever heard use before.

“I’ve got seven vaults that I’d like to visit,” Harry replied. “Can we start with Vault Two Seven Nine, please?”

With a nod, the goblin turned to his controls and set the cart in motion. For the first hundred metres, it was a fairly sedate ride, but then the cart plunged downwards, spiralling along the tracks, zigzagging through low, narrow tunnels and careening over ravines on the narrow tracks. Bursts of fire shot from far below them, causing Hermione to burrow even further into Harry’s side.

Finally, with a jerk that caused both teens to nearly fall headfirst into the bottom of the cart, their stop was achieved.

“Vault Two Seven Nine,” Thrork announced from the rock shelf in front of a round metal door where he was now standing. “Key, please.”

Shakily, Harry handed out the appropriate key before stepping out of the cart to join the goblin. While the goblin was doing what was needed to open the old vault, Harry held out his hand for Hermione to take as he helped her out of the cart.

“That’s a small amount of gold?” Hermione asked incredulously.

Harry turned to examine the knee-high pile of gold galleons spread over the floor of the vault.

“Well, in comparison to my Trust Vault, yeah, it is,” he replied.
It only took a cursory look to assure them that the vault in front of them really only held gold and that there wasn’t anything in there that wasn’t on the inventory list that Slipshard had given Harry.

“What are you going to do with it?” Hermione asked sotto voce.

Harry shrugged. “To be honest, I don’t know. Maybe I’ll have Slipshard invest it or something. Clan Lomas hasn’t been around for a very, very long time, but it’s all that I’ve got from my mum’s side of the family, so I don’t think that I want to dissolve it and roll it into the rest of the Potter family.”

Hermione gave him a side hug, recognising that before today, his mother’s family legacy consisted solely of the Dursleys.

“That’s a good idea, Harry, and it’s not as though you have to decide today,” she told him.

“Alright, I think that I’m done here,” Harry said to Thrork. “Can we go to Vault One Four Three now, please?”

-OoOoO-

Nearly two hours later, Harry and Hermione were rocketing along the tracks towards the second last of his vaults. That intervening couple of hours had been a riot of emotions for Harry.

There’d been the awe at all of the things that he’d found in the Potter and Peverell vaults – everything from jewellery to books to tapestries to heirlooms made of gold, silver and crystal, not to mention the piles of gold galleons, silver sickles and bronze knuts. Accompanying that awe had been an undercurrent of anger, anger at what he’d lost by spending all of those years with the Dursleys instead of with his parents and the heritage that he hadn’t known about.

Anger and grief had been the order of the day at the vault that the Ministry had set up in his name. Seeing the collected detritus of his parents’ house after that night piled about the vault had caused him to crash to his knees, Hermione wrapped around him as he cried. Eventually, the two had poked around the boxes and trunks, finding clothes, pots and pans, his baby toys and eventually, some photos. By the time that he’d found those, it’d been too overwhelming for him and he’d had to go, promising to return another time.

“Vault Ten Oh One,” Thrork announced.

Once the door swung open, Harry and Hermione strode forward. This, Harry had seen once before: the collected plunder from his battle with a sixty-foot basilisk. Lining the left hand side of the vault were a number of barrels, half a dozen chests and a single small, wooden box.

“Are those …?” Hermione asked, looking at the chests.

“Basilisk parts,” Harry nodded. “Skin, blood, organ parts, bones, whatever would be useful in potions.”

He walked forward, Hermione at his side to the small box atop one of the barrels. After tapping the catch with his wand, he flicked it back and opened the lid. Inside lay half a dozen fangs on a bed of velvet material; a small vial to one side of them.

“These are the most dangerous souvenirs,” Harry commented. “Fangs and basilisk venom.”

With a snap, he closed the lid and turned to survey the gigantic pile of gold in the centre of the vault.
“How much is there?” Hermione asked.

“Just over a million galleons,” Harry replied. Then, after a moment’s silence, “think it’ll be enough?”

Hermione shot him a nonplussed look. “More than enough, Harry. Are you sure, though?”

“You’ve seen the other vaults, Hermione, and that doesn’t even take into account the land and investments,” Harry replied. “I don’t need this and it’ll do more good for our friends than simply sitting here.”

She nodded in agreement.

“How much is there?” Hermione asked.

“Just over a million galleons,” Harry replied. Then, after a moment’s silence, “think it’ll be enough?”

Hermione shot him a nonplussed look. “More than enough, Harry. Are you sure, though?”

“You’ve seen the other vaults, Hermione, and that doesn’t even take into account the land and investments,” Harry replied. “I don’t need this and it’ll do more good for our friends than simply sitting here.”

She nodded in agreement.

“Thrork, I’d like to move the barrels, chests and box to the last vault,” Harry told the goblin. “Can you shrink them down for us to take with us, please?”

“CRUCIO!”

The platinum-haired man writhed on the ground, desperate for the pain that wracked his body to stop. But the knife-like pains that encompassed every single nerve cell in his body continued endlessly. Blood ran from his mouth where he’d bitten through his tongue; while his robes were being stained yellow from where he’d lost control of his bodily functions.

Abruptly, the pain stopped leaving him panting on the rough wooden floor. As he twitched and jerked from the aftermath of the abuse to his nerves, he couldn’t help but wonder why he was the one being punished. Being the bearer of bad news was never a good thing, especially when the culprit that caused said bad news was dead.

“Ma…mas…master,” he managed to choke around his bloody tongue.

“What is it, Lucius?”

“I … I have …a …a p…p…plan,” he stuttered, keeping his face pressed into the ground, hoping against all hope that his presumption wouldn’t result in another round of torture.

“And what is this plan, my slippery friend?”

His master’s tone left no doubt that he was within seconds of being on the receiving end of his master’s wand once more.

“The boy … the boy is lost to us, but … but perhaps we can get … get your other g…greatest en… enemy,” he managed.

“You intrigue me, Lucius. Do tell, but I must warn you: you won’t like the consequences if I don’t like what you have to say.”

Knowing that he had no choice, he began to outline his plan.

Albus Dumbledore looked around at the faces that filled the conference room table. Outwardly, his demeanour was exactly as one would expect: calm, collected and totally in control. His bright blue eyes were twinkling and he made sure that he was sitting back in the comfortable plush chair that he’d transfigured for himself. His hands were steepled together in front of his face as he waited for
the others to settle, seemingly giving them the time that he was allowing them.

Inwardly, though, he was seething. This should not be allowed to happen. Not in his school. The Hogwarts Board of Governors were there to fulfil a necessary evil, a body of witches and wizards to look pretty and immediately accede to any of his requests. Not to question his decisions as they were about to.

The one saving grace was that Lucius Malfoy and Augusta Longbottom were no longer on the Board; that would have been untenable. He had some allays on the Board, but nowhere near the numbers that he felt that he might need.

“I call this meeting to order,” Amos Diggory announced.

Immediately, the other eleven members of the board settled, all eyes snapping to either him or to Albus seated at the opposite end of the table.

“We are here to discuss the tragedy of November twenty-four,” Amos continued. “Albus, how in Merlin’s name could this have happened?”

Dumbledore allowed the twinkle in his eyes to fade even as he lowered his head. “It was all a terrible, terrible tragedy of events that no one could have foreseen occurring. No one knew of the imposter impersonating young Harry Potter, nor could any of us ever imagine that he would set the dragon free.”

“Yes, about that,” Dilys Cloverfoot said, leaning forward from her place to frown at the Headmaster. “That imposter, Barty Crouch Jr, wasn’t he polyjuiced as Alastor Moody before he impersonated Harry Potter?”

“Apparently so,” Dumbledore allowed, wincing internally at where he knew this line of questioning was sure to go.

“Alastor Moody,” Dilys persisted. “The two of you have been friends for more than fifty years and yet you couldn’t tell that he was being impersonated in your very school for two and a half months?”

“Young Barty was a very convincing actor. None of us managed to see through his act,” Dumbledore replied.

“Apparently,” Dilys sniffed.

“Why didn’t you simply send the dragon home once you knew that you didn’t need it?” Amos asked. “At the very least, it should have been nowhere near the stadium that day.”

“It is my understanding that the cost alone, not to mention the threat of the exposure of the entire magical world would have been increased significantly, to send the dragon back to the Romanian Reserve earlier,” Dumbledore replied. “It made much more sense to keep it where it was in the Forest until after the First Task.”

Those facts, at least, earnt him a small reprieve. Looking around, Dumbledore could see almost all heads nodding with his reasoning.

“So why was the dragon even brought into the stadium?” Amos asked. “It was my understanding that the goblins had ruled that Mister Potter wasn’t bound by the Goblet of Fire. Surely him turning up like that would have raised some concerns? At the very least I would have thought that you would have allowed the aurors to question him as to why he was there.”
“Perhaps we should have,” Dumbledore allowed, “but when ‘Mister Potter’ turned up claiming that the goblins had reversed their decision, we simply believed him. Young Harry, after all, has never been known for lying, especially to me. It was a costly mistake that I wish with all my heart that we had not made.”

“A costly mistake?” Primrose Epicule repeated, her voice rising as her rant continued. “It most assuredly was. Thirty-seven dead, including Durmstrang’s Headmaster, Igor Karkaroff, not to mention the twenty Hogwarts students. And then there are the two hundred and six who were wounded, the vast majority of them your own students and teachers. Charity Burbage was nearly crushed to death; Rubeus Hagrid had an arm bitten off; Filius Flitwick is still in Saint Mungo’s with a broken back and isn’t expected to walk ever again; and Aurora Sinistra will be lucky to keep her sight. All teachers or ex-staff of Hogwarts who did their utmost to save the students under their care. Can you claim to have done as much?”

“No, no I can’t say that I did,” Dumbledore admitted, head lowered. “I was trapped under the remains of one of the stands and by the time I had managed to free myself, the dragon had been put down.”

“Hogwarts currently has three teachers down injured, that’s including Flitwick and Sinistra who’ll be lucky if they ever return to teaching again, and one hundred and seventy-one students killed or injured,” Amos summarised. “All lessons have been currently cancelled while those in the school undergo counselling. And you still have two more tasks in this Merlin-be-damned Tournament to go! I really hope that they’re not going to be as dangerous.”

“I can assure you that there is no way that any spectator can be injured by anything that the final two Tasks involve,” Dumbledore stated calmly.

“When do you expect classes to resume?” Peter Fletcherly asked.

“Within the week,” Dumbledore replied. “If Filius and Aurora need extra time to recover, then the remaining staff will gladly cover their classes for them.”

“And what happens if they cannot return to the castle?” Peter persisted.

“We will cross that bridge when we come to it,” Dumbledore replied, “but I have the utmost confidence in the staff of Saint Mungo’s.”

“It seems to me that Harry Potter, Minerva and the others of Diricawl had the right of it,” Dilys commented. “This Tournament is too dangerous. I don’t know what we were doing agreeing to allow you to revive it. We should have listened to history.”

Once again, Dumbledore forced himself to keep a straight face, no matter how much he was wincing internally. He noticed a number of heads swivelling about, accompanied by minute nods. His eyes widened fractionally as he realised the implications: they’d already decided upon a course of action long before this meeting had begun.

“Unfortunately, we are forced to continue this Tournament,” Amos grimaced. “However, that does not mean that we have to sit idly by and allow the staff and students to place themselves in danger. Dumbledore, before we consent to allowing spectators at either of the two remaining tasks, you will outline in great detail exactly what each Task entails and the safety measures to ensure that all spectators will be kept safe. If we aren’t satisfied, then no student will be permitted anywhere near the event.

“This is the second major hit to Hogwarts’ reputation that she’s taken in four months. First there
was The-Boy-Who-Lived-Again withdrawing from Hogwarts to start his own school, a school that took one of the best teachers that Hogwarts had and made her their Headmistress, followed by the flurry of students wanting to transfer to Diricawl Academy. If the way I read that situation is correct, then only the fact that Diricawl had limited space saved Hogwarts from losing up to half of her students back then.

“And now there’s this debacle. Polyjuiced teachers; dragons being set loose; and close to a third of Hogwarts’ students injured or killed. This kind of negative publicity has to stop! As of right now, Dumbledore, you are on probation. If any, and I do mean any, kind of cock-up happens between now and the end of the school year, you can be assured of your sacking as Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

“Do I make myself clear?”

It was all that Dumbledore could do to restrain the fury that was burning incandescently inside him. His eyes flicked around the circle, finding even the ones that he thought that he could count on averting their eyes from him. Each and every one, he vowed, would rue this day, treating him like some common wizard instead of the great Leader of the Light that he was.

For now, though, he was forced to do the unthinkable: kowtow to this bunch of imbeciles.

“Perfectly, Amos,” Dumbledore replied.
Chapter 25

The momentary flash of blue light and small pop caused Harry to jerk slightly backwards. No matter how much he was expecting it, the portkey arrival of anyone to Potter Haven always startled him.

Gathering himself, he stepped forward and sketched a short bow to the goblin who was now standing before him.

“Welcome to Potter Haven, Slipshard,” he said.

“Mister Potter,” Slipshard returned as he stepped off of the long bundle of cloth that had arrived with him.

“Is that it?” Harry asked excitedly, eyeing the bundle.

“If you mean is it the tapestry of your family tree that you asked to have made,” Slipshard replied, his sharp teeth displayed prominently, “then, yes, it is.”

A deep guttural laugh escaped Slipshard as he looked up into Harry’s face. Then, after stepping to one side, he gave the tapestry a sharp kick, effectively unrolling it across the floor.

Harry’s eyes roved over the rich golden brown cloth hungrily. It was easily three metres long and at least two metres wide. Its edges were trimmed in a deep chocolate brown, with tassels of the same colour hanging from its bottom edge. In the direct centre of the top of the tapestry were three crests. As was expected, the Potter crest was slightly larger than the two that were woven either side of it, with each of their names embroidered directly underneath: The Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter; The Ancient House of Peverell; and Clan Lomas.

It was the Lomas coat of arms that really caught his attention, which was unsurprising considering that this was the first time that he’d seen it. As there was no magical Lomas family crest, Harry had had the goblins research and then use the muggle coat of arms for the family. The top third of the shield consisted of a wide blue band. Two thinner red bands descended from it, splitting the lower white section into thirds. Three black fleurs-de-lis adorned the middle third of the shield.

The family tree itself was made up of hundreds of names and dates, all embroidered in rich red-gold thread, all interconnected by black lines designating marriages and child-parent relationships.

Dropping to one knee, Harry reverently touched his own name, before sliding his hand up to his parents and then to their parents. There were simply so many names on here that he knew that he was going to be spending hours staring at them all, committing them to memory.

“Instructions from the enchanter,” Slipshard stated, breaking his concentration by holding out a roll of parchment. “This details how to add extra names to the tapestry in the coming years. He estimates that there is enough space for three, possibly four more generations on the bottom of the tapestry.”

“Thank you, Slipshard, it’s perfect,” Harry smiled, the depth of emotion clear for the goblin to hear in his voice. “Dobby.”

With a small pop, the small house elf appeared, his tennis ball green eyes widening as he realised that he’d just materialised in the middle of the tapestry on the floor. With one massive hop, he was off and looking up into Harry’s face.
“Could you roll this up and move it to my room, please?” Harry asked.

“Of course, Master Harry Sir,” Dobby replied.

A single snap of Dobby’s long fingers had the tapestry rerolled. A second snap had both tapestry and house elf disappearing from the room.

Seconds later, flames in the fireplace behind them erupted before turning emerald green.

“Thanks for coming, Mister Tentridge,” Harry said to the elderly man stepping from the FLOO, a briefcase clutched tightly in one hand.

“My pleasure, Mister Potter,” Julius replied with a nod of his head, then, turning to face the goblin, he executed a bow. “Slipshard, it is good to see you again.”

“Likewise, Mister Tentridge,” the wily goblin replied. “Shall we get down to business?”

“I trust that the Board are ready for us?” Julius asked, looking at Harry.

“They should be,” Harry replied. “I asked them to wait in the dining room for us.”

“Then if you would lead the way?” Julius suggested.

Taking his cue, Harry led the two new arrivals through the manor to the dining room of Potter Haven. Stepping inside, he found the people that he’d expected already there: Headmistress McGonagall; Remus; Sirius; Emma and Dan; Madam Longbottom; and Beth.

“Harry?” Sirius asked, his eyebrows nearly disappearing under his dark bangs at the sight of the two who followed him into the room.

“I’ll explain in a minute, Sirius,” Harry replied, leading Julius and Slipshard to the three seats in the middle of the table opposite the Diricawl contingent.

“I wasn’t aware that you’d be here; it’s good to see you both,” Minerva stated with a nod to the lawyer and the goblin.

“I asked them to come,” Harry explained, “to help me with something that I’d like to propose to you all.”

“Oh?” Minerva asked, cocking a single eyebrow at him.

Suddenly feeling slightly nervous at the seven pairs of eyes that had fixed upon him, Harry shot a glance to Julius to his left.

“It’s your show, Harry,” the old lawyer told him.

Taking a breath, Harry concentrated on the speech that he’d been rehearsing for the past few days.

“Having everyone here at Potter Haven, making Diricawl Academy, has been brilliant,” he began. “But I think that everyone here would agree that Potter Haven isn’t set up to be a full time school for lots of people.”

“That is why we’ve been looking for a new place,” Headmistress McGonagall agreed.

“That’s not to say that we haven’t appreciated you opening up your home to us,” Emma said, leaning forward on the table with a smile, “because we have. Even having as few of you kids as
we’ve been able to have here has been amazing.”

“It’s just a shame that we couldn’t get even more of your friends out of that madhouse of a castle,” Dan agreed, shaking his head.

Harry smiled. “That’s why I asked you all here this evening. I think that I have a way to help you move Diricawwl somewhere larger so that we can have more people learning with us.”

“You know where a large piece of land that will meet our needs can be found?” Remus asked eagerly.

Harry nodded, a wide smile nearly splitting his face.

“Yeah, I do,” he told the eager Board of Diricawwl Academy of Magical Studies.

A sharp intake of breath from Sirius told Harry that he, at least, had figured out where Harry was going.

“Ynys Crochenydd,” Sirius breathed.

“Ynys Crochenydd,” Harry nodded. At the confused looks coming from Beth, Emma and Dan, he elaborated. “Ynys Crochenydd, also known in English as Potter Island, is the Potter ancestral lands. It’s where, once upon a time, my family manor stood before Death Eaters destroyed it in the last war. It’s about three miles off of the Welsh coast and is almost six hundred acres all up. There’s a few magical creatures already there: fairies for sure and Sirius says that there used to be a small herd of hippogriffs and unicorns as well.”

“That’s all very well and good, Harry, but Ynys Crochenydd is your land,” Minerva stated. “Why would you even consider letting us use it. We’re more than content to find some land for the school to buy for itself.”

“Minerva’s right, Pup,” Sirius said, leaning forward, “you’ve already done enough for everyone here; you don’t need to give up Potter Island as well.”

“I believe that you misunderstand,” Slipshard cut in, “this is a business deal, not a gift.”

“Business deal?” Minerva asked cautiously.

“Indeed,” Julius replied, taking over smoothly. “Harry is proposing that, in return for a few minor concessions, that he lease Ynys Crochenydd to Diricawwl Academy of Magical Studies for a period of ninety-nine years. At the end of that time, Diricawwl Academy will have the option to renew for a further ninety-nine years. These terms will continue until such time as both Diricawwl Academy and the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter agree to conclude the arrangement.”

“Lease?” Minerva asked cautiously.

“Indeed,” Julius replied, taking over smoothly. “Harry is proposing that, in return for a few minor concessions, that he lease Ynys Crochenydd to Diricawwl Academy of Magical Studies for a period of ninety-nine years. At the end of that time, Diricawwl Academy will have the option to renew for a further ninety-nine years. These terms will continue until such time as both Diricawwl Academy and the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter agree to conclude the arrangement.”

Harry watched the adults across the table looking at each other in disbelief. Emma and Dan seemed to have the most thoughtful looks on their faces, but that might have been because Julius had lifted the idea from the muggle world and they understood it better. Augusta, Minerva and Sirius seemed
highly confused, while both Remus and Beth seemed intrigued.

Finally, Minerva seemed to gather herself and faced the three across the table from her.

“Before we make any decisions, I think that it would be best to hear all of these terms and concessions that you are asking for,” she stated.

“A wise decision,” Slipshard stated.

In response, a sheaf of papers was pulled from Julius’ briefcase and a copy of the proposal passed to all present.

“As you can see from the top of the page,” Julius began, “Mister Potter is proposing to lease Ynys Crochenydd to Diricawl Academy as well as provide the contents of Gringotts Vault Ten Oh One to Diricawl Academy for their sole use to build structures and revamp any part of the island that needs to be remodelled to enable it to benefit the school.”

“A vault? Exactly how much is in there?” Sirius as suspiciously.

“A little over a million galleons,” Harry replied.

“Harry, no!” Minerva and Remus cried.

“No way, Harry!” Dan agreed.

“That’s your money, Harry, you can’t go giving it away,” Emma protested.

It took Harry holding up both hands and waving them about before the furore finally died down enough for him to get a word in edgewise.

“Look, it’s okay,” he said. “It’s just the gold that I got from the goblins selling the basilisk. I don’t need it and I certainly don’t want to profit from it. It’s not like it’s a part of the Potter or Peverell estate and I’d always intended on finding something good to do with it. And what better than making sure that kids for generations to come can get a really good education?”

“But what about rebuilding Potter Manor?” Sirius asked. “I know that your father put some gold aside to do just that.”

“He did, but with the manor here at Potter Haven, I don’t need another manor somewhere else,” Harry rebutted. “Instead, I thought that I’d use that money on fixing something up on the mainland across from Ynys Crochenydd, maybe something like a motel or something for the parents of the muggleborns so that they can visit their kids a bit easier or something. That’s assuming that you take me up on my offer, of course.”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Madam Longbottom mused. “I know that when I was on the Board for Hogwarts, we’d get a number of enquiries each year from parents, especially the muggleborn parents, asking about visiting the castle to see where their children were being educated.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” Minerva interjected. “We still need to hear the rest of the details before we decide whether or not we’ll agree to Harry’s proposal.”

“As I have already explained the leasing agreement that Harry is proposing,” Julius continued, “I’d like to direct your attention to page two. There you will find the concessions that Harry is asking for from Diricawl Academy.
“Firstly, Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies will be required to pay a fee of one hundred galleons per student per year to Mister Potter. Depending upon the final size of the school that you build, that would easily see the return of the contents of Vault Ten Oh One to Mister Potter within the first ninety-nine year lease of Ynys Crochenydd.”

“That’s something,” Sirius grunted.

“Second,” Julius read, “all Potter, Peverell and Lomas students will be exempt from tuition fees for their education at Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies.”

“Potter, I understand, but Peverell and Lomas?” Dan asked.

“When the goblins did their heritage test, they found that I’m the Head of all three of those families,” Harry said.

“That’s fair,” Remus agreed.

“And thirdly, Mister Potter or his designated appointee will hold a seat in perpetuity on the Board of Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies,” Julius said.

“And, before you ask, it’ll be my appointee until after I’ve graduated,” Harry stated. “In this instance, and assuming that you agree, I’ve asked Slipshard to fulfil my responsibilities in that regard.”

“Well, why not? We’ve already got a house elf as a teacher,” Minerva murmured.

Harry nodded. “Yes, and that’s something that I’d love to see more of.”

“What do you mean, Harry?” Remus asked.

“This isn’t a condition, mind you, but I’d love to see Diricawl become the first really inclusive school in not only Britain or Europe, but in the world,” Harry replied passionately.

“We’ve already got you, Moony, a werewolf, and Jaxom, a house elf on staff, not to mention Dan and Emma, muggles both who do some part-time teaching. I’d love to see other species not only teaching, but as students as well. A goblin, perhaps, who we could learn from; I know that I’d love to learn gobblegook and who knows what else they could teach us.

“And if we can make it safe for Moony to be here, then why not werewolf students? We simply build some safe rooms and provide some wolfsbane potion and there won’t be any problems. And, I’d love for at the very least the option for goblins or house elves or dwarfs or whoever to be able to come here to learn. Yeah, I know that they’re not allowed to use wands, but there are so many other subjects that they could learn that they wouldn’t need wands for.”

Harry took a breath and snapped his jaw shut in the face of the amused grins that were aimed at him.

“Yeah, well, you get the idea,” he finished sheepishly.

“You make excellent points,” Headmistress McGonagall smiled, “and I can assure you that we’ll be giving them a lot of consideration. Now, as to your proposal, I think that, at first glance, it seems more than generous, but I also believe that it is not a decision that we should make tonight. Would I be correct in assuming that there is no hard timeframe on when we must decide by?”

“That is correct,” Julius assured her.
“In that case, I would like to thank you for this, Harry, and assure you that we will think on it and discuss it at length,” she told him. “Give us a few days, a week at most I should think, and you’ll have your answer.”

“Okay, Headmistress,” Harry replied, “and for what it’s worth, I hope that you take it; I only want what’s best for me and my friends, both those here and those that wish they were.”

Sirius Black was deep in thought. There were plans to be made. Plans that needed the special attention of a Marauder. And said plans had to be best for not only were they for the greatest prank that the Marauders had ever pulled, but they’d also be responsible for protecting the son and godson of a Marauder.

Thus, Sirius was sitting back in one of the comfortable wicker chairs on the back patio of Potter Manor. His arms rested on the chair, the scroll of parchment tapping on his chin even as his unfocussed eyes stared out at the valley below.

“Here he is, Remus,” a voice from far away permeated his consciousness.

But even then, it wasn’t until the sound of a pair of chairs scraping along the tiles coming towards him that he was roused him from his musings.

“I take it you’re on duty?” Dan asked.

Blinking profusely at the tall man now sitting on his left, Sirius said the only thing that he could.

“Huh?”

“That’s a galleon you owe me, Dan,” Remus laughed. “I told you that there was no way that Sirius Black of all people would be being responsible and keeping an eye on the kids.”

Sirius looked between the two, noting the sour look in the dark brown eyes of Dan Granger in comparison to the merry look in Remus’ grey eyes.

“What are you two on about?” he finally asked.

In response, Remus merely indicated the view before them.

Turning back towards where he’d originally been facing, Sirius’ eyes widened in surprise.

The first thing that he saw were the nine teens on the lawn not far from the end of the patio. They were formed up in two teams of four on either side of a long, thin net, all with small rackets in their hands. A tiny white, feathered ball of some kind was being hit backwards and forwards over the net between them. He watched as Neville did a small, awkward looking jump as he hit the ball, sending it back over the net where it was missed by Tracey before landing on the ground.

“Point for Neville’s team,” Astoria, who was standing beside the net, called.

This prompted Hannah to bound over the Neville, give him a quick hug, and then bounce back to her spot on the court.

A movement above the playing teens caught Sirius’ eye and pulled his gaze upwards.

There he found the rest of the kids. Colin, Dennis and Mickey looked to be playing an elaborate game of tag, only fifty metres up on broomsticks. Harry and Hermione completed the broomstick
flying group, only these two were flying more in tandem, lazily crossing the sky above. Suddenly, Harry accelerated ahead before looping up and around until he was flying back towards Hermione, only this time upside-down.

A small smile grew on his face as he watched the teens have an awkward mid-air kiss, with Harry maintaining his sloth-grip hold on his broom.

“I wish they wouldn’t do that where I could see them,” Dan groaned.

“Better where you can see them than wondering what they’re doing when you can’t see them,” Sirius shot back.

A quick glance at Dan Granger’s suddenly green face caused both Sirius and Remus to laugh.

A sudden pop in front of them revealed Neri sporting a small smile as she placed three bottles of butterbeer on the table before them. Before they could do more than thank her, she sketched a tiny curtsy and popped back off again.

“So, if it wasn’t the kids, what did bring you out here on a fine day like this?” Remus asked after a time of the three men enjoying their drinks while watching the kids.

With a face of disgust, he handed over the scroll that was still clutched in his hand.

“Is this real?” Remus gasped after reading it through.

“What is it?” Dan asked.

The scroll was passed along the line for the third member to read for himself.

“Betrothal!” Dan spluttered, staring wide-eyed at the other two men. “The magical world still does that?”

“It’s rare, but it does still happen,” Remus replied, before fixing Sirius with a piercing gaze. “Please tell us that that thing isn’t real.”

“I wish I could,” Sirius began before being interrupted by an enraged Dan.

“It’s real! That’s going to crush Hermione; probably Harry as well!”

“Relax, guys, it may be real, but it’s completely invalid,” Sirius said taking back the scroll and opening it to reveal the bottom part. “If you note the date here, you’ll learn something very important.”

“January two, nineteen ninety-three,” Remus read. “Why’s that date so important?”

“Ah, that would be because Minerva and I officially became Harry’s guardians exactly one week before this was signed, making this completely invalid,” Sirius explained.

“An illegal, too, I should think,” Remus added.

“Thank God for that,” a relieved Dan said, relaxing back into his chair.

“Who signed it? Dumbledore and Molly Weasley?” Remus asked.

“Yeah, those two,” Sirius spat. “Trying to get their claws into Harry’s inheritance, I’d think.”
“Well, I hope that you’re going to make them pay for that,” Dan stated.

“Oh, yes, I’m going to make them pay alright.” Sirius agreed before suddenly freezing in place as an idea began to bloom.

A wicked smile slowly began to grow and he looked to either side of him, confident that he had the brains beside him to turn this nugget of an idea into a Marauder worthy one.

“Yes, I think that we’re going to make them pay indeed,” he grinned.
Albus Dumbledore sat serenely behind his desk. A lemon drop continuously moved from one side of his mouth to the other. It was the one indicator of what he’d rather be doing: pacing. But this wasn’t the time. He needed to be seated right where he was, projecting the right image for when his visitor arrived.

Sitting back in his chair, he stroked one hand through his long beard, a small sigh escaping him at the fact that he could run his fingers through its magnificent length once more. A stray blast of fire from that blasted dragon had burnt off more than half of his beard before he’d been able to put the fire out, trapped as he was beneath the wreckage of the judges stands. In the end, he’d been forced to resort to a hair restoral draught to return his beard to its magnificent volume.

A glance at his pocket watch confirmed his suspicions: she was late. A fact which annoyed him to no end. Of late, people had been brushing him off and dictating terms to him; him, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts, Chief Warlock of the Wizengamot, Supreme Mugwamp of the ICW. If it wasn’t that he needed her help so badly, he’s simply FLOO her and tell her that if she wasn’t going to be on time for a meeting with him, then to not bother coming at all.

Unfortunately, he did need her. Or, at least, he needed the help that she could give. She had the potential to bolster his flagging reputation.

It was only by the very skin of a flobberworm that he was holding on to his positions. Already the Hogwarts Board of Governors had had the audacity to place him on probation – again! – threatening to sack him if anything else went wrong this year. And then there’d been that motion of no confidence in the Wizengamot. He’d only survived that through the block of ardent supports that he’d gathered over the years preventing the necessary seventy-five percent majority that was needed for the motion to succeed.

And when it came right down to it, Albus Dumbledore needed those positions. With them in hand, it was so much easier to … guide the wizarding world towards the ultimate goal – his vision of the Greater Good. Already he’d been hampered significantly by the Potter boy’s refusal to return to his rightful place as a student of Hogwarts.

He had plans for the boy, plans which may just have to be altered, judging by the fact that the boy’s scar had drastically reduced. If his guess was right, and his guesses usually were, then that killing curse that Harry’d taken from Lucius Malfoy, had killed the very thing that Dumbledore had been banking on. But without the boy nice and close and handy, he couldn’t confirm anything, and without confirmation, it was hard to know the exact path that needed to be taken.

A sudden whoosh of the fireplace flaming to life brought him from his musings.

He straightened in his chair, making sure to steeple his fingers, place a small, knowledgeable smile on his face and a twinkle in his eye. The right image needed to be projected, after all. With a little bit of luck and persuasion, this meeting could not only shore up his flagging reputation, but it could place the boy once more in a position where he could, at the very least, observe him, and at best, begin to guide him once more towards his destiny.

The flames turned green just long enough for his guest to step gracefully from the fireplace.

Minerva McGonagall had changed since she’d last worked at Hogwarts. Gone were the severe
black robes that she’d worn in place of a more stylish robe cut from the McGonagall tartan, if he wasn’t mistaken. Her dour expression had also faded. She seemed … happier, content.

“Allbus,” she greeted.

“Welcome, Minerva,” Albus smiled. “Lemon drop?”

“Thank you, no,” she replied, taking the seat across from him. “How are the students who were injured?”

“For the most part, healed,” he replied. “Four still remain in Saint Mungo’s, but they should be able to return to the castle by the end of the week. Madam Pomfrey has yet to release her final half a dozen charges, although I suspect that she will in the next day or two.”

“What of Charity, Aurora and Filius?” Minerva asked, concern etched clearly on her face as she leaned forward in her chair.

“They’re recovering,” Albus sighed sadly. “Charity’s been healed for the most part. The healers predict that she may need a cane to walk, but she’ll be out of the hospital in another day or two. The splinter of wood that pierced Sinistra’s eye wasn’t as bad as the healers first feared. While she has sustained some scarring, her sight is as good as it ever was.”

“And Filius?” Minerva prompted when he’d been silent too long.

“Filius’ back was broken when the dragon swiped him with its paw. He sustained extensive injuries. Poppy tells me that they were lucky to even save his life. I’m sorry to say that he’ll be in Saint Mungo’s the longest; perhaps another month or so and when he leaves, it’ll be in some kind of wheelchair. The specialists are optimistic that he’ll live a long, fruitful life still,” Albus relayed.

“A wheelchair,” Minerva gasped. “But what will that mean for his teaching?”

“I’m afraid that Filius’ days of teaching at Hogwarts are over. The stairs alone would be too prohibitive.”

A thoughtful look crossed Minerva’s face, but it was gone too quickly for him to get a feeling of what it might portend.

Most likely, it related to her visiting her old friend in hospital, he mused.

“Now that those unpleasantries are dispensed with,” Albus said, “perhaps we could get down to why I asked you here; we both have schools to run, after all.”

“Of course, Albus,” Minerva nodded.

“I asked you here to ask about your plans for the Yule Ball,” Albus twinkled at his counterpart.

“To be honest, Albus, Diricawl is … reluctant to attend any other TriWizard Tournament events,” Minerva replied. “And I don’t think that anyone can blame us, either. We’ve had one student’s name come out of the Goblet of Fire at the Choosing Ceremony, a student who it was proved did not enter himself and after the debacle of the First Task, I think that everyone was glad that we didn’t attend.”

“I understand,” Albus said in his best grandfatherly voice. “But surely you can see that those troubles are behind us now.”
Minerva stared at him as though he was talking nonsense. “And just how did you come to that conclusion?”

“The fact that the perpetrator, young Barty Junior, was killed in the First Task,” Albus replied with a sad shake of his head.

“Just because Barty Crouch was killed doesn’t allay all of my fears,” she confessed. “To be honest, I simply can’t believe that Barty conceived of that plot all by himself.”

“Yes, Amelia expressed similar doubts,” Albus confessed. “Be that as it is, I firmly believe that all persons with nefarious plots have now been eliminated from within the castle. Alastor will be back teaching shortly and you know as well as I that there’s no-one more vigilant than him.”

“Alastor will certainly be an asset,” Minerva allowed. “But that doesn’t mean that I’m willing to bring my students to a place of potential danger. As much as they would dearly love to come to Hogwarts for the Ball and to spend time with their friends, I need to place their safety above their wishes.”

Albus quickly suppressed the gleam of triumph that threatened his visage at that pronouncement. Perhaps it wasn’t inconceivable that the boy could be returned to the castle where he belonged.

Perhaps, he decided, an appeal to Minerva’s fondness of Hogwarts was in order.

“I must confess, Minerva, that Hogwarts really needs you and your students to attend the Yule Ball,” he stated. “Both Olympe and Alexei Draklov, poor Igor’s Deputy Head, have expressed their concerns and are seriously considering pulling their students out of Hogwarts and Britain altogether. Hogwarts needs Diricawl’s help. If you and your students agree to come to the Yule Ball, then I believe that Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will remain and that can only help International relations.”

He sat back then, waiting as patiently as possible as Minerva digested his words. He could see the internal debate happening, he just had to hope that it would be enough.

“Before I’d even consider it, Albus, I’d want some assurances,” Minerva finally stated.

“But, of course,” Albus smiled magnanimously. “I had already planned to ask Amelia to provide a complement of aurors for the evening, as well as asking Alastor to handle security for the night.”

“That’s a start,” Minerva allowed.

“Diricawl would, of course, be permitted to provide any extra security that you would like; just as I’m positive the French and the Bulgarians will also do,” Dumbledore stated.

“What about a secure FLOO? It’d be far easier and safer, not to mention much more practical for us to FLOO to Hogwarts,” Minerva suggested.

“Certainly, certainly, an easy thing to arrange,” Albus waved off.

Minerva nodded thoughtfully. “And what about an age limit?”

“Fourth years and up can be invited to attend; younger years only if they are the partner of an older student,” Albus agreed, conveniently forgetting to mention that those exact arrangements had already been decided upon.

“That would mean that, at most, only nine Diricawl students would be in attendance,” Minerva
“Even that small number from the smallest school in Europe would be a tremendous aid in repairing relations between the three largest schools,” Albus stated.

“Then I will give a tentative answer of ‘yes’,” Minerva replied, although her raised hand halted the smile blossoming on his face. “That’s only a tentative agreement. I will, of course, have to discuss this with the rest of my staff as well as the students in question. And rest assured, that if we do decide to come, we will be bringing a significant security force with us.”

“I quite understand,” Albus replied, even though he didn’t. As far as he was concerned, it was the Headmaster’s, or in this case Headmistress’, job to make the decisions and for everyone else to simply fall into line.

A decisive nod from Minerva signalled that she was content to finish their conversation there.

“Thank you for your time today, Minerva,” Albus said as they rose from their seats. “It is refreshing to have another Head of School to discuss things with and come to an agreement with.”

Another nod was her only response.

“Until next time, Albus,” she said before stepping into the fireplace and disappearing in a blaze of fire.

-oOoOo-

“Well?” Augusta Longbottom demanded the instant that Minerva stepped into the sitting room of Potter Haven.

“Better than expected,” Minerva replied, striding forward to take a seat amongst the cluster of Diricawl staff members.

“Albus needs us badly,” she related. “Both the French and the Bulgarians are threatening to pull their students out of the country. If we come to the Yule Ball, it’ll be a signal that we believe that the castle is once again safe. And Albus is desperate to give that impression.”

“What were his concessions?” Remus asked.

“We can FLOO in, bring as many staff as we want, not to mention hiring any additional security that we feel is needed,” Minerva replied. “Both the French and the Bulgarians are also going to supply some security and the Ministry will provide a complement of aurors.”

“That should keep the kids safe,” Dan nodded.

“So, we’re going to let them go?” Beth asked.

“Yes, I think so. Fourth years and up are invited; younger years if they have a date from amongst the older students,” Minerva related, “although, for our purposes, I think that we’ll neglect to mention the stipulation for the younger years and just keep it open for our older students.”

“Good idea,” Augusta agreed.

Minerva looked around at the faces surrounding her and gave a small nod of her head.

“While I have you all here, have you come to a decision about Harry’s offer?”
“I think that we should take it,” Sirius stated decisively.

“I agree,” Remus said. “Harry’s made his home here. I can’t see him wanting to rebuild on Potter Island and I don’t think that he would have made the offer if he wasn’t sure.”

There was a general murmur of agreement after that.

“Well, it looks as though that decision is unanimous,” Minerva noted. “I’ll let Harry, Mister Tentridge and the goblins know tomorrow and we can sign it then. As this will be a brand new school, and considering that we’ll have the funding to set it up the way that we’d like, I’d like each of you to make a wish list, not only for what you’d like to see or have for your own subject areas, but also for facilities for our new school or subjects that you think we could add.”

“What about the kids?” Emma asked.

“What about them?” Minerva asked.

“Well, it’s going to be their school, too,” she replied. “Couldn’t we put out a suggestion box or something for them to add in what they’d like to see or have or learn about in our revamped school?”

“That’s not a bad idea,” Remus mused. “Their younger eyes and minds might come up with ideas that we’d never think of.”

“I agree,” Augusta stated simply.

Minerva nodded. “If you could prepare such a box, Emma, we can introduce it to them at dinner tomorrow night when we announce both the details for the Yule Ball and fact that we’ll be moving to a new location for the start of the next school year.”

-oOoOo-

Harry sat nervously in the plush high backed chair at the conference table that the goblins had supplied. Sure, he knew his part; contingencies had been discussed ad nauseam. The most probable responses had been planned for and their own responses decided upon. But still, this was the biggest … undertaking like this that he’d ever been involved in, and for it to involve him …

Sneaking a glance to his side, he observed his partner in crime. Sirius looked to be the picture of perfect calm. He was lounged back in his chair, one leg crossed over the other as they awaited the other party. But there were subtle hints that he wasn’t quite as calm as he portrayed himself to be: the slight fiddling with the elaborate scroll sitting on the desk before him; an excited manic gleam in his eye; the way that the corner of his mouth occasionally twisted up in an aborted grin.

No, Sirius wasn’t quite as cool, calm and collected as he wanted Harry to think he was. That distinction went to Slipshard. The goblin was seated at the far end of the table, a quiet observer to the proceedings due to start any minute now.

As if on cue, the door to the conference room opened to admit the three people that they’d been waiting for.

Albus Dumbledore was the first to enter, resplendent in his trademark garish robes: these a lurid purple with silver flutterbys flying about them. A quick glance around the room was enough to have him fixing in on Harry, a wide smile on his face.

Behind the ancient wizard bustled a pair of red headed witches. The first, Ginny Weasley, was
being guided in by the protective hand of her mother, Molly, placed firmly in her back. Ginny had obviously been made to dress up for the day – her long red hair was brushed and styled in an elaborate knot on the side of her head and the dark green robes that she was wearing were obviously brand new.

“Ah, Harry, my boy, it’s so wonderful to see you again,” Dumbledore exclaimed. “Sirius, it’s a pleasure.”

“Professor,” Harry nodded, very aware that he’d been coached to be as polite as possible, at least during these initial stages.

“Albus,” Sirius beamed, “so good of you to come. Molly, always a delight. And I assume that this is little Ginevra?”

“Ginny,” the shy girl corrected quietly.

“Ginny,” Sirius repeated with a smile. “Please, take a seat.”

They waited, then, while the three situated themselves across from Sirius and Harry – Ginny in the centre with her mother on her left and Dumbledore on her right, directly opposite Sirius.

“Before we begin, I’d like to apologise for how long it’s taken for all of us to sit down together and to get this sorted out,” Sirius stated.

“And exactly why have you asked us here?” Dumbledore asked curiously.

Sirius feigned a look of surprise. “Why, the betrothal contract, of course.”

A gasp escaped Molly even as Ginny’s eyes bulged and she whipped her head around to stare at her mother.

“A betrothal contract?” she questioned. “Between me and Harry?”

Harry squirmed in his seat at the gleam of triumph that erupted in the red-head’s eyes.

“Yes, dear, now hush while we go over it,” Molly replied, gently patting her daughter’s hand.

“And what, may I ask, is your role, today, Sirius?” Dumbledore asked.

“I’m sort of a neutral party, so Harry here asked me to go through the particulars with you,” Sirius waved off. “After all, while Harry may be emancipated, he’s still young and doesn’t know the rituals and formulas that we older folk know.”

“Slipshard here is just an observer,” Harry added. “Although, if there’s anything that we need from the goblins, he’ll be able to help us out.”

“Certainly, certainly,” Dumbledore beamed.

Harry could see the old wizard’s eyes twinkling away. Obviously, the old man expected that today was going to be a good day, he obviously thought that they hadn’t realised that the contract was invalid due to the signing date and was eager to see Harry and Ginny betrothed properly before they did realise it.

“Now, Harry here hasn’t actually seen the contract,” Sirius explained. “Slipshard gave it to Harry when he was emancipated and, while we should have dealt with it then, things have just been a bit hectic. I’m sure you can understand.”
“Of course, my boy, quite understandable. And, as they say, better late than never,” Dumbledore smiled.

“Well, then, shall we begin?” Sirius asked and, without waiting for an answer, he slipped a finger under the golden seal and cracked open the scroll.

“Okay, it’s probably best if I simply read it and if there’s anything that needs to be explained to either Harry or Ginny, then we can do it for them,” he stated.

“Betrothal contract between Harry James Potter, Head of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter, Head of the Ancient House of Peverell, and the Head of Clan Lomas.”

“I’m sorry, did you say Potter, Peverell and Lomas?” Molly queried, an excited tone to her voice.

“I don’t remember all three of those being on the contract,” Dumbledore stated.

“Well, no, they probably weren’t,” Sirius agreed. “Harry here didn’t even know about the Peverell and Lomas families until he was emancipated. My guess would be that once the contract was signed, the Potter magics activated, thus updating Harry’s titles. That, of course, would have activated the Peverell and Lomas magics as well.”

“What do you mean ‘magics’?” Molly asked suspiciously.

Sirius stared at her across the table. “You did know that any contract that is signed by or on behalf of the ancient families would have its own magic to ensure that all the clauses and prohibitions that are normally built into such things for that family is activated, didn’t you?”

Harry had to look down at the tabletop to hide the smirk that threatened to erupt on his face. The worried look that Molly and Dumbledore had just shared had been priceless.

“You didn’t know that?” Sirius asked. “Well, that explains it then.”

“I’m sorry, explains what exactly?” Dumbledore asked.

“Why the two of you signed this. There’d be no way that I’d ever sign a Potter contract. The family’s simply too ancient to predict exactly how it’s going to react. Even the Black family magic is only enough to hold it in check. At least, I think so.”

“Can we keep going?” Harry asked, “I’d like to find out about my obligations with Ginny.”

“Sure thing Pup,” Sirius replied. “Now, where were we?

“And Ginevra Molly Weasley, daughter of the Ancient House of Weasley. This contract stipulates that, upon both participants, Harry James Potter and Ginevra Molly Weasley, becoming of age, the two shall marry within a period of three months.

“To ensure the continuation of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter, an heir clause is included. Ginevra Molly Weasley is required to bear Harry James Potter an heir within two years of marriage and an additional two heirs within the following seven years.

“Upon the signing of this contract, Harry James Potter is required to provide House Weasley nine pigs, all under one year of age. In return, upon the signing of this contract, House Weasley is required to provide Clan Lomas three horses, all between one and two years of age, one of which must be male.”

“Well, that is a new one on me,” Sirius agreed. “Looks like the Clan Lomas magics. Considering that they were only a young family, I wouldn’t think that there’d be anything else in there from them. But pigs?”

Harry regarded the way his godfather was shaking his head at the absurdity of the idea.

“If it helps,” he interjected, “from the research that I’ve done, Clan Lomas was apparently big into pig farming. They supplied pig products to a large percentage of the magical families of Wales, even after the family became squibs.”

Dumbledore’s blinking blue eyes indicated that he’d bought the story.

“The contract stipulates that these items should have been given at the time the contract was signed,” Slipshard stated from the end of the table. “Am I correct in assuming that this has not occurred?”

“Not as far as I’m aware of,” Harry replied. “Can you take care of it for me?” At the goblin’s inclined head, he continued. “Then can you have someone buy, what was it? Nine? Nine piglets for me and have them delivered to the Weasley property for me?”

“It shall be done within the hour,” Slipshard promised.

Harry watched as the goblin stared pointedly at Molly. The way her mouth was opening and closing without a sound coming out of it nearly had him bursting out laughing.

“If you’d allow me, Molly?” Dumbledore interjected. “Could you have the sum for three horses withdrawn from my personal vault and have three horses bought and delivered to …?”

“Potter Haven,” Harry supplied.

“Potter Haven?” Dumbledore repeated.

“It shall be done within the hour,” Slipshard stated before calling a second goblin into the room, only to have him scurry back out again intent on ensuring that the transaction took place.

“Well, hopefully that’s the surprises out of the way,” Sirius commented. “Let’s continue, shall we?

“The bride price for Ginevra Molly Weasley, payable to the Ancient House of Weasley upon the marriage of Harry James Potter to Ginevra Molly Weasley is as follows: the sum of five million galleons and half of the properties and business holdings owned by the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter.”

Harry’s gut churned at the obvious greed evident in both adults across the table from him.

“This bride price is to be held in trust by the Ancient House of Weasley until the heir of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter comes of age. At that time, the bride price is to be passed to the heir in full.”

“What?” Molly screeched, but Sirius failed to stop, instead reading the rest of the clause.

“In addition, the Ancient House of Weasley will be required to gift ten percent of the amount of the bride price to the heir of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter when they come of age.”

“Ten percent,” Molly blanched.
“Five hundred thousand galleons,” Dumbledore whispered.

“Plus ten percent of the price of the properties and businesses that I’m required to give away,” Harry added.

“But we don’t have that kind of money!” a panicked Molly stated, looking around wildly.

Sirius looked at her sympathetically. “And that’s why I won’t tangle with Potter contracts.”

“Surely these additional clauses can be struck out,” Dumbledore stated with an air that he expected exactly that to happen.

“The contract is iron-clad,” Slipshard stated simply.

“Well, at least you’ll have a couple of decades to get the money together,” Sirius stated. “Best continue, we’ve only got the room booked for another hour.”

“Upon the signing of this betrothal contract between Harry James Potter and Ginevra Molly Weasley, the Ancient House of Weasley voids their rights to their daughter Ginevra Molly Weasley, transferring her care and guardianship unto the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter.

“Additionally, as the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter do take unto themselves Ginevra Molly Weasley, it behoves the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter to provide all measures to ensure that the future of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter is protected.

“As the Ancient and Noble House of Potter is currently under threat of extinction, this contract decrees that, upon the signing of this contract, that Ginevra Molly Weasley be placed into the care of the Ancient House of Ferguson, an ally of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter for twelve centuries.

“The Ancient House of Ferguson will further ensure Ginevra Molly Weasley’s safety by placing her in a place far from the magical world, in this instance, the Saint Mary Teresa Nunnery outside of Dunedin, New Zealand where Ginevra Molly Weasley will remain until the marriage between Harry James Potter and Ginevra Molly Weasley.”

“What? You’re not sending my baby away!” Molly shrieked.

“A nunnery? In New Zealand?” Ginny muttered, wide-eyed even as she looked to be about to hyperventilate.

“Well, it does make sense, I guess,” Harry stated reluctantly. “Voldemort is still out there and after me and we all know that if he finds out about Ginny, then nothing will stop either him or his minions from either hurting her, kidnapping her or killing her.”

“Harry’s right,” Sirius agreed. “And after what happened at the World Cup and then at the First Task of the TriWiz, it makes sense.”

“No one’s taking my baby away!” Molly declared.

“The contract is iron-clad,” Slipshard repeated.

“It’s alright, Molly,” Dumbledore said soothingly, reaching across the near-comatose girl to pat the woman on the arm. “It’s only for a couple of years, then Ginevra will be home again. And I’m sure it’ll be sooner. Once Tom has been taken care of, Ginevra can be brought home early.”
“Um, I wouldn’t go getting too far ahead,” Sirius stated, his eyes on the contract in his hands.

“If the danger to the Most Ancient and Noble House of Weasley persists at the time of the marriage between Harry James Potter and Ginevra Molly Weasley, then Ginevra Molly Weasley is only to be brought back to Great Britain for the marriage and until such time as an heir is conceived. At that time, for the safety of both mother and heir, Ginevra Molly Weasley will be returned to her prior place of safety.”

“That’s good,” Harry declared. “I wouldn’t want Ginny or our baby being in danger.” He turned then to Sirius. “Do you think fertility potions would help?”

“Pup, between fertility potions and Ginny being the daughter of Molly, I’d bet that you’d have her pregnant by the end of the wedding night!”

“Hang on,” Ginny interrupted, coming out of her stupor, “did that thing say something about it being away from the magical world?”

“Yes, it did,” Sirius replied after rereading the contract.

“No magic?” she shuddered. “For years?”

“That’s what it amounts to,” Sirius agreed.

“But at least you’ll be kept safe,” Harry stated, reaching across to pat her on her hand.

“The contract stated that this should have happened from the time of the signing of the contract,” Slipshard interrupted.

“You’re right,” a wide-eyed Harry stated. “Can you book some plane tickets for as soon as possible, please?”

“Certainly, Harry,” Slipshard replied, signally for another goblin to come to him.

“Don’t worry, Molly. I’ve had dealings with House Ferguson,” Sirius told her. “I’ll make sure that she gets there safely.”

“You’re not taking my daughter,” Molly declared, one arm wrapping around said girl.

“According to the contract that you signed, yes I am,” Sirius shot back. “Assuming that the goblins can arrange a flight quickly enough, we’ll go straight from here.”

“Surely you’ll allow the girl to say goodbye to the rest of her family,” Dumbledore stated chidingly.

“We’re already on the clock here,” Sirius replied. “And it’s not like she’s going to need many possessions living in a nunnery.”

Dismissing Molly and Dumbledore’s protests, Sirius continued to read the contract.

“As this betrothal contract has been signed by a third party on behalf of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter, it is understood that the third party, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore of the Ancient House of Dumbledore, declares himself to be wholly subjugated by the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter for the life of the contract, that is, until the heir has reached his majority.”

“I certainly do not!” Dumbledore protested vehemently, a fact that Sirius ignored in favour of
“For the life of this contract, Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore agrees to not buy or sell any property, either for personal gain or on behalf of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter without the express permission of the Head of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter. Further, any seats and votes that are held by Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore on the Wizengamot of Great Britain shall become subject to the will of the Head of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter: their votes and seats shall become one, under the direction of the Head of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter.”

Dumbledore baulked at that particular clause and turned a shade of white to rival his beard.

“Ah, it seems that the remainder of this contract basically outlines the penalties that shall be applied to any party that breaks any of the clauses previously outlined,” Sirius declared. “Do we particularly need to read those?”

“I think that we had better,” a still shocked Dumbledore stated.

“Very well,” Sirius replied. “Let’s see.

“The penalty for any of the affected parties within this contract, that is, Harry James Potter, Ginevra Molly Weasley, Molly Muriel Weasley and Albus Percival Wulfric Brian Dumbledore breaching any of these clauses shall be as follows: the total subjugation of the party’s House, including all properties, businesses, vaults and Wizengamot seats and votes. If the breach is brought about by Harry James Potter, then the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter will dissolve to become a part of the Ancient House of Weasley. Conversely, if any of the remaining parties breach this contract, then the entirety of their House will dissolve and become a part of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter.”

A pair of pale-faced and shaky adults stared back at Sirius, obviously attempting to wrap their minds around what they were now locked in to. Not even the appearance of a goblin whispering into Slipshard’s ear was enough to break them out of their stupor.

“Your plane tickets,” Slipshard said, handing a document wallet to Sirius. “Your flight leaves in ninety minutes. Also, all animals have been delivered as requested.”

“Thank you, Slipshard,” Sirius replied. “Well, say goodbye to your mother, Ginny, it’s time to go.”

Molly stood so fast, her chair clattered backwards, coming to rest a good three metres behind her. With one hand, she pulled her daughter up and thrust her behind her back, while with the other, she pulled her wand and trained it on the Marauder.

“You’re not taking my daughter!” she snarled.

“I’m sorry, Molly, but you signed the contract,” Sirius replied, sounding anything but sorry. “Surely you knew that there were going to be repercussions.”

“I don’t care! You’re not taking Ginny and shipping her off halfway around the world and stuffing her in a muggle convent of all things,” she declared.

“Does this mean that I get some pigs?” Harry asked innocently.

When three pairs of confused eyes settled on him from across the table, he clarified his statement.

“Well, you’re breaking the contract, aren’t you? That means that everything that once belonged to
the Weasleys now belongs to me. Vaults, house and pigs.”

The hand that was clutching her wand abruptly snapped to her chest as Molly realised the danger she was placing her entire family in.

“No, please, surely there has to be something that we can do!” Molly pleaded. “I didn’t want this! Anything but this!”

“That’s right,” Sirius spat, now also on his feet. “You didn’t want this, did you? It was one thing to play God with not only your own daughter but also with a boy that you barely knew. You – both of you – had your own agenda, didn’t you? All you saw was a boy, ignorant of this world but with millions of galleons to his name that you wanted. And if your daughter got the boy that she’s been crushing on since long before she’d ever met him, well, that was just a bonus wasn’t it?

“And now the tables have been turned on you. Now it’s you who are threatened with losing everything that you own; including your very daughter. And in the face of that, you finally protest. Well, this is what you have reaped, madam, and this is what you have sown. I really hope that you’re happy with yourself.”

Sirius’ tirade had left tears streaming down Molly Weasley’s face, tears that matched those of her daughter from where she still hid behind her mother’s skirt.

“And what of you, old man? The mastermind intent on manipulating two families for your own end. You had no care for the lives that you’re playing with. You disgust me, Dumbledore!”

“Ginny,” Harry said gently. “How about we deal with this between the two of us? After all, it was us that they were playing with.”

From behind her mother, Ginny hesitantly shuffled into view.

“What … what do you … mean, Harry?” she hiccupped.

Standing up, Harry snatched up the contract and held it out across the desk. At his gesture, she grasped the other end and then, with one pull, the two of them tore it in twain.

Shocked gasps erupted from the other side of the table.

“What have you done?” Molly gasped.

“Absolutely nothing,” Harry told her, “apart from tearing up a spare bit of parchment.”

“What do you mean, Harry?” Dumbledore asked from where he still sat, his face still as white as ever.

“This,” he replied, gesturing around the room, “this was all a fake. That contract had about as much validity in it as toilet paper. You, Dumbledore, were not my guardian when you signed it. That meant that you had no legal standing to be signing contracts on my behalf.”

“I wasn’t your guardian,” Dumbledore repeated as the realisation that this was some elaborate prank dawned on his face.

“No, you weren’t,” Sirius spat. “Minerva and I became Harry’s guardians a week before you signed that. Perhaps now you’ll understand the consequences of playing with other people’s lives.”

With a nod at each other, Harry and Sirius turned to Slipshard and bowed.
“Thank you for your services today, my friend,” Harry smiled.

“It was my pleasure, Mister Potter,” Slipshard replied.

And then, the two split, each rounding the table at a different end before walking out of the room, leaving a pair of shell-shocked adults and one confused teen behind them.

As the door closed behind them, Sirius grinned down at his godson.

“Mischief managed,” he said.
“Harry?”

From the floor where he’d landed after FLOOing back home, Harry looked up to see an upside down Hermione smiling sweetly down at him.

Rolling over so that his girlfriend was the right way up once again, he smiled up at her. “Hi, Hermione.”

“Harry,” she repeated, “why did a couple of goblins deliver three horses to the manor half an hour ago?”

“They did? Good,” he replied, climbing to his feet and shooting Sirius a significant look.

“Where did they come from?” she repeated.

“Dumbledore,” he shrugged.

“Dumbledore?” she repeated slowly.

“Yeah, he had to give us three horses as a part of the betrothal contract,” he replied absently.

Beside him, Sirius’ eyes suddenly widened before he fled the room, slamming the door behind him.

“Betrothal contract?” Hermione asked and something in her voice caused Harry to want to run after his godfather. “What betrothal contract is this?”

“Dumbledore and Molly Weasley tried to set one up a couple of years ago, but it’s worthless; Dumbledore signed it after Sirius and Minerva had already become my guardians.”

Hermione slowly turned back around, her eyes narrowed. “If it’s worthless, then why would Dumbledore give you three horses?”

Tugging on her arm, Harry pulled her across to the small couch against the far wall.

“Dumbledore and Molly Weasley tried to set one up a couple of years ago, but it’s worthless; Dumbledore signed it after Sirius and Minerva had already become my guardians.”

Hermione slowly turned back around, her eyes narrowed. “If it’s worthless, then why would Dumbledore give you three horses?”

Tugging on her arm, Harry pulled her across to the small couch against the far wall.

“Since then, Padfoot’s been working on a prank to get back at Dumbledore and Molly Weasley for signing the thing. And today was the day that we pulled it off. You see …”

-oOoOo-

Hermione eyed the strange box that her mother carried into the dining room for the evening meal curiously. Seeing it placed against the wall under one of the side tables and then seemingly ignored, she gave an internal shrug and turned back to her conversation with Lil.
The meal progressed normally from that point on: conversations abounded up and down the table amongst both the teens and adults, punctuated by bouts of laughter and the occasional playful shove.

Finally, dessert (a rich, moist chocolate mud cake topped with cream and strawberries) was finished and spoons clinked into empty bowls.

It was then that Headmistress McGonagall rose from her seat and tapped her glass drawing all eyes to her and all conversations to fall away.

“Thank you,” she said, sweeping her eyes down one side of the table and back up the other. “I have just a couple of announcements this evening; announcements that I think you are going to find of particular interest.”

Hermione straightened slightly in her seat. Her hand was given a slight squeeze where it rested in Harry’s lap causing her to shoot him a quick smile.

“Firstly,” Headmistress McGonagall continued, “I should tell you that I met with Headmaster Dumbledore yesterday to discuss Diricawl’s involvement in the Yule Ball that is scheduled for Christmas Eve as part of the TriWizard Tournament.”

Beside her, Hermione felt Harry stiffen slightly.

“I will admit that we, your teachers, were initially reluctant to allow any of you to go,” Headmistress McGonagall stated. “But after talking to Headmaster Dumbledore, we’ve been given a number of reassurances and concessions which have changed our minds.”

“What concessions?” Harry asked flatly.

McGonagall nodded slightly to him before answering, “Primarily about security. Hogwarts will be swamped in aurors, not just from the British Ministry of Magic, but also with French and Bulgarian aurors as well. I have spoken to both Madam Maxine and Interim Headmaster Draklov and their Ministries have agreed to provide additional security for the evening.

“In addition, Diricawl will be providing its own security. Remus?”

Diricawl’s Deputy Head rose from his seat and placed his hands into the pockets of his cardigan before he began to elaborate on what measures that they’d decided upon.

“Firstly, as much as we enjoyed the ride from here to Hogwarts in the hovercraft, we’ve arranged for a secure FLOO connection to be used for the evening. Secondly, we’ll be taking as many of our staff as possible, all with the express task of keeping a close eye on those who go. And lastly, I spoke to Slipshard this morning and he’s agreed to our hiring a complement of two dozen goblin security guards for the evening.”

“Two dozen goblins!” Neville whistled. “That’d make anyone pause for thought.”

“Exactly,” Remus smiled.

“With these measures, we trust that not only will you be safe for the evening, but that you’ll feel safe as well,” Minerva stated.

“How long does the ball go for?” Susan asked.

“The doors to the Hogwarts Great Hall open at six,” Minerva replied. “There will be dinner and
dancing, as one would expect with a ball, before the evening finishes at midnight. We will, of course, FLOOR home immediately after that.”

Around the table, heads swivelled and bent together to discuss the ball, well, at least amongst the girls. For the boys, they mostly looked amongst each other with slight panicky expressions plastered on their faces.

“One last thing for this topic,” Minerva said, gathering attention back onto her. “The Yule Ball is only open to fourth years and up. I’m sorry but you younger ones won’t be able to go.”

“No worries,” Colin shrugged.

Hermione’s lips twitched as she noticed Neville become the centre of attention for half a dozen girls, a situation that it looked as though caused him a great deal of panic, judging by the way that he looked like he wanted to flee the room. Her hand squeezed Harry’s and she smiled knowing that she, at least, was assured that she’d have a date for the ball. Assuming that Harry did the right thing and asked her, of course.

Movement from across the table drew her eye and she turned curiously to see her mother rise, only to go and fetch the box that she’d brought into the room with her earlier.

When she was once more seated, the box firmly cradled in her lap, Minerva continued with her announcements.

“There is one other announcement that I’d like to make this evening,” she said. “It seems that Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies has finally found its new home.”

A great babble of excited voices erupted up and down the table, only to be cut off moments later by Headmistress McGonagall tapping her glass for attention.

“As I was saying,” she repeated, “Diricawl has found its new home. Mister Potter has leased us Ynys Crochenydd, along with the funds that we’ll need to build our new school.”

“Leased?” Daphne asked, one eyebrow raised as she questioned Harry.

“It’s like a long-term rental agreement,” Harry explained simply.

Hermione’s mouth opened to explain further, but a combination of Harry’s hand squeezing her own and Headmistress McGonagall beginning to speak again promptly stopped her.

“That is a simplified explanation and enough of one for you all,” Minerva said. “Suffice it to say that the details are between Mister Potter and the Diricawl Board. What you need to know is that this means that, as of the beginning of the next school year, we will have a brand new school. Between now and then, there’ll be a lot of work to do: buildings will need to be built, resources procured, and classes and courses decided upon, just to name a few.

“With that in mind, and considering that you are the first of Diricawl’s students, we’d like to ask for your input into these decisions.”

At that, the box that Hermione’s mum had been cuddling was lifted and placed in the middle of the table.

“This is a suggestion box,” Minerva explained. “There is a slot at the top of it for you to post any ideas and suggestions that you’d like to see at our new school. Anything and everything that you can think of, whether it be about classes and subjects that you’d like to learn; equipment that you
think that we might need; how the dorms should be set out; the only limit is your imagination. Within reason, of course. I promise you that they will all be read and considered carefully.”

“Even a football pitch?” Mickey asked.

“Yes, simply write it down and put it in the suggestion box,” Minerva replied.

“What about a dark room for developing pictures?” Colin asked.

“Can we have more magical creatures?” Luna asked.

“Languages. I’d like to learn French or maybe Spanish,” Fiona stated.

“Can we still have shared rooms?” Tracey asked with a glance at Daphne.

Minerva raised both hands to stem the tide of endless questions that were beginning to come almost on top of each other.

“As I said, write them all down, put them in the box and we’ll go through them and incorporate as many as is practical,” she stated.

The room froze then as everyone watched everyone else. Then, almost as one, the table emptied as every teen erupted from their seats and headed for the door, all obviously intent on finding some paper and a pen.

“I think we’re going to need a bigger box,” Hermione heard her mother comment just as she reached the door.

“Nah, I put a space expansion charm on the inside of it,” Sirius replied.

That was enough for her. Thoughts and ideas were swirling about her head and Hermione had no intention of forgetting to add a single one to the suggestion box.

-oOoOo-

“Nev?”

The wild-eyed boy stood with his back pressed against the door that he’d just slammed, his chest heaving as though he’d just run a marathon.

“What’s wrong?” Harry tried again.

Neville’s eyes darted about Harry’s room before fixating on his friend.

“They keep staring!” he blurted. “All of them. They just keep staring. Everywhere I go, there they are, staring at me!”

Now it was Harry’s turn to stare as he tried to decipher Neville’s strange comments.

“Who’s staring, Nev?” Harry asked.

“The girls! All of them,” Neville replied before moderating his statement. “Well, all of them except for Luna and Astoria. Oh, and Hermione, too, I guess.”

“So, all of the other girls keep staring at you?” Harry asked slowly.
“Yeah,” Neville replied, nodding his head vigorously.

“Um, why would they keep staring at you?” Harry asked.

Neville stared wildly back. “The Yule Ball! They’re after a date but there’s only one of me and six of them.”

Harry couldn’t help but laugh. “Well, at least you’ll know that whoever you ask is going to say ‘yes’.”

“It’s not funny, Harry!” Neville snapped, plonking himself down onto Harry’s desk chair. “It’s easy for you; it’s not like Hermione was going to say ‘no’ when you asked her.”

“When I asked her,” Harry repeated, a panicked look on his face.

“You did ask her, didn’t you?” a now amused Neville asked.

“Ah, not yet, I was … I was just waiting for the right time,” Harry replied quickly.

“Sure you were,” Neville grinned.

A glare from Harry accompanied him as he scrambled from the bed towards the door.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Neville asked, quickly putting himself in between Harry and the exit.

“To ask Hermione to be my date for the ball,” Harry replied.

“You’re not leaving me alone in here,” Neville declared.

“Then come with me and get your own date,” Harry replied. “Surely there’s one of the girls that you wouldn’t mind asking.”

A sheepish look crossed Neville’s face, a fact that Harry immediately pounced upon.

“Ah ha! So there is someone! Who is it? Hannah?”

Neville’s cheeks pinked with his embarrassment.

“How’d you know?” he whispered.

“To be honest, Nev, it wasn’t that hard to work out,” Harry replied. “Come on, you know that she’s going to say ‘yes’. Let’s just go get our dates and then this’ll all be behind us.”

Grabbing Neville’s shoulders, Harry spun the other boy around until they were both facing the door.

“Dates or death!” Harry declared, throwing the door open.

“What!” a startled Neville protested as he was propelled through the door.

-oOoOo-

“Sirius?”

“Ah, Harry, come in, come in,” an excited sounding Sirius called.
Almost hesitantly, Harry crossed the threshold to the potion’s room and looked around. He wasn’t quite certain exactly why he was there – it wasn’t the right time for a potion lesson for him or for anyone else. On top of that, he was supposed to be in a Mind Studies lesson. He just hoped that Sirius hadn’t decided that he was in need of some serious pranking, after all, it’d been nearly a week since the old Marauder’s last prank.


Sirius turned and hitched one side of his butt up onto the desk that he’d been standing at.

“And what is the purpose of your Mind Studies lessons?” Sirius asked.

Not understanding where this question was going, Harry answered it anyway.

“To organise my mind so that I can think better and to recall facts faster; to build mind shields and a mindscape to prevent legilimens from accessing my thoughts and memories; and to help me understand myself better.”

“Exactly,” Sirius stated. “And what is the ultimate goal of knowing yourself that you’ve been working on for the last year and a half?”

“That’s right,” Sirius nodded. “And you’re finally at that point that you’re ready to begin the next step; which is why you’re here.”

“Really?” Harry asked excitedly, his eyes shining brightly, his heart pounding in his chest.

“Really,” Sirius repeated. “You can’t tell me you’re surprised, Pup. You’ve been working on your Mind Studies lessons for a long time now. Your occlumency shields and mindscape are coming along nicely - you’ll be able to handle even a mid to high strength legilimens attack; and your meditation exercises are exactly where they’re supposed to be.”

“They are?” Harry asked, surprised. He hadn’t thought that he’d be quite up to this point for at least another couple of months yet.

“They are,” Sirius nodded. “And with what Tonks has told me about your metamorphmagus skills, your self-transfiguration is a long way ahead of where you need to be. I tell you, if your dad and I had had that ability, we’d have been able to transform so much earlier than we did. That’s one advantage that you have on us.”

“So what comes next? The Animagus Revealer Potion, right?”

“Yep. And that’s what we’re going to be starting today,” Sirius confirmed. “Now, this is a beyond NEWT level potion, that’s how difficult it is, and it takes four months to brew just to get to the point where it will force you into a trance that will show you your inner animal.”

“And after that we have to keep brewing it so that it’ll eventually transform me?” Harry asked.

“That’s right. That part takes an extra two months, which is good because it’ll give you time to research your animal and learn everything that there is to know about it – what it looks like, how it moves, how it defends itself, what it eats, where it lives, you name it, you’ll become a walking encyclopaedia of your animal. After that, it’s simply learning how to transform,” Sirius said.

“How long will that take?” Harry asked eagerly.
Sirius shrugged. “Usually anything from three to six months, but with your metamorph skills, I’d bet on the shorter time.”

“So, maybe nine months from now I’ll be an animagus,” Harry summed up.

“Yes, before the beginning of the next school year is our goal. That’s assuming we finish gasbagging and actually start the potion.”

In three quick strides, Harry was standing in front of the bench, ready.

“What’s the first step?”

“Well, to start with, we’re going to need a size four, silver cauldron …” Sirius began.

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“Hey, isn’t that your family owl?” Katie Bell asked the twin red-heads opposite her.

Without even looking up for confirmation, Fred and George abandoned their breakfast, scrambling backwards over the bench in an attempt to escape the inevitable.

“Any idea what we did this time, brother?” George asked, his feet slipping on the stone floor in his search for traction.

Fred shook his head. “Nah. We haven’t even pulled any pranks for a couple of weeks.”

And they hadn’t either; it simply hadn’t seemed appropriate, not with so many of their fellow students recovering from the First Task of the TriWiz. They, themselves, had been lucky. The dragon had first attacked the opposite side of the arena from where they’d been sitting giving their group time to make an escape.

That didn’t mean that they’d gotten away injury free, though. In the stampede out of the stands, they’d ended up with bumps and bruises all over their bodies. Angelina had had it worst. She’d been slammed into a support pillar, breaking her wrist. Thankfully, it’d been a quick fix for Madam Pomfrey.

“Hey, wait up, guys!” Lee called after them. “It’s not a Howler!”

Fred and George stumbled to a halt halfway down the table and looked back. Surely enough, Lee was right: the letter attached to the leg of the crashed owl was white, not red as they’d expected.

Cautiously, they made their way back to where they’d been sitting.

Reclaiming their seats, the twin red-heads peered closely at the letter, being extra careful not to actually let their noses touch it.

“What do you think?” George asked.

“That’s definitely mum’s handwriting,” Fred stated.

“And it’s addressed to us,” George added.

“But it’s not red; it’s not a Howler,” said Fred.

The twins stared into each other’s eyes, confusion and wonder etched on their faces. Mail from their mother was a fairly regular occurrence. Unfortunately, that mail as far back as they could
remember, had always been in the form of a red Howler. *This* was something unexpected.

“Well? Are you going to open it?” Alicia asked, amusement clear in her voice.

Twin sets of shoulders slumped.

“Guess we’d better,” Fred replied.

“We’d never hear the end of it if we didn’t,” George agreed as he reached out to untie the letter from Errol.

His grimaced face was half turned away as he tentatively touched it and only released a small amount of tension when nothing happened. Feeling slightly bolder, George finished untying it and placed it on the table between himself and his twin.

“I got it off, you open it,” George declared.

With a huff, Fred complied. Surprisingly, once again nothing happened when the envelope was opened, nor when the sheets of parchment were removed.

“Looks like it’s perfectly safe to me,” Angelina stated.

“It may look that way to you, my dear Angelina,” George replied solemnly, “but this is a letter from our mother. Nothing can be assumed.”

“George,” Fred breathed, his eyes fixated on the now opened parchment between them. “You’re going to want to read this.”

And so, following his brother’s lead, he did so, his eyes becoming wider and rounder the further that he read.

*Dear Fred and George,*

*I’d guess that I’d better start with saying that, no, you’re not in trouble. Secondly, I’ll apologise upfront about this letter. You see, this isn’t an easy letter to write – the fact that this is my fourth go at it proves it. I think that I’ve finally worked out that I just need to write what I’m thinking which’ll mean that I’m likely to ramble a bit. But you’re both good boys and will understand, I’m sure.*

*Something happened a couple of days ago that’s had me thinking, thinking a lot about the way that I am and the way that I’ve treated not only the two of you, but all of your brothers and your sister as well.*

*I know that I try to control you all. I’ve done it all your lives. If I’m honest, I’ve been doing it all my life to the people around me, even your father. I’ve pushed every one of you into how I think that your lives should go – from schooling to jobs and even to partners. I know that that’s why both Bill and Charlie left home so quickly after Hogwarts and why they don’t come home as often as I’d like them to.*

*And I’ve been doing it to you as well. You know that I’ve wanted the both of you to get good, respectable jobs in the Ministry, just like your father when you leave school. I’ve known for a while now that that’s not what you want, but I never really took that into consideration, at least not before a couple of days ago.*

*I guess that I’d better explain what happened. I only hope that you can forgive me and understand that I am trying to change. I’ve told your father all of this and, while he’s not happy with me, he is*
willing to give me another chance, provided that I prove that I’m trying to change. That’s part of why I’m writing to the two of you as well as to your brothers: to show that I am trying to change.

A couple of years ago now, Headmaster Dumbledore came to me as Harry Potter’s guardian, saying that he knew that Harry was infatuated with your sister. I, of course, knew of Ginny’s crush and how much she dreamed of one day marrying Harry, so when Albus suggested that we could secure the children’s future with a betrothal contract, I agreed. I didn’t see the need to discuss it with either your father, Ginny or even Harry Potter. I simply leapt at the chance to get a good husband for my baby girl.

I didn’t know it at the time, but Albus wasn’t actually Harry Potter’s legal guardian. Oddly enough, neither did Albus. Apparently he was told just after he’d had that accident with young Harry at King’s Cross Station last year, but you both know that Albus was in Saint Mungo’s for a couple of weeks then – but apparently, that wasn’t something that he felt that he should tell me, instead simply hoping that no one would notice the date on the contract and that it would happen anyway.

To cut a long story short, Albus, Ginny and I met with Harry and his godfather, Sirius Black, a couple of days ago about the betrothal contract. Only now, days later, can I see how they played us, showing Albus and I what it feels like to decide other people’s lives for them. (Perhaps one day I’ll even tell you of their prank, I’m sure that you’d get a laugh out of it.)

As much as I hated how they did it, I think I might have needed it to happen so that I could understand how my family has felt about me trying to control every part of their lives for them all these years.

Which brings me back to why I’m writing to the two you. You’re good boys, even with all of your pranks, and you deserve to work towards the future that you want for your lives. That doesn’t mean that I don’t want some involvement, I’m your Mum, after all. But it does mean that you deserve to have a lot more say in your lives.

I’m not saying that I’m going to get it all right straight away, but I promise to try to step back and to not be the controlling mother that I have been.

A few months ago, you were invited to attend Diricawl Academy, something which you wanted to do. At the time, I told you ‘no’, but I think that I might have been wrong about that. So, if you still want to change schools, then you not only have my permission, you have my blessing.

There’s so much more that I want to say to you both, but I don’t think a letter is quite the right place to do it, so I’ll save the rest until I see you.

I so hope that you can forgive me and that we can start again.

All my love,

Mum.

-oOoOo-

Knock knock

“Come in!” a cheerful voice called.

Opening the hospital room door, Minerva gestured for Luna to proceed her into the room.
“Miss Lovegood! Minerva! How wonderful to see you,” Filius Flitwick exclaimed.

“Hello, Professor,” Luna replied.

“Filius,” Minerva nodded, “it’s good to see you up and about.”

And indeed, the tiny Charms Master was in fact ‘up and about’, hovering over a metre in the air while sitting in an elaborate wheelchair. As the two women stood just inside the door, they watched as the chair floated from one side of the room to the other before gently descending to the open space in the floor in front of them.

“I take it you’ve been charming your wheelchair to become a bit more versatile?” Minerva stated.

“Indeed I have,” Filius smiled, laying his wand in his lap. “Come, come, sit. It’s so good to see you both.”

“How are you, Professor?” Luna asked.

“I’m recovering,” Filius allowed. “Most of the … injuries that I sustained have been healed now and the Healers tell me that I’ll be able to go home in a couple of days.”

“Will you …” Minerva trailed off.

“Will I ever be able to walk again?” Filius finished for her. “No. No, the dragon severed my spinal column, something that not even magic can fix.”

At the aghast expressions on the two women, he continued, “but I refuse to allow it to ruin my life.”

“That’s why you charmed your wheelchair to fly,” Luna noted sagely.

“Exactly, Miss Lovegood,” Filius nodded.

“A truly remarkable achievement,” Minerva smiled.

“Do you think that you could teach me those charms?” Luna asked. “It’d be ever so handy to simply fly around the library gathering the books that I need. Or perhaps I could use it to sneak up on the crumple-horned snorkack; they wouldn’t have time to hide if they couldn’t hear me coming.”

“Don’t ever change, Miss Lovegood,” Filius chuckled, and then, “I’ll have to see what I can do. But I’ve still got a few kinks to work out. I haven’t quite overcome the problem of keeping my concentration enough to fly and do something else at the same time.”

“Well, if anyone can work it out, it’s you, Filius,” Minerva assured him.

“Thank you, Minerva. And it seems that I’ll have all the time in the world to work it out,” Filius sighed.

“Dumbledore’s been by, then,” Minerva frowned.


“Well, that’s just silly,” Luna stated. “If you can fly, then stairs aren’t going to be a problem, are they?”
Minerva blinked then at the piercing stare that Luna had settled on here. It was most unlike any expression that she’d ever seen on the young teen’s face.

“Yes, well, I think what Miss Lovegood here is alluding to is the fact that as Hogwarts has terminated your employment, Diricawl would be incredibly foolish to not offer you a job,” Minerva said.

“I thought you already had a Charms Master,” Filius frowned.

“We do,” Minerva nodded. “Mistress Sharon Miller; she also teaches our Enchanting class. But she’s only with us as a part-time teacher and has already told me that she’d prefer to finish up at the end of school year.”

“Harry wants to learn gobbledegook,” Luna stated. “And I’m sure that there’d be others of us who’d like to as well if the opportunity presented itself.”

Filius blinked. “I’m not often asked about my goblin ancestry; it’s always been a bit of a taboo subject.”

“Well, that’s just silly,” Luna replied airily. “It’s a part of you, isn’t it? Why should you deny part of who you are?”

“Miss Lovegood makes a good point,” Minerva agreed. “And inclusion of all magical species is something that Diricawl wants to aim towards. Not to mention how good it’ll look for Diricawl to have an Order of Merlin recipient on its staff.”


Minerva smiled. “Second class, I’m told. Both you and Hagrid have been nominated for what you did during the First Task.”

“I … I haven’t heard anything about that,” Filius replied, shaking his head. “Are you sure?”

“Positive. Amelia let it slip the other day. I assume that you’ll keep that knowledge to yourself?” Minerva said, giving a mock stern look to both Filius and Luna.

“Of course, Headmistress,” Luna replied.

Filius simply nodded. “An Order of Merlin! Me! A part-goblin. Hah! Oh, and in answer to your question … I’d be honoured to come teach at Diricawl.”

“Excellent. We’ll expect you sometime next week, then?” Minerva smiled.

“I’ll be there,” Filius replied.
“Susan! What about this one?” Hannah called across the store.

And like a mob of meerkats, six heads bobbed up over racks or peered around the side of aisles to see the dress that Hannah was holding up. It was shimmering pale pink, off the shoulder satin and silk number that tapered in at the waist before flaring out into a full length affair.

Said girl cocked her head to the side, studying the effect that the dress had against Hannah’s figure.

“What about this one? Do they have it in lavender or maybe violet?”

“I’ll ask,” Hannah replied before whirling about to go find someone to ask.

That question decided, the other six heads disappeared back amongst the racks, looking for their own perfect dress for the upcoming Yule Ball.

“You and Hannah are so lucky,” Lil sighed, as she and Hermione flicked through the dresses in front of them.

Hermione couldn’t resist the smile that lit her face. “I know. Although I do feel sorry for the rest of you.”

Lil waved it off as she plucked a deep burgundy dress from the rack and held it up in front of her. Hermione regarded the effect critically before scrunching up her nose.

“Not quite,” she said. “The top’s too small and with your … assets, you’re likely to end up falling out of it.”

“Not a bad way to get one of the dateless boys from the other school to notice me,” Lil countered half-seriously.

“Here, try this one instead,” Hermione suggested, pulling out a dress that was almost identical, apart from the fact that this one had a strap over one shoulder instead of being strapless like the one that Lil had originally pulled.

“Ooh, that’s gorgeous! Thanks, Hermione,” Lil exclaimed before grabbing the dress and rushing off towards the changing room.

“You know, Lil may have a point,” Tracey said as she rounded the aisle. “It wouldn’t hurt to do something to attract some of the other boys.”

“Really, Trace? If we need to do that, then I don’t think that they’re the type of boys that we want hanging off of us for the evening,” Daphne replied.

“You heard Harry and Neville, they’ll make sure that they dance with all of you, not just Hannah and I,” Hermione said, pulling out a periwinkle blue dress that had caught her eye.

“I still don’t think that it’s a good idea for Harry to go,” Susan stated, “especially when we don’t know if Crouch was working with anyone when he put Harry’s name into that Goblet.”

Holding the dress close in front of her, Hermione couldn’t help spinning with it, imagining dancing with Harry in her arms. She looked up as she came to a halt, seeing the smiles on the faces of her friends around her.
“Yes, I think this is the one,” Hermione decided. “Oh, and don’t worry about Harry. He’s got a plan.”

Daphne shorted in a very unladylike way. “Harry Potter has a plan? Everyone run for the hills!”

The sound of her friends giggling followed Hermione as she headed towards the change room to try on the dress.

-oOoOo-

Albus Dumbledore stood serenely in the centre of the antichamber to the Great Hall of Hogwarts. His hands were folded in front of him and his head was slightly bowed, as if in deep thought.

Traditionally, this room was used for the staff, a place for them to collect themselves or to have private conversations that didn’t need to be aired in front of the entire school. Occasionally, it was pressed into additional uses, for example, the evening of the Choosing of the TriWizard Champions when the Champions met in here to receive their instructions for the First Task.

Tonight, though, it was to be the receiving room for Hogwarts’ guests. The FLOO connection to this room had been made as secure as it was possible to be and any time now, the students and staff of Diricawl Academy would be arriving.

The only thing that marred the room’s appearance, at least in Dumbledore’s opinion, was the presence of a pair of goblin guards standing on either side of the FLOO. Each stood attentively, their halberds held ready in their hands. As if they needed to be armed within these great walls! And, to add insult to injury, that wasn’t the extent of their weapons. Each also wore a great dirk on either hip and carried an axe upon their backs.

Even more troubling, was that Dumbledore knew that there were even more of these goblins scattered about nearby: a pair just outside these very doors; a complement at the entrance to the castle’s doors; a dozen scattered about the magical rose garden that had been created for the evening; and even more stationed inside the Great Hall itself.

Not that they were the only security within the walls of the castle. Aurors from three different Ministries of Magic, in their red, blue and black robes were also on guard for any possible lawbreaking. Not that Dumbledore was expecting any.

The fire flaming into life cut short his musings and he looked up, smiling slightly in anticipation of his guests, or at least, in anticipation of one guest in particular.

The first to step gracefully from the FLOO, as expected, was his new counterpart.

“Welcome, Minerva,” he said.

“Albus,” she replied, inclining her head.

Then, in quick succession, Sirius Black and Remus Lupin, materialized, both scrutinising the room before moving out of the way of the fireplace. And then came the children. Dumbledore welcomed each one by name, eagerly awaiting the one that he was most eager to see.

“Mister Longbottom. Miss Abbot. Miss Bones. Miss Greengrass. Miss Davis. Miss Spinks. Miss Moon. Miss Granger. And …”

Dumbledore puzzled over the next boy out of the FLOO. He was expecting it to be Harry Potter. What he found instead was someone unknown. This boy looked to be older than the others, much
taller and more broad-shouldered, perhaps a sixth year, he guessed. His sandy-blond hair was long, a fact that Dumbledore frowned at, especially when the boy turned slightly, causing his ponytail to swing over his shoulder. He had high cheekbones which only helped to emphasise his piercing slate grey eyes.

“I’m sorry, I don’t believe that we’ve met,” Dumbledore said to the young man wearing the deep forest green robes trimmed in black.

The boy looked him up and down before turning away and cocking one eyebrow at Miss Granger who was currently standing beside him.

“Hadrian, that’s Professor Dumbledore, Headmaster of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry,” she said.

The boy, Hadrian, looked back and stared him in the eye, an invitation that he simply couldn’t pass up. Unfortunately, the boy’s occulmency shields were far too strong for passive legilimency to counter.

“Welcome to Hogwarts, Hadrian, was it?” Dumbledore said.

“Thanks,” Hadrian replied in a rough voice before turning away.

Dismissing the boy, Dumbledore turned back to the FLOO then, waiting for Harry Potter to arrive. Unfortunately, he was only to be disappointed by finding out that the last four out of the FLOO were Augusta Longbottom, Amelia Bones, the goblin Slipshard, and a wheelchair bound Filius Flitwick. Their arrival signalled both the flames cutting out and the double-cracked appearance of a pair of house elves.

“This is quite the contingent,” Dumbledore remarked to Minerva.

Minerva glanced around the room before replying. “I realise that we brought more chaperones than actual students, but after what happened the last time we were here, not to mention the First Task, I don’t think that you can blame us.”

“I thought that Mister Potter would have accompanied you,” Dumbledore stated.

“Yes, well,” Minerva replied. “We brought as many as wanted to come. The rest of our students are back at the Academy.”

Noticing the non-answer, Dumbledore frowned and looked again at the unknown boy. Innocently readjusting his spectacles, he activated their function that allowed him to see active magic. There were the expected charms on the boy’s robes: sizing, stain resistant, temperature control. But on the boy himself, Dumbledore saw nothing, no glamours or charms, no transfigurations or any other active magic. The boy wasn’t even wearing glasses, something that he knew Harry Potter needed.

Dismissing his disappointment, he faced the gathered crowd.

“Welcome to Hogwarts for this evening’s Yule Ball. Soon, the Great Hall will be opened and you can make your way inside. I must ask your indulgence for a few moments as I make you aware of the security arrangements for this evening. I’m sure that you’re all aware that there are aurors for Britain, France and Bulgaria here, not to mention two dozen of Gringotts finest. For your own safety, we have banned all use of magic this evening. Even the simple act of drawing your wand is likely to leave you surrounded by wands and other less savoury weapons.

“Tonight is a night of fun and friendship, where all four schools can mix and mingle and make new
friends. I urge you all to take advantage of that and most of all, to have a very merry Christmas indeed.”

Murmurs of thanks echoed around the room before Minerva, Amelia and Sirius Black led the Diricawl contingent from the anti-chamber to the Entrance Hall of Hogwarts.

-oOoOo-

“Woah, they’ve really gone all out this year, haven’t they?” Hadrian asked as he lead the Diricawl contingent into the Great Hall.

“Hm hmm,” Hermione replied from his arm, her chocolate eyes shining brightly as she surveyed their surroundings.

The usual twelve gigantic Christmas trees were spaced around the room. Each had been decorated with gold and silver ropes, baubles both large and small, and a legion of twinkling fairies dancing and flitting about the leaves. Garlands of mistletoe, holly and ivy were strung around the walls with candles settled in their loops helping to light the room.

Gone were the traditional four House tables. Instead, dozens of large circular tables had taken their place, each one capable of seating ten. The polished silverware and golden plates gleamed brightly, reflecting the fat, white, red and gold candles in the centre of the table surrounding a swan made of ice. Even more candles, these long and thin with bright tapering flames floated overhead, giving the room a romantic quality.

And everywhere they looked, icicles hung or were formed into intricate patterns. A light dusting of snow covered the floor, while more fell from the ceiling, disappearing before it reached the tables below.

“Let’s find a table,” Susan suggested.

As one, the nine of them moved to the right and began weaving through the tables that were already occupied until they came to one near the front that was still empty. Hadrian and Neville each held out their chairs for their respective dates, causing identical smiles to blossom on Hermione and Hannah’s faces. An unexpected hand flashed forward, copying their gesture for Susan.

“Justin!” Susan exclaimed, then, after giving him a quick hug and taking the offered seat, “thank you.”

“Would you mind?” Justin asked, indicating the vacant chair left at their table beside Susan.

“Of course not,” Hadrian replied.

Hadrian watched as Justin paused, still half standing, his eyes narrowing as he took in the sight of him and Hermione sitting so close together, his arm around his date.

“Hermione? I thought that you’d be with Harry,” Justin asked.

In reply, Hadrian’s grin widened before his cheekbones lowered slightly, his eyes morphed from grey to green and a faint lightning bolt scar appeared on his forehead. The instant that Justin’s eyes widened in recognition, Hadrian resumed his earlier appearance.

“Harry? But … how?” Justin managed.
“Shh, keep it down,” Susan shushed him, clamping a hand over his mouth.

“His name’s Hadrian,” Hermione replied. “He’s been home schooled for the past couple of years.”

Justin’s snort told everyone that he got that joke.

“I’m a metamorphmagus,” Hadrian said sotto voce, leaning across the table. “I’ve been practicing for a while now.”

“Right. Of course you are,” Justin replied shaking his head, then, in a slightly louder voice. “It’s nice to meet you Hadrian, I’m Justin, Justin Finch-Fletchly. Susan, Hannah and Lil were Hufflepuffs with me when they used to go here.”

“It’s nice to meet you, Justin,” Hadrian replied.

Sitting back, Hadrian replaced his arm around Hermione and watched the hall fill up as the table descended into small talk.

The first person that he noticed was his old room-mate Ron Weasley. In fact, it was hard not to. The robes that he was wearing were ghastly. Really there was no other word for it. All frills and lace where there had no right to be. His date, a younger looking girl that Hadrian didn’t recognise, looked to be trying to distance herself from the monstrosity. Unfortunately, Ron had her hand caught in his elbow and didn’t seem to be interested in letting her go any time soon.

Keeping with the theme of Weasleys and eye-catching apparel, it was Ron’s twin brothers, Fred and George, who Hadrian was next to see. One was dressed in lurid purple robes trimmed in bright yellow, the other had bright yellow robes trimmed in purple. Completing their outfits were gigantic red flowers of some kind affixed to their left breast. Their dates, Angelia and Alicia, at least seemed to be taking it well, at least, Hadrian assumed so judging by the way the four were laughing and joking their way between the tables.

Others caught his eye and he smiled to see them: Seamus and Dean, with Lavender and Parvati; Megan Jones and Anthony Goldstein joined at hip; Ernie and Sally-Anne; and even Draco Malfoy holding Pansy Parkinson’s hand.

His crowd watching was cut short then as a fanfare announced the arrival of the TriWizard Champions.

Fleur Delacour and her date, Roger Davies led the procession. Fleur looked radiant, her long silver hair flowing down her back over her pearl-coloured dress. Roger, for his part, looked to be a drooling mess, tripping over his own feet as he obediently followed his date.

Next came Cedric Diggory, accompanied by Cho Chang, both looking cool, calm and collected, smiling and waving at the crowd clapping them. Bringing up the rear was the Bulgarian quidditch star, Victor Krum, accompanied by a dainty-looking girl in a sky-blue dress who looked as though she was about to faint the next time that Victor smiled at her.

Hadrian’s eyes shifted back to his date and he leant in, kissing her lightly on her cheek.

“It’s been confirmed,” he whispered to her. “You are most definitely the most beautiful witch in the room.”

Hermione’s lips twitched upwards and she turned, capturing his lips with her own.

“You don’t scrub up too bad yourself, Hadrian,” she replied once they parted.
By the time the two had eyes for something other than each other, the Champions had reached the dais that usually held the teachers’ table and now held only a single table for twelve – the Heads of each of the four schools, the Champions and their dates, Mister Bagman and, oddly enough, Percy Weasley.

As they sat, small cards edged in gold appeared on the plates in front of everyone in attendance. Looking down, Hadrian found that it was a menu.

His confusion was cleared up by Neville.

“Braised steak with steamed vegetables,” he said to his plate, causing said choice to magically appear on his plate.

Reading through the menu, Hadrian quickly made his own choice. “Chicken breast on egg noodles with mushroom sauce and steamed vegetables.”

Instantly, succulent smells rose from his plate and he smiled before lifting his fork for his first bite.

-oOoOo-

The song slowed towards its inevitable end before the band tapered off. Couples around the room finished their dances, some waiting for the music to begin again, others quickly making their way off the floor either in search of seats, friends or drinks.

Hadrian’s arms, having been filled with Hermione for the previous two songs, slid down from her upper back to her hips and then his right fell away, the left finding Hermione’s right hand. Grey eyes stared into chocolate, lips turned upwards in perpetual and identical smiles.

“Shall we sit this one out?” he asked.

Hermione’s eyes darted about the floor before coming back to meet Hadrian’s.

“I will. You, on the other hand, have a bit of catching up to do,” she told him.

At his quizzical look, her head tilted to the far side of the dance floor drawing his eye. There he found Neville leading Susan onto the floor. Hadrian could only sigh. He and Neville had made a pact that, while they’d spend most of the evening with their dates, they’d make sure to have at least one dance with every other Diricawl girl. And while Neville had been honouring the pact, Hadrian had been failing to live up to his part, dancing exclusively with Hermione so far all evening.

“You’re right,” he sighed.

Hand in hand, the two wove their way back to the table where Harry gallantly held out Hermione’s chair for her. After a quick kiss, he straightened and turned to survey the table. Only Daphne, Hannah and Lil remained, the others having been claimed by others.

He’d just turned to Daphne when he felt a pair of arms suddenly grip his armpits and lift him so that he was no longer touching the ground. His head whipped from side to side only to find shocking red hair atop purple and yellow robes.

“I should have known,” he sighed. “The twin red-headed menaces.”

“I like that,” the one on the left grinned.

“Our reputation precedes us,” the other agreed.
“This should make things easier,” the stated in unison.

“Excuse us ladies, we’re just going to have a little talk with Casanova over here,” the left one stated.

“Fred, George, would you put me down?” Hadrian asked.

“Now why would we want to do that?” the one on the right, who Harry now identified as George, asked.

“It’d sort of defeat the purpose, really,” Fred agreed.

Rolling his eyes, Hadrian allowed his face to morph back to its normal appearance.

“Harry?” Fred asked, dropping said boy.

“Yes, now, how about we take a seat and have his conversation in a way that’s not likely to attract attention,” Hadrian said.

“Sorry, mate, we didn’t know it was you,” George said.

“Obviously,” Harry replied dryly, then, once they were seated, “out of curiosity, what’d you want with me anyway?”

“Well, you see, we know that Hermione here …”

“Is a one-man sort of girl, …”

“Not the type to play with a bloke’s affections, …”

“And we also know that you and she are dating, …”

“So we were simply going to have a little conversation …”

“With the bloke who thought that he could …”

“Date your girlfriend,” they finished together.

“Thanks, anyway, guys,” Hadrian said.

“So what’s with the disguise, Harry?” Fred asked.

“And how did you reverse and reapply those glamour charms so quickly?” George added.

“No charms,” Hadrian replied, shaking his head. “I’m a metamorphmagus. For now, we’re not advertising the fact, even though it’s not really a secret.”

“You can count on us, Harry,” George nodded.

“Hadrian,” Hermione interjected. Then, at the twin’s confused looks, she clarified her statement. “He’s using ‘Hadrian’ tonight.”

“Righto. But while we’ve got you here, what’d you do to our Mum? We got a letter from her the other week that didn’t sound like her at all,” Fred asked.

“Hang on, before we get to that, ‘twin red-headed menaces’?” George interrupted.
Fred nodded at his brother. “You’re right, brother of mine, that is more important. Not that we’re
complaining or anything …”

“It is accurate, but we’ve never heard us described like that before,” George finished.

Harry grinned at the two. “Blame Dobby and Minerva. I can’t remember which one came up with
it first, but they’ve been using it to describe the two of you.”

“Professor McGonagall?” George asked, looked impressed.

“It was Dobby,” Hermione stated. “That’s what he called you when you sent the letter telling us
what the First Task was going to be about.”

“Remind us to buy the little guy a new pair of socks or something,” Fred said.

“Yeah, the little guy definitely deserves something special for coming up with such a cool
nickname,” George agreed.

“Now, back to the other matter. What’d you do to our Mum?” Fred asked.

“Sirius and I played a little prank on your Mum and Dumbledore,” Hadrian replied. “It seems that
Dumbledore convinced your Mum to sign a betrothal contract between me and Ginny a few years
back. It actually wasn’t valid; Dumbledore wasn’t my guardian at the time, not that he didn’t know
that. Anyway, when we found out about it, Sirius decided that it’d be a good idea to give them a
taste of their own medicine, so to speak.”

“Fair enough, makes sense,” Fred nodded.

“Now, this prank, we’re going to need details,” George stated, leaning forward.

“Sirius rewrote the betrothal contract and claimed that it was my family magic that altered it,”
Hadrian explained. “It started with some animals. I had to give your family nine pigs and we made
Dumbledore give me three horses.”

“Pigs?”

“Horses?”

“Yeah, it was just to get them off-balance. And it really didn’t cost us anything. A galleon a piglet;
while Dumbledore had to fork out a couple of hundred galleons per horse.”

“A bold start,” George said.

“After that, it was all about Ginny really. Actually, I was hoping that she’d be here so that I could
apologise for what we put her through,” Hadrian said, looking around the Hall once more in a futile
attempt to see the red-haired girl. “It really was mean what we did to her, but if we wanted to teach
your Mum and Dumbledore a lesson, then we didn’t have much choice.”

“What’d you do to Ginny?” a hard-faced Fred asked.

Hadrian winced. “We had to convince your Mum that messing with other people’s lives has
consequences. So, for that hour, we had your Mum thinking that, for Ginny’s safety, we were
going to send her to a muggle nunnery in New Zealand.”

“A muggle nunnery …”
“In New Zealand,” Fred repeated. “Now that’s just cruel.”

“Effective though,” George allowed.

“Definitely, especially considering that letter,” said Fred.

“Letter?” Hadrian asked.

“Yeah. Mum told us that she now realises how much of a control freak she’s been to everyone over the years and is trying to change,” George replied.

“And she even said that we can come to Diricawl if we want with her blessing,” Fred said.

“Wow!” Hadrian replied, sitting back in his chair, “I really didn’t think that it would have worked so well.”

“Well, apparently it did.”

“But next time, …”

“Leave Ginny out of it …”

“Or we’ll have to prank you mercilessly, …”

“Non-stop …”

“For the rest of your life.”

“And we may not even stop then,” Fred grinned maliciously.

“Deal,” Hadrian quickly agreed.
Rita Skeeter was bored. Oh, that wasn’t to say that her evening hadn’t been filled; really, how could it not have been when she’d crashed THE event of the year: The Yule Ball.

She’d arrived early, on the jacket of one of the British aurors no less, and quickly sped into the Great Hall of Hogwarts. The fact that she was a water beetle animagus could be so incredibly useful.

She’d been able to zip around the Hall all night, listening in to conversation after conversation. As couples began wandering out to the enchanted rose garden, she’d followed, hoping to spy a dalliance or two that was worthy of her time and penmanship. All evening she’d zipped between the garden and the Hall, eavesdropping on the notable personages in attendance: Dumbledore, Bagman, the Champions – Diggory, Krum and Delacour – even the three other Heads of school.

And by the time that twelve o’clock was nearing and the ball was winding down, Rita came to the realisation that she’d spend a night wasting her time. Oh, if she’d been a writer for *Witch Weekly* or something, then she would have had enough material to fill an entire issue – who was dating whom; who was wearing the best dresses; who was wearing the most atrocious formal wear (a Weasley, definitely, but the jury was still out as to whether it was the youngest boy or the twins); which dalliances in the secluded rose garden were a trifle daring …

But in terms of the scandals that she was expecting, nothing.

There were far too many aurors from three different countries, not to mention a horde of security goblins stationed just about everywhere in the Hall and rose garden for anyone to even consider doing something news or gossip worthy.

And worse still, Harry bloody Potter hadn’t even bothered to show up!

The fact that Dumbledore and Potter were at odds was well-known in the Wizarding world. The fact that the two of them were expected to be in the same room for a night had had her mouth-watering with the potential. And then, nothing!

The closest that she’d come to gossip-worthy news was that Potter’s girlfriend had been on the arm of some unknown boy. If worst came to worst, she was sure that she could make something of it, but still …

Seeing McGonagall gathering her students and staff, Rita decided to pursue the one vague story that she’d found.

Beating her wings as fast as she could, she flew up and above the crowd, her eyes on her target below. At the door to the Hall, the unknown boy paused to say ‘goodbye’ to the Weasley twins and their dates. It was just the opportunity that Rita was waiting for.

In a well-practiced manoeuvre, she folded her wings back and dropped down to land in the boy’s sandy-blonde hair. As quick as a flash, she buried herself in it before creeping down the back of the boy’s head to hide against the nape of his neck.

The jolting of her hiding place indicated that the boy was on the move.

“You first, Mister Evans,” she heard McGonagall say.
This was obviously the boy’s name as Rita felt him continue on from where he’d briefly paused.

“I’ll be right behind you, Hadrian,” a female voice that she recognised as the Granger girl whispered into the boy’s ear.

“See you on the other side,” Hadrian said cheerily. “Potter Haven!”

The next thing Rita felt was the heat of the flames of the FLOO, followed by the dizzying whirl of the activated FLOO system. The boy, Hadrian, stepped forward once they’d arrived and Rita waited for her chance to escape to find somewhere to hide where she could observe where she was and, more importantly, what was going on around her.

The FLOO sounded in rapid succession as more and more of the Diricawl contingent returned home.

Rita had just begun working her way out of the forest of hair that she was buried in when she got the shock of her life: the sandy-blond hair was turning jet black!

“That feels better,” the gravelly voice of Hadrian began before morphing into something else, just like his hair. “Being taller and more muscled like that really messes with my centre of gravity.”

“And yet you didn’t trip once, Harry,” the Granger girl replied, a light chuckle in her voice.

“Only because I’d been practicing so much the last couple of weeks,” this new voice replied.

Her hiding place was jostled then as a hand slipped into the black hair that was surrounding her, only narrowly missing her beetle form.

“Oi, cut it out, you two, you’ve had all evening to do that,” a different voice said.

“One evening is not enough, Nev,” the voice that Rita thought belonged to Hadrian replied.

“Come on, Neville, didn’t you say something about needing to check on your plants in the greenhouse?” an unknown female voice asked.

“I’m positive that he certainly did not!” a voice that Rita thought belonged to the renowned Augusta Longbottom stated. “It’s time that all of you were in bed. And that is your own beds, if you please.”

“Yes, Gran,” the boy called Nev or Neville replied. “Night, Harry, Hermione.”

“Night, Neville,” the two replied simultaneously.

*Harry?* Rita thought, her eyes widening the miniscule amount that they could in the form that she was in. *Surely not!*

In a flurry of wings, Rita shot out of the black hair and up towards the ceiling. Finding a convenient painting, she landed on its frame and scuttled around until she could see the room below her.

“It’s a shame that you couldn’t go looking like this, Harry,” Granger was saying. “I would have much preferred to spend the night in your arms rather than ‘Hadrian’s’.”

“I know, Hermione, but it just wasn’t safe,” Harry Potter replied. “You saw how Dumbledore was when we arrived.”
“I know, but still …,” Granger sighed.

A lop-sided grin appeared on Potter’s face. “Are you sure that you don’t prefer me looking like this?”

As he was speaking, Rita watched his face change, his hair lengthen and lighten and his entire physique alter from the scrawny Boy-Who-Lived-Again into a taller, well-muscled Adonis. A slap on his new chest from the girl changed Potter back into his usual appearance.

*He’s a metamorphmagus!* a stunned Rita realised as the two left the room hand in hand.

She was so gob-smacked by the unexpected revelation, that she nearly missed her opportunity to leave the room. It was only by some very fast flying that she was able to make her way through the door before it was shut.

*Now this could be the start to a beautiful story,* Rita thought.

Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies had been a closed book to the wizarding world up to now. No reporter had been allowed in since the start of the school year and all that was known about it was what was reported when she herself had been given a tour prior to that. But now Rita was in with the rest of the night ahead of her to explore.

And after seeing one secret, she had high hopes that she’d find a whole lot more before the inhabitants woke for Christmas Day.

-oOoOo-

The *thump* of an unexpected weight landing on Harry’s midsection jerked him awake Christmas morning. His startled eyes stared at the ginger fur-ball staring back at him from mere inches away.

“Hey, Crookshanks,” he gasped. “Can you get off; I *really* need to use the loo with you sitting on my bladder like that.”

A satisfied blink and a cat smile preceded the half-kneazle standing and trotting fully on to the bed. As soon as he was free, Harry scurried out from under the covers and headed to the bathroom.

“I take it Hermione’s up and wants her presents?” Harry called over his shoulder.

If Crookshanks deigned to answer, Harry never heard as he shut the door behind him. He emerged some minutes later, wrapping a large maroon terry-cloth bathrobe around him. As he tied it closed, he crossed the room to find his slippers; the floor was *cold* in the middle of winter.

Picking up his glasses, he allowed his eyes to morph back into their natural state before putting them on.

“Well, shall we go down for presents and breakfast?” Harry asked the cat sitting on his bed, its fluffy tail neatly wrapped around his front paws.

A fluid jump from the bed to the door followed by a bushy tail standing erect as he padded towards the door was his only answer.

“How’d you get in here, anyway?” Harry asked as he opened the door.

Once again, Crookshanks declined to answer.

The sound of voices chatting and laughing away drew Harry down the stairs and into the front
sitting room. He paused in the door, taking in the scene, a small smile on his lips.

A massive tree had been set up in the middle of the back wall, the star on top only just shy of the ceiling above it. Garlands of silver and gold rope were draped artfully around, not just the tree, but the entire room. Baubles and twinkling lights and fairies galore completed the decorations on the tree. Sprigs of holly and mistletoe were dotted here and there – on walls and in doorways, and lit candles throughout the room added to the Christmas air.

“Harry!” Hermione cried, getting to her feet from where she’d been laying on the rug surrounded by Lil, Daphne, Susan and a pile of discarded wrapping paper.

“Merry Christmas,” he called as she raced across the room towards him.

He caught her around the waist and spun her in a circle, kissing her soundly.

“Merry Christmas,” she finally replied, having been placed back on her feet.

“Merry Christmas, Harry!” a half dozen other voices called.

“Merry Christmas,” he replied.

Apart from the group of girls lazing about on the floor, he saw Hermione’s parents, Minerva, Remus, Beth and Mickey seated on chairs throughout the room.

Wrapping one arm about her, Harry led Hermione across the room.

“You wouldn’t happen to know how Crookshanks got into my room this morning, would you?” Harry asked quietly.

The innocent look on her face was enough of a dead giveaway to answer his question.

“Would you like your presents, Harry?” Hermione asked instead.

“Presents?” Harry asked, looking around. “But what about the others?”

“Hey, if they’re going to waste the day asleep, I say it serves them right to get their presents late,” Lil stated, a sentiment that was unanimously agreed upon by all those there.

A pop behind him turned Harry around.

“Would Harry Potter Sir be liking his present now?” Dobby asked hopefully.

“Sure Dobby,” Harry grinned. A quick summoning charm aimed at the base of the tree brought a gift into Harry’s hand. “I have one for you, too, Dobby.”

As usual, Dobby’s bright green eyes teared up at the thought of something so kind being directed his way. Harry was going to wait until Dobby had opened his gift first, but the way that the little guy was standing there staring at him with such an expectant expression on his face abused him of that notion.

Carefully, Harry undid the sticky-tape on the bright yellow and red, badly-wrapped present. Inside, he found not just the expected pair of hand-knitted socks, but a pair of mittens, a scarf and a beanie as well. Every single one was a different colour – blue and yellow socks, red and purple mittens, a white and green beanie, and a scarf with every colour under the rainbow longer than Harry was tall.
“I love them, Dobby,” Harry exclaimed, immediately wrapping the scarf around his neck four times before it was short enough not to trip over. “Go on, open yours.”

And Dobby did, tearing into the wrapping paper with abandon. His tennis ball sized eyes widened even further as he beheld the black leather satchel embossed with the Potter crest on its flap. The outside was filled with a half-dozen pockets and zips, and when Dobby opened it up to look inside, the house elf’s entire head disappeared into the inner compartment.

“The inside’s ten times bigger than the outside and all of the pockets have space expansion charms on them, too,” Harry told him.

“Dobby loves it!” Dobby exclaimed leaping forward to wrap his arms around Harry’s legs.

Kneeling down, Harry returned the hug.

“A bit different than last year, hey, mate?” Harry asked, surreptitiously looking around at all of the people in the room.

Dobby’s ears flapped, he was nodding so hard. “Dobby thinks this is better.”

“So do I,” Harry agreed.

“Come on, Harry,” a grinning Hermione said, grasping his hand and pulling him towards the rug in front of the tree.

“You’d best do as you’re told, Harry,” Dan Granger called from across the room, “Hermione’s never been one to wait for presents. Especially at Christmas.”

As he flopped onto the rug amongst his friends, Harry gave his hair a shake, turning the tips of his black hair red, green and white.


Harry grinned at her before delving under the tree looking for the small black box bedecked in silver ribbon that he’d hidden in the depths of the pile of presents. Feeling the right shape, his hand closed around it and he scuttled backwards.

“Merry Christmas, Hermione,” he said, presenting her with her present.

“Thank you, Harry,” Hermione replied, darting forward to give him a quick peck before turning her attention to the box in her hands.

Within seconds, the ribbon had been sent flying and the top of the box pulled off, before the thin gold paper was peeled back.

“Oh, Harry, it’s gorgeous!” Hermione breathed.

Ever so gently, she lifted out the silver chain, allowing the silver book-shaped locket to dangle freely. Twin elaborate ‘H’s’ had been etched on the front of the book, almost like a title.

“Open it up,” Harry insisted.

Each side of the inside of the locket held a magical photo of them, photos that were currently smiling and waving and sending kisses at their counterpart.

Snapping the locket closed, Hermione held it out to her boyfriend.
“Put it on for me?” she asked.

Getting to his knees, Harry shuffled around until he was behind her, the ends of the chain dangling from his hands. Then, as Hermione held her hair up, he slipped the locket around her neck and affixed the clasp. Feeling daring, he took advantage of her hair being out of the way to steal a quick kiss onto the back of her neck.

“Harry!” Hermione squealed, then, quieter, “my *parents* are sitting right there, you know!”

Harry’s shrug earned him a playful slap before she reached behind her to grab up and pass his present to him.

As was his habit, Harry carefully undid the tape, making sure not to rip the paper. Presents were still too new, too exciting, to destroy even something innocuous as the wrapping paper. Once the paper had fallen away, Harry found a small black leather satchel. Raising one eyebrow at Hermione in curiosity, he quickly unzipped it. Inside, he found all of the tools that an advanced rune carver or warder would need to etch into even the hardest surfaces like marble, along with a book on Warding.

“Wow, Hermione! This is great!” Harry exclaimed.

“I’m glad you like it, Harry,” she smiled, “after all of the rune-work and enchanting that you’ve been doing, this seemed like the next logical step.”

The two embraced then, their lips automatically coming together.

“That’s enough, you two,” Dan groused, “there’s more presents still to open yet, you know.”

The rest of the day passed in a blur of food, laughter and fun.

Harry and Remus joined forces to prank a still sleeping Sirius, turning his black hair white and giving him a beard that Dumbledore would be proud of in conjunction with an enormous belly. Their last touch had been to charm all of his clothes red before they left the room that he was sharing with Remus. Unfortunately, the prank dissolved into nothingness when Sirius spent the day pretending to be Father Christmas, ‘ho, ho, ho-ing’ all over the manor and singing the most outlandish Christmas carols at the top of his voice. It took Minerva silencing the man and performing a sticking charm on the seat he was in to give everyone at least a bit of a reprieve.

The manor itself had never been so full: the families of every student turned up for the festivities, staying for dinner and beyond. Snowball fights galore were held out in the yard where teams built more and more elaborate magical forts with turrets and ‘moats’ and magical catapults and delighted in either banishing snowballs at their opponents or charming them to round corners in search of their prey.

Due to the extremely late night the night before, the festivities wound down early and everyone who’d been at the Ball was in bed before the moon had even risen.

All in all, it was the absolute best Christmas that Harry’d ever experienced, as evidenced by the massive smile that he was still wearing when he nodded off to sleep.

The mood in the dining room of Potter Haven during breakfast of Boxing Day was the polar
Boy-Who-Lived-To-Lie-And-Gather-Power by Rita Skeeter

You’ve all read the accounts, I’m sure, not to mention seen the fashion that was on display at Hogwarts two nights’ ago at the TriWizard Cup Yule Ball. But, dear readers, I’m sure that you were left with one burning question, just as I was.

Four schools were invited to the premiere teen event of the year and four schools attended: Hogwarts, Durmstrang, Beauxbatons and Diricawl. And the most famous faces of each school were there, well, almost all. Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Lived-Again, was most conspicuous by his absence.

All throughout the Great Hall of Hogwarts, lips were asking the same question – where is Harry Potter? And what were we told, dear readers? That only those who had wanted to come from Diricawl Academy were in attendance, leaving us with the impression that The-Boy-Who-Lived-Again didn’t want to come to his old school.

But, this investigative reporter knows exactly what you want answered, dear readers, and that is why I personally chased down those answers. And what I found has been most shocking indeed.

The truth is, dear readers, that Harry Potter was at the Yule Ball. How, I hear you ask? No, not with the use of charms or transfigurations or even polyjuice potion. It seems that our dear Harry Potter is a metamorphmagus!

For those of you unaware of what that is, it means that Mister Potter has the ability to change the features of his appearance – hair, eyes, build, facial structure – with a mere thought. It is exclusively an inherited trait, a trait that has had a tendency to show with the Most Ancient and Noble House of Black, a House that Harry Potter’s grandmother was born into.

What does this mean? Well, dear readers, it means that Harry Potter could walk down the middle of Diagon Alley or Hogsmeade and we would be none the wiser. It also means that I find myself wondering about all of these ‘interesting’ branches of magic that Harry Potter, The-Boy-Who-Lived-Again, has woven around himself. We already knew from two years ago that he is a parselmouth (a wizard with the ability to talk to snakes); he’s the first wielder of a magical staff in centuries, a relic that he found in the fabled Chamber of Secrets; now we find out that he’s a metamorphmagus; and then there’s the fact that he’s studying another obscure branch of magic in the animagus transformation.

There is also the fact that Diricawl Academy is on the move. Yes, dear readers, not satisfied with their already hidden location, the staff and students of Diricawl Academy have decided to move to Ynys Crochenydd, the ancient island seat of the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter, where they can expand from a dozen to potentially hundreds of students.

One simply has to wonder exactly what it is that Harry Potter intends to do with this influence that he’s accumulating over our vulnerable young, especially in light of his ‘interesting’ abilities.

Never fear, dear readers, I will continue to investigate this case and bring you reports as soon as I have them.
Chapter 30

“How…! How did …?! Where’d she …?!”

Flinging the offending paper to the table, Harry stared around the room, his emerald eyes piercing everyone there with his gaze.

“How’d she get all this?” he hissed, his breaths coming raggedly from his heaving chest.

“We don’t know, pup,” Sirius stated darkly. “But I can guarantee you that we will find out!”

Harry’s eyes once again to rest on the offending paper. Everything was there. His parslemouth ability; his metamorph skills; their studies into animagi; even the fact that Potter Island was going to be the new home for Diricawl Academy.

“The problem, Mister Potter, is that none of what Rita Skeeter revealed has been secret,” Minerva stated. Immediately, she raised one hand to ward off his harsh reply. “Yes, you’re right that we haven’t advertised those things, but they weren’t secret.”

“Minerva’s right, Harry,” Remus said. “Everyone here knows about everything that she’s written there. As do the parents of your friends here, not to mention Julius and the goblins. And that’s not even taking into account that the entire wizarding Britain learnt about your parslemouth ability two years ago.”

“And you yourself told a number of people about your metamorph skills at the Ball the other night,” Sirius added.

“But the animagus stuff, the move to Potter Island?” Harry protested. “I refuse to believe that someone here or their parents or Julius or Slipshard would have told Skeeter or anyone else.”

A soft hand slipped into his and Harry felt himself relax minutely.

“I agree with Harry,” Hermione stated. “We trust all of those people. And the only other way that I can think of that Skeeter would have found out about those things is if she was here, snooping around.”

“But there’s no way she would have been able to get into Potter Haven without us knowing,” Minerva said.

“The wards around this valley are top-notch,” Sirius agreed. “The wards that the goblins and the elves put around it would keep anyone else out. Short of tearing them down, something that I assure you that we would know about, there’s no way in unless you’re keyed into them.”

“You’re sure about that?” Harry asked suspiciously.

“Positive,” Sirius replied. “If you’re not keyed in, you couldn’t walk or even fly into the valley without getting bounced a couple of miles away. Same goes for portkeying or apparating in. Heck, with the animagus wards, I couldn’t even sneak in as Padfoot if I wasn’t keyed in.”

“The only real weak point into Potter Haven is the FLOO,” Remus mused. “There’s simply no way to guard against every eventuality. Yes, we have a password set, but it’s not infallible. That could be compromised.”
“And that is why the elves monitor the FLOO for us as well,” Minerva said. “Every time the FLOO activates, whether for someone to come or go, the elves are aware of it.”

Harry’s eyes narrowed. “Nerri!”

A soft pop announced the arrival of the smallest of the three elves. Her light blue eyes were staring up at Harry with the same look of expectancy that she always seemed to wear whenever she looked at him.

“Nerri, when was the last time that you left Potter Haven?” Harry asked.

“Nerri has stayed at manor since Master Harry brought Nerri to here,” she replied.

“That’s what I thought,” Harry nodded. “Do you remember any time that the FLOO has activated when none of us knew about it?”

Nerri cocked her head to the left and her eyes unfocussed slightly as she thought.

“Only one time that Nerri can think of, Master Harry,” she said.

“When was that?” Sirius asked intently, sitting forward in his chair.

“Yesterday morning before sun come up,” she replied.

Heads all around the dining room darted to each other, the same wide-eyed, worried expression on all of them.

“Nerri, this is very important. Did anyone come out of the FLOO when it activated then?” Harry asked.

“No, Master Harry,” Nerri replied, shaking her head. “If there be visitor, Nerri would have come get Master Harry or Miss Gonagall.”

“Thanks, Nerri,” Harry said, dismissing her.

“So we may have had a visitor without knowing,” Remus stated.

“But if that was Rita Skeeter and she was leaving at the time, then the question is: when and how did she come here?” Hermione asked.

“She had to have come through the FLOO,” Remus said. “It’s the only thing that makes sense.”

“That still doesn’t explain how she got here without any of us or the elves knowing about it,” Minerva stated. “Assuming that that was Miss Skeeter leaving, of course.”

Remus looked speculatively across the table at Sirius.

“If it was you having to sneak in through the FLOO, how would you do it, Padfoot?” he asked.

Sirius sat back in his chair, his head tipping backward as he thought.

“Invisibility cloak would be one way, of course,” he replied slowly. “Disillusionment charm might work as well, although that one’d be less likely to work, what with the ash that using the FLOO kicks up. Course, that’d apply for the cloak as well. If Padfoot wasn’t so big, I might try sneaking in as him. Wormtail might be able to do it as a rat, especially if he could hitch a ride in someone’s pocket, but he’s in Azkaban. Other than that?”
His speculation finished with a shrug.

“You’re telling me an animagus could get through the FLOO?” Harry asked dangerously.

“There’s no way to ward a FLOO against animagi,” Remus told him.

“Then someone needs to do something about that!” Harry stated. “How are we supposed to feel safe in our own homes if people can circumvent the security that we are able to put in place?”

“Not to mention the potential espionage possibilities that are evidently possible,” Hermione agreed.

Their statements were left hanging there as everyone in the room looked at everyone else.

Finally, Minerva sighed bringing all attention along to here.

“For now, the best that we can do is to change the password allowing access to our FLOO and to decide what to do about that,” she said, finishing by pointing at the paper in the middle of the table.

“Is there much we can do?” Harry asked. “It’s not as though any of it’s not true, after all.”

“It may be true, but the way it’s presented is something that we can counter,” Remus said.

“It’s what should have happened last year,” Hermione said. “Your name was dragged through the mud last year when you were on the run. A good bit of PR would have had people understanding your position more which would have helped them be more on your side.”

“Exactly,” Minerva nodded. “A good piece of public relations is in order.”

“That Markus Waynesbury has always seemed fair. At least, the articles that he’s written for the Prophet have always seemed to present both sides of an argument. Not to mention that article about us he did after the First Task – that was incredibly flattering to Diricawl as a whole,” Sirius mused.

“Harry, would you be willing to give an interview alongside me? Perhaps even give him a tour of Potter Haven?” Minerva asked.

“It’d give you a chance to tell people your side of things, what it’s like to have inherited these gifts and why we’re learning what we are,” Hermione said, giving his hand a squeeze.

Harry glared at the paper once more before sighing. “If you think it’ll help, I’ll do it.”

“Good, I’ll contact him immediately,” Minerva stated, rising from her chair.

“Oh, and Sirius?” Hermione asked. “Whatever you’ve got planned for Skeeter, I want in!”

Padfoot and Moony shared a look before giving the determined-looking girl at predatory grin.

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“Thank you for coming, Mister Waynesbury,” Minerva said as the green flames of the FLOO died down having deposited the reporter to Potter Haven.

Harry took in the crumpled man’s appearance. His salt and pepper hair matched the well-groomed beard that he wore. Wrinkles lined his face, particularly between his eyebrows and out from the sides of each of his brown eyes. Currently, he was dusting ash from his dark grey robes, a colour that made it almost impossible to tell if the man was having any success in the slightest.
“It’s a pleasure to be here,” Mister Waynesbury replied.

Harry saw his eyes dart around the room, taking in its every feature as well as his presence as well.

“I must say that I was surprised to receive an owl from you,” Mister Waynesbury continued, “especially in light of the article that the Prophet printed this morning.”

“That is precisely why we contacted you,” Minerva explained. “We here at Diricawl Academy and Mister Potter in particular, were most distraught not only about the revelations in the Daily Prophet, but also about the obvious breach in our security that Miss Skeeter has highlighted.”

Mister Waynesbury’s face suddenly blanked and Harry wondered exactly what that portended. Was the man in favour or against his colleague’s tactics? Did he have an opinion on whether or not the article should have even been written in the first place.

“Your owl said that you’d be willing to do an interview with me?” Mister Waynesbury asked.

“Indeed we would,” Minerva replied, indicating Harry as well. “And we would be amenable to including a tour of our school as well.”

The reporter’s eyes lit up at that and his hands dove into pockets of his robe.

“Would you mind if I used a dicta-quill?” he asked, holding up a sheaf of parchment and royal blue quill.

Harry cocked one eye at his Headmistress, a fact that she saw and understood.

“A dicta-quill is a quill that has been charmed to record the exact words that are said within its presence,” Minerva explained. “That would be acceptable.”

A sharp jab and flick of Mister Waynesbury’s wand had the quill poised over the parchment, both floating in the air just behind his left ear.

“Headmistress McGonagall, Mister Potter, it is my pleasure to come to Diricawl Academy today to interview you both and to tour your school,” Waynesbury said before checking the floating parchment that the quill had been writing on and nodding at what he found there.

“Shall we?” Minerva said, indicating the door.

“This almost looks more like a manor than a school,” Waynesbury commented as he was led across the foyer and towards the main sitting room.

“That’s because it is a manor,” Harry said. “As you know, Diricawl Academy is currently located in my home in Potter Haven. The Manor was refurbished by the goblins when I purchased this valley and further renovated into a school when Diricawl Academy took up residency here.”

“And where exactly is Potter Haven?” Waynesbury asked.

“Sorry, I’m keeping that a secret,” Harry replied. “Within the next eight or so months, Diricawl will be moving and this will be simply my home again and I’d prefer not to give out the location of my home to the entire wizarding world.”

“You mentioned that Diricawl Academy is moving,” Waynesbury said, while taking some additional notes with the small pad and quill in his hand. “Is my colleague’s assertion that you’ll be moving to Potter Island correct.”
“It is,” Minerva replied as they continued their walk, this time towards the library. “Diricawl Academy has come to a business arrangement with Mister Potter for us to lease his land for our use.”

“And what do you get out of this business arrangement, Mister Potter?” Waynesbury asked.

“Well, apart from free tuition and a bit of gold, I’ll be given a position on the school board, not that I’ll be taking up that position until after I’ve graduated from school,” Harry replied.

“This is a very impressive little library you have here,” Waynesbury commented, looking around. “It must cover a lot of subjects.”

“Enough to be getting on with,” Minerva replied. “There are currently seventeen subjects that the students here have the opportunity to learn from.”

“Seventeen?” Waynesbury replied incredulously. “That’s a lot more than Hogwarts offers.”

“Indeed,” Minerva replied. “But with our extremely small class numbers, we’ve found that the students have coped with their subject choices. Once we move and increase not only the number of students, but also the number of staff that we have, we hope to add even more subjects that the students can choose to learn.”

“Diricawl’s staffing choices was another point that my colleague brought up in her article this morning. Do you have any comment to make in reaction to her statements?” Waynesbury asked.

“Indeed I do,” Minerva replied, her lips incredibly thin. “Diricawl Academy strives itself on providing the best instruction for each subject that we allow our students to learn. That means that we will always look for and employ the very best teachers that we can – no matter their background. Yes, we currently have muggle teachers, but I ask you, who better to teach about muggles and muggle subjects than muggles themselves?

“Yes, we have a house elf teaching both Herbology and Care of Magical Studies, but again, I have to ask, who better to teach these subjects than a being that has lived and breathed these subjects from the day that he was born. The half-goblin that Miss Skeeter mentioned in her article, is none other than Charms Master and Order of Merlin recipient, Filius Flitwick who was recently let go from his post at Hogwarts.

“Finally, we have Mister Remus Lupin, yes, a known sufferer of lycanthropy. This disease that he has been afflicted by since childhood affects him one night per month. We have more than appropriate safety procedures in place to ensure that everyone – staff, student and Mister Lupin himself – remain safe from harm.”

“Mister Potter, do you truly feel that your school is safe with a known werewolf on staff?” Waynesbury asked.

“I do,” Harry said emphatically, “in fact, one of the things that I’d love to see is for Diricawl to get to the point where children with lycanthropy feel safe and free to come and study at our school.”

Both quills, the one floating behind Waynesbury’s ear and the one in his hand were almost a blur as they wrote what the two Diricawl members had to say.

“If we may continue along the line of students with … different abilities,” Waynesbury said, “Mister Potter, Miss Skeeter made some remarkable allegations about what you are capable of.”

“She did,” Harry frowned. “And unfortunately, they’re all true. Yes, I speak parseltongue. That’s
been known for years. Exactly how I ended up with that ability is anyone’s guess. And yes, I am a metamorphmagus. That seems to be something that I inherited from my grandmother, Dorea Black.”

“As for the assertion that the students of Diricawl are learning to become animagi,” Minerva continued, “while that is true, I can assure you as a Transfiguration Mistress, that it takes years to become an animagus, assuming that any of the students actually have that ability and the desire to see the study through that far. And as Diricawl has only been operating for less than five months, well, I’m sure that you can see how ridiculous that particular charge is.”

“And when it comes down to it,” Harry picked up, “I’d do anything to increase my magical skills and abilities.”

At the reporter’s intrigued look, Harry elaborated.

“It’s well-known that Voldemort isn’t dead. He possessed Professor Quirrell at Hogwarts three years ago, and I had to stop him from getting the Philosopher’s Stone. Then, two years ago, Voldemort nearly came back using an enchanted diary. That time I had to kill not only him, but also the basilisk that he had roaming the halls of Hogwarts petrifying the staff and students. Last year, it was Voldemort’s minion Lucius Malfoy shooting killing curses at me, making me into The-Boy-Who-Lived-Again!

“I don’t know about you, but I’ve been seeing a pattern here: Voldemort and his minions simply won’t leave me alone. So, it makes sense for me to learn everything that I can to make sure that I continue to survive. And while none of those things are secret, we have been keeping them close to our chest: what’s the point of learning something if the bad guys know that you know it and can work out how to counter it?”

Waynesbury’s contemplative look told Harry that he’d made his point. A quick glance at Minerva verified that she’d noticed the same thing. If nothing else, then it seemed as though the whole point of this interview had been achieved.

“Shall we move into the studio?” Minerva asked. “That is where the students practice their art – be it musical, photographic or by painting. You can also see our greenhouses from there.”

The mound of slips of parchment in the middle of the table was so high that even the simple act of taking one often threatened that a cascade of others was likely to slide down and possibly off the table. When Sirius had first upended the suggestion box onto the table, he’d done it from the side of the table, soon, though, he was standing on one of the chairs, shaking the box to ensure that the last of parchment and paper was dislodged from the depths of the space expanded interior.

The suggestions in the box had nearly taxed the space expansion charms when the various parents of the current Diricawl students had decided to add their two knuts worth in on Christmas Day as well.

Filius had simply laughed with glee when he’d been told what all of these meant before conjuring half a dozen enormous blackboards around the room. Then, with a piece of chalk in hand, he’d flown about the room on his airborne wheelchair, writing the called out suggestions into appropriate columns and groups on the different boards.

One board was completely filled with subjects that either the students would like to learn or the adults would like to see taught. Another two were filled with equipment that they would need to
start a brand new school. A fourth dealt with the structure of the buildings – everything from the size of the library to teacher quarters to dormitory suggestions. Even the idea of having a mini-shop filled with paper, pens, quills, parchment, chocolate and books had been floated. The last two boards were currently filled with miscellaneous ideas and suggestions that would probably need an extra board or two when it came to sorting out those ideas.

“Here’s a long one,” Dan called, plucking a piece of paper from the pile and running his eye down it. “Looks like Mickey, Dennis and Colin’s work. They’ve asked for a quidditch pitch, a football field, a swimming pool, an indoor sports hall for the winter months and all the balls, brooms, tennis rackets, squash rackets and other sporting equipment that goes along with them.”

“Indoor sports hall?” Sirius asked, his head snapping up from the list that he was looking at.

“Yeah,” Dan replied. “It’s not unexpected, really. All of the non-magical schools have something like that. It gives the kids a way to burn off excess energy and stay fit in the winter months.”

“I like it,” Filius squeaked as he zipped from one side of the room to the other, up and over the table as a shortcut.

“There’s definitely a lot of suggestions already and we haven’t even got to half of them yet,” Minerva commented, casting an eye over the boards.

“We’re likely to find more and more of the same suggestions the further through them that we go,” Remus commented.

“Are you sure that Ynys Crochenydd is going to be big enough for us to build a school big enough to house all of this?” Beth asked.

“Definitely,” Sirius replied. “We’ll have over five hundred acres to play with, and that’s not counting the extra fifty or sixty acres where we’ll keep the magical creatures.”

“But look at all of those subjects,” Leonard, the school’s Arts teacher said, waving a hand at the appropriate board. “There’s what, thirty there already? That’s a lot of teachers before you even start to think about the students.”

“Thirty-one,” Filius corrected.

“And there’s no reason we have to have them all or even begin teaching them all straight away,” Minerva said. “In fact, what I have in mind is for every teacher to have a minimum of two subjects each. We’re already doing something like that now. And then there’s some like Beginning Healing and Healing, and the two Alchemy subjects which will both obviously be taught by the one teacher for both course levels.”

“What about other responsibilities like Head of House?” Augusta asked.

“It’s pretty apparent that none of the kids want Houses like they have at Hogwarts,” Beth stated, indicating one of the miscellaneous boards.

“I’ve heard the kids talking and they all seem to like the fact that there’s no real divides between them – either House or age – here and that they can all learn together at their own pace,” Remus said.

“Yes, it has worked well, especially for someone like Hermione or Luna,” Scarlett, the school’s Arithmancy and Astronomy teacher said. “Both girls have been forging ahead in their studies.”
“And they’re not the only ones,” Minerva stated.

“What about having a designated person in charge of each age group that the students can go to, sort of like a House Parent or Counsellor?” Emma suggested.

“That’s not a bad idea,” Remus mused.

“I believe that the number of students that there are going to be should be determined before any building designs can be decided upon,” Slipshard stated from near invisibility behind the stack of suggestions still on the table.

“How many students are there at Hogwarts?” Dan asked.

“Currently in the vicinity of four hundred, although the castle can hold up to a thousand with ease,” Minerva replied.

“Why so low?” Emma asked.

“A number of factors,” Remus, their History teacher replied, sitting back and settling into lecture mode. “Historically, magicals have had a habit of producing the bare number of children, of late, that has dropped to a single child in a lot of families. And then, when you add in the fact that this century alone there has been two wars which have decimated the population, including wiping out of whole family lines, it’s not surprising that there have been so few magical children born. The muggle-born boom has helped somewhat, but not enough to reverse the trend.”

“I don’t think that I want Diricawl to ever be as big as Hogwarts,” Minerva stated, “I’ve enjoyed the smaller class sizes.”

“I think no more than twenty per class or year group would be a good number,” Filius said.

“So, a maximum of a hundred and forty?” Dan clarified.

“That sounds about right,” Remus agreed.

Suddenly, Emma reached across the table for a spare piece of paper and a pen before bending to work, scratching away at whatever had caught her attention.

“With over one hundred and fifty people, we’re going to need more than just the three elves,” Scarlett observed.

“Jaxom, Nerri and Dobby be Potter elves, not Diricawl elves,” Jaxom stated with a sharp nod of his large bulbous head.

The room froze for a moment as everyone processed that unexpected statement.

“Do you know if Harry will continue to allow you to teach?” Minerva asked carefully.

“Master Harry has spoken to Jaxom. Jaxom can teach if he wants. And Ynys Crochenydd is Potter land if Diricawl be there or not, so Jaxom happy to keep looking after all the beasties and teach what he knows,” he replied.

“That’s good,” Sirius said. “How many house elves do you think we’ll need to look after the school?”

“Depends on size of buildings,” Jaxom replied. “Maybe twenty-five; thirty be better to help with grounds as well.”
“Makes sense,” Remus commented. “We’re aiming to multiply the size of our school by ten, so ten times the number of elves that we currently have sounds right.”

“Filius, could you add ‘house elf quarters’ to the appropriate board, please?” Minerva asked.

“I’ve got it!” Emma exclaimed unexpectedly.

“What’ve you got?” Dan asked.

“The design for the dormitories,” Emma replied, holding up a piece of paper.

“Allow me,” Filius said before waving his wand to float the paper over to a vacant wall, increase it to the point that it was easy for everyone to see and then to stick it to the wall.

Everyone stopped what they were doing to peer at the strange drawing that Emma had produced. There were two large octagons joined together in the middle of the paper. A smaller rectangle shot off of the opposite end of one of the octagons from where it was joined to the other octagon. Hexagons had been added to the remaining six sides of the middle octagon. Inside each hexagon had been divided into sex equal areas.

“Would you like to explain your design?” Minerva invited.

“Sure,” Emma said, getting up from her chair and rounding the table so that she could point to each feature as she described it.

“I took what Hermione’d told me of the Hogwarts’ dormitories and went from there. This’ll be a separate building that you get to along this corridor.” Here she pointed to the rectangle at one side of the page, before moving her finger to the octagon that it connected to. “This area is the common room, a place to relax or study. I thought that we could fill it with couches and study tables, both individual and communal. Each of these hexagons are the dormitories. There’ll be six rooms in them: five doubles and one single. I thought that we could have a prefect in the single room, giving them charge over ten other younger students. As you can see, there’s three hexagons on each side of the common room – boys and girls. This other area,” here she pointed to the other octagon, “is a separate common room, but more for more boisterous activities.”

“That’ll only hold sixty-six students,” Remus pointed out. “Are you thinking that we have a couple of those buildings?”

“No no no. Two levels,” she replied. “Keep the noisier common room as one massive double storied room and we can either have two levels of the other common room or just build the upper level rooms alongside a balcony that looks down into the main area.”

“I like it,” Filius announced. “It keeps all of the students together; allows for the upper levels to gain prefect status; while at the same time giving the students a chance to be together in their own year groups to sleep.”

“And a hundred and thirty-two students fits in with what we were saying,” Sirius added. “That’s, what, nineteen students per year level? Well, in all but one year, I guess.”

“Great work, Emma,” Minerva smiled. “I’ll leave you to more fully design that and to discuss it with our dwarven builders once we contract them.”

“I believe that security must be determined, especially after the fiasco of last week,” Slipshard stated, changing the topic.
“What can the goblins do for us?” Remus asked.

“I have asked my colleagues,” Slipshard replied, glancing at a sheaf of parchment in front of him, “and they tell me that with Ynys Crochenydd being an island, it gives them greater leeway to ensure that the wards will be unbreachable. They can sink lodestones into the sea around the island to anchor the wards. They have determined that they can even create two points of entry and egress within the wards – one for boats to approach the island along a given route and another for portkey and apparition travel.”

“What about animagus wards?” Sirius asked.

“They’ve been included in my discussion,” Slipshard stated.

“It’s a shame that there aren’t wards to combat the Dark Mark,” Remus mused. “That sort of ward would have been incredibly handy to have at Hogwarts to stop Crouch Junior from getting Harry’s name in that Goblet.”

“Not that Dumbledore would have ever raised them,” Minerva countered. “Not with Severus teaching there.”

“Goblins know of and can detect the Dark Mark,” Slipshard said slowly.

Remus and Sirius shared a look before leaning forward simultaneously.

“What about wards to combat the Dark Mark?” Sirius asked eagerly.

“I’ll have my warders look into it,” Slipshard promised.

“That’ll give us an extra layer of security,” Remus said, “but it still won’t be impenetrable. Even if we put a building where portkeys and apparition arrive and add in the FLOO in just that one spot, it may not be enough to deter intruders, especially knowing that He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named has been seen twice in the last couple of years, even if it was just as a spirit. I think that it’d be wise if we hired someone strictly for security.”

“Am I right in thinking that the problem is that magical people have it too easy to catch us unaware?” Dan asked slowly.

“That’s one way of looking at it,” Remus replied. “You can’t do much active magic while in transit, but once you arrive, it only takes a second or two to cast a spell.”

“Well, why don’t we take that option away?” Dan asked.

Every magical person in the room stared at the man as though he’d just lost his mind.

“You can’t stop magic from being performed,” Sirius said.

Dan stared back at him. “But I’ve watched you do it.”

“What? When?” an incredulous Sirius asked.

“When we were modifying the hovercraft,” Dan replied. “You had to do something to a couple of the rooms to stop magic from happening around the engineering sections.”

“You know, he’s right,” Sirius breathed. “I lined a couple of rooms with magic suppressing wards. No one can cast magic in those rooms; it was the only way to ensure we didn’t bollocks up the engines.”
“And you’re suggesting that we do that to the room where people portkey, FLOO and apparition into?” Remus asked. “Would that even work?”

“One way to find out,” Slipshard grinned, his pointed teeth showing prominently.

“And I’m sure that we could come up with a few other tricks to ensure that only people who mean the school no harm are allowed out of that room,” Dan said.

“Looks like the four of you are our security sub-committee,” Minerva said. “Congratulations. Now what’s next?”
Chapter 31

The silence of the large circular office was broken only by the flicking of parchment and the scratching of a quill. Occasionally, the noise would cease as the owner of said office glanced once again at the copies of the *Prophet* sitting on the side of his desk and scowled.

As hard as he tried to ignore them, the articles in the newspaper continued to mock him. He would have loved nothing better than to incinerate the lot, but for now, they needed to stay where they were – their purpose still had not been fulfilled.

Each article dealt with his greatest focus, greatest annoyance and greatest failure: Harry Potter.

The first covered the success of the Yule Ball. The success, that is, apart from the fact that Harry Potter hadn’t attended. The second refuted the first, at least in terms of the boy. It seems that young Harry *had* indeed attended the ball, albeit in disguise. The article then went on to outline the lengths that Harry was going to educate himself and to gather magical power – metamorphmagus abilities, parselmouth, and even the beginnings of becoming an animagus.

It was the third article that really showed that the boy was thinking and planning ahead: each and every one of his skills were being honed in preparation for the possibility of battle. And *that* had never been in Harry’s future. At least, an able Harry in a battle had never been in the boy’s future.

But then, there was the evidence of his scar to consider.

Albus Dumbledore was still waiting to confirm his suspicions about that. If what he thought had actually happened, then his plans were going to need to be altered. Even with the prophecy, it wasn’t now necessary that Harry die at Tom’s hand; preferable, yes, but necessary, no.

There were still the other pieces that needed to be found and dealt with, of course, but the piece that was Harry still needed to be confirmed and the only way that Albus knew how to do that was with a diagnostic spell, a spell that he could only perform in the presence of Harry Potter. The Ball would have been the perfect opportunity to perform such a spell, but the boy had tricked him. He’d been suspicious of the older blonde, Hadrian, when he’d arrived, but his specially charmed half-moon spectacles hadn’t detected any active magic, leading him to believe that Hadrian was who he said he was.

But that piece within Harry was the key to his plans. He had no intention of moving forward with any of his plans until he knew its status.

The sudden flaring of the flames in his fireplace, coinciding with them turning green, brought the smallest of smiles to his face. *This*, he hoped, would bring Harry to him.

“Ah, Minerva, welcome back to Hogwarts,” Albus said, rising from behind his desk as the elderly witch stepped from the fireplace whirling her wand to vanish the ash and soot from her robes.

“Headmaster,” she greeted.

Albus waved to the seat in front of his desk, at the same time managing to pick up the bowl of sweets that he kept on the desk.

“Lemon drop?” he asked.

“Thank you, no,” she replied, sitting primly in the closest chair.
“Thank you for coming today, Minerva,” Albus said as he retook his seat and allowed his eyes to sparkle.

“It’s my pleasure, Albus. After the success of the Yule Ball, it left me feeling a tad more favourably towards the remainder of the TriWizard Tournament,” she replied.

“Speaking of the Yule Ball,” Albus said, allowing his twinkle to fade, “I must admit to feeling disappointed by the trick that you and young Harry pulled that evening. As you saw, there was no need for it; he, and everyone else, were perfectly safe.”

“In hindsight, we can see that that was the case,” Minerva replied. “Be that as it may, however, Mister Potter felt safer and more comfortable in disguise. It’s just a shame that his secrets were found out and then reported for all to know.”

“Unfortunately, even with your vast experience, I feel that you and your teachers still have much to learn about the running of a school, and especially in the area of security, it seems,” Albus said sadly.

“Do not go there, Albus,” Minerva stated, her lips thinning dangerously. “You do not want to get into a security debate with me. Need I remind you of possessed teachers, enchanted objects, basilisks and polyjuiced teachers? And that is just some of Hogwarts’ record over the past three and a half years.”

Albus waved his hand, letting the matter drop. He’d worked with Minerva for decades and knew the signs for a full-born rant well and currently all of those signs were there. The fact that she’d been out from under his … direction for the past half year wasn’t likely to help matters either.

“Perhaps we can simply agree that, with the obvious success of the Yule Ball, that matters have taken a turn for the better,” Albus suggested, bringing the conversation back towards the topic at hand.

Minerva narrowed her eyes at him slightly before giving her head a sharp nod.

“Excellent, excellent. Well, then, can we count of Diricawl’s attendance at the Second Task?” he asked.

“That decision will not be made until after we know what the Second Task involves and the security that will be in place for it,” Minerva stated.

It was only through his many years of political training that Albus was able to refrain from making a face at that, not that he’d expected anything different, but it was always nice to hope.

“As you already know, the main task for the First Task was for the Champions to collect a golden egg that their dragons were guarding,” Albus said. “Inside that golden egg was a clue for the Second Task. A rhyme, to be precise, in Mermish. To put it succinctly, the Champions, once they’ve worked it out, will have discovered that something precious to them will be hidden at the bottom of the Black Lake and that they’ll have a single hour in which to recover said item.”

Minerva stared at him for the longest time before she slowly repeated the Champions’ Task.

“The Champions have to venture into the depths of the Black Lake to retrieve a hidden item?”

“Exactly,” Albus beamed.

“And where will the spectators be during this Task?” she asked.
“We will have the stands from the First Task placed around the lake so that the students from the four schools, as well as our other guests, can see who succeeds first,” Albus replied.

“No,” Minerva said.

“No?” Albus asked, taken aback by that simple one-word statement.

“No, “Minerva repeated. “No, Diricawl Academy will not be coming to the Second Task of the Tournament.”

“I’m sorry?” Albus asked, confusedly.

“Albus, you want me to bring my students here to sit in some stands in the freezing cold that February in Scotland always is and stare at a lake for an hour. No. No, I won’t be subjecting them to something so idiotic! I don’t know who came up with such a Task, but it clearly wasn’t someone thinking about the spectators!”

Albus stared unbelievingly at Minerva as she got to her feet.

“You may have the best security already lined up,” she continued, “but I have no need to hear it. Good luck with the running of the Task. I’ll consider the Third Task when I hear the details for it. Good day, Albus.”

He barely had time to rise before the elderly witch had stepped into the FLOO, thrown her powder and was whisked away.

With a sigh, Albus Dumbledore dropped heavily back into his seat. That didn’t go to plan at all. She hadn’t even given him the opportunity to persuade her to the right course of action. Exactly what the repercussions of Diricawl not attending the Second Task would be he had no idea, but somehow, he didn’t think that it was going to be anything good.

-oOoOo-

Grunkle glared at the guano-ear across the field. It was bad enough that they existed, but to have to work on the same job as them? His small, black eyes narrowed under his dark bushy eyebrows as another one appeared closer than he was willing to allow them. His arms crossed over his long, wiry beard and his thick, booted foot began tapping. What he wouldn’t give to plant his pick up their long noses.

Behind him, his team scampered about, busy digging into the ground around the remains of the ancient manor. They needed to clear away the old blocks and foundations before they could begin the real work. Well, at least the real work for this job.

Building structures for wizards wasn’t what he or any of his brothers really wanted to do, but dwarves had to take whatever jobs they could find these days. In the old days, they had miles of earth to dig around in. But now, with the way that the muggles had taken over everything, their space was limited. And then there were the accursed goblins. They’d carved out hundreds or miles of caverns just within Albion alone, not to mention what their kind had done throughout the rest of the world.

A sharp snap spun Grunkle around, his eyes searching out for danger. But this wasn’t underground, it wasn’t likely that the Earth was going to collapse on them. The motion of his sister’s son, Braknel, climbing clumsily to his feet caught his attention. He grimaced in sympathy as Braknel held up the remains of his axe. It seemed that the boy had tried to use it as a lever and found that universal truth: rock always beats wood.
Crack.

Grunkle spun back around to stare suspiciously at the pile of lodestones and the goblins that swarmed them. His sharp eyes noted the difference: there was one fewer lodestone than there had been and he scowled.

*That* was the big difference between the two earth-dwelling races – goblins had a lot more magic than dwarves did. Which probably explained why every now and again the goblins would challenge the wizards to war, while the dwarves did everything that they could to remain unnoticed and as unthreatening as possible.

Oh, the dwarves had magic. But it was all stone magic. Give them earth and they could turn it into anything in the blink of an eye: marble, granite, flint, sandstone, slate were all stones that they could work with their hands tied behind their backs. That was their medium and what made them such good builders, as long as they were working with stone, of course. The treaty went back as far as any dwarf or goblin could remember, which, considering their lifespans, was a very long time: dwarves worked the stone; goblins worked the metals and gems.

Those facts, of course, only emphasised what had Grunkle in as big a snit as he was currently in: the goblins were enchanting and working with stone. They may be lodestones, carved with goblin runes to make the wards that would eventually encircle and protect this island, but still, they were *lode stones*!

The sound of a pick digging into the earth, its dull, melodious *clunking* behind him, changed unexpectedly into a *ting*. All work around the ancient ruins froze. Even Grunkle stopped his scowling.

That noise meant only one thing: metal.

Sneaking a look at the overgrown cave-bats, Grunkle took note that none of them had heard the sound. Well, if *they* were going to work stone, then the *dwarves* were going to work some metal for a change.

Jumping across to the nearest stone, Grunkle bounded across the ruins, from stone to stone, his steps always sure, even if one or two of them moved slightly.

Within minutes he was pushing his way between two of his team to peer down into the hole. The deep rumble of a dozen dwarven voices around him was swiftly ignored. In the pit, three of his workers were scraping their picks along the side wall, dislodging dirt with every pass.

The metal that they were exposing was a dull silver, obviously worked judging by the straightness of it and slightly scorched in places. A hit of bronze appeared, hard to see at first with all of the dirt around it, but enough to focus Grunkle’s attention on it.

By the time the griffin in full flight had been revealed he knew what it was that they’d found.

“Better contact the bosses,” he grunted to his foreman. “Tell ’em we found a family vault on the property and ask ’em what they want done with it.”

-oOoOo-

“On time as usual,” Slipshard commented as Julius Tentridge opened the door to the goblin’s office.

“You know that I love punctuality just as much as you goblins do, Slipshard,” Julius said. He gave
a short bow, before saying, “good afternoon.”

“Good afternoon, Mister Tentridge,” Slipshard replied, waving the lawyer in and motioning to the unoccupied seat in front of his desk.

“Hi, Julius,” Harry said, accepting the hand that Julius offered.

“Mister Potter, it’s good to see you again,” he said.

“You know, I’ve just finished going through that with him,” Harry said, jerking a thumb at his account manager, “I don’t need it from you, too.”

“As you wish, Harry,” Julius smiled.

Once the three were comfortably settled into their seats and the secretary that Slipshard had called had come and gone, leaving the two wizards with a cup of tea each and a plate of scones to share between them and Slipshard with a stone goblet that was smoking slightly, they got down to business.

“I asked you to meet me here today, Julius,” Harry said, “because there’s a couple of things that I’d like done and I wasn’t quite sure which one of you would be the best one to ask. And, seeing as I was meeting Slipshard anyway to go over my accounts, I figured that I’d kill two birds with one stone.”

Julius and Slipshard shared a brief look. Ordinarily, the lawyer and the banker didn’t have a lot to do with each other. But after taking over the Potter accounts, they’d found themselves working together, and surprisingly enough liking it, more than they ever thought that they would.

“A couple of things, hmm?” Julius said. “Well, let’s take them one by one then.”

“Right,” Harry said, pulling a small notebook from his pocket and flipping the cover to see his notes. “Firstly. You know that Diricawl is moving to Ynys Crochenydd.”

“We were there when the lease was signed,” Slipshard stated.

“Right. Well, as Slipshard knows, I own a chunk of land on the Welsh coast just opposite the island. I’d like to do something with it. My friends have talked about Hogsmeade enough for me to know how much the students of Hogwarts appreciate having the town nearby to escape to some weekends. It breaks up the monotony, from what I gather. We kind of do the same with the town near Potter Haven now. But there won’t be anything like that with the island, so I thought that I could do something with the land that I own.”

“What did you have in mind?” Julius asked.

“To be honest, I’m not a hundred percent sure,” Harry admitted. “I’ve got a bunch of ideas, but until I know more about the land itself, then I’m not sure which ones would work best.”

“I take it you’d like a survey of the land?” Slipshard asked. “Size of the land; composition of the soil; what, if any, wards or enchantments are in place?”

“Exactly,” Harry replied.

“It shall be done by the end of the week,” Slipshard promised, making a note on the ledger in front of him.
“What sort of ideas did you have in mind, Harry?” Julius asked. “We can at least work out what has the potential to be feasible.”

“Well, I guess I’m thinking some shops and entertainment, primarily,” Harry replied. “Maybe something a bit more muggle, something different. A bowling lane, maybe. Or maybe a mini-golf course. I really don’t know; I don’t have a lot of experience with that sort of thing. Oh, and I’d like to put in a small hotel or something – something that the parents can use when they come to visit their kids. You know, something that means that they don’t have to worry about driving all day to see their kids and then trying to find somewhere to stay. Oh, and we’ll probably need some sort of proper dock or something for the school’s hovercraft.”

Julius tried not to goggle at the boy. “Ambitious,” he finally settled on. “Depending on the size of the land, I don’t see why it wouldn’t be doable. Do you envision this area to be staffed by people who live there?”

“Yeah,” Harry replied. “I guess that means that we’ll need a residential area, too.”

“Are you wanting this place to be purely muggle or magical as well?” Slipshard asked. “We’ll need to know for the wards that we design.”

“A mixture, I think,” Harry replied.

“I suggest that you come up with a list of ideas that you’d like to see on this property and prioritise them from most important to least and after Slipshard’s people have given us more details, we can proceed from there,” Julius said.

“As your Account Manager, I can see that this idea has the potential to make you a great deal of money if managed correctly,” Slipshard stated, a gleam in his eye.


Julius and Slipshard shared a look, having already had this discussion, they were each sure of what was about to come.

“Slipshard says that I own the cottage and land there that my parents lived on for a while,” Harry continued. “He also said that I can’t do anything with it because the Ministry seized it and turned it into a monument.”

“That’s correct,” Julius acknowledged.

“Well, I’d like you to do something about that,” Harry stated firmly. “I don’t think it’s right that I own something that the Ministry says I have no control over. I want you to force the Ministry to either relinquish control back to me or to buy it off of me.”

“Do you have a preference?” Julius asked, taking out a piece of parchment and a quill.

Harry’s head dropped in thought.

“I’m not sure, to be honest,” he said slowly. “Part of me wants it back and part of me just wants to get rid of it and the bad memories that it holds.” Suddenly, he looked up. “You judge. Whatever noises the Ministry makes, work out what they’re most likely to give in on and force them to do it.”

“It may take some time,” Julius warned.

“That’s fine,” Harry replied. “But obviously the sooner the better.”
After jotting a few more notes for himself, Julius looked up at the boy in front of him.

“Was there anything else?”

“Yeah,” Harry’s voice had become hard, making both Julius and Slipshard lean a little closer. “The Daily Prophet. I’m sick of it printing stuff about me that makes everyone think the worst of me. Cyrus Greengrass has done his best to corral them since he bought majority shares in the paper but they still find ways around him to print pretty much what they like. They did it all last year and Skeeter did it again after Christmas. Is there anything that either of you can do about it? Maybe sue the reporter or something?”

“I understand that there are defamation laws in the muggle world,” Julius said slowly. “Here in the wizarding world, there really isn’t anything like that of yet. There have been attempts to get new laws passed to that effect, but the older, more traditional votes on the Wizengamot have always voted them down. I could try, but I don’t hold out much hope.”

“That’s pretty much what Sirius said,” Harry grunted. “Guess I’ll have to wait until I’m twenty-one and can take my seat on the Wizengamot and try to change a few things.”

“Do not forget that you will be eligible for two seats,” Slipshard reminded him, “Potter and Peverell.”

“That’ll help,” Harry replied. “I only wish that I didn’t have to wait another six and a half years to use them.”

-oOoOo-

“So, what’s the plan?” Hermione asked, plopping herself into a chair near her father, Sirius and Remus.

The three men stared at her, stared at each other, and then stared at her some more.

“Plan, Pumpkin?” Dan asked tentatively.

“Yes. Plan. As in, what do you have planned for Rita Skeeter?” Hermione asked, her eyes narrowed at the obtuseness of the three men.

“Ah, that plan,” Remus said, sitting back into his chair. “I’m afraid that we haven’t come up with one yet.”

Hermione’s eyes were now close to being slits.

“What do you mean you haven’t come up with one yet? It’s been nearly a month since she wrote that vile article.”

“What he means, Pumpkin, is that we haven’t been able to …” Dan began before petering off under her harsh glare.

“To come up with anything good enough for her yet,” Sirius finished, coming to his friend’s rescue.

“Then it’s a good thing that I’m here, isn’t it?” Hermione told them.

At their tentative nods and furtive glances at each other, she continued.

“Obviously, our goal is to totally discredit Rita Skeeter as a journalist, preferably in such a way
that she incriminates herself.”

“It would be good to find out how she got her information,” Remus agreed. “I would assume that she’s used similar techniques in the past against others.”

“Getting her to incriminate herself would be next to impossible,” Dan said. “It’s not like she’s just going to tell us how she did it.”

“She would if we asked her in the right way,” Sirius mused slowly.

Remus stared at his best friend, his mind whirling to play catch-up. “Sirius, you’re not thinking about …”

Sirius’ head snapped around, his eyes boring into Remus’. And then he gave a slow nod.

“But that’s illegal!” Remus protested.

“Only if we get caught, Moony,” Padfoot grinned. “Only if we get caught.”

“Fine. But still, how would you get it to her?” Remus asked.

“Like we’ve never been able to trick someone into drinking something that we wanted them to,” Sirius said, waving away his objections. “We did it all the time back at Hogwarts.”

“We were kids then and not likely to be thrown into Azkaban if we were caught!” Remus warned.

Dan’s head was snapping backwards and forwards between the two, trying to follow a conversation that made absolutely no sense. Finally, he leant towards his daughter.

“Do you know what they’re talking about?”

Once again, Hermione’s eyes were narrowed.

“Possibly,” she admitted.

“Fine. Assuming that we can do that and she admits it to us, what good will that do us? It’ll be her word against ours,” Remus pointed out.

“You’re right. We need a lot of people to hear her say it at the same time,” Sirius admitted.

“Look, I’ve got no idea what you two are talking about, but if you can get Skeeter to admit what she’s done, why don’t you just record her?” Dan asked.

“Record her?” Sirius asked.

“Sure. Use a tape recorder,” Dan said, and then, seeing the twin blank expressions, attempted to elaborate for the two wizards. “It’s a non-magical device that takes a recording of what someone says so that you can play it back again whenever you want.”

“Muggles have devices that can do that?” Sirius asked.

“If we do it in the muggle world as well …” Remus trailed off, the possibilities presenting themselves in his mind.

“But that still wouldn’t help us with getting lots of people to hear her confession,” Sirius pointed out.
“Actually, it would,” Hermione said, causing three heads to snap towards her. “I’ve got an idea.”

A tap at the door, though, interrupted their planning session. The four of them looked around at the door in various states of annoyance.

“Sirius? There’s a dwarf here to see you?” a confused-sounding Minerva said from the doorway.
Chapter 32

The giant metal cube sat innocently not far from the building that housed the school’s hovercraft. When compared to it, the new cube looked small, barely the size of a small room. Looks, though, as any magical person knew, could be deceiving. The outside may be small enough to walk around in less than half a minute, but the inside, that was anyone’s guess.

Harry surveyed the new addition to the valley with a great deal of nervousness. The cube had been found on Potter Island, hidden beneath the ruins of the foundations of his grandparent’s old manor. It’d obviously survived that night – the scorch marks that covered the top and the face attested to that. Clumps of reddish-brown dirt still clung to its surface in sharp contrast to the deep brown, almost blackish dirt of Potter Haven.

“So how do I open it?” he asked.

“It’ll be blood locked,” Sirius explained, not for the first time. “Put some of your blood on the crest and it’ll determine that you are a Potter and open for you.”

Harry nodded jerkily. No matter how many times he was forced to do something that involved cutting his hand – usually at Gringotts to sign some official papers – he’d never liked it and he suspected that he never would.

A soft hand slipped into his, its thumb rubbing gently over the back of his hand.

“We’re here for you, Harry,” Hermione said.

Harry looked at her and smiled.

“Well, let’s do it, then,” he said determinedly and strode up to the face of the cube.

Using his wand, he made a slashing motion, cutting open his palm. Blood welled up in his palm and he grimaced. Staring up at the gigantic Potter crest, Harry reached forward and smeared his bloody hand on the tree in its centre.

For the longest time, nothing happened. And then, an almost anticlimactic click could be heard before the door opened the barest fraction.

“Well, that’s done,” Sirius commented before grabbing up Harry’s bleeding hand.

A soft warmth accompanied the tip of Sirius’ wand as it traced across the slash that Harry’d made until the cut was completely healed, leaving behind only a bloody palm. A quick scourgify took care of that as well.

“I’m not going to have to do that every time that I want to open this thing, am I?” Harry asked.

“Nah, well, at least, you won’t need that much blood,” Sirius replied. “A simple pinprick will be enough from now on. The first time the door needed enough blood to determine that you were a Potter and that you were doing it of your own free will.”

“The door could determine that as well?” Hermione asked. “How?”

Sirius simply shrugged at her. “Magic.”

Hermione’s scowl had Harry chuckling for the first time since the cube had arrived earlier that
morning.

He was nervous about what he’d find inside – nervous and excited. He had so very little from his parents, well, very little that was personal and meant something, vaults of gold and ancient heirlooms didn’t mean as much. Inside this thing could be something that his grandparents had treasured.

Grasping the edge of the door, Harry heaved it open.

At first, the interior was hidden in darkness, but then, as he took his first step over the threshold, a dozen torches flared into life.

The first thing that Harry noted was that he’d been right. While the outside of the vault might look as big as a small room, the inside was easily three or four times that size. The second thing that he noticed was that it was a complete mess. Boxes and chests were lying haphazardly; gigantic vases were grouped together, with a second layer piled on top of a lower layer in some bizarre type of pyramid; a stack of picture frames were leant against one wall and there looked to be miniaturised furniture of all sorts dotted everywhere.

And then Harry noted the figure lying curled up almost at his feet.

Jerkily, Harry lowered himself to his haunches, his eyes never leaving the house elf that was curled up in a foetal position. It looked old, much older than any elf that Harry’d ever seen before. Its clothes consisted of what he once suspected was a pristine white pillowcase that had seen better days – it now contained patches of soot and ash, most likely from the fire that had destroyed the manor.

And clutched in its hand was a piece of parchment.

“Oh, hell,” Sirius whispered.

Ignoring his godfather, Harry tentatively reached out, grasped the parchment and tugged it loose. As soon as he had it, he quickly stood back up and took a step backwards, away from the corpse at his feet.

“What is it, Harry?” Hermione asked softly.

In reply, Harry simply unfolded the parchment so that they both could see. The writing on it looked childish, not that Harry could really complain – his own chicken scratch was never the best, as much as anyone tried to get him to improve.

_Master James_, they read,

_Tippy is now the last house elf of the House of Potter. All the others are gone now, dying in the attack that also killed Master Charlus and Mistress Dorea. We followed our orders as best we could and leave what we could save here for you, just as Master Charlus ordered._

_Tippy wanted you to know what happened to Master and Mistress so he be writing this note for you to find one day._

_The boney-face ones attacked Potter Island when Master and Mistress were sleeping. They placed wards over the house and stopped Master and Mistress from escaping. Berk and Ganty tried to stop boney-face ones, but they were killed._

_After boney-face ones sealed the manor and started the fire, Master and Mistress ordered Tippy,
Danok and Ranzy to save as much as we could and put it here in the vault for you. The nasty flame animals ate quickly, but we did what we was ordered to do.

Only Tippy made it to here after saving as much as he could.

Tippy has waited as long as he could for you but fears that he cannot wait much longer. Tippy has been honoured to serve the Most Ancient and Noble House of Potter.

Harry’s eyesight misted slightly and he quickly took off his glasses before running his arm across his eyes to clear them.

“He always was a good elf,” Sirius said. “I remember him from when I was young and staying at your grandparents after I ran away from home. He treated me just like a part of the family; of course, I suspect that that was your grandfather’s doing, but still, I liked Tippy.”

“Dobby,” Harry called.

The soft pop of the arriving elf had Harry looking to the side. Dobby’s gaze, though, wasn’t on Harry, but on the sight of the elf still lying on the floor at the front of the vault.

“Master Harry Potter Sir?” Dobby asked, a clear waver in his voice.

Harry knelt down and rested a hand on his small friend’s shoulder.

“That was Tippy,” Harry said softly. “He was a Potter elf and gave his life for the family. Can you and Jaxom prepare a proper place to bury him? Somewhere special in the valley. I think we’ll make sure that there’s a monument or something for him, too; something special so that everyone can know what a loyal and brave elf he was.”

Dobby nodded his head, his large bat-like ears flapping, even as his gaze never left the other elf.

“Dobby can do. Dobby knows the perfect spot.”

Then, with a snap of his fingers and a sharp crack, both elves were gone.

“You’re doing a good thing, there, Harry,” Sirius said, laying a hand on the boy’s shoulder. “Your grandfather would be proud.”

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After Tippy had been laid to rest on a small outcropping that overlooked the southern part of the valley, a headstone in place that had been carved from a large lump of granite by Sirius with the words that Harry had asked for, the three Potter elves, Harry, Sirius and Hermione returned to take a proper look at what was in the vault.

It seemed that the elves that had attempted to save as much as they could from the burning manor hadn’t been too particular about how it was stored, which made sense – the manor would have been burning around them and they had their orders.

As the six slowly waded in, they took the time to make it somewhat more orderly.

A display cabinet was found amongst the shrunken furniture that was quickly resized and placed against one wall for the rest of the doll-sized furniture – tables, chairs, desks, lounges, beds, cabinets and all the rest – to be housed for now. The many vases and pots, all of obvious age, were moved into a more stable position.
The paintings were examined to find that, for the most part, they were simple still-lifes or landscapes. The few magical portraits that they found, all of people that Harry didn’t know, were ominously still, their magic having long since bled away.

And then there were the chests. As each chest was moved about, it was opened and briefly inventoried. Some contained weapons and armour, others knickknacks. The ones that had Hermione nearly salivating were the ones that contained hundreds of miniature books. It seemed that the elves had managed to save the Potter library, or as close to it as made no difference.

Somewhere in amongst all of this, Harry hoped that he’d find some personal touches, be it a journal or photo or jewellery box, something that had definitely once belonged to his grandparents. Unfortunately, with the amount of stuff in here, he suspected that it was going to take a long time before he’d been through it all and discovered everything that there was to find.

-oOoOo-

The café wasn’t overly busy, but there were enough other people about that they knew that they’d have to be careful. The Statute of Secrecy was there for a reason after all. But the risk was worth it. Here, in this setting, Rita Skeeter would be forced to keep her nasty little green quill in her bag, not that it would have mattered anyway – she wasn’t going to be the one asking the questions.

Hermione was already in place, sipping from a cup of tea, the pot in the middle of the table in front of her. Across the room, Remus sat reading a paper, his appearance disguised by a simple colour charm on his hair and a pair of thick reading glasses. In the bookshop across the street, browsing the aisles closest to the door, was her father, ready at the slightest signal to rush over to her aid. Really, he was the least happy about this plan, well, about Hermione’s part in it; he would have preferred to have that role for himself, to keep her safe from any possible reprisals.

The team was rounded off by the big, black dog lying on the pavement just beside the door to the café. Sirius’ animagus form was still something that they didn’t advertise, despite the fact that he’d had to register after his trial. Far too many people were learning about it to keep it quiet for much longer – all of the Diricawl students and quite a number of the staff now knew about it.

The tinkling of the bell as the door to the café opened lifted Hermione’s eyes. Rita was here and she knew that it was time to put her game face on.

The woman standing in the doorway caused the staff and customers to stare at her. While her attire was muggle, it was so outlandishly flamboyant, so out of place in comparison to everyone else there, that it really stuck out.

The reporter was wearing a muggle dress, a lime green muggle dress with overly large pearl buttons down the front of it. Her short blonde hair was set in elaborate curls that looked as though a sledgehammer would be needed to make them move as even stepping up into the café couldn’t cause them to bob around. Her square-jawed face was completed by the rhinestone jewelled spectacles that she wore. In the crook of her elbow was her ever-present crocodile-skin handbag.

Rita looked around the small room before stopping on what she obviously thought was her prey, at least, if the momentary predatory grin was anything to go on.

Hermione watched her as she sauntered across the room before sliding into the chair directly opposite the teen.

“Miss Granger,” Rita purred, “or would Hermione be more appropriate?”
“Hermione’s fine, Miss Skeeter,” Hermione replied.

“Rita, please,” the reporter purred, “after all, I’m sure that we’re going to such good friends.”

Hermione nodded and forced herself to give a small smile. She felt sickened just being in the same room as the woman, let alone having to talk civilly to her.

“I must admit to being surprised to receive your owl,” Rita said. “It’s not every day that someone from Diricawl wants to talk to a reporter, after all.”

“We talk to Mister Lovegood all the time,” Hermione couldn’t help saying.

“Yes, well, I did say ‘reporter’,” Rita smiled. “Old Xeno would be much better writing a book, after all, fiction does seem to be what the Quibbler most seems to publish, what with all of their hammering blumperthings and what not.”

Hermione had to bite down hard on the side of her cheek to stop herself for retorting with any of the dozens of things zipping through her mind just then. Instead, she gave a simple nod, even if it was a bit jerkier than she would have liked.

“And to meet here in the muggle world …” Rita trailed off, waving a hand nonchalantly about.

“Well, I thought that the anonymity that the muggle world gives us would be good,” Hermione replied.

Rita reached her long scarlet painted fingernails towards her handbag before pausing.

“I guess that it wouldn’t be prudent to use my usual quill, would it?” she commented.

“Tea?” Hermione offered in place of a reply, lifting the pot.

“Please,” Rita replied as she dug out a simple notepad and pen.

Once her things were arrayed in front of her as she liked, Rita added just a dash of lemon to her tea before picking up the cup and taking a long sip.

Got you, Hermione grinned in triumph.

She watched as Rita swallowed and even took a second sip before her eyes glossed over and her features went slack. Reaching out, Hermione plucked the cup out of an unprotesting Rita’s hands and placed it back onto its saucer.

A glance at Remus produced an answering nod, telling her that the muffliato spell had been placed around the two females. Now if anyone tried to eavesdrop on them, all they would hear would be an annoying buzzing sound.

From out of Hermione’s bag came a small silver device. After clicking one particular button on it, she laid it in the middle of the table.

“State your full name and age,” Hermione said.

“Agatha Agorita Skeeter; forty-two,” Rita replied in a flat monotone.

Hermione’s eyes widened. The first innocent question and already they’d hit pay dirt.

“Did you enter Diricawl Academy without anyone knowing?” Hermione asked.
She, Sirius, Remus and her father had compiled a list of questions before they’d come for Hermione to ask. Extras had been added depending on Rita’s answers and how much time they had left before the veritaserum wore off.

“Yes.”

“How?” Hermione asked.

“I changed into my animagus form and hid in Harry Potter’s hair,” Rita replied.

This time, Hermione’s eyes goggled and she nearly growled. This woman had the gall to accuse Harry of trying to become an illegal animagus when she was one herself? Rita obviously had some nerve; the irony of it didn’t escape the teen witch.

“What is your animagus form?” she asked.

“A green water beetle.”

“Describe your actions while you were at Diricawl Academy.”

“After arriving, I hid in the room and watched as the boy known as ‘Hadrian’ changed into Harry Potter. I learnt that Harry Potter was a metamorphmagus. I hid in a different room until everyone was asleep and then investigated every room in the house that I could safely enter. I found McGonagall’s office and looked through all of her files and copied all of the interesting information. After gathering enough to write a sensational article, I changed back into my animagus form, slipped under the door to the room where the FLOO was and FLOOed away.”

Hermione nodded. That tallied with what they’d already guessed.

“Apart from being an unregistered animagus, what other secrets are you hiding?”

“Cornelius Fudge has a secret mistress that he meets every Tuesday for a couple of hours after lunch. Womple Warrington bribed his way onto the board of the Wimbourne Wasps. Alexa Vaisey is an unregistered vampire and hides this fact by conducting all of her business by owl post. Dirk Cresswell is a muggleborn, not a half-blood like he pretends to be. Delores Umbridge has seven blood quills that she paid thieves to steal for her from the goblins. Walden Mac …”

“Stop,” Hermione commanded.

While all of that information was interesting, they were fast running out of time. By her watch, they had maybe only one or two minutes left before the truth serum wore off.

“What articles do you have planned that will paint Diricawl Academy or Harry Potter in a bad light?”

“I do not have any articles planned,” Rita replied.

“Do you have any ideas for future articles about Diricawl Academy or Harry Potter?”

“I aim to use my animagus form to sneak onto Potter Island to examine the new school before and after Diricawl Academy moves there,” Rita replied.

She blinked then and Hermione knew that her time was up. A second blink followed by a shake of her head indicated that the veritaserum had worn off. Rita glared across the table then, her eyes narrowed.
“What did you do? Do you use a truth serum? On me?” she snarled.

Hermione simply reached out, plucked up the tape recorder and pressed the button to stop recording.

“Yes,” she finally replied.

“What’s that?” Rita asked suspiciously as she eyed the silver instrument.

To answer, Hermione simply rewound the tape before pressing the play button.

“--nelius Fudge has a secret mistress that he meets every Tuesday for a couple of hours after lunch. Womple Warrington bribed his way onto the board of the Wimbourne Wasps. Alexa Vaisey is an unregistered vampire and …”

“I think that’s enough,” Hermione said, stopping the playback. “This is a tape recorder. It’s a muggle device. Basically, it records everything that a person says so that it can be played back and listened to later. Over and over and over again. Just imagine if the wrong people heard this.”

Rita’s face paled. “What are you going to do with that?”

“Well, originally, I wanted to take this to the WWN and have them play it over the wizarding radio for the entire wizarding population to hear it,” Hermione stated.

She didn’t think that it was possible for Rita’s face to pale any further, but it did. Only the firm grip that Rita had on the table seemed to keep her upright as she lurched unsteadily in her seat.

“But I don’t think that I’ll do that,” Hermione continued. “Oh, I might later, if you don’t behave yourself, but not right now.”

“What do you want?” Rita sighed.

“You will not print another word about Diricawl Academy, Harry Potter, me or anyone associated with either Harry or the school without my express permission. I also get to proof any article about those subjects that I do say that you can write. You will not tell anyone about this conversation or about what happened today. Yes, I know that using veritaserum isn’t quite legal, but just imagine what will happen to you if some of your secrets get out, hmm?”

Rita vaguely nodded, her gaze never leaving the muggle device.

“And to make sure that you don’t try anything stupid,” Hermione continued. “I’d like to point out that I am currently not alone. There are three other people watching you right now. And once I get home, I will be making copies of this recording and they will be placed in secure locations with people that I trust who will be instructed to release it if anything happens to me.”

Hermione waited for that information to sink in.

“Do you understand, Agatha?” she asked.

Rita grimaced at what was obviously a hated name, before nodding.

“No, I want it hear you say it.”

“I understand,” Rita said.

“Good. Thank you for your time today, Rita. It was truly a pleasure,” Hermione smiled sweetly.
Grabbing her notebook, pen and handbag, Rita pushed her chair back and stood. Then, with a last murderous glare, she strode for the café.

-oOoOo-

There was a mad scramble the morning of February twenty-five for the single copy of *The Daily Prophet* that was brought to Diricawl Academy.

Remus eventually settled the debate by grabbing the paper, lifting it over his head and declaring that he’d read the article aloud for everyone to hear at once. As soon as everyone had settled once again into their seats around the breakfast table, he did just that.

*TriWizard Tournament: The Second Waste of Time by Markus Waynesbury*

Yesterday saw the Second Task of the TriWizard Tournament take place at Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

I would like to report that during the hour in which the three Champions battled various creatures, an unknown environment and the clock in order to rescue their hostages, I was witness to great and heroic deeds and feats of unparalleled magic. Unfortunately, I cannot do so.

You see, while I and hundreds of spectators, including the students of the three competing schools (Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies chose not to attend this event), their families, dignitaries and guests were seated on the stands to watch the Second Task, the Task actually took place under the waters of the Black Lake of Hogwarts.

Each Champion had needed to decipher the clue given to them within the golden egg that they retrieved from the dragons in the First Task. That allowed them to know that they would have exactly one hour in which to recover something precious to them from the heart of the merpeople village in the Black Lake.

*The Champions started well with Hogwarts’ Cedric Diggory and Beauxbaton’s Fleur Delacour performing flawless bubble-head charms, while Viktor Krum of Durmstrang performed a partial transfiguration to turn himself into a part-human – part-shark hybrid. But once the Champions disappeared under the surface of the water, the spectators were left to simply imagine what was happening.*

The crowd quickly became restless, with the only entertainment being provided by Hogwarts’ sixth years, Fred and George Weasley, who boldly strode to the front of the audience and began performing feats of magic that we were expecting the three Champions to perform.

They convinced fellow sixth year, Lee Jordan, to eat a candy that turned the Gryffindor into a giant yellow canary. They produced a large, black, circular disk each and stood to at either end of the stands while one stuck their hand in their hole, only to see it emerge out of the other. The two then proceeded to play ‘catch’ by having assistants hold their ‘holes’ while they threw a ball into their hole only for it to appear out of the other. The entertaining performance was completed with a set of fireworks that would easily rival Dr. Filibuster’s.

*From the Champions, the only point of interest within the allotted hour was when Beauxbaton’s Champion, Fleur Delacour, emerged at the half-way point, the victim of a grindylow attack.*

Neither of the remaining Champions were able to return with their hostages within the one hour time limit: Cedric Diggory arrived one minute late, while Viktor Krum was the last to return with his hostage.
The final points for the Second Task were: Cedric Diggory – forty-seven; Victor Krum – forty; Fleur Delacour – twenty-five.

Let us hope that the Third Task is as interesting for the spectators as it is for the Champions.
A swirling mist of steam rose gently above the giant, man-sized cauldron, exactly the light shade of blue that it was supposed to be. The long-haired man sighed with relief. He’d hate to think what his punishment would be if things had gone wrong while he was away, even if the reason that he was away was his Master’s orders in the first place.

This was, without a doubt, the most complex potion that he’d ever attempted to create. The fact that he’d been working on it for close to five months already and that there were still another four months brewing time indicated as much. And it still wouldn’t be complete until the final three ingredients were added at the very last second.

Having assured himself of his work here in the basement, the man took a deep fortifying breath and ascended through the ancient, dilapidated house to find his Master. For once, thankfully, the snake was elsewhere, most likely out hunting.

“What news, my slippery friend,” a high, cold voice asked as he entered the room.

“Everything went exactly as planned, my Lord,” he replied, having dropped to one knee the instant that he’d heard his Master’s voice.

“Good. Good. Tell me all,” he was commanded.

“I was able to slip into Hogwarts with ease,” he relayed. “The aurors at the gates registered my wand, but as I was using a … procured one, that wasn’t a problem. They also searched for and confiscated anything that could be used to hold any sort of liquid. My polyjuiced form deceived them sufficiently for entrance. As you commanded, I immediately found a place in which to disillusion myself before settling into position beneath the stands.

“Once I felt the polyjuice wear off, I placed heavy glamours on myself before cancelling the disillusionment charm and taking my seat in the stands themselves. The Task was another proof of Dumbledore’s stupidity; we stared at the surface of the Black Lake while all of the action took place under water. The only entertainment came from the blood-traitor Weasley twins. They have a real flair for joke items that I think could be easily adapted for our own purposes.

“After the Task, it was a simple matter to walk out of the gates and to return to your side,” he concluded.

“Not directly to my side, I trust?” and the warning was clear – if he had, punishment would be swift.

“No, my Master. As you commanded, I made half a dozen apparition jumps across the country to confuse anyone trying to follow me,” he quickly assured his Master.

“And the potion? You have checked it since you returned?”

“It was the first thing that I did,” he assured his Lord. “It remains exactly as it should be. It will be ready for the ritual at the correct time.”

“You have done well, very well. What of the boy?”

“Neither Potter nor his friends attended the Task,” he replied.
“As expected,” his Master mused. “Potter continues to distance himself from the old fool. Soon they shall be too estranged to be able to work together when the time comes, not that both of them shall be alive by then, of course.”

The kneeling man could only smile. His mission had gone well, his Master’s plans continued apace and soon, oh so very soon, he would no longer need to hide. Soon, he would have his revenge.

-oOoOo-

Hermione was nearly buried in books. Tomes of all sizes and ages surrounded her, filling not only the desk that she was working at, but also one of the chairs beside her. A notepad was by her hand, ready to record the most pertinent and important information. And a host of parchment and scrolls in front of her guided her study.

Really, it was her own fault that she was in this predicament. Three months. That’s all that she had left. She should have started ages ago. At the very latest, straight after Christmas, not the beginning of March.

Of course, it was also Harry’s fault. Not that she’d tell him that. It wasn’t really his fault that he’d been able to forge ahead last year while she’d diligently stuck to the curriculum outlined by Hogwarts. She should have done more, studied harder and further in advance.

And then he’d gone and passed his Ordinary Wizarding Levels in Muggle Studies two years early. With an Outstanding, no less; a feat that she was certain that she could match, even if it was going to be a year later than her boyfriend. At least she’d caught up to him in all of his other subjects, well, apart from Mind Arts and Enchanting.

The boy seemed to have a real knack for Enchanting and as for Mind Arts, well that was simply something that couldn’t be hurried along, even with her logical and ordered mind.

And as soon as she’d heard Harry’s plan to take the OWL for History of Magic at the beginning of June – still a year earlier than he should be – she’d been determined to take it with him. It and the Muggle Studies OWL. She was certain that she’d pass easily, especially after having Professor Lupin teaching them this year, plus all of the study that she’d been doing.

But still, she should have been revising so much earlier. Especially if she planned to beat Harry’s mark like she wanted to.

She’d toyed with the idea of attempting her OWLs in a couple of other subjects at the same time – Arithmancy or Charms, perhaps – but eventually decided against it. She was still in her fourth year of magical education and OWLs weren’t supposed to be until the end of the fifth year. She could wait and the extra year of study would ensure that she received top marks.

The added bonus of getting Muggle Studies and History of Magic out of the way now though (apart from matching Harry) was the fact that when Diricawl moved to Potter Island next year, a whole host of new subjects would be on offer. She still hadn’t decided exactly what she’d like to take in their place. Perhaps a second language, she was fairly proficient with French already and she could see herself brushing up on it quickly and moving on to a third language.

There was also Alchemy or Business and Finance or simply working towards getting her A-levels to open up the possibility of going to Oxford or Cambridge.

With a shake of her head, Hermione disregarded such thoughts. While it was nice to daydream, subjects for next year and her future could be considered later. Like during the holidays. Right
now, she had to focus on History of Magic. There was still so much to learn, so much more than Professor Binns ever droned on about or even what Professor Lupin had covered so far.

Pulling the next book towards her, Hermione lost herself in the history of Diagon Alley and how Gringotts and Olivanders helped to establish the first wizarding shopping district in England back in the fourth century B.C.

-oOoOo-

Julius Tentridge sat in the slightly uncomfortable chairs outside the Minister’s Office. His hands were clasped lightly in his lap and his briefcase sat beside his left leg. All in all, he gave the very appearance of a man unconcerned with the fact that he’d been sitting there for close to forty minutes already, a time that was nearly half an hour past his appointment time.

Ordinarily, Julius would have left after ten minutes of such disrespectful behaviour and attempted to make an appointment for another time. But for this matter, he’d cleared his entire day; thus his appearance that he was prepared to wait all day if necessary was very accurate.

Finally, after another three minutes of inactivity, the Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, popped his head out of the door. His eyes immediately flicked to the lawyer and a brief frown crossed his face. Inwardly, Julius was almost crowing: he’d won. The Minister may not want this meeting, may have already tried to reschedule four times, but today he was going to have to give in and succumb to having the meeting.

“Genevieve, could you summon Delores and Angus Fairchild from the Magical History and Preservation Department?” Minister Fudge asked his secretary. “And once they’re here, send them and Mister Tentridge straight in.”

“Oh course, Minister,” Genevieve replied.

The door to the Minister’s office had barely shut before two paper planes soared off to find the two named individuals.

Julius sighed. It seemed he was in for another wait. And not for anything good either. Angus Fairchild, he could understand, especially considering the topic at hand. But Delores Umbridge was going to be nothing but a pain in the hippogryph’s ass. She was a consummate yes-man and was only going to try to throw up objection after objection to everything that he questioned or proposed.

Luckily, Julius had foreseen her inclusion in the meeting and had prepared accordingly. At least, he hoped so. Between Fudge and Umbridge and their dithering on anything, he wasn’t confident that he’d get this matter settled any time soon, let alone today. The only option he really had was to try to bamboozle them with legalities and fast talk and to force them into actually doing the unthinkable: making a decision.

Finally, after a quarter of an hour wait, the two people that they’d been waiting on arrived.

Delores Umbridge waddled her way in to the outer office of the Minister of Magic as though she owned the place. Her simpering, high pitched girly voice addressed Genevieve as though she was talking to her own secretary. Then, without even acknowledging Julius, she opened the Minister’s door and walked in.

Angus Fairchild was as tall as Delores Umbridge was short. Or at least, Julius expected that he was. It was hard to tell seeing as the ancient fellow walked with a distinct stoop. There was even a
distinct gap between the long white beard that fell from his chin and his thin chest as it passed on its way to his knees. The man had to be nearly two hundred if he was a day; the perfect sort of person to have in charge of the Magical History and Preservation Department, considering that he looked like he was full of history and needed a few preservation charms himself.

“Mister Tentridge? If you’d like to go in now,” Genevieve said, motioning towards the door that the two Ministry employees had just disappeared through.

“Thank you,” Julius replied with a hint of a smile.

Julius barely paused as he took in the occupants of the Minister’s Office. As expected, Fudge was seated in his high-backed winged chair behind his desk. Beside him, in a slightly less elaborate chair, sat Undersecretary Umbridge. Fairchild was in one of the two seats in front of the desk, bent so far forward that it looked like a slight nudge would be all that it would take to send the man’s nose into the desk.

“Minister, Undersecretary, Mister Fairchild,” Julius said, nodding to each.

The instant that he was seated, his briefcase once more on the floor beside him, Fudge started the meeting.

“Yes, well, you asked for this meeting, Tentridge?”

Suppressing the urge to remind the man that he’d made the appointment for nearly an hour before this, he simply nodded. “Yes, Minister.”

“What is this about, then?” Umbridge questioned.

“In simple terms, I am here representing Harry Potter in the interests of the house at Godric’s Hollow which he currently owns but that the Ministry of Magic has taken responsibility for,” Julius replied.

“The Potter House at Godric’s Hollow is a national treasure and must be preserved as a monument to brave James and Lily Potter who gave their lives in defence of their son, allowing him to defeat the Dark Lord,” the deep, yet wheezy voice of Fairchild beside him rumbled.

“Mister Potter has no contention with the fact that the wizarding world has erected a monument dedicated to his parents,” Julius said.

“Then what seems to be the problem?” Fudge asked.

“The problem, Minister, is that, even though the Potter House at Godric’s Hollow is owned by Mister Potter, by Ministerial decree, he cannot touch the property,” Julius replied.

“And why would he want to?” Umbridge asked. “If I recall correctly, anything of value was taken out of the house and placed into a vault for Potter when he reached the proper age.”

“That is true and is indeed something that Mister Potter is grateful to the Ministry for,” Julius said. “However, that does not negate the fact that property owned by Mister Potter cannot be accessed by Mister Potter, nor does he have any say over said property.”

“Historical sites must be maintained and preserved for future generations,” Fairchild rumbled.

“Mister Potter would like to assert that the monument that was erected in the centre of Godric’s Hollow is a sufficient enough reminder to the wizarding public of his parent’s sacrifice,” Julius
“No. No, I don’t think so,” Umbridge declared. “The wizarding world deserves to be able to see the results of He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named’s demise.”

“So that I am clear in my understanding,” Julius said, “is it the Ministry’s position that it must retain all rights to Potter House at Godric’s Hollow and to maintain said House as a perpetual monument to the events that happened on October thirty-one, nineteen eighty-one?”

“Without a question,” Fairchild stated.

“Yes,” Fudge said at the same time that Umbridge declared, “indeed!”

“In that case, I have been authorised by Mister Potter to instruct the Ministry to purchase Potter House from him,” Julius said, picking up his briefcase and placing it upon his lap.

“The Ministry is in no position to buy the place,” Umbridge said, her voice rising with her incredulosity.

“Out of the question,” Fudge added.

“Very well,” Julius replied, readying himself for the next part of his gambit.

Quickly opening his briefcase, he extracted a particular piece of parchment.

“In that case, Mister Minister, Mister Potter will see you in court to determine exactly who has the rights to the property that he owns. If he is successful, which I can assure you that he will be, then he will further move to sue the Ministry for failure to pay rent for the lease of said property.”

As he said this last part, Julius added a second piece of parchment to the first, this one an invoice for twelve and a half year’s rent.

“He can’t do that!” Fudge spluttered.

“I am afraid that he can,” Julius said calmly.

A slap to the desktop snapped three heads around to the ancient man seated beside Julius.

“That property must remain as a national monument!” Fairchild declared. “I will not countenance the possibility of it not remaining so. Buy the place, Cornelius!”

“See here Fairchild, Department Head or not, you cannot order the Minister around,” Umbridge protested.

Ever so slowly, Fairchild straightened in his chair, his clear grey eyes meeting Umbridge’s and holding them until the woman wilted. He then turned his fierce gaze upon the Minister.

“Fine. Fine. The Ministry will buy the Merlin-be-damned place,” Fudge sighed. “How much is the boy asking?”

Julius had a figure in mind that he knew was fair market value, especially considering the poor condition of the house. But seeing how quickly Fudge had wilted under Fairchild’s gaze, he decided to up it by a good twenty-five percent.

“I would think that one hundred thousand galleons sounds fair, especially when you consider that the Ministry has been keeping Mister Potter from his property for so long,” Julius said.
Fudge’s mouth moved up and down as he seemed to be repeating the figure over and over to himself. It looked like he’d finally managed to convince himself to offer a counter to the amount when he caught sight of Fairchild still staring straight at him.


That was totally unexpected. Julius had expected a long, long battle before a price was agreed upon, assuming that they even got to this point, which he’d highly doubted. It seemed that Fairchild really had some clout with the Minister.

Pulling out a third piece of parchment, Julius placed it on the desk before grabbing up the Minister’s quill, inking it and beginning to fill in the blanks.

“This is a legal document stating that the Ministry has agreed to buy Potter House at Godric’s Hollow for the agreed upon sum of one hundred thousand galleons,” Julius explained. “Now, if the Minister will sign it and then we all sign it as witnesses?”

-oOoOo-

Harry looked around the old vault that had been brought from Potter Island once again. It was now cleaner and more organised, but still appeared to be immensely cluttered.

Trunks of books were piled along the back wall three high. He still didn’t have a complete number of books that they held, but judging by the fact that each trunk had a space expansion charm and all of the books had been shrunk, he guessed that it had to be at least several thousand.

Exactly where he was supposed to put them all, he had no idea. The library here at Potter Haven was already full and he was loath to give them to the school, not that Minerva would have taken them anyway, she’d made sure that he knew that.

And then there was the pottery. There was actually more of it than he’d first realised. It wasn’t until Sirius had levitated a particularly large piece past him while he’d been kneeling down that he realised exactly why the Potter elves had saved it all. The mark on the bottom of the enormous vase had told the story: this was Potter pottery. As in, each of these pots were family heirlooms, made centuries ago by Potters, probably before they’d given up the business of making things themselves.

And he wanted to display every piece. It was a piece of his history, a piece that he wanted to learn more about. And again, not something that he had the room for here.

It had been while he’d been exploring the furniture (now displayed in multiple cabinets throughout the vault) that Harry’d finally found what he’d really been looking for. He’d been idly unshrinking various pieces, examining them before reshrinking them and putting them away that he’d found it.

The first had been a jewellery box in a dresser. There were pieces in it – rings, necklaces and bracelets – that had that ‘worn’ look. Upon showing them to Sirius, he’d declared that they were some of his grandmother Dorea’s favourites. In fact, she was well-known for wearing some of these quite regularly.

The other precious thing that he’d found had been inside a bedside table. The top drawer had contained a journal. Harry’d quickly skimmed it, only to discover that this was his grandfather Charlus’ personal journal and that every Potter Head had one like it somewhere in the library stacks. He’d taken it and had been reading it conscientiously every night before bed.

Of course, furniture and pottery and trunks of books weren’t the only things in the vault. There
were dozens of pictures and portraits, waiting for a fresh infusion of magic to make them move once more; tapestries; suits of armour; and knickknacks galore.

All of it Harry wanted to display. But it was the majority of the trappings of a full manor house and even if he emptied Potter Haven, he was sure that he wouldn’t be able to display all of it.

For now, the vault would have to be its home. One day, though, Harry vowed to come up with a solution.

-oOoOo-

“Come on in, Harry,” Sirius said.

Harry entered the classroom, looking around at the changes. Usually there were three rows of desks set up in here. Tonight, though, the desks and their chairs had all been moved against the wall. In their place was large vacant area that Minerva was in the process of filling with a thick red and gold carpet rug, easily three metres square.

Cocking one eyebrow at his godfather, he silently asked what the occasion was.

“It’s the end of March. Your animagus revealer potion has reached its next stage,” Sirius told him.

“You mean that I get to find out what my form is?” Harry asked excitedly.

“Indeed. Assuming, of course, that you have one,” Minerva replied.

“Not that many don’t have a form,” Sirius added in quickly. “I’m sure that you’ll have one.”

“So what’s the process?” Harry asked.

Minerva motioned to the vial of brilliant blue potion sitting on the teacher’s desk at the front of the room.

“Tonight you will drink that potion,” she said. “It’s only a small part of the revealer potion that you’ve been brewing. The rest will continue to simmer for another two months before it’ll be ready for the next stage.”

“That means that after we’re finished in here, we’ll pop across to the potions lab and you can drop in the final few ingredients, including a piece of your hair, to key the potion to you,” Sirius cut in.

“Okay,” Harry agreed.

“After you drink the revealer potion tonight,” Minerva continued, “you will enter a trance. We’ve cleared out the room and added in the rug for you to help you be more comfortable. In this trance, you will meet your inner animal. This is the animal that you will have the potential to become.”

“It’s best if, once you’ve taken the potion, you drop into your usual meditative state. That will help the trance flow more smoothly and give you a clearer picture,” Sirius said.

At Minerva’s insistence, he crossed the room and sank down onto the rug. It felt divine; incredibly soft and silky and he could easily see himself curling up on it in order to meditate. Assuming that he didn’t fall asleep, of course.

“Whenever you’re ready, Harry,” Minerva said, handing him the vial. “There’s no rush.”

While there may not be any rush, Harry was far too eager to find out his inner animal to wait.
Uncorking the vial, he tipped his head back and drank it in one go. For a magical potion, it really wasn’t too bad, tasting more of fresh eggs and some kind of berry than anything else. A peculiar smell of petrichor tantalised his nose for a second immediately afterwards, gone before he could completely register it.

Handing the vial back, Harry let himself fall back onto the lush rug, his hands automatically falling to his sides. After taking a last look at Sirius and Minerva, both of whom smiled and nodded encouragingly to him, he closed his eyes and slipped within himself.

Just as he’d first taught himself so long ago, he used the colours of the rainbow to settle his mind. But instead of fixing on each one, his mind was so trained that the colours almost blurred together.

Redorangeyellowgreenblueindigoviolet

The more that he allowed his mind to quiet, his thoughts to still, the deeper his breathing became until, finally, he was drifting on the edge of wakefulness and sleep. From here, he could see into the landscape that he’d built for himself.

At first, it was dark, darker than the black of night, exactly as he remembered his cupboard being in the dead of night when he was locked in there when he was younger. Knowing it like he did, he lifted one hand, letting it glide upon the rough wood above him. Three steps down, he slid his hand over, feeling the irregularity of the knot of wood, and giving it a push.

Dropping his hand, he sat down and reached for the invisible handle of the cupboard door set beside the ground. Turning it anticlockwise, he pushed the door open only to find himself looking out at the library of Potter Haven.

With a smile, he stepped out into the light. Here, all his memories were categorised and sorted away. It was a place of safety and rest, a place where he could relax and examine those thoughts and memories that needed no interference from others.

But as he looked around the room, he found an anomaly. This wasn’t like the time before he’d sorted his memories, with books scattered all over the place. No, this was a window where none before had been.

Curious, Harry moved towards it. The scene outside this window was nothing like what he would expect to find at Potter Haven. Instead of the rolling green hills, he was greeted with the sight of scraggly bushland. Dry dirt and yellowing grass could be seen dotted about the place.

An urge to explore this unexpected place overtook him and he grasped it by the simple method of climbing out of the window. A quick glance over his shoulder showed him the window frame of his library hanging in mid-air, a sight that caused him no surprise or confusion.

Ignoring it for now, Harry walked forward.

His hands ran through the rough, dry bushes as he walked past. The dirt crunched under his feet and the hot sun beat down on him. It came to him that he was in a place that could not be found anywhere in Britain. But that this was the home of his inner animal.

He searched the sky then, the bright blue almost blinding in the midday sun. One or two small white clouds floated high overhead, but no dark specs marred the sky, marking a bird flying past.

A quiet rustle of sound reached his ears and he looked around. The grass to his right wobbled slightly and, knowing that there was no wind, he sunk to his haunches to better see the animal hiding there.
He had no idea how long he waited. It could have been minutes, or even hours, before the animal felt safe enough to emerge.

A small tawny coloured head with a slight reddish tinge to it was the first to appear. Seeing no danger, the animal crept forward to stand in the centre of a patch of dirt.

It was small, its body maybe the length of his forearm, although its bushy tail was longer than that again. Its four small feet were darker, almost black in comparison to its dappled tawny body. Suddenly the animal stood up, balancing on its back feet and tail, allowing Harry to see its lighter underside. Its ears, small roundish things on the top of its head, twitched slightly before it lowered itself back down. It paused for another moment or two before it turned tail and disappeared back the way that it had come.

Feeling that his time here was over, Harry stood and began to retrace his steps.

When he returned to wakefulness, it was with a perplexed expression on his face.

“Well?” Sirius asked eagerly.

“I saw it,” Harry told him. “I’m not sure what it was, but I saw it.”

“Well that shall be your homework, Mister Potter,” Minerva told him. “Before you can change into your animal, you need to know it intimately. Everything from its body structure to how it moves, its primary habitat and diet. Also what predators your animal has, if any. Everything about it. And it sounds like the best place to start will be in identifying it.”

“Can you describe it, at least?” Sirius asked.

“Definitely a mammal,” Harry replied. “About this big,” here he held out his hands, “with a long bushy tail. It looked like it lived in a hot place; there was a lot of dirt and dry grass and bushes around.”

“I suggest that you start your search in the library. I made sure that there is an entire section of books on animals and if you can’t find it, then we can order in some more,” Minerva told him.

Harry nodded in acknowledgment before deciding to voice the thoughts that he’d been having since even before he’d seen his animal.

“You know, I really thought that I’d be a bird or something, considering how much I like to fly.”

“While that is true, I’d like to suggest that flying is not your primary attribute,” Minerva replied. “You’re a very protective person, Harry. You look out for your friends and family even before you’ll look after yourself – just look at what you are doing here by inviting your friends to join you away from the danger that you perceive Hogwarts to be and you’re even going further than that by letting us lease Potter Island so that even more of your friends can come somewhere you feel safer.”

“There’ll be other characteristics as well,” Sirius said. “And once you identify your animal and learn more about it, you’ll learn more about yourself as well.”

“I guess,” Harry replied uncertainly.

“All right, let’s get the next steps in the potion sorted out before bed,” Sirius said, rubbing his hands together.
“You know you guys don’t have to do this?” Harry tried again.

“And we’ve told you, Harry; we want to do this,” Hermione stated without even looking up from the book that she was perusing.

“Yeah, mate, this could be us in a year’s time and you know that you’ll be helping us,” Neville agreed.

With a sigh, Harry turned back to his own book. Neville did have a point. He was about a year in advance of the others in their quest to become animagi. Not that it was easy to tell, the mind arts were so fluid and personal that each individual journey was different.

Sirius had highlighted that fact by pointing out that, although he, Harry’s dad and Wormtail had all started the process at the same time, they’d all finished at vastly different points. The difference between Prongs (who finished first) and Wormtail who was the last to complete his transformation was apparently close to eight months.

There’d been a great deal of excitement and interest that morning when he’d told his friends that he’d taken the aminagus revealer potion the night before and had met his animal in a trance. Hermione, Daphne and Susan had all bombarded him with questions about what it was like. Even Luna and Neville had thrown in a question or two.

And when he’d revealed that he had no idea what his animal actually was, he’d been dragged straight to the library, a crowd surrounding him. He’d then been sat down and, while Hannah and Luna had gone to fetch all of the animal books in the library, he’d been made to retell every scrap of information that he could remember not only about what his animal looked like, but also about the environment that he’d met it in.

Tables had been pushed together to make one massive place where Harry, Hermione, Neville, Daphne, Susan, Hannah and Luna could all sit together, books galore in the middle for them to research through. Hermione had declared that none of them were moving until they’d identified Harry’s animal, a decision that was unanimously agreed upon by all of the others despite Harry’s protest.

“What about a squirrel?” Luna asked. “You could be a squirrel. It’d be nice to be a squirrel. They love chattering away and eating nuts. Although, I don’t think that they like macadamias, which is a pity; they’re very yummy.”

“I know what a squirrel looks like and it wasn’t that,” Harry replied.

“Look at this one!” Daphne declared a short time later, turning the book that she was looking at around for everyone to see.

“A kangaroo?” Hermione asked.

“I’m not a kangaroo,” Harry stated.

“Oh, I know you’re not,” Daphne replied. “Your description is nothing like it. But could you imagine being able to hop everywhere? Apparently, they can jump quite high.”

“Having a pouch would be quite handy,” Luna remarked.
There were some general murmurs of agreement at Luna’s statement, although Neville did look a bit dubiously at her, making Harry suspect that Neville didn’t know about kangaroos and other marsupials having pouches.

“What about this one, Harry? It looks like what you described,” Hannah asked, passing her book across the table.

Harry examined the picture closely.

“It’s close, but not quite right,” Harry told her.

Harry was about to pass the book back when Hermione’s hand stopped him. She took a moment to look at the picture before addressing him.

“Perhaps if you tell us the differences between this meerkat and your animal it’ll help us to identify what you are a bit quicker,” she suggested.

Harry looked at the meerkat once again, mentally comparing it to the image in his mind.

“Let’s see,” he mused. “The face here is a bit too elongated and the ears here a bit smaller and placed too far down the side of its head. And the tail is nowhere near bushy enough. It does look about the right size though, and the environment looks pretty close.”

“I wonder,” Hermione murmured before she snatched the book that Harry was looking at and flipping forward a dozen or so pages.

Harry watched her narrowed eyes rove over the page before she spun the book back around and showed it to him.

One look was enough.

“That’s it!” Harry exclaimed.

The picture was identical to what he’d seen in his vision the night before. Everything from the dappled tawny fur, the dark, almost black feet and the long bushy tail were perfect. His eyes flicked to the top of the page.

“You’re a mongoose!” Hermione declared at the same instant that he read the name.

Instantly the others raced around the table to crowd around Harry and Hermione.

“Oh, aren’t you cute!” Hannah squealed.

Harry swivelled to stare at the girl.

“Cute?” he asked incredulously.

She smiled at him, shrugged and pointed to the book. “Well, you will be when you look like that.”

Almost as though they all had the same thought at the exact same time, the five surrounding him rushed back to their seats and began flipping through books.

“This says that there’s thirty-four different species of mongoose,” Daphne said. “Any idea which one you are?”

“Here! I’ve got a double page spread of photos of different types of mongooses,” Susan said.
Harry immediately got up and rounded the table to look over her shoulder. It only took a couple of seconds for him to find the right one, although he did take extra time to examine the others, just in case.

“This one,” he said, pointing to the particular picture. “The Indian Gray Moongoose.”

“The Indian Gray Mongoose can be found in southern Asia, particularly in India, Pakistan, Nepal, Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. In North Indian languages (Hindi, Urdu, Punjabi, etc.) it is called Nevalaa,” Hermione read.

“This book says that they’re also called mongoose,” Neville said, “although that’s not as common.”

“Ooh, this sounds useful,” Hannah piped up. “The mongoose is immune to neurotoxins of snake venom.” She looked up, a curious expression on her face. “I’ve got no idea what neurotoxins are, but it sounds like a good thing.”

“It basically means that if a venomous snake bites Harry while he’s in his mongoose form, he won’t be affected,” Hermione stated.

“Mongoose can kill cobras!” Neville declared. “They have wickedly fast reflexes as well.”

“Well that makes sense,” Luna said. “Everyone knows how good Harry is on a broom at catching the snitch.”

“And you did kill that basilisk two years ago,” Susan added.

Harry’s eyebrows shot up as he reread the passage that about what mongooses like to eat. For now, he was completely ignoring the fact that they like to eat rats and scorpions and carrion and focusing on the good part.

“Listen to this,” he said. “Apparently mongooses like to eat eggs by standing on their back legs against a wall and throwing the egg between their legs until it breaks.”

“I think that Nerri won’t exactly be happy if you start going around throwing eggs at the walls,” Daphne deadpanned.

“Oh, but that sounds like fun,” Luna said sadly.

The stunned silence in the room lasted perhaps half a minute before descending into laughter.

-oOoOo-

Minerva strode into the receiving room of Potter Haven to find the two individuals that she’d been informed had arrived. They weren’t friends exactly, regardless of how well she knew them. Acquaintances would probably be the best term. But then, her interactions with the members of the Hogwarts’ Board of Governors was limited, at best.

“Good morning, Amos, Dilys,” she said. “Welcome to Diricawl Academy.”

“Good morning, Headmistress McGonagall,” Dilys Cloverfoot replied. “Thank you for agreeing to see us.”

“What can I do for you?” she asked.

“We’re here about the TriWizard Tournament; specifically, the Third Task,” Amos Diggory
replied.

“Indeed?” Minerva’s eyebrows rose. “I was under the impression that Albus was in charge of the arrangements for Hogwarts.”

“He was,” Dilys stated dryly. “However, after the fiasco that the Tournament has become, the Board of Governors has decided to step in for this Task.”

“I did read that the Second Task was … uninspiring for the spectators,” Minerva said carefully.

“Dead boring, I think you mean,” Amos snorted.

“And that is why we’re taking charge of this one,” Dilys said. “Not that the last Task was wholly Albus’ fault – most of the decisions were made long before the Goblet of Fire was even lit.”

“What is it that you want from me?” Minerva asked, quite sure that she already knew the answer.

“We are here to invite Durmstrang to the Third Task of the TriWizard Tournament,” Dilys said.

“My understanding is that there were no incidents at either the Yule Ball or the Second Task?” Minerva asked.

“No. Both events ran smoothly, despite how boring the Second Task was to watch,” Amos said.

“Knowing that does make me more inclined to agree,” Minerva said, before holding up one hand to stop the other two from commenting before she was done. “However, I would like to know more about this Third Task before I decide.”

“In a nutshell, the Champions will have to run through a maze filled with magical traps and creatures,” Dilys said. “The first one to find and touch the TriWizard Cup will be the winner of the Tournament.”

“That does sound as though it has the potential to be interesting to watch. What’s the catch?” Minerva asked.

Amos chuckled. “The ‘catch’, as you put it, is that the maze is inside a ten-foot high hedge.”

“And before you say anything, we know that that’ll make it nearly impossible for the spectators to see the action,” Dilys said. “That’s why we’ve taken over.”

“We’ve got the best enchanters in the country working on some special mirrors,” Amos said. “Basically, we’re going to have a charmed object following each of the Champions through the maze. That object will project an image of the Champions’ progress through the maze onto one of three giant mirrors that the spectators will be able to watch.”

Minerva frowned, trying to imagine what was being described.

“So it’ll be like watching a giant tele … television?” she mused.

Amos and Dilys looked at each other.

“We don’t know what that is,” Amos admitted.

Minerva waved it away. “A muggle device; nothing of importance. So far, what you’re describing sounds good. What about security?”
“A full complement of aurors has already been arranged,” Dilys replied. “And I believe that there will be both French and Bulgarian aurors there as well. You may, of course, bring extra if you wish.”

“Good,” Minerva nodded. “And assuming that we do come, is there any restrictions on how we arrive?”

“None whatsoever,” Dilys replied. “You can FLOO straight to Hogwarts if you wish or use that craft of yours again.”

Minerva nodded idly as she ran the idea through her mind. The fact that Albus wasn’t involved in running this Task was a massive plus in her book. The fact that the same security level that had ensured nothing had happened at either the Yule Ball or the Second Task was another good sign.

“I will tentatively say that Diricawl Academy will attend the Third Task,” Minerva said. “I will, of course, still need to discuss this with my staff before we can give a definitive answer.”

“The fact that you’re even considering it is good news, Minerva,” Amos smiled. “You’ve got no idea what a publicity nightmare this whole event has been. To be honest, I don’t know why we agreed to host it in the first place.”

“Thank you, Headmistress,” Dilys said. “We won’t take up any more of your time; we know how busy it is to run a school.”

“Yes, thank you, Minerva,” Amos agreed as he snatched up a handful of powder and prepared to throw it into the fireplace.

-oOoOo-

Harry tugged Hermione along to the very centre of the great enclosure that housed Diricawl’s myriad of magical creatures. The nifflers nosed out of their burrows at their passing and high pitched giggles could be heard from beneath a nearby bush where some gnomes were obviously hiding.

Reaching the small grassy patch that he’d been aiming for, he wrapped one arm around Hermione’s waist and pulled her tight against his side.

“Harry!” she protested.

Fortunately, with one of her arms now trapped behind him and the other still filled with books and a notebook, she was unable to do any more than that.

Giving her a lopsided grin, he leaned in and gave her a quick peck on the cheek.

“Dobby!” Harry called.

As had been prearranged, a picnic blanket and basket appeared in front of their feet.

“This doesn’t look like studying,” Hermione commented.

“There are more ways to study than one,” Harry countered, spreading the blanket out on the ground. “And there’s no reason why we can’t brush up on our Care of Magical Creatures in comfort.”

Harry expected a counter-argument, so was pleasantly surprised when Hermione instead sunk to
her knees on the blanket, depositing her books beside her.

“Fine. As long as you’re not going to be distracting,” she finally said. “We’ve got exams in less than a month and I want to do well.”

Harry looked up from where he was digging about in the basket.

“Hermione. You know as well as I do that you were ready for those exams before Christmas.”

“That doesn’t mean that I want to risk forgetting important information,” she stated.

Harry pulled out a box of crackers and a plate of five different cheeses as he listened to her.

“You’ve had the advantage of being here for nearly two years. In this subject, you even went out and gathered most of these animals yourself from their natural habitat.”

Harry shrugged. “I guess. But that still doesn’t mean that I know as much as you.”

From the depths of the basket, Hermione pulled out a pair of bottles of butterbeer.”

“I think that you’re selling yourself short,” she said. “You’re incredibly smart and you’ve had the advantage of learning here for two years. Me, I was stuck at Hogwarts with the likes of Binns and Snape.”

“Don’t forget that one of those years I was here alone, Hermione,” Harry said. “I didn’t have any teachers at all. I had to do an awful lot of trial and error and write the occasional letter and study twice as many books to stay up with the rest of you.”

“Then how is it that you got an O in your Muggle Studies OWL two years early, hmm? Or, for that matter, are ready to take your History of Magic OWL one year early?” Hermione asked.

“Hermione, a muggleborn student on their first day at Hogwarts could get an O in their Muggle Studies OWL, you know that,” Harry said, scooting closer to her after putting a piece of cheese on one of the crackers.

“And the History of Magic exam?” she persisted.

“You know that I’ve had to work my butt off to be ready for that now instead of next year,” he said, “and the only reason that you weren’t ready for it a year ago is because you had to put up with Binns for so long.”

“Hmm, maybe,” she allowed.

“Hermione, I think that you just have to admit that you’re smarter than me and any advantage that you think that I had was simply me getting away from bad teachers earlier than you. You don’t need to compete with me. There simply is no competition; I’ll never measure up to you,” Harry said.

Hermione’s head dropped and Harry could see her chewing her bottom lip in thought.

“I guess that you’re right,” she finally allowed. “It’s just that I’ve always been super competitive when it comes to academics. I’ve told you about my childhood, how I didn’t make friends easily. Being the best in school was something that I could do and I’m always going to want to be the best.”

Awwkk
Harry looked across to see one of the school’s two diricawls waddling towards them. Reaching into the basket, he dug out a bunch of grapes. Then, plucking one off, he tossed it to the approaching bird. The silly thing nearly tripped in its haste to intercept the treat. With a grin, Harry tossed a second grape a little away so that the diricawl would quickly waddle across the grass for it.

“Looks like our studying subjects are beginning to arrive,” Harry remarked.

A flash of colour flittered past as a swirl of flutterbys passed by.

“Looks like you’re right,” Hermione said. “Although I’m still not sure exactly how we’re supposed to be studying while having a picnic at the same time.”

“That’s easy,” Harry said, flopping down and wiggling about until he could comfortably place his head in Hermione’s lap. “We simply pick one of the animals that we can see and trade facts back and forth about it. Once we’ve said all we know, we pick another animal and repeat.”

Hermione frowned down at him. “I guess that that could work.”

“Of course it will,” Harry smiled lopsidedly. “I’ll go first. Over there on that tree. The silver-green lizard? That’s a moke. Tell me one fact about it.”

-Griselda Marchbanks was not amused. And if this was a joke, then somebody was going to pay.-

Griselda Marchbanks was not amused. And if this was a joke, then somebody was going to pay.

She’d been asked to come to Diricawl Academy of Magical Studies by its Headmistress, her old friend Minerva McGonagall, in order to conduct Ordinary Wizarding Level examinations in two disciplines. The problem, as far as Griselda was concerned, was that, as the Governor of the Wizarding Examination Authority, she was aware of the exact make-up of the school – how many students there were and in what year levels.

And none of them were OWL students.

Oh, there was Mister Potter, but he was a special case. He hadn’t been the first in her long, long history as an examiner to take their OWL before their fifth year, but he was the first to do it as a third year. Only the fact that there had been a legal reason in the first place had she allowed such a thing to take place.

And now she’d been summoned to the newest school in Britain, one where Mister Potter was a student, to conduct examinations. She suspected that he was the one who she would be examining in History of Magic. But if that was so, and considering that Mister Potter had already attained an Outstanding in Muggle Studies, she had to wonder why she’d been asked to prepare for examining that discipline as well.

“Madam Marchbanks. Thank you for coming.”

“Headmistress McGonagall,” she nodded, “nice to see you. Now, if you can tell me what I’m doing here? I don’t believe that you have any OWL level students.”

She may have said that last part as a statement, but there was a definite question buried in there as well.

Minerva indicated that they should walk as they talked.

“We have two students who we believe are ready to take their History of Magic OWL,” the
Headmistress said.

“Mister Potter and …?” Griselda asked.

“Miss Hermione Granger,” Minerva replied. “They both feel, and we, their teachers agree, that they have the knowledge to not only take the test but to pass at a very high level.”

“It’s rare but not unheard of,” Griselda mused. “And who am I to be testing in Muggle Studies?”

By this time, the two of them had ascended a staircase and turned a corner. Minerva gestured down the hall where a small cluster of students awaited them, presumably outside a classroom.

“This would be them,” Minerva stated.

Griselda looked over the group of five students. Her eyebrow rose at the sight of Mister Potter amongst the group. The fact that he was holding the hand of a girl with the bushiest hair that she’d ever seen answered the question that his appearance raised. There was another girl who looked to be a comparable age to Mister Potter and his partner. And then there were two smaller boys, one of whom looked to be a first year!

She stopped dead in the corridor, turning to Minerva with a scowl firmly etched on her face.

“If this is some sort of joke!” she spluttered. “A first year wanting to take an OWL examination …”

A snort of laughter from down the corridor spun her back around.

“Is something amusing, Mister Potter?” she asked.

“A little, Madam Marchbanks,” the boy replied.

“Please, enlighten me,” she instructed.

“My apologies, Madam,” Mister Potter said. “It’s just the fact that you don’t realise how easy the Muggle Studies OWL is to any of us muggleborn or muggle-raised students. The hardest part is adjusting our thinking to remember what life in the muggle world was like four or five decades ago.”

She stared hard at the boy who failed to whither under her glare.

“Are you implying that the Ordinary Wizarding Level examination for Muggle Studies is no longer relevant?” she asked.

“Maybe not irrelevant,” he answered carefully, “but definitely out of date. Not to mention far too easy for anyone brought up in that culture. If you want proof, then simply give the test to Hermione, Hannah, Colin and Dennis and when they all get an Outstanding, you’ll have all the proof you need.”

Griselda continued to stare at the boy before her eyes flicked to each of the other four standing with him. If what Mister Potter was saying was true, then the subject would need a complete overhaul. The fact that there had remained a mixture of grades from the students that completed the subject at Hogwarts belied Mister Potter’s assertion. But then, she’d never delved into exactly who was achieving what marks, what percentage were muggleborn and raised or were from wizarding families.
“We shall see,” she finally allowed.

Then, with a wave of her wand, she opened the door and ushered the students undertaking the test into the room.
Chapter 35

The half-circle of adults that jumped to their feet the second that Harry and Hermione walked into the large sitting room of Potter Haven froze the two teens as they entered. Harry’s eyes darted from Remus to Sirius to Minerva and finally to Tonks. All of them gave off an air of expectation, although there was some difference between Minerva’s slightly apprehensive look and Tonks’ glee that almost had the metamorph bouncing where she stood.

“Uh, hi,” Harry said.

“Hey, Pup,” Sirius replied.

“It there something going on?” Harry asked.

“Indeed, Mister Potter,” Minerva said, causing Harry’s eyebrows to rise at the use of his surname, something Minerva only did when she was feeling particularly formal or particularly nervous.

“You do know what date it is, don’t you?” Remus asked.

“May twenty-six,” Hermione answered promptly.

Harry’s mind darted about, trying to work out why the date was especially important. Suddenly, he had it.

“The potion! It’s been two months!” he exclaimed. “Is it ready?”

“The potion is ready,” Minerva confirmed. “The real question is: are you?”

“I think so,” Harry replied. “I’ve been learning everything that I could about mongooses for the past two months. I’ve even been studying that skeleton that Sirius got me so that I know exactly how its body works. I think that you could ask me just about anything about mongooses and I’d be able to tell you.”

“What do you think, Tonks?” Remus asked.

“Can’t fault his metamorph skills, they’re nearly as good as mine now,” she replied, eyeing her student carefully. “And we’ve done a few simple animal parts that have all worked fine.”

“And I believe that your human transfiguration is at an appropriate level,” Minerva added.

“Then I can take it? I can transform into a mongoose?” Harry asked excitedly.

“Yeah, Pup,” Sirius grinned. “We thought that we’d do it in here so that you’ve got a bit of extra room to move around.”

“Now,” Minerva said, her tone indicating that she was entering lecture mode. “This potion is only designed to transform you into your animagus form for a short period of time, usually about ten minutes. And it can only be taken once. It’s your job to concentrate on the transformation, both from human to animal and from animal to human. Not to mention to get a feel for how the animal moves and what its senses are like and what it feels like to have your body in that shape. After this, it’ll be wholly up to you to train your body to transform. The potion will aid your ability after this, but it cannot do the transformation for you.”

Harry nodded solemnly, taking in the information that he already knew.
“And it’ll take Harry at least three months before he can transform completely by himself?” Hermione clarified.

“Generally, it takes between three and six months,” Sirius nodded, “but with Harry’s metamorph skills, we’re betting on closer to the three month mark.”

“So, can I take it?” Harry asked eagerly.

“And I can stay, right?” Hermione asked. “To see you transform?”

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” Harry told her with a squeeze of her hand.

He crossed the room then and took the vial that Remus held out for him. The potion inside was a turquoise so bright that it was almost glowing.

As he stepped into the middle of the room where the various couches and chairs had been removed from, the others moved back, giving him room while also looking on intently. Harry looked at each of them in turn.

Sirius and Tonks were looking eager and expectant; Remus and Minerva shared a look of encouragement and nervousness; and Hermione didn’t seem to know exactly what to feel, at least that’s what Harry thought, judging by the myriad of emotions crossing her face. In the brief time that he looked at her, he saw love, worry, expectancy, interest, expectancy and a touch of envy.

“Well, here goes,” Harry said, lofting the potion in a kind of salute before upending it and downing it in one go.

Oddly enough for a magical potion, it didn’t taste half bad, very fruity and woody. Harry found himself annoyed at that fact – the one potion that tasted alright but he could only have it once.

Within seconds of the potion hitting his system, he felt his body begin to change. Knowing how vital this was, he concentrated hard on exactly what was happening to him.

It felt as though his bones were melting inside of him, a slight heat accompanying it. The world began to grow around him as he shrunk. A strange popping sensation erupted from just above his butt and he knew that his tail had just appeared. Looking down, he saw his arms shimmer as tawny fur appeared on his upper arms; dark, almost black fur on his hands and lower arms. His ears felt as though they decided to go for a wander, sliding up his head.

The strange weight distribution unbalanced him and he fell forward, landing on four paws. A final shiver swept his body before everything stilled.

It was dark where he was, trapped within the clothes that he had been wearing. Wiggling his nose and using a forepaw to help, he found a gap between his pants and shirt and stuck a head out.

The world around him looked completely different from this low to the ground. Thankfully though, it remained in colour, even if that colour appeared slightly washed out. Cautiously, he emerged from the clothes, stepping lightly across the rug before beginning to turn himself in a circle. His body felt long, as though it wouldn’t take much to tie himself into knots, especially when he added in his bushy tail as well.

And speaking of his tail, he couldn’t help but to chase it around in a circle before grabbing a hold of it with his front paws and running his claws through the thick fur.

“You’re gorgeous,” he heard Hermione murmur.
Looking across at her, Harry found that she’d sunk to her haunches, a look of awe on her face.

Feeling mischievous, he gambolled across to her before skipping into her lap and climbing up and around her body until he was draped across her neck. He brushed his head against her cheek eliciting a giggle from her when his light whiskers tickled her.

Then, knowing that his time was rapidly disappearing, he slipped back down to the ground and simply began running around the room. He slipped under couches before jumping up and running along their backs. From there he jumped back to the ground landing lightly and agilely.

Harry spent the next few minutes weaving in and out of the legs of the adults, a burbling laugh coming from his mongoose throat as Tonks tried to jump out of the way only to end up falling backwards firstly onto and then over the back of one of the couches.

And then he knew that his time was up: his body was beginning to warm up again. In a rush, he skittered behind a chair, concentrating on the feeling of his body returning to normal. Finally, it was done, leaving him panting.

A blanket dropped onto his naked body and he pulled it around him, smiling up at Sirius in thanks.

“Well done, Harry, well done indeed,” Remus congratulated.

“I would have to say that your distinguishing feature is your green eyes,” Minerva commented. “I’ve never seen an animal with that eye colour before. Something for you to keep in mind for when it comes time to register.”

“And don’t worry about the clothes thing, that takes a lot of practice to get, even after you learn to transform but you will learn to transform with them,” Sirius stated.

Harry’s arms were suddenly full of his bushy-haired girlfriend.

“Congratulations, Harry,” she whispered, “you’re so much closer to being an animagus, just like your dad.”

-oOoOo-

“It is done,” the blond-haired man announced as he dropped to one knee before his Lord’s chair in the old, dilapidated house that they were using as a base.

“Any problems, my slippery friend?” the Dark Lord asked, a warning clear in his tone.

“None, Master. I used the same method as I did in the Second Task. It was child’s play, then, to disillusion myself and to cast the spell,” he replied.

“You have done well,” the Dark Lord hissed. “Tonight. Tonight I reclaim my body and our true reign shall begin again.”

-oOoOo-

“Welcome one and all!” Ludo Bagman’s amplified voice rang out across the grounds of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. “Welcome ladies and gentlemen, friends, families, students and guests to the Third and Final Task in the TriWizard Tournament.

“Tonight will see our three Champions vie to be the winner, the one to hold aloft the TriWizard Cup, earning for themselves and their school the title of Champion of Champions and eternal
“Tonight’s challenge is a maze. The three Champions will each enter the maze at differing times, depending on their current standings. Within this maze are numerous traps, vast challenges, creatures galore and danger at every turn. The Task is simple enough: merely be the first to reach and touch the TriWizard Cup. Whoever does so will be the winner.

“The points currently stand thus: in first place, Cedric Diggory from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry with eighty-five points. In second place, Viktor Krum from The Durmstrang Institute with eighty points. And with sixty-six points, our final Champion, Fleur Delacour of Beauxbatons Institute of Magic.

“On my whistle …”

A short blast of the whistle signalled Cedric Diggory bursting from the starting line before disappearing into the maze, a small shiny metallic ball whizzing after him just above and behind his head.

Harry’s head immediately swivelled to the giant pieces of glass hanging in mid-air above the maze. Each one, he knew, would display the progress for one of the Champions. Everything that the Champions did and saw would be relayed by the tiny metal sphere and displayed on the corresponding piece of glass.

At the moment, two of them were showing Krum and Delacour waiting at the start of the maze for their turn to enter. The other showed an image that was bobbing and weaving along, following Cedric as he raced down the first path of the maze.

Around him, shouts of advice were called as Cedric reached a crossroads. The fact that the Champion couldn’t hear any of the advice didn’t seem to perturb the audience. As Cedric chose the left path, a second whistle blast sounded and the glass on the far left showed Viktor Krum entering the maze.

By the time that Cedric was approaching his first obstacle – a golden mist that stretched across the entire length of the path in front of him – Fleur had entered the maze.

Harry watched intrigued as Cedric waved his wand at the golden mist to no obvious effect. He glanced back, shrugged and promptly dove into the mist. As far as the audience could tell, nothing happened when he did. But obviously something was happening to the popular Champion for he instantly froze, his hands waving about as though he was trying to regain his balance. Tentatively, step by step, Cedric began to move forward, each foot sliding on the ground as he advanced.

Meanwhile, Fleur was the first to encounter one of the animals that Bagman had indicated was in the maze – this one a hippogryph. The majestic grey animal stood guarding the way that Fleur had chosen. Harry knew this one. He’d encountered a hippogryph before. And so, it seemed, had Fleur.

The silver-haired Champion bowed to the half-horse half-eagle, holding it until it returned her bow. Then, Fleur simply walked past, giving the hippogryph a pat on its neck as she did so.

When Krum suddenly sank from view, everyone gasped. It took the metal sphere swivelling downwards before the Bulgarian could be seen again. Harry goggled at the fact that half of Krum had disappeared into the ground. Luckily for the Bulgarian, though, his right arm and wand had remained above ground. A couple of spells later – freezing and blasting, judging by the colours and effects – a now hobbling Viktor Krum continued his journey through the maze.
Harry oohed, aahed, winced, shied and applauded with the rest of the crowd as the three Champions steadily made their way through the maze.

There were vines that whipped out from the hedge, attempting to ensnare the Champions; a host of mischievous blue pixies down one alleyway; a monstrous shelled thing with a dangerous stinger that shot fire from one end of it that all three Champions simply took one look at and ran from; a thick white fog that descended to obscure everything; more of the quicksand traps; and even some enchanted fire that sprang up either side of the Champions for them to get past.

It was Viktor who first found the Sphinx.

“You are very near your goal. The quickest way is past me,” the melodious voiced Sphinx told him.

At this, Viktor raised his wand as though he were about to attack. The Sphinx, though, ignored this.

“If you can guess my riddle I shall let you pass,” she continued. “Answer on your first guess and you shall pass peacefully. Remain silent and I shall allow you to walk away. Answer wrongly and I shall attack.”

“What is your riddle?” Viktor asked suspiciously.

“A house has four walls. All of the walls are facing south and a bear is circling the house. What colour is the bear?”

For an instant, Harry thought that Viktor was going to attack, instead, he sighed, lowered his wand and jogged back the way he’d come.

“That was deceptively easy,” Luna remarked. “She could learn something a bit harder from the Ravenclaw door knocker.”

Harry was about to ask what the answer was when he was interrupted by the sight of Fleur Delacour arriving in front of the Sphinx from a different direction than Viktor had arrived by.

“You are very near your goal. The quickest way is past me,” the Sphinx repeated her statement from before.

Fleur simply nodded.

“If you can guess my riddle I shall let you pass. Answer on your first guess and you shall pass peacefully. Remain silent and I shall allow you to walk away. Answer wrongly and I shall attack.”

“What is ze riddle?” Fleur asked.

“A frog jumped into a pot of cream and started treading. He soon felt something solid under his feet and was able to hope out of the pot. What did the frog feel under his feet?”

Fleur puzzled this one for close to five minutes before she, too, gave up and dashed back the way that she’d come.

“Oh, come on!” Hermione groused. “That’s two I could have answered.”

Once again Harry was prevented from asking the answer by the arrival of a Champion in front of the Sphinx who promptly went through her spiel once more.

“Right, give it to me,” Cedric said.
“Take away my first letter and I still sound the same. Take away my last letter and I still sound the same. Even take away my letter in the middle, I will still sound the same. I am a five letter word. What am I?”

Cedric paced around the clearing, muttering to himself in a voice so low that the sphere couldn’t pick it up to transmit it to the audience. Every now and again, he’d glance back at the Sphinx. Suddenly, though, he stopped, one hand raised. Slowly he turned to face the Sphinx.

“Are you ‘empty’?” he asked.

The Sphinx simply smiled broadly at him, got up, stretched her front legs and moved aside for him to pass by.

The audience shot to their feet as Cedric rounded the corner to his right and a bright shining plinth came into view, the TriWizard Cup sitting on top of it.

Cedric took off at a run to the yells and cheers of the crowd. He was barely ten metres from it, though, when a flash of something big, black and hairy bowled into him, sending him flying. The sphere swivelled about until it had not only Cedric but also an enormous spider – an acromantula, Harry thought – centred in its view.

Flashes of red and yellow lights erupted from Cedric’s wand driving the spider momentarily back. It was enough, though, as it allowed Cedric to take a diving lunge. His hand landed on top of the plinth and he pulled himself forward. Desperately, he swung his other hand up to grab hold of the Cup.

And promptly disappeared in a swirl of coloured light.

-oOoOo-

Once the TriWizard Tournament had been won, it took a surprisingly small amount of time to extradite the remaining two Champions from the maze.

Cornelius Fudge, Minister of Magic for Great Britain, was ecstatic. The Tournament might have started under a cloud with the fourth name coming out of the Goblet of Fire. And then there was the fiasco that was the First Task, not to mention that all of the deaths that had come from it was a nightmare, not only for him personally, but also for the Ministry.

But the culprit of those two events had been identified and killed by the dragon, thus preventing the necessity of a trial and dragging the good name of the Ministry even further through the hippogriff dung.

But then they’d turned things around. The Yule Ball went off without a hitch, as did the Second Task (even if it was dead boring). And now they’d just experienced the thrill of the Third Task. It was simply icing on the cake that the overall winner was the home-grown hero: Cedric Diggory of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry.

Already, Cornelius could imagine how often Amos was going to be crowing about his son’s prowess all through the Ministry. And really, who could blame him. The win was not just a win for young Diggory, but for Hogwarts, the Ancient House of Diggory itself, and the Ministry.

Thus, Cornelius’ current course of action.

“As Minister of Magic, I really must insist, Dumbledore,” Cornelius was saying.
“But Cornelius, it really should be the Headmaster of the host school who presents the TriWizard Champion with their trophy and prize,” Dumbledore countered.

“No, no, no! I believe that I should be the one to do it. And Merlin help me, I will be the one to do it,” Cornelius stated, putting his metaphorical foot down.

Thankfully, Dumbledore conceded. Cornelius simply chose to ignore the old man’s exaggerated sigh, slight lowering and shaking of the head and the dimming of his ever-twinkling eyes.

Soon, the impromptu stage was prepared. The three Headmasters were seated in their spots on the far right side of the podium with their Champions between them and the podium itself. To the podium’s left, sat the various Ministry personnel who had worked so tirelessly to see this event take place.

As Minister of Magic and self-appointed prize giver, Cornelius was the first up to the podium, settling his trademark green bowler hat firmly on his head. He briefly considered giving a long-winded speech to open the presentation ceremony, but one look at the expectant crowd and he decided to reverse the proceedings: he would award the Diggory boy first and then give his prepared speech.

With a slight tap of his throat with his wand, he was prepared to speak to the hundreds of people filling the stands before him.

“Ladies and gentlemen, parents, students and distinguished guests,” he said, his amplified voice echoing around Hogwarts’ quidditch pitch. “I give you the TriWizard Tournament Champions! Fleur Delacour! Viktor Krum! Aaaand Ced-ric Dig-gory!”

At each name, the crowd roared its approval and Cornelius delighted in the positive, excited atmosphere.

“There are many people who we need to acknowledge tonight for the outstanding success that the TriWizard Tournament has been,” he continued. “And we will acknowledge them, but not just yet. Firstly, let’s get on to the exciting part – let’s crown our winner! We watched him battle a Swedish Short-Snout dragon. We saw him dive into a frozen lake to rescue a hostage held in the village of the merpeople. And tonight, we watched as he battled all kinds of challenges in the maze behind me.

“I give you, ladies and gentlemen, the Winner of the TriWizard Tournament, Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry’s Champion: Cedric Diggory!”

The applause and cheering and whistling that resounded throughout the stadium drowned out even Cornelius’ sonorous-charmed voice.

Diggory, for his part, stood from his seat, waving to the crowd, a massive smile nearly splitting his face. At Cornelius’ gesture, Diggory approached the podium.

“As the winner of the TriWizard Tournament, Mister Diggory, you have earnt yourself the TriWizard trophy,” Cornelius said, pausing in his speech to hand over the highly polished silver chalice that sparkled in the lights.

Diggory took the trophy and held it aloft, turning in a complete circle to show it off to the crowd.

“Also,” Cornelius said after a suitable length of time and the crowd had quietened somewhat and he had picked up the other half of the Champion’s prize, “you earn yourself one thousand galleons –”
The rest of Cornelius’ speech was abruptly cut off as he vanished from the grounds of Hogwarts in a swirl of multicoloured light.
Chapter 36

Lucius Malfoy crouched among the headstones of Little Hangleton Cemetery. His eyes and wand remained trained on the precise spot that the incoming portkey traveller would land. He had no doubt of this, after all, he _was_ the one who had made the portkey in the first place.

Now it was just a matter of waiting.

He knew roughly when the portkey would arrive, but not precisely. Thus why he’d made sure that the portkey was password activated, in this case, the phrase: ‘one thousand galleons’. A phrase that was sure to be said; after all, the bag of money held that precise amount, so, when it was being presented to the TriWizard Champion, the presenter would be sure to say exactly that phrase.

The fact that it was going to be Albus Dumbledore presenting said prize and thus being portkeyed away ensured that Lucius was on high alert: Dumbledore wasn’t one that you wanted to give even the slightest edge of advantage to.

As he waited, Lucius grouched silently to himself. This whole plan of The Dark Lord’s was extremely complex, far too complex in Lucius’ opinion, not that he’d ever even allowed himself to think such a thing anywhere in his master’s presence.

It hadn’t been so bad when they still had Barty Crouch Junior helping out. But the fact that he’d been caught in his own trap and thus killed by a dragon of all things hadn’t helped in the slightest. The only saving grace was the fact that Barty had died quickly, without the chance to expose their plans to the enemy.

Dumbledore, though. Dumbledore was the key. Everyone knew that Dumbledore was the only one that The Dark Lord was … wary of. Not afraid, never afraid, The Dark Lord was always sure to make sure that it was well known that he wasn’t afraid of anything or anyone.

And to take him now, to use him and kill him before The Dark Lord’s second rise, before the coming war even began, would almost ensure that they would be victorious. And Dumbledore was perfect for the coming ritual to raise the Master.

Oh, Dumbledore wasn’t The Dark Lord’s first choice for the ritual. No, Harry Potter had that honour, but Potter was too well protected. Dumbledore, though, Dumbledore was definitely a very close second choice.

A hint of light brought Lucius’ wand up a touch and a flurry of spells leaping forward. Six _stupefy_ in as many seconds were whirling on their way even before the figure had fully materialized from their portkey ride. Lucius made sure to send the first two directly on target, the next two to either side and the remaining two back on target again. There was no way that he was going to allow Dumbledore even the slightest chance to escape, evade or retaliate.

The blonde grinned to himself as he saw the first two spells slam into the figure as it materialized. The third and fourth, of course, missed, but the fifth hit. Only the fact that the man was on his way to the ground caused the last of the stunners to pass over his head. For good measure, Lucius sent another two stunners and an _incarcerous_ at the slumped body on the ground.

Arrogantly, he sauntered up to the now stunned and bound wizard. The sneer on his face, though, morphed into shock, from shock to confusion and then from confusion straight on to worry when he beheld the man lying at his feet.
Instead of the great Albus Dumbledore that he’d expected, the wizard that had fallen into their trap was none other than the Minister of Magic himself: Cornelius Fudge. Lucius’ eyes darted about the scene disbelievingly. But even if he wasn’t already incredibly familiar with the man himself, the green pinstriped robes and the distinctive bowler hat left no doubt. The fact that the man was still holding the bag of galleons told the story of how he’d arrived.

The only conclusion that Lucius could come up with was that the odious man had usurped Dumbledore’s right to present the TriWizard Champion with their winnings, insisting that he do it himself.

Well, it was his own fault and not one that Lucius could do anything about. Not that there was time for him to do anything even if the Master ordered. He’d been brewing the potion for nine months now and it was at a crucial stage – if it wasn’t completed tonight, within the next hour, even, it would be useless. Lucius tapped his chin with his finger, thinking hard before shrugging.

The ritual called for the ‘blood of the enemy’ and really, when it boiled right down to it, the vast majority of the wizarding population would qualify as an ‘enemy’. Cornelius Fudge was just going to have to do.

Lucius just hoped that he wouldn’t be the one to suffer too much for this unexpected development.

With an idle wave and flick of his wand, the bound (and now disarmed) wizard was levitated and floated behind Lucius to the designated spot. As soon as they reached the correct headstone, Lucius leant the Minister against the one bearing the name ‘Tom Riddle’ and added a second layer of ropes, these ones wrapping around both the unconscious man and the headstone itself.

Now came the next unpleasant part of the night – moving the cauldron into place. Unfortunately, as the potion that it contained was particularly susceptible to even the smallest amount of magic performed anywhere near it, magic that had the potential to undo the last nine months of work, magic could not be used to move it.

No, instead, Lucius had to move the man-sized cauldron from the top of the hill where it had been placed out of the way of any potential spells, down to where it needed to be.

It was a long half an hour later by the time that Lucius had finally succeeded in his task. By then, though, he was covered in sweat – it coated his back and under his arms, his hands were slick with it and beginning to blister, and it dripped heavily down his forehead and into his eyes. His long hair was plastered to his neck and obscured some of his vision with the way that it had fallen in front of his eyes. His clothes, too, were disgusting, a combination of sweat and dirt and mud.

“Lucius?”

Lucius spun around, his wand raised, only to find a now-awake Cornelius Fudge staring open-mouthed at him.

Not having any patience to deal with the whiny Minister of Magic, Lucius simply slashed his wand through the air, conjuring a gag for the odious little man.

Eyeing the hill with distaste, Lucius then turned his feet back onto the well-worn path.

At the top, he picked up not only the long, black robes that would be needed later, but the one for whom they would be used: his Master. The fact that his Master was currently in the form of a foul reddish-black humanoid, the size of an incredibly young child necessitated the Dark Lord being carried this way. Only the fact that Lucius had spent three-quarters of his life working hard to hide
his feelings from the world prevented him from gagging and dropping his Master in disgust.

“Hurry!” his Master’s high, cold voice commanded.

And so, with nary a splash, he allowed the current form of the Dark Lord to slide into the cauldron where it immediately slipped under the water. There was a small thunk as the body hit the very bottom of the cauldron.

Raising his wand, Lucius allowed his eyes to close and began the final part of the ritual. Soon, very very soon, his Master would be reborn again.

“Bone of the father, unknowingly given, you will renew your son!”

Immediately, the earth at his very feet cracked open and a slither of fine dust rose up, before falling softly into the cauldron. Lucius nodded as the surface of the potion hissed, sent sparks in all direction and turned a vivid, poisonous-looking blue.

Flicking his eyes towards the cauldron once again, Lucius steeled himself for the next part. This, he knew, was going to hurt.

The knife that he’d concealed in his robes was razor-sharp, having been coated with the correct spells to make it pass through any matter as easily as butter.

“Flesh of the servant,” he chanted, “willingly given, you will revive your Master.”

And then, before he could think any more on it, Lucius raised the dagger high, thrust his left hand out over the potion and swung the knife down with all of his might. A splash of potion flew high as his hand hit the liquid, and a small wave threatened to spill some of it over the cauldron’s lip.

Lucius, though, noticed none of this.

His piercing cry of agony rent the very air and the knife clattered to the ground as he clutched the stump of his arm to him. Blood spurted from arteries, coating his robes in hot, sticky fluid within seconds.

Fumbling in his pocket, Lucius pulled out his wand and cast a tourniquet spell over his arm, cutting the blood flow from spurts to a mere trickle. Dropping the wand, he thrust his hand back into his pocket and pulled out the blood replenishing potion that he’d made sure to acquire for just this moment. With shaky teeth, he pulled the cork and upended it, his breathing becoming not quite so ragged as the potion took effect.

Knowing that time was of the essence, Lucius dropped the now empty vial back into his pocket, leant down and retrieved his wand, only for it, too, to go into a pocket. Then he grabbed up the knife.

Cornelius Fudge twisted and turned in his bonds as Lucius approached. A panicked cry escaped him, the words inaudible through the gag. None of it halted Lucius’ progress towards the man that he’d once thought of as his most useful tool.

“Blood of the enemy,” Lucius intoned, staring right into Fudge’s eyes, “forcefully taken … you will resurrect your foe.”

With one quick slash, Fudge’s sleeve and flesh was cut. The knife was placed against the pooling blood and caught before Lucius carefully carried it back towards the cauldron. Thankfully, not a drop was spilt.
With a careful flick, Fudge’s blood, the blood of the Master’s enemy, was deposited into the burning red potion.

Instantly, the potion turned a blinding white, a white so bright that Lucius was forced to turn away or risk damage to his eyes. When he next turned back, the stump of his arm cradled against his blood-soaked chest, it was to see diamond-like sparks shooting in all directions.

And then the sparks stopped.

In their place was a billowing white cloud of steam erupting from the very centre of the cauldron. A dark shape appeared in the mist and Lucius looked wonderingly on it. The shape coalesced into that of a tall, skeletally thin man.

“Robe me!” the Dark Lord commanded and Lucius scurried to obey.

By the time that he’d done so, the mist had disappeared.

The ritual had gone perfectly.

His Master was reborn!

-oOoOo-

Lord Voldemort savoured the feeling of being in a body once again. Oh, he was in a body before the ritual, but that tiny, powerless shell didn’t really count. This, though, this was more like it.

He was tall with sinewy muscles. One hand rubbed over his face and his bald head. His nose, what there was of it, was more like two slits, not dissimilar to a snake, something that he could live with. Once, a long time ago, when he still retained the name of his muggle father, Lord Voldemort cared about his appearance. Indeed, he could have even been considered quite vain. But he quickly learnt that there were more important things than looks, like power.

Ritual after ritual had been performed through the long years of his first rise and each one had taken something of his good looks, replacing them with something even more precious: power. And this ritual was the most important one yet. This one returned him to a body, a body capable of performing powerful magic.

“My wand,” he commanded, holding out one hand towards the whimpering platinum-haired man on the ground.

Within seconds, he was lovingly caressing the yew wand once more. His eyes closed as he savoured the feeling of the wood between his fingers.

With a twirl and a flick, he fired off a powerful bombarda. As expected, the far-off tombstone that he’d aimed at exploded into a brilliant ball of shrapnel. But something felt … off.

Lord Voldemort peered down curiously at his wand. No, everything there seemed as perfect as ever, no blemishes or cracks of any kind. A second blasting curse obliterated a second tombstone with the same results: the explosion was as powerful as he expected and yet, at the same time, it wasn’t.

This time, Voldemort examined the magic within himself.

Delving deep within his mind, he flew through the well-known pathways until he came to the blood-red ball of magic at his very centre. What he found there made him, at least mentally
speaking, frown. Where he expected to find a boost in his magical core from the use of the enemy’s blood in the ritual that brought him back to life, he found a dull coppery … blob.

This was nothing like what he expected to find from using the muggle-loving fool’s magic. It should have been almost incandescent with the foreign magic that he now had at his disposal. Everything that he’d ever read about the ritual that was used stated that the more powerful the wizard used, the greater the enemy, the greater the power boost that he would gain. Even using Potter’s blood would have given him something more than … that.

Snapping his eyes open, Lord Voldemort turned to face the headstone of his long departed father and the man tied there. This man, though, was not Dumbledore. There were no flamboyant robes, only pinstriped green ones. And instead of the expected long white beard and hair, this man was clean-shaven and had thinning dark grey hair.

“Lucius,” he said, annoyance clear in his voice.

“Yes, Master,” Lucius replied.

“Where is Dumbledore?”

And though he’d asked the question lightly, the threat was clear.

“I don’t know, my Lord,” Lucius whimpered. “He was supposed to present the prize. I can only guess that Fudge decided to do it instead.”

“Crucio!” Lord Voldemort hissed, turning his wand on the man at his feet.

Lucius screamed into the night, his body arching with the torture curse before attempting to curl itself into a ball to escape. Finally, after a mere thirty seconds, Lord Voldemort allowed the curse to cease, leaving Lucius Malfoy a whimpering, crying mess at his feet.

Fudge, Lucius had called the bound man.

Voldemort strode closer to examine the man in the light of the moon and the flames under the cauldron. Yes, Fudge it was, his eyes told him. The Minister of Magic himself. This could be useful. Plans would, of course, have to be altered. But first …

“Why was Fudge used for the ritual, Lucius?” Lord Voldemort asked.

“Th-there … there w-wasn’t enou-enough time … to get … anyone e-else,” Lucius stuttered.

Voldemort considered that. No, no there wouldn’t have been. The timing of the ritual was extremely precise. Fudge would have been the only option available. The fact that it had worked at all was almost a miracle, and the small amount of boost in his magic that it gave him was still a boost. As much as he wanted to complain, Lord Voldemort knew that he couldn’t. Still, the forms had to be maintained.

“For your failures, Lucius,” Voldemort stated before, “crucio!”

Feeling merciful in the return to a body, Voldemort only held the torture curse on his follower for an additional twenty seconds.

“Your arm, Lucius,” Voldemort commanded the twitching man at his feet.

“Th-thank y-you, M-mast-master, th-thank you,” Lucius stuttered through the pain, holding up his
mutilated left arm.

With a feeling of satisfaction, Lord Voldemort examined the grisly mess of blood, bone, skin and tissue. Even with the tourniquet spell that he could detect on it, thick, dark blood seeped from the wound. Lifting his wand, Voldemort hovered it over the stump before bringing it down, bypassing the wound and pressing it hard against Lucius’ Dark Mark.

Instantly, the faded skull and snake motif darkened to black, the snake undulating around the arm.

“Now. Now we shall see,” Lord Voldemort said, letting the arm drop.

He strode away slightly until he was in the centre of a bare patch of ground and waited, both hands holding his wand, his head bowed.

And then they began to appear.

One by one, the cracks of apparition began. Sometimes a small group would appear together. As each one appeared, Lord Voldemort counted. He counted and compared what he knew and what he suspected. As they’d been trained to do, they moved about him, settling into the circle around their Lord, the sound of their cloaks sweeping across the ground.

Finally, when he was sure that no more would or could come, Lord Voldemort lifted his head and gazed at his followers, his Death Eaters. Slowly he turned in a complete circle until he’d seen them all.

As expected, they were nervous, as they should be. More than a few shifted uncertainly on their feet before stilling as his gaze rested upon them. Holes in the circle indicated those who had fallen or had been captured or had simply been too cowardly to return.

“Welcome, my Death Eaters,” Lord Voldemort said quietly. “Thirteen years … thirteen years since last we met. Yet you answer my call as though it was yesterday … we are still united under the Dark Mark, then! Or are we?”

He paced around the circle slowly, then, allowing his followers time to remember, remember their actions these past thirteen years. Remember and worry about those actions and how their Master would feel about them.

“I smell guilt,” he continued. “There is a stench of guilt upon the air. I see you all, whole and healthy, with your powers intact – such prompt appearances! – and I ask myself … why did this band of wizards never come to the aid of their Master, to whom they swore eternal loyalty?”

Not one replied, not that he had expected it. None even made a sound, save for the occasional pitiful whimpering sound that Lucius made as he cradled the stump of his hand from where he lay on the ground in his assigned place in the circle.

“And I answer myself,” he continued, “they must have believed me broken, they thought I was gone. I, the great Lord Voldemort, who they all knew had gone further than any before him in the quest for immortality. And so, they slipped back among the sheep of the Wizarding world, snug behind their veneer of respectability and nobility, never once thinking of their Master and the fact that he was waiting for them.”

He continued to pace even as he continued his monologue, enjoying the shudderings and shifting feet of those who would soon pay for their transgressions.

“Perhaps you thought that I was diminished, that I had become less than any of you, not to mention
that great muggle-loving fool Dumbledore and you thought yourself safe, too. But you all knew of my power, power that I have striven hard to attain, power that flows through these veins, ready to strike once again.

“And where shall I strike first, I wonder?”

Even as he voiced the question, the Death Eater in front of him launched himself to his knees, crawling unashamedly across the ground to reach his robes. But Lord Voldemort was not in such a forgiving mood. Instead, he simply raised his wand.

“Crucio!”

The screams of the man echoed around the clearing, screams that, if one listened closely enough, held the hints of a man begging for forgiveness.

Finally, Voldemort lifted his wand, leaving the tortured Death Eater gasping as he lay flat on the ground.

“Get up, Avery,” he commanded. “Stand up and join your brothers. You ask for forgiveness? But I promise you that I do not forgive. Nor do I forget. Thirteen long years … I want thirteen years’ worth of repayment before I will forgive you. You and all those who now stand beside you.

“Only one has begun paying that debt, haven’t you, Lucius?” Voldemort asked, turning his gaze upon the one-handed man crumpled on the ground.

“Lucius here did not return to me out of loyalty, though, but out of fear. Fear for what the rest of society would do to him. He knew that even in the form that I was in, that I was still more powerful than anyone else. And so Lucius has worked hard to follow my commands, commands that have resulted in my rebirth and the return of all of you to my side. He deserves the pain that he is in. He deserves it thirteen times over. But he has served me well this past year.

“And for that, Lucius, I will consent to giving you a reward,” Voldemort said. “Hold out your arm, Lucius.”

“Master, thank you, Master,” Lucius sobbed, lifting up the stump of his arm.

In one deft wand movement, Lord Voldemort removed the tourniquet spell. Then, before too much blood could spurt from the wound, he performed a complicated twisting motion with his wand, creating a lump of molten silver that spun in the air before it reshaped itself into the form of a hand. The hand then lowered onto the stump, binding and connecting in such a way as to replace what the wizard had cut off.

Voldemort turned away from the man gazing lovingly at the new hand to examine the other thirty-odd men surrounding him.

“You all have returned to me,” he said. “You have witnessed the pain that I can give when you fail and the mercies that I can bestow when you please me. You, Crabbe and Goyle, Macnair and Nott, you who show your respectable faces to society. I know of the fun that you had at the World Cup. Torturing muggles and sowing the seeds of fear into the crowd. You will be expected to do better this time. You will have your fun, I will make sure of that.

“Here, here is where the Lestranges should stand. But they are entombed in Azkaban. They, at least, were faithful. And they will be again. We shall release them and the others like them who never wavered. They shall soon stand amongst you once more, ready to do my bidding.
He moved on, then, eyeing each of his Death Eaters, making them cower before him, before he stopped once again, this time at the largest gap in the circle that surrounded him.

“And here we have six missing Death Eaters who should be with us. Five are dead, now, three of them in years’ past and two more just in this year, one of them my most loyal servant of all. And the last, the one too cowardly to return … he will pay, as will any who forsake my service.”

Looking through the gap where he was lamenting his lost followers, Lord Voldemort spied their most honoured guest.

“But there is one more here tonight, one who helped make this night … special. It wouldn’t do for us to ignore him, would it?”

As one, the Death Eaters around him turned to examine the man still tied to Tom Riddle Senior’s tombstone. Gasps were heard throughout the group as the man’s identity was recognised.

“Cornelius Fudge. Minister for Magic of Great Britain,” Lord Voldemort said slowly as he casually walked towards the bound man.

Behind him, Voldemort heard his Death Eaters closing ranks, nervous titters interspersed between them at the Minister’s predicament. Ignoring his followers, Voldemort focussed on the bound man.

He stopped four feet away, his head cocked to one side as he considered his options. There were so many wonderful ideas popping into his mind and, while none of them fitted into his original plans, they were simply too delicious to ignore.

With a wave of his wand, Lord Voldemort vanished the gag.

“Hello, Minister,” he drawled.

“You!” a visibly shaking Cornelius Fudge squeaked. “But … but it can’t be. It simply can’t be you! You can’t be back!”

“Oh, but I assure you, Minister, I have returned,” Lord Voldemort assured the man. “And my return shall herald in a time of great purging in Magical Britain. The Mudbloods shall die and the half-bloods and blood-traitors shall learn their place. And your precious Ministry, it shall bend to my will, doing as I command.”

A dark stain appeared on the front of the Minister’s robes, causing many of the Death Eaters watching to laugh at the man.

“But what shall I do with you?” Voldemort mused. “I could place you under my _imperious_ and watch as you did my bidding. That could be quite amusing. Of course, you would get to see it all, listen to my commands come from your very mouth and be helpless to do anything about it.”

He watched the man quake.

“But it would be easier to simply have one of my Death Eaters in charge instead of wasting a trickle of my magic controlling you,” Voldemort conceded, enjoying the fact that the Minister slumped in his ropes as he learnt that that wouldn’t be his fate.

“Your death, of course, is the other option,” he continued. “Yes, the death of the Minister of Magic would send the Ministry itself into a panic. Factions would arise as each tried to gain the political power of the top job. And in that panic, it would be much, much simpler to insert my own operatives into the Ministry.
“But how best to sow that panic?”

Voldemort glanced around the clearing and inspiration struck in the form of a discarded green bowler hat and bag lying in the moonlight. A simple summoning charm had both in his hands in moments.

“Place this in our coffers,” Voldemort told Lucius, handing the man the bag. “I’m certain that we can put one thousand galleons to much better use than a mere schoolboy could.”

His wand weaved an intricate pattern then as he enchanted the bowler ready for its momentous moment.

Finally finished performing his magic, Lord Voldemort stepped forward, righted the lime green bowler and placed it on the Minister’s head with exaggerated care. A simple sticking charm assured that it would remain in place. A second tap of the bowler with his wand prepared the next phase of his new plan.

Lord Voldemort stepped back and gave a mock bow to the Minister of Magic.

“Thank you, Minister, for you lovely assistance,” he said.

Then, standing back upright, he slashed his wand through the air, parallel with the man’s neck.

“Activate!” Lord Voldemort said and, before the severed head could even reach the ground, it disappeared in a multi-coloured flash of light.

-oOoOo-

Amelia Bones was having the worst night of her life, a night straight out of her nightmares.

Everything had been going so well. The Third Task of the TriWizard Tournament had been run successfully. Even the audience had enjoyed watching the three Champions racing through the maze using the enchanted balls and mirrors. There hadn’t been a single instance that had required one of her aurors or an auror from either of the other two countries.

And then, during the final celebrations, when the TriWizard Champion, Cedric Diggory, was being presented his prizes, the Minister for Magic had been whisked away by an unknown portkey.

Exactly how the pouch containing the one thousand galleon prize money had been turned into a portkey was still unknown. Not even the when was known. Even the fact that it had been activated by a pass-phrase was only being guessed at. In fact, it still wasn’t clear whether the Minister was even the target – the original schedule called for the Headmaster of the host school to be the one to present the prizes.

And that meant Dumbledore, not Fudge, was likely the target.

But the instant that Fudge had disappeared, every auror in the stadium had leapt into action. The stadium was locked down tight. No one was allowed either in or out. Every person was being checked and checked again, trying to find the culprit or at the very least, a clue that could lead to the culprit.

Not that Amelia was expecting that they’d find anything. She was of the opinion that the person responsible was long gone.

Exactly how much longer the investigation was likely to take was anyone’s guess. Probably until
every person had been individually checked for the second time.

Casting a quick *tempus* she saw that they’d already been at it for over an hour.

A flash of light in the corner of her eye whipped Amelia around and only her many years as an auror stopped her from vomiting everything in her stomach there and then.

Cornelius Fudge, or at least his head, had returned. Her investigator’s mind immediately processed that the decapitation had only happened within the last minute: thick spurts of blood were still pouring out of the severed neck.

Screams abounded around her drawing every eye to the spectacle. But before she could do anything about it, the head quivered from where it had rolled across the grass before righting itself.

And then the mouth opened and a voice that was not Fudge’s began to speak out of it, a voice that had been charmed with a *sonorous* to assure that everyone in the stadium could hear every word.

‘MAGICAL BRITAIN, REJOICE, YOUR LORD AND MASTER HAS RETURNED!

“YES, TONIGHT, IN A VERY SPECIAL RITUAL THAT YOUR MINISTER OF MAGIC WAS THE GUEST OF HONOUR AT, I, LORD VOLDEMORT, RETURNED TO BRITAIN.

“IN THE TIME THAT I HAVE BEEN AWAY, YOU HAVE BECOME LAX. YOU HAVE ALLOWED MUDBLEEDS TO FLOURISH. HALF-BLOODS AND PUREBLOODS HAVE LOST THEIR SIGHT OF THE OLD WAYS, OF OUR MOST IMPORTANT TRADITIONS. EVEN AN UPSTART SCHOOL HAS BEEN ALLOWED TO ESTABLISH ITSELF AND OUR CHILDREN HAVE LEFT THE HALLOWED HALLS OF HOGWARTS.

“THIS MUST STOP! THIS WILL STOP!

“NOW THAT I HAVE RETURNED, WIZARDING BRITAIN AND HER TRADITIONS WILL RISE TO PROMINENCE ONCE MORE AND ALL THOSE WHO OPPOSE THIS WILL FALL.

“I SPEAK ESPECIALLY TO YOU, MUDBLEEDS AND HALF-BLOODS STEEPED IN THE FILTHY MUGGLE WAYS: GIVE UP YOUR DELUSIONS, CAST YOURSELVES AT THE FEET OF YOUR BETTERS AND BEG FOR MERCY.

“And to those who champion the filth, those who dare to stand and defy your lord, I can only say this: prepare to be swept away in the coming purge.

“DUMBLEDORE, BONES, MOODY, LONGBOTTOM, POTTER, YOU AND YOUR ILK HAVE JUST ONE CHANCE. BOW BEFORE ME OR EXILE YOURSELVES. FAILURE TO DO SO WILL RESULT NOT ONLY IN YOUR DEATHS, BUT IN THE DEATHS OF EVERYONE THAT YOU HOLD DEAR, EVERY MEMBER OF YOUR FAMILY AND EACH INDIVIDUAL THAT YOU CALL ‘FRIEND’.

“FOR LORD VOLDEMORT HAS RETURNED AND MY RULE WILL BE UNDISPUTED!”
It was something like a protective guard that flanked the students of Diricawl Academy after their return to Potter Haven from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry and the horror that the Third Task of the TriWizard Tournament had turned into.

Sirius had parked the school’s hovercraft as close to the front door of the manor as possible and then, before any of the children were allowed to disembark, the adults had filed out, taking up positions between the hovercraft and the manor’s front door on both sides.

Harry, with Hermione’s hand firmly grasped in his, couldn’t help but quickstep his way past Sirius, Remus, Minerva, Augusta, Emma, Dan, Beth and Cyrus Greengrass who’d hitched a ride for the event. Glancing past the guard of adults, Harry could see Dobby and Jaxom standing facing outwards, adding their own level of protection.

“You know that this place is fully warded, don’t you?” Harry asked after the entire complement of adults, students and elves had trooped into the formal sitting room at the front of the manor.

“Wards can be breached,” Sirius stated flatly.

Harry opened his mouth to argue but Hermione squeezing his arm killed the protest before it began. The problem was that he knew how well not only the manor but the entire valley was warded. The goblins had done a good job of it and then Dobby had added his own house elf enchantments on top of it.

Their third house elf, Nerri, chose that moment to come trotting into the room, Slipshard hard on her heels.

“I came as soon as I heard,” Slipshard stated.

“How well is Potter Haven protected?” Minerva asked without preamble.

“Well enough,” Slipshard replied. “It’ll withstand a concerted attack for quite some time, depending, of course, on the number of attackers and how powerful they are.”

“Dobby added a layer of house elf enchantments when Dobby and Master Harry Sir first moved here,” Dobby added in his squeaky voice. “Nasty wizards won’t like Dobby’s enchantments.”

“Look, I know that what happened back at Hogwarts was bad, but surely we’re all overreacting a touch,” Emma said.

“I’m not so sure about that,” Beth said, taking a seat beside the other woman. “You don’t know what it was like during the last war with He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named and his Death Eaters.”

“War? You think that we’re headed for another war?” Dan asked.

“Not headed for,” Cyrus said seriously. “In. We’re now in another war.”

“That was a declaration of war if I’ve ever heard one,” Augusta agreed. “And the Wizengamot will be in turmoil about now. With Fudge dead and You-Know-Who back, the government will be in disarray. If they haven’t called an emergency session yet, they need to. I’d better head in to the Ministry. I don’t expect that I’ll be back any time soon.”
Then, with a fond pat on her grandson’s shoulder, Augusta strode from the room.

“Augusta’s right,” Cyrus stated, looking at Sirius. “We’d better get to the Wizengamot chambers as well.”

Lord Black frowned at him. “I’ll wait until the session’s called. I’d feel more useful being here.”

With a nod of understanding, Cyrus gave each of his daughters a brief hug before rushing from the room after the Regent Longbottom.

“Do you really think that we’re in danger here?” Dan asked, returning to the previous conversation. “We’re just a school.”

“A school that was referred to in Voldemort’s speech as something that shouldn’t be allowed to operate,” Remus replied. “You can bet that we’re going to be targeted.”

“And as strong as the wards here are, wards can always be broken,” Slipshard stated.

“Can we make the wards any stronger?” Emma asked.

Minerva beat Slipshard to the punch.

“Certainly,” she replied. “Wards can always be made stronger, but the question is: is that something that Diricawl needs to do? Especially when we have a ready-made alternative waiting for us.”

“I take it you mean Potter Island?” Harry asked.

At Minerva’s nod, Slipshard stroked his chin as he looked up in thought.

“I would say that the wards we’ve installed around the island are already comparatively stronger than the ones here. The lodestones were placed a number of months ago and have been charging from the nearby ley lines ever since. They should be at full strength within a month or two. In addition, we’ve layered the anti-portkey and anti-apparition wards so that there is only a single entry point. The anti-Dark Mark wards are also active. They’ll bounce anyone with the Mark a hundred miles away.”

“What about boats?” Dan asked. “Could someone just sail up to the island if they knew where it was?”

“In theory,” Slipshard replied with a feral grin on his face, “but I wouldn’t want to be them if they did. Apart from the muggle-repelling wards and the fact that the island’s unplottable and therefore cannot even be seen by magicals unless they’re within fifty feet of the shoreline, we’ve layered the only access point through the wards in a particular pattern that if you don’t know would lead to some serious … repercussions.”

“What about the buildings? Could we move into them right now if we had to?” Minerva asked.

“Sure,” Sirius shrugged. “The dwarves haven’t finished them all, but the main ones are ready: the student dorms, teacher accommodations and classrooms. The rest should be done within the next six weeks, I believe.”

“Are you thinking of moving the school to the island as soon as possible?” Dan asked. “I thought that we were going to wait until the term was over.”
“Yes, but the return of You-Know-Who changes everything,” Minerva replied. “Magical Britain is at war again. We’ve probably got a small window of time before You-Know-Who and his followers restart their terror campaign and I want to make sure that the children are protected as fully as possible before that happens.”

The mention of the Diricawl students seemed to make all of the adults in the room realize that they were having this serious conversation with said students still in the room with them.

“Right, you lot,” Remus said, clapping his hands together. “We’ve all had a long day with as much excitement as we need to have. Off to bed with you all, I think.”

Surprisingly, there wasn’t as much grumbling as the adults would have expected.

Harry, though, broke off from the tight-knit clump of students heading out of the room, motioning for Slipshard to follow him.

“Yes, Harry?” Slipshard asked, looking up at the boy.

“How secure is the valley?” he asked.

“As I said, the wards are strong, but could be broken with a concentrated attack,” Slipshard replied.

“How likely is that to happen?” Harry asked.

Slipshard paused before answering slowly.

“It is hard to tell. I heard Voldemort’s speech on the Wizarding radio. The fact that not only the school, but also you yourself were named in it as enemies make it almost certain that he will, at some point, target you and yours.”

Harry nodded. “That’s what I thought. Can you add an extra layer of wards around the manor?” He held up his hand then, to stop the goblin answering before he could fully outline what he was thinking. “I don’t mean the valley, but just the manor. Leave the valley’s wards in place and put up a second set inside the valley’s wards that just surround the manor itself.”

Slipshard paused in thought. “It could be done. It may take a little time, but it could be done.”

“Good,” Harry replied. “Do it. And while you’re at it, add extra wards on all of my properties – Hermione’s Book Nook and Beth’s apartment; the Peverell property; and all the rest of my businesses and properties. Whatever wards you think they’ll need.”

“It won’t come cheap,” Slipshard warned.

Harry waved that off. “Don’t care. Whatever it takes. Actually, add one more place to that list: the Grangers’ place in Crawley. Better move that one up the list a bit, too.”

“Certainly,” Slipshard said, taking out a piece of parchment and a quill and writing himself a note.

Movement on the main staircase that he could see from where he was standing caught Harry’s eye and he looked up. Hermione was there, watching him, her bottom lip caught between her teeth. He couldn’t help but smile at her.

If there was going to be a war – and all of the adults seemed to think that it wasn’t just inevitable, but that the first shot had just been fired – then Harry was going to make sure that he did everything that he could to protect the ones that he loved.
For now, though, for now the coming war could wait. Neither side was ready, at least, he *hoped* that the other side was as prepared as the good guys were. Either way, there was nothing more that he could do about it. Now, this moment, was all that counted.

Giving Slipshard a nod, Harry strode away.

As he reached Hermione, he reached out, grabbed her hand and pulled her tight to his body. Holding her, with the feel of her arms around him and the smell of her lavender shampoo in his nose, he allowed himself to relax slightly.

The war would come, and with it, no doubt, the pain, sorrow and despair that he’d read always accompanied war. But that was for tomorrow. It could wait.

Gently, Harry released Hermione and turned her towards the stairs, then, hand in hand, they headed up, leaving the worries of the future behind them.

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