Becoming Jean

Summary

A deadly spell goes awry and sends Hermione back to 1978, the seventh year of the Marauders. There she must adapt to a new life, under a new name, with new friends, but still the same old enemies. Rated M for violence and lemony situations.

Also posted with my other works on my FanFiction account.
Hermione lay on the floor, staring numbly at the richly embellished, high arched ceilings, thinking that if a little light shined through this dark, dark house she was imprisoned in; it might actually be quite beautiful. Bellatrix Lestrange had tired of her, and had moved on to interrogate the goblin Griphook, who was sitting in a chair with the dark haired witch towering over him, demanding to know if the sword of Godric Gryffindor that she held in her pale, bony hand, was the real one, and not a copy like Hermione had protested it to be.

Hermione dared not to move. Her arm burned. It burned and bled at the same time. The word 'Mudblood' that was carved into her upper arm by the knife Bellatrix was holding stood out in crimson contrast to her white skin. Small trickles of blood dripped from the letters and collected in small pools beside her arm. Yet, Hermione Granger's eyes moved around the room slowly, but intently, trying to keep her focus so she wouldn't pass out from the pain.

Bellatrix Lestrange was shouting at the goblin, waving her knife around in his face, sometimes cutting into it. The Malfoy family: Lucius, Narcissa, and Draco, were grouped together close to their deranged relative. Their eyes were mixed with fear, but at the same time excitement at the possibility of returning to the Dark Lord's good graces by the end of the night. The snatchers that had brought she and her companions here milled about the room, not really paying attention to the Death Eater's interrogations. She caught a glimpse of silver and realized with a jolt that Peter Pettigrew was among them. Hermione watched numbly as the ex-Marauder descended down a set of stairs into the cellars. Her heart ached, for her friends were down there, trapped. Her best friends Harry, and Ron…

Hermione brought her attention back to the room she was in. There was only one set of eyes that were on her as she subtly explored the room; the amber colored eyes of Fenrir Greyback. The werewolf had been watching her ever since Bellatrix had stopped torturing her, ever since he had first seen her, hungrily watching her. Hermione had remembered from Lupin that his wolf sire had developed an unusual taste for humans, even when not under the full moon. Hermione shuddered internally, and when her eyes met his, they quickly darted away, as if she had been the one who had been caught staring. Fenrir chuckled deep in his chest, some of his sharp, yellowing teeth slipping out over his lip.

Bellatrix had tired of the goblin, satisfied with his assessment that the sword was a fake. With Greyback's laugh she turned and looked down at the young witch. Her eyes reminded Hermione of Sirius' eyes when she thought he was a mad mass murderer, emotionless, merciless, and glowing with insanity. Bellatrix crossed her arms and leaned on one leg, cocking her hip out, the dagger that marked Hermione a mudblood dangling at the end of her fingers. One of Bellatrix's sleeves was turned up to the elbow, her left sleeve. The burning sensation in Hermione's arm died with the sweeping chill that passed over her body. She had called him. Lord Voldemort was coming.

"And I think," said Bellatrix turning her head towards Fenrir, "we can dispose, of the Mudblood. Greyback, take her if you want her."

It was as if someone had sounded a dinner bell. Fenrir began walking towards Hermione with
aggressive, predatory steps. Hermione staring up at him with horror filled eyes was trying to force her aching arm to raise her off the ground.

"NOOOOOOOOOOOO!"

Fenrir stopped, confused and annoyed, and looked over his shoulder. Hermione peered around him. Harry and Ron had somehow managed to arm themselves and break out of their confinements in the cellar and were now plowing there way though the snatchers and the Malfoy family to get to Hermione, her red-headed hero leading the charge with Harry flanking him.

Fenrir didn't pay attention to the two teenagers that were battling his compatriots for too long. He turned his head around and once again started moving towards Hermione with a hungry look in his eyes, with Hermione all the while slowly scooting along the marble floor away from him.

But Fenrir was to be denied again. Bellatrix suddenly was behind Hermione. The witch seized a fistful of Hermione's thick and curly hair and jerked her up onto her feet by it. Hermione's head was then forced upward as Belltrix's knife found its way to her throat and was poised at the ready to slit it open.

"STOP OR SHE DIES."

The whole room suddenly stopped moving, as if the action had been caught in a muggle photograph. Harry and Ron were hiding behind the pieces of furniture in the room, their brains working fast trying to figure out how to get to Hermione.

"Drop your wands," Bellatrix whispered threateningly, "Drop them, or we'll see exactly how filthy her blood is!" Hermione knew she would do it. She halfway expected her to do it anyways, even if Harry and Ron complied. There was a pause, and the two boys did not seem to be cooperating. "I said, drop them!" The knife in Bellatrix's hand tightened against Hermione's neck. Hermione hissed, her head hitching itself higher when she felt the blade cut into her skin.

"All right!" Hermione heard Harry say, and moments later she heard the clatter of their wands rattling across the floor.

Hermione's heart sank in despair. "Let her kill me," she thought, "Let her kill me so they can escape. Let me die so they can live." But Hermione knew that neither Ron nor Harry would abandon her. And, if their situations were reversed, she would be doing the same thing. She would fight tooth and nail to rescue either one of them. She would do anything for anyone to insure their safety.

Hermione was aware that there was a conversation going on around her, but her mind was not absorbing it at the time. Her mind was far too preoccupied on what was happening on the ceiling directly above she and Bellatrix. Hermione's mind was rationalizing the slightly bizarre and completely unforeseen thing she was witnessing, thinking that the loss of blood from her arm was causing her to see hallucinations because…there was a house elf on the chandelier. Its scrawny, beige little legs were wrapped around the chandelier's thick black chain, and it was silently and steadily loosening the massive piece of metal from its holdings on the ceiling.

The oval shaped crystals that decorated the arms of the chandelier shook, dancing in front of Hermione's eyes. The supports of the chandelier within the ceiling groaned, creating lumps in the ceiling and they strained under the additional weight. It reminded Hermione of a tooth being pulled. The groaning garnered Bellatrix's attention, and everyone looked up and the chandelier, which was swinging precariously on its last thread, the house elf still wrapped around its chain.
And then it dropped it an explosion of creamy colored, powdered ceiling bits. Bellatrix screamed and released Hermione, skittering backwards to safety. The chandelier dropped on Hermione and she was on the ground again, pinned between two of the iron wrought arms. At that moment Fenrir saw a window of opportunity and lunged for it, diving for Hermione in the chaos, his fangs completely bared as he lunged at her. Three bolts of red light shot out over the shattered remains of the chandelier. Harry, now armed with three wands in one hand, hit the werewolf squarely in the chest with all three of the spells. The blast Stunned Greyback well into next week and Hermione watched as he was thrown backwards hitting the wall with an impressive thud, and then crumpling to the floor.

Ron sprinted for Hermione and began prying her out of the metal wreckage. Hermione saw out of the corner that Harry was doing the same thing with Griphook, who still had an iron grip around the hilt of Gryffindor's sword. Ron with Hermione and Harry with Griphook began racing back down the room toward the house elf that was not figure of Hermione's imagination; and not just any house elf, but Dobby, who was staring defiantly with his tennis ball eyes at his old masters.

Hermione felt more than saw the curse that barely missed she and Ron, hitting the wall very close to Dobby. There was a crack, and Narcissa's wand flew from her hand into Dobby's who began twirling it around in his long fingers like it was a miniature baton.

"You dirty little monkey," bawled Bellatrix. "How dare you take a witch's wand, how dare you defy your masters?"

"Dobby has no master!" squealed the elf. "Dobby is a free elf, and Dobby has come to save Harry Potter and his friends!" If it had been any other time in any other place, Hermione would have set off fireworks, and conjured bright and colorful flags with S.P.E.W. emblazoned on them and waved them around like it was a national holiday. However, since it wasn't, she could only smile weakly at the brave little elf teetering on the edge of a coffee table a few feet in front of her.

Harry had over taken Ron and Hermione with Griphook and the sword, on account of the goblin being lighter and less injured. Hermione saw Harry grasp Dobby's hand. At the same time Harry gasped and a look of fear passed over his face. Hermione looked over her shoulder. Bellatrix had thrown her knife, and it was spiraling in steady circles towards Dobby and his boldly spoken words. In her shock, Hermione stumbled, causing Ron to misstep. Instead of grabbing Dobby's outstretched hand, Ron's fingers wrapped around the front of Dobby's grimy and dirty tea cozy. Hermione watched the dagger get closer and closer to their group. It was almost traveling in slow motion she was watching it so hard. Hermione also felt Dobby's magic start wrapping around her, pulling them all away from this place. Any second now and they would be gone, safe. Bellatrix's knife reached them the moment Hermione felt Dobby's magic depart tugging them along with him.

But they didn't leave, and Ron started screaming.

The blade had pierced Ron's hand, and had pierced it deep, causing him to let go of Dobby the moment he and the others had left, leaving Ron and Hermione stranded in the hands of their enemy. Ron's knees buckled and he fell to the floor, dragging Hermione down with him. Bellatrix alone approached, a look of sadistic glee on her face. Ron pulled the knife out of his hand and tossed it away from them. He then put his arm over Hermione's lap and shielded her with his upper body, staring up at the Death Eater with bravery and anger in his eyes.

But Bellatrix only laughed at him, pulling out her wand, which had been concealed the entire time. "I like doing it better this way, anyways," she said.

And the she did it. "Avada Kedavra!"
Hermione watched the green light burst from Bellatrix's wand and pass into Ron. She felt him shudder against her, and in about a second his head rolled back onto her shoulder and his glassy eyes stared up at her.

But then she felt something, a strange sensation in her stomach. She looked down and saw a tiny sliver of green light, no wider than a thumbnail, pass around Ron. It made its way through the gap made by Ron's body and his arm that was still thrown over Hermione's lap, and entered her.

Hermione's grip on Ron loosened and she felt as if she were being pushed backwards, not in a forceful way, but as if someone was gently laying her on her back. Her eyesight grew misty, and then it went black.
Seventies Shock

Chapter 2: Seventies Shock

When Hermione came to she saw nothing but a dark and unbroken stretch of red. Violently, her body jerked upward to where she was sitting upright, her body still feeding off the adrenaline from her attack. Hearing nothing, she forced her shaking body to move off whatever she was sitting on, slipping off of it, and tumbling to the ground like a child who had not yet learned to walk. Her breath came out in short, harsh gasps as she lay on the hard, wooden floor. Hermione's eyes were wide with fear, rotating in a small circle inspecting her body. They soon landed on her shoulder, and her body froze, her brown eyes locking onto it and the memories that it triggered. She saw Ron's fiery head of hair lean limply back onto it, and his once laughing, lively eyes stare into hers with nothing left in them.

This mental image left Hermione shaking harder than she had been originally. Streams of salty water fell down her face, collecting on the front of her shirt. "Ron..." she whispered to herself, "oh God." Hermione's body began to jerk involuntarily, her breath increasing in speed to the point where she was hyperventilating. She gagged, and she tasted the acidic, grime of vomit that entered her mouth but slipped down her throat again as her stomach continued to heave.

Hermione turned her head and she saw a door tucked away in the corner of the room, with the paneled door pushed slightly ajar. Through the small opening she spied a mirror, and in the mirror's reflection she saw the corner of a sink. Hermione drug herself across the room on her hands and knees that were barely functioning, her arm still somewhat aching from Bellatrix's knife wound, and all the while the picture of her best friend and potential lover's dead face was pasted over her eyes.

Hermione crawled through the opening in the door and kicked it shut with her foot. She then moved past the sink, which was high above her head, and the mirror in which she saw it in, pulling herself up to the toilet which was tucked away in the corner of the tiny room and threw up what little was in her stomach. Hermione wretched two more times before she leaned her head up against the rim, wiping her messy mouth with the back of her hand. The hysteria had stopped, but the tears continued. Slowly, wearily, she lowered herself down and tucked herself into the contours of the porcelain bowl and cried a long and hard cry, not caring how long she did, or who would hear her.

When she at last calmed herself, Hermione uncurled her body and stood up, stretching her stiff back muscles as she did so, still sniffing every once and a while. She pushed down on the plunger and flushed away the mess that she made in the toilet. Hermione then walked slowly, still testing out the stability of her legs, over to the sink. She turned the water as hot as it could go and let the steam fill of the room, breathing it in deeply. She then turned the tap down to a bearable temperature and washed the remnants of the vomit off of her hands. Hermione then stuck both of her hands in the water, making a makeshift cup and splashed the water onto her face, cleaning away the filth, grime, and the salty tear streaks.

The now cleaner Hermione stared at the mirror until it finished unfogging itself. Only then did the young witch decide to leave the solitude and safety of the tiny bathroom. She rested her hand on the brass doorknob, and with a deep reassuring breath, she turned it open.

Hermione's inhaled breath came out quickly in a gasp, letting the door softly bang up against the wall it swung into. A look of shock and utter confusion came onto her face as she stared out from the bathroom into one of the girls dormitories in Gryffindor Tower. It was all there and accounted for: the five slender posted beds with an gentle twist at the top creating an elegant spiral, in contrast
to the boys dormitories filled with thick and masculine furniture, all decked out in red and gold, dressers and nightstands to accompany each of the beds, clean as a new penny and unadorned, showing signs that no student currently occupied them, the pewter heating stove in the center of the room that Hermione had on many occasions huddled up to on winter evenings, and four large stained glass windows, each framed with two wooden chairs, and dark red curtains that matched the trimmings on the bed. Hermione's jaw dropped open on sight, and she was slowly bringing it back to a close as she nervously inched out into the room. As she slowly crossed the room, over to the door that would exit it, Hermione wondered how on earth she could have possibly gotten, in what seemed like only a few moments, from the terrors of the Malfoy Manner to a place she considered home. She reached the door to leave the room, and with one last look over her shoulder, she departed from it.

Hermione descended the spiral staircase, creeping past the upmost care the five dormitories that she went by in case anyone was in there, until the stair case spat her out in the Gryffindor Common Room. Again, everything was exactly the same there. For a moment, Hermione allowed herself to feel the nostalgia that came with being an ex-student as she wandered around the room. Subconsciously, Hermione meandered over to the corner where a large, overstuffed, wing backed chair rested next to a small circular end table, where she did her homework. She touched the upholstery and remembered the countless nights that she sat between her stack of schoolbooks and her stack of parchment drilling out that night's assignment while Ron and Harry sat across from her, either doing their own homework, or planning out what would be there year long adventure.

The soft smile that had been blossoming on her face fell off and shattered on the floor. 'Harry,' she thought suddenly, 'Harry.' Did Harry and the others make it out ok? Were they safe? Did they risk their lives even more trying to come back and save she and Ron? But most of all, how was Harry coping with the death of his best friend without Hermione being there to comfort him and each other? Hermione felt tears prick at the corners of her eyes again, knowing that once again Harry had lost somebody that he cared for; this one more personal and more painful than all the others. Hermione also felt the pain of her reality twisting through her heart again at the thought that Ron was indeed gone from their lives forever.

Now disillusioned with the room, and sad once more, she turned to leave it walking over to the wall that hid the portrait hole and pushed on it. But the secret door wouldn't budge. Hermione pushed harder on it but it still didn't move. She huffed, confused and slightly annoyed, and leaned up against the wall to see if The Fat Lady was talking with her friend from another portrait, Violet the witch, and wasn't paying attention. Hermione heard though the thick, stone barrier the light snoring from the sleeping Fat Lady. Hermione began banging on the wall with her fist, eventually using two hands before the Fat Lady woke up with a startled sound and opened the door for her.

The Fat Lady yelped slightly at the sight the a dirty and bloodied eighteen year old wearing street clothes stumbling out of the collection of rooms she was guarding. "Who are you? Where did you come from? There weren't any Gryffindors that were staying over the holiday. Where are you going?" Hermione paid her no mind, not even hearing her words, and began teetering down the staircase trying to find someone who maybe could get in contact with Harry if he was somewhere safe. The Fat Lady watched her staggering, receding form and left her own portrait, jumping from frame to frame in search of the head of the house she was charged to protect.

Hermione did not make it very far with the pace that she was going, and was in one of the auxiliary corridors on the third floor when she heard the sharp sound of footsteps ringing down the hall before their owner appeared around the corner. Hermione had often seen that stern expression on Professor McGonagall's face. It was her 'You are so clever when your breaking the rules' face, the 'I'm so glad you all are mine but you give me headaches face.' She felt herself breaking down again as another onslaught of seven years' worth of memories stemmed from her teacher's face.
"Miss," said McGonagall, approaching the young woman who was now standing still and staring at her, "Miss, may I ask you why you are here—" But the professor did not get to finish her sentence, for Hermione, once she was in arm's length grabbed McGonagall in a fierce embrace and started sobbing on her shoulder.

"He's dead, professor," McGonagall heard though Hermione's tears, "Ron's dead, and Harry's all alone."

"Who's dead, dear," McGonagall asked gently, but with some urgency, "What has happened to you?"

Hermione pulled away from the Transfigurations professor and only slightly abated her crying. "Ron's dead." Hermione's crying stopped immediately at McGonagall's lack of a reaction and was more than a little annoyed. "Ron's dead," she said again.

"I am so terribly sorry to hear that," McGonagall responded robotically.

Hermione thought heatedly that the Deputy Headmistress did sound too terribly sorry to hear about it, but she kept her comment to herself out of her respect for the matronly old witch.

McGonagall then looked down and her eyes widened considerably, clapping her hands over her mouth. "Oh my dear, you're bleeding!"

Hermione looked down and saw that her arm once again had a lot of blood on it due to her knife wound. It ran down her arm and was collecting in her palm. Some of it was dripping from her fingers onto the floor.

McGonagall sprang into action, wheeling Hermione around and taking both of Hermione's shoulders in her hands. "I am taking you to the Hospital Wing right now."

"You don't have to take me there, Professor McGonagall," Hermione protested as the professor began to steer her, "it's not like I haven't been to the Hospital Wing before." Professor McGonagall didn't say anything after that, and Hermione noticed that she was trying to walk faster without Hermione knowing it.

McGonagall brought Hermione to the Hospital Wing and bid her to sit on one of the copper beds near the middle of the room, which she did, glad to be off her feet. McGonagall went to the back of the Hospital Wing to fetch the nurse from her office. Ironically, Hermione thought that this was one of the most cheerful rooms in the entire castle. It had large windows on one side from floor to ceiling with a nice view of the Quidditch pitch. Hermione imagined Madam Pomfrey pulling out her office chair and watching the match though a pair of binoculars, wondering which player will be brought to her at the end of it. There were light green blankets on the copper beds, with crisp white linens folded underneath. And there were always bright and happy get well cards, small collections of wizarding candy, and clusters of flowers in vases sprinkled around the room for patients from various well wishers.

Hermione's thoughts were broken when Professor McGonagall walked though her line of vision. The elderly witch turned around and looked at Hermione. "I will be back soon. Madam Pomfrey will take care of you now," and she left the ward in a shimmer of emerald green robes.

Madam Pomfrey walked out of her office a few moments later carrying a silver tray bearing several small vials of potions and her wand. She sat down next to Hermione and the younger witch allowed the nurse to look at her arm. Madam Pomfrey set to cleaning off the excess blood and soon uncovered the hateful word that was carved into Hermione's arm. "My dear," she said quietly,
holding Hermione's arm tenderly, "who did this to you?"

Hermione didn't answer. She had her head turned away from the nurse and was looking out the door McGonagall had left though, wondering why her old professor was acting the way she was.

Madam Pomfrey didn't leave much of a pause and continued working on Hermione's injury. She believed in the philosophy of not to ask to much on why a person was bleeding profusely while said person was bleeding profusely. The nurse selected one of the vials from her collection and applied it to the now clean wound saying it was for the clotting, even if she was talking to herself.

"Although," she continued, "these wounds were made by a cursed weapon. The scars will never truly go away." Madam Pomfrey brandished her wand and tapped Hermione's wrist. "Ferula." White bandages snaked out from the nurse's wand and mummified Hermione's arm from wrist to elbow. "There," said Madam Pomfrey, satisfied with her work. "Now why don't you take a moment and rest, dear. It looks like you need it."

Hermione was still silent and Madam Pomfrey equally as silent collected her things. The nurse was almost inside her office before Hermione finally spoke to her. "Thank you, Madam Pomfrey," she said looking over at her. The nurse smiled and nodded her head once before going back inside her office, closing the door quietly.

Hermione wanted to rest, but she did not want to sleep. She didn't want the images of Ron, Harry, Bellatrix, and Fenrir to creep into her unconscious mind. Instead, Hermione tucked her legs into her chest, rested her head on her arms, and her arms on her knees, letting her hair fall over all of it. She closed her eyes and enjoyed the peace and quiet that it brought.

Hermione must have been more tired than she realized, for even though she was awake, she was very slow in lifting her head in response to the voice that was calling to her from the end of the bed.

"Miss? Miss, are you awake?"

Hermione raised her head and stared into the twinkling blue eyes of a man that had been dead for nearly a year. Hermione screamed. Hermione screamed and was using her feet to push her backwards as far as the bed's headboard would allow, her finger pointing wildly at the face of Albus Dumbledore.

"You—You—You're—who are you?!"

"I am Professor Albus Dumbledore," the supposed to be dead wizard said, as if the two of them were discussing something as menial as the weather, "and you are safe here. This is Hogwarts—"

"I know this is Hogwarts!" Hermione snapped, her patience and her anxiety finally reaching a breaking point. "I've lived here for seven years!"

A look of surprise, concern, and confusion passed over Dumbledore's face, which, from Hermione's position, was terrifying. "Beg your pardon?" he said.

"I've lived here," Hermione repeated, emphasizing her words, "for seven years. I have gone to school here. You know me."

Dumbledore didn't say anything for a moment. He sat there at the end of the hospital bed and laced his long fingers together in front of his silvery beard and stared at them for a moment before looking up at Hermione.

"Who do you think I am?" he asked gently, but bluntly.
"I know your not Albus Dumbledore," Hermione answered, somewhat regaining her composure. Dumbledore nodded once. "And where do you think you are?"

"Well, if you aren't Professor Dumbledore, then this definitely isn't Hogwarts."

Dumbledore nodded again, and paused before his next question. "And when do you think you are?"

Hermione thought this was an odd question, but she answered it anyways. "January 13, 1998."

Dumbledore held out his longest pause yet, slowly unlacing his fingers. "Well," he said, but now without the candor he was using earlier, "I can assure you that I am Professor Albus Dumbledore, and this is indeed Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry," he paused, "but this is not January 13, 1997. This is January 13, 1978."

Hermione felt all the air in her body leave her. In a haze she stiffly turned her head and looked at the calendar that hung on Madam Pomfrey's office door. 1977 was written in red, in dainty, large, curly letters across the top. "Oh my God," she whispered, "Oh my God."

"Miss," said Dumbledore, "I would like you to try to remain as calm as possible. I have many resources, and I will use all of them to the best of my capability—" Dumbledore stopped talking when the young witch in front of him began to weep into her uninjured hand. "There, there, there," he said soothingly reaching out and touching her leg, "we'll get all this sorted out."

"It's not...all of this," sniffled Hermione tears still in her eyes, "it's just...I have been having a hard time accepting that he's dead," she paused and looked up at her professor, "and now he's not even born yet."

"Who's dead, dear," Dumbledore asked.

"Ron Weasley," she said, emotion thick in her voice, hoping in vain that saying his name would trigger something, anything.

"Tell me everything, but" Dumbledore said sharply holding his hand up, "only tell me what I need to know," he put his finger down on the rail of the footboard to emphasize his point, "for this exact moment. Do you understand?" Hermione nodded, remembering and understanding the laws of time that came with the Time Turner Professor Dumbledore and Professor McGonagall had given her during her third year, which was now many, many years ahead of her.

Hermione told Dumbledore everything. She told him that her name was Hermione Jean Granger. She told him that Death Eaters had captured her and that they had tortured her. She told him that Ron Weasley had attempted to rescue her and that he had died in the process. But most importantly, she told him that what brought her here was a sliver of the killing curse that had killed him.

Dumbledore listened to all of this without interrupting once; only nodding once or twice was the proof that he was listening. After she was finished he remained quiet for a while. "I do not suggest that you share this information lightly with anyone, Miss Granger, or any other information you might have." Hermione nodded. "You will also need an alias. Hermione is a beautiful name, but unique. Granger we may be able to pull off because you are muggle born. You will also need a safe place to stay while I research your predicament." After a moment Dumbledore clapped his hands together and stood up. "Miss Granger," he said, "feel free to leave the Hospital Wing as soon as you feel able. Also feel free to wander Hogwarts and Hogsmeade at your leisure. I will inform
Professor McGonagall that a seventh year Gryffindor named Jean Granger will be joining us for this term."

Dumbledore turned and began to leave the Hospital Wing leaving Hermione, now Jean, Granger sitting up in the bed. Dumbledore suddenly turned on his heel when he reached the door as if he had forgotten something. "Oh and Miss Granger," he said, "enjoying having Gryffindor Tower all to yourself until the students come back for the start of term beginning next week. He winked at her. "Goodnight."
Jean Granger sat on the sill of the window in Gryffindor Tower, blankly looking down at the castles grounds. Her school clothes were pressed and neatly folded inside her chest of drawers and the set of robes she had on were crisp and starched from the newness of them. Her schoolbooks, which Professor McGonagall had ordered for her from Flourish and Blots, were orderly stacked beneath her bed. It was the end of the Christmas holiday, and today was the day the students would be returning to Hogwarts. From her perch, Jean watched the carriages in a neat and orderly line, file up to the castle gates and deposit their handful of students. In turn, she watched the small clusters meander their way up to the front gates and then disappear into the castle. Jean's eyes were straining from the intensity of her stare, wondering if from this distance she could spot the collection of people she dreaded, and was most anxious to meet: The Marauders.

Due to the circumstances, it took Jean a few days to figure out the significance of where and when she was, and whom she would be meeting then and now, but when she did it literally floored her with shock, excitement, and fear. Jean didn't know how to act around them. Obviously, she did not want to inadvertently reveal their futures to them, and if she did involve herself in their lives, how would she explain everything to them in her present time.

'Remus,' Jean reminded herself mentally, how would she explain everything to Remus when she got back. Jean's heart sank deep into her stomach when she thought about it. Somewhere, in that crowd of lively students, there was a group of friends at the beginning of their last term of their last year at Hogwarts; the beginning of what they think is the rest of their lives. They are innocently unaware that two of them would not survive the next ten years, leaving a lost and lonely orphan at the doorstep of his mother's sister, and a traitor roaming free and living comfortably, and one more would not survive the ten years after that, leaving only Remus, the last of a legacy. Jean felt like a black cloud, a foreboding shadow of their dark future.

Jean looked out the window for a few minutes longer, watching the sun set into the lake, and the last of the students skittering into the castle. She was dimly aware of the fact that she should be making her way down to the Great Hall for the start of term feast. Jean wondered if she should pluck up the courage and go down to meet her new classmates, or wait until someone happened to stumble upon her.

Almost as soon and Jean thought of it, she was given an answer. There was a light knock on the door that led to the tower's spiral staircase. After a beat, a young woman around Jean's age with the golden Head Girl Badge pinned onto her sweater stepped into the room. The woman smiled a bright, warm smile. "Are you Jean Granger? Professor McGonagall said that we had a transfer from another school who is a Gryffindor. When I couldn't find you in the Common Room, I thought you might be up here." She stuck out her hand. "I'm Lily Evans."

Jean had no idea what kind of expression was on her face, but she hoped it was a remotely amiable one as she took Lily's hand and gave it one or two shakes. "Hi," Jean managed to force out of her mouth. Lily Evans was the most beautiful girl Jean had ever seen. She had thick, dark red hair, which fell in loose waves down to just beneath her shoulder blades. She was tall, thin, and nicely dressed. Her long fingers tipped with perfectly painted nails were folded elegantly in front of her. But, without a doubt, her most striking feature was her eyes. Jean now understood why everyone who ever knew Lily was so enraptured by the similarity between her eyes and Harry's. No copy could be more accurate. Down to the exact shape and color they were alike.
Jean's face must have hidden the fact that she was gawking, for Lily didn't seem to notice. "The feast will be starting in a few minutes. Would you like to come down and join us? I'll introduce you if you like."

Jean nodded and stood up from the place she was sitting. "Yes, please."

Lily nodded before she turned and led Jean back down the spiraling staircase. She moved smoothly and gracefully down the stairs, her heels tapping lightly against the stone. Jean remembered during her fourth year, the night of the Yule Ball, gingerly inching her way down the stairs, one hand hitching up her dress to her knees, the other pressed firmly to the wall. Lily and Jean walked through the Common Room and passed through the portrait hole. When they were walking though the corridors Lily spoke to Jean again. "Have you been enjoying Hogwarts? Professor McGonagall said that you arrived early for term. How long have you been here?"

"Five days," responded Jean, "and yes, Hogwarts is wonderful. Professor Dumbledore spent the first day giving me a tour of it." In truth, Dumbledore had not given her a tour, but she did not want to explain how she knew how to get around Hogwarts so well without even a finger point for direction. Jean also didn't want to be hand led around the entire castle, one because it was time consuming, and also she didn't want to face her memories that were painted all over its walls.

"That was nice of him," said Lily pleasantly. "Well, I'm Head Girl this year, so if you need anything, just let me know."

"Thank you," said Jean smiling at her. Jean found another piece of Harry inside Lily, a piece that she loved most about Harry, his unfailing ability to be kind and considerate to strangers, whatever their station or background.

The pair walked a few more feet and then passed through the large open double doors of the Great Hall. Jean and Lily stood for a moment at the entrance staring at the spectacle. With a proud and beaming smile, Lily turned towards Jean. "Isn't it beautiful?" she asked.

"Yes," responded Jean softly, tears pricking the corners of her eyes. It had been two years since Jean had last seen a Hogwarts feast, the start of her sixth year. Dumbledore's death resulted in the cancellation of the end of term feast, and since she was with Ron and Harry searching for Voldemort's horcruxes, she missed what would have been her seventh year start of term feast. The four long tables and the staff table had already been magically laden with food and the golden plates, silverware, and goblets glimmered underneath it. The colorful banners of the four houses hung over their respective tables. In betwixt the flags floated hundreds of white lit candles underneath the sky, which the ceiling reflected, a clear night with twinkling stars.

"It's not real, the ceiling," said Lily pointing up at it, "it's just bewitched to look like the night sky. You can read about it in Hogwarts, A History."

Jean's face broke into the biggest grin ever.

Lily, encouraged by Jean's enthusiasm, took her arm and began to lead her though the throngs of people. "Come on, our table is over here." Lily led Jean over to the right center table, which lay underneath the crimson flags with their golden lion emblem. Lily continued to walk, with Jean behind her to the central area of the table. Sitting there were four boys, two dark headed ones on one side, and two light haired boys on the other side.

One dark haired boy, the one closest to them turned his head, his eyes lighting up when he saw Lily. The young man stood up in one swift motion and walked the few steps between the two girls and himself. "There you are," he said opening his arms, "we were wondering where you went."
Lily stepped into the young man's arms and he bent down and kissed her quickly on the lips. "You mean you were wondering, James," she said. Lily turned to Jean who was staring intently at the both of them. "I had just gone to collect our newest Gryffindor. This is Jean Granger, a transfer student."

James looked over Lily's shoulder and the stepped around her. Like Lily, James greeted Jean with a huge smile and stuck out his hand. "James Potter." James Potter was a head taller than Harry was, but, aside from the eyes, that was the only difference between him and the son she had left in the future. He was lanky, and lean, like he was an athlete, like Harry. Both of them had identical faces with round-rimmed glasses, and topped with uncontrollable jet black hair. James' hazel eyes were the only things that were only his. They were warm and lively and welcoming.

Jean felt her heart breaking, seeing so much of Harry inside the father he never met, but she forced it back together and took James outreached hand. "It's nice to meet you."

James and Lily brought Jean over to the table. Lily sat by Jean, and James sat by Lily. As they sat down James introduced his companions, pointing to them in turn. "This is Sirius Black, Remus Lupin, and Peter Pettigrew." There was a small chorus of hellos and waving of hands as Jean smiled at them.

Jean filled her plate with honey ham, mashed potatoes, creamed corn, and sweet peas and looked around the table as everyone tucked into their food. James had slung his arm over Lily's shoulders and Lily leaned a little bit into his neck. They looked so peaceful, so happy, so normal. Jean suddenly felt that she would give anything in the world to disappear right at that moment, not because she desperately wanted to be back in her own time with her own friends, but because this sight was not hers to see. If anything, Jean wished the she and Harry could switch places, so he could be the one to see his parents, be with them, because he of all people deserved an unlooked for miracle. She didn't belong here with this group of people, Harry did, and just like that, Jean felt another weight add to the burden on her person.

Jean looked past Lily and James to the other boy that was on James' other side. Sirius was idly twirling his fork into something on his plate, looking bored and bemused at the same time. Sirius in his youth, brought to light for Jean how much he had suffered and changed during his stint in Azkaban. The Sirius that she knew was gaunt, and haunted. Even when she knew he was innocent, his rugged exterior, short temper, and long bouts of brooding, did make Jean somewhat cautious of him. He was like an animal that belonged to an abusive owner; even when put in a proper environment, he still carried his past, and everyone could see it. The Sirius in front of her was young and whole. He had a handsome face, and his grey eyes were sharp and bright. Sirius had long dark hair that fell to his shoulders in loose waves that shined like polished ebony. Sirius paused, and looked up, catching Jean's eyes. He winked and her and Jean swiftly looked away.

Sitting across from her, spooning soup into his mouth was Remus. He had less silver in his hair, but Jean could still see some shining in the candlelight in between his sandy colored hair that hung about his face. Remus already had lines on his face, but they were thinner, less pronounced and fewer than when Jean first met him. If one did not know his secret, one would say they were smile lines. Remus' eyes set in his youthful face were much more captivating than she remembered. In truth they were not truly amber, but brown with vibrant gold flecks concealed in the color of his eyes. Jean liked to think that this was Remus' wolf form, Moony, concealed within Remus' human body, staring out at the world, dormant, catching the eye of those who knew he was within. Remus looked up and saw Jean staring at him. He gave her a warm smile, and she returned it before looking down again, continuing to eat her dinner.

Jean was much more subtle and cautious when she looked at the last member of the dinning party
several minutes later. Peter sat at an angle to her, directly across from Sirius. A slight frown turned
down the corners of her lips. He would ruin all of the lives that were across from him. He would be
an accessory in the murder of James and Lily, and he would be a direct cause to Sirius'
imprisonment in Azkaban. Yet, Jean did not know what to make of the boy sitting with her. Peter
looked happy; his blues eyes were shining with overwhelming joy at having his group of friends
back together after the long holiday. He looked so harmless sitting there with his blonde hair and
rotund figure, chewing open mouthed, that Jean, if she had not seen his guilty person with her own
eyes, would not believe that he would become a Death Eater.

Jean turned her eyes back down to her own plate, and saw that she had eaten everything. She
placed her fork down on the plate and pushed it away from her. She had come full circle, what
would the others be thinking in regards to her.

James looked over at Jean who had been sitting quietly though the entire meal, while everyone else
had been chatting about her. He extended his fingers up off Lily's shoulder and brushed them up
against Jean's arm. She looked at him.

"So Jean," he began, "where are you from?"

Jean and Dumbledore had in detail discussed her alibi in the days before the students had returned
to Hogwarts, so she answered without hesitation. "America," she said, "Massachusetts."

This got everyone's attention.

"What school?" asked Remus.

"The Salem Witch Institute. It's a co-ed school despite the name. They just kept it because of the
area's history," answered Jean. Remus nodded, obviously fascinated.

"America? Funny," said Sirius looking around both James and Lily, "you don't sound American at
all."

Jean and Dumbledore had even thought of a response for that. "Well," said Jean, "technically I was
born in Britain, but my parents moved to America before I was even a year old. They met in school
and both decided that America had better opportunities for them. So both of them moved and
continued their studies over there. They are both dentists, you see."

"Oh, so they're muggles?" Jean looked up very quickly. Peter; out of all the people sitting there, it
had to be Peter.

Jean forced a smile. "Yes," she said her tone somewhat stiff, "they are muggles."

There was a pause, a short one, barely noticeable, but there, until Lily spoke, clearing away the
awkwardness that Peter had inadvertently created. "That's wonderful," she said, leaning around
James to look at Jean. "It will be so nice to have someone else that grew up in a non-magical
background." Lily laughed lightly, "I swear," she said, "sometimes it's like you're talking to aliens
with this bunch about something as simple as a microwave." Lily gestured to the group of boys
surrounding she and Jean. The others laughed at Lily's comment, and so did Jean, remembering
how she and Harry had tried to explain something so trivial for muggles to Ron. Just like that, the
tone returned to normal.

Before anything else could be said among them, Dumbledore stood up from his chair. Everyone
grew silent and turned towards him. "I hope," said Dumbledore, "that our bountiful feast will make
you sleep well tonight." He paused and smiled. Jean had so missed the twinkling in his eye. "Good
evening."

The students in the Great Hall began to disperse. Jean, Lily, James, Sirius, Remus, and Peter all walked to the double door entrance together before James and Lily stepped away from the group. "Well," said Lily, lightly taking James' arm. "James and I had better be going."

"Aren't you coming with us?" asked Jean.

"James and I have a meeting with the Headmaster and the Heads of Houses, as well as a meeting with the Prefects after that," said Lily.

"Besides," said James, interrupting Lily, "we don't stay in Gryffindor Tower anymore. We stay in the dormitory for the Head Boy and Head Girl."

Sirius, Remus, and Peter, laughed and even Jean managed a snicker as Lily flushed, clearly embarrassed, and turned her head sharply up to look at James with a fierce look. "How convenient," Jean said.

Lily let out a bemused exasperated sigh before slapping James lightly on his chest. "You will be staying in my old bed in the seventh year dormitory, Jean," said Lily, "but don't worry, you will love my old roommates."

"And James leaves his old roommates without so much as a scrap, and goes to pursue much more pleasurable company." Both Lily and Remus rolled their eyes and looked at Sirius.

James rolled his eyes too, before glancing at his watch and tugging on Lily's arm. "Come on Lils," he said gently, "everyone will be waiting for us."

"Ok," said Lily. Lily stepped forward and pulled Jean into a hug. Jean stiffened for a moment before allowing her arms to wrap around Lily, once again feeling that this was where Harry always should have been. "I'll see you in the morning, Jean."

"Yeah," said Jean softly, "see you in the morning."

Lily stepped back to James. James nodded at Jean and Jean waved her hand once at him before he and Lily, hand in hand, disappeared into the throngs of departing students.

"Well," said Remus after a moment, "I had better get going too."

"Oh," said Jean, turning to look at him, "Are you a prefect?"

Remus nodded, "Yeah, and our little staff meeting will be starting soon as well." He began stepping away from the remaining three as well. "I'll see you in a little while. Sirius, Peter, will you make sure she gets back to the House alright?"

Sirius nodded at Remus before he too disappeared into the chaos. Jean hid a smile. In the future Remus said he was always the parent of the group, looking out for the others, as they looked after him.

Sirius turned and looked at Jean who in turn looked up at him. "Well," he said pleasantly, "shall we?"

Jean nodded smiling at him. "Sure."

"Peter are you coming," shouted Sirius, looking over his shoulder to find his remaining companion.
Peter stood a few feet away from them, close to the door of the Great Hall. Sirius stepped away from Jean over to Peter. "What is it," he asked.

"Well," said Peter. Jean peered around Sirius and saw that the smaller blond haired boy was wringing his hands slightly, as if he was nervous. "You see, there is so much," Peter vaguely pointed back to the tables within the Hall still heavily laden with food. "And it will all be going to waste. And I thought—I"

Sirius laughed a little at Peter, who in turn began wringing his hands more. "You can't tell me that you're still hungry?"

Peter shook his head furiously back and forth. "No, no, I only meant…well…It might be nice if we had a little…a little snack storage in case we got, you know, hungry later on."

Sirius shook his head, a smile blossoming across his face. He clapped Peter on the shoulder. "Go on. We will see you in the Common Room."

Jean watched the entire exchange, fascinated. She knew that there would one day be a time that if these two were ever in a room together, one would be set on killing the other. Here, it was like Sirius was the older brother; caring, considerate, loving, and Peter looked up to him. The relationship was a little one-sided, but certainly not unhealthy, and definitely not the seeds of what she knew it would grow into.

Peter began walking quickly back into the Great Hall. He turned and waved, tripping slightly on his own feet at the did. "Bye," he called out.

Jean, again, gave him a small wave of her hand before Sirius walked back to her.

"You seem close," commented Jean as they began to walk. "All of you seem really close."

"Yeah," said Sirius making his way up the staircase beside Jean, "all of us have been close friends since first year."

"That's nice," said Jean smiling.

"How do you like Hogwarts so far?" asked Sirius.

"Oh, I love it," said Jean, "everything's wonderful here."

Sirius smiled widely and Jean was taken back a bit. It was rare for the Sirius she remembered to smile, truly smile. Harry was probably the only one that he had ever given them to. When Jean did see them, his hollow tortured face became whole again, somewhat like the pictures of him that Harry kept in his mother and father's photo album. But, Sirius never quite recaptured it. The Sirius before her had not been to Azkaban, not had his life torn from him. Seeing him smile, with his face still youthful and whole, made his face glow. His smile made his eyes shimmer, and made her breath short. Jean knew that Sirius was a handsome man when he was younger, but she had never seen him as a handsome man, until that moment.

The two of them were quiet for a moment, continuing to make their way to the Gryffindor House. Jean had asked the first question, and Sirius had asked the second, now it was Jean's turn again. Before she could say anything, or even had anything to say, they reached the portrait of the Fat Lady.

"Password?" she asked, as if she were already tired of asking that question to students and it was only the first day back.
"Polly woggle," replied Sirius. The ornate golden frame popped itself off the wall and rotated away from it, revealing the passage to the common room. Sirius held out his hand and waved it very gallantly. "Ladies first," he said.

Jean smiled and walked through the opening, Sirius following behind her. The room was bustling with students trimmed in scarlet. All of the seats were taken, as well as most of the space in the room, so Sirius and Jean walked over to an empty place over by the stairs that lead to the dormitories.

"How long have James and Lily been together," asked Jean when they finally stopped walking.

Sirius tilted his head sideways, his fingers twitching as he counted in his head. "Around five months," he said, "but James has been in love with Lily since he first laid eyes on her. Lily has just begun to realize it. But, that is why it looks so…natural, so broken in."

Jean was beaming, she was happy to see that James and Lily were so much in love, that in their lives they did achieve happiness during a peaceful time.

Sirius raised an eyebrow. "Why are you smiling?"

Jean turned down her smile, but did not take it off completely. "Just…just for the sake of smiling."

Before either of them could say anything more, Peter pushed his way through the crowd, searching for them. His arms were filled to the brim with food, sweets, and two glass flagons of pumpkin juice. Sirius rolled his eyes at Peter. "It seems like you have stocked our room for the entire term."

Peter shrugged his shoulders, giving a neither here nor there look. Sirius laughed lightly and with both of his hands he removed the pair of flagons from Peter's arms. Sirius passed one of the bottles to Jean and uncorked the other one. "To you," he said, toasting Jean, and he drank until the neck of the bottle was empty.

Sirius and Jean stood by the stairs and drank their bottles of pumpkin juice. Peter went upstairs with his snack supply; both of the remaining assuming the he retreated to deplete the amount without being looked upon. The bottles were empty and Sirius and Jean chatted idly about inconsequential things such as the weather and the color of the room until the second and last of their returning friends made their way over to them.

"You are hard people to find," said Remus, but even as he spoke the crowded room was beginning to empty as their fellow Gryffindors retired to their rooms. "Oh," said Remus, "before I forget." Remus reached into the pocket of his robes and produced a folded piece of paper, which he handed to Jean. "It's your time table for this term. Dumbledore gave it to McGonagall, who gave it to Lily, who gave it to me."

Jean took it and pocketed it. "I am a hard person to find," she commented, "thank you."

"You're welcome." The room was all but empty, a few students still tucked away in various corners, themselves included. "Come on Sirius," said Remus, "I'm tired. Let's go to bed."

"Alright," said Sirius pushing himself off the wall he was slouching on.

The three of them walked up the first half of the staircase, then paused when it divided to either the girls or boys dormitories.

"Goodnight, Jean," said Sirius.
"Goodnight," added Remus.

"Night," said Jean to both of them. Jean turned and walked up her staircase. Both boys stood on the landing and watched her. Jean turned around once and looked at them before she disappeared.

Jean slowly made her way up to her dormitory, her heart racing in her chest, a smile blooming across her face. It had been a long time since she had had a pleasant evening. Jean had good food, enjoyed good company, and she was going to bed without the worry of Death Eaters or Snatchers discovering she Ron, and Harry in their sleep. Her smile wilted somewhat when she thought of them. Jean had seen Ron survive wounds she, at the time, believed would've killed him, and yet he died in her arms without a scratch on him. And Harry, somewhere in the future Harry's battle was still going on. He was still fighting to save the world, and now he was alone in doing it. Jean hoped that Harry allowed himself to turn to the network of supporters that were behind him and let them assist him: like Neville, Luna, or Ginny. Jean's smile brightened at the thought of Ginny. Of all people, Ginny would help Harry, would heal him. She would make it her business to do whatever she could for him. Jean hoped that they would find each other again, and that they would go on together, even if it was to the end of the world. Jean steadied herself from her dismal thoughts, and bolstered herself with her happy thoughts. Dumbledore would get her back to her own time. And when he did, Jean would tell Harry everything, and it will give him strength in his despair. Jean decided to allow herself to enjoy this rare chance; Harry would thank her for it.

Motivated by her silent pep talk, Jean reached the door to her dormitory. Even with it closed, Jean could hear the high feminine chatter behind it. Jean breathed deeply and pushed it open. The circular room had four women in it, milling about doing their evening activities. All of them paused for a second when Jean entered.

The girl closest too the door let out a small shout of welcome and scurried over to Jean and pulled her in to the room. "Hi!" said the young woman, "You must be Jean Granger. Lily told me all about you. I'm Alice Prewett."

Jean received an electric shock from the unexpected surprise. Neville's mother was standing in front of her, so young, and so healthily, not at all like when she saw Mrs. Longbottom in St. Mungo's. Jean's smile about split her face, and she couldn't help but reach out and hug her. "I'm so glad to meet you," Jean said her voice gushing with emotion.

"Well, aren't you sweet," said Alice. Alice had a round face with happy brown eyes, just like Neville. Her long brown hair was pulled up in about twenty pink foam rollers. Alice took her by the arm and led her across the room introducing as they went. "This is Dorcas Meadowes."

The woman with light brown hair wearing a purple nightie was bending over her chair, laying out her clothes for the next day. She looked over her shoulder. "Hello," she said.

Alice went on. "And this is Marlene McKinnion." She was wearing a pink and white fuzzy bathrobe and sippers towelling out her curly blonde hair. She smiled and waved hello by using her reflection in the mirror. Jean winced as she smiled and waved back, remembering that Moody had once mentioned that both of these women had died during Voldemort's first rise to power.

"And finally," said Alice, "this is Mary Harper." Jean breathed a sigh of relief, not knowing this person, or knowing of this person, and therefore not having any knowledge of what dark future this girl may or may not have. She was already sitting on her bed reading a book by the light of her wand. Mary looked up and nodded. "Hi," she said, "it's nice to meet you."

Jean said hello back. Jean searched the freckles on Mary's face. There was something familiar about her, but she couldn't quite place it.
"And here we have your bed," said Alice, "but you already knew that. Look at you; you've got everything neat as a pin. It's almost that Lily sent us a copy of herself." Alice and Jean laughed. Jean was glad she was so like Lily, even though she had just met her, being compared with Lily was the nicest thing anyone could do for her. Alice went back over to her bed as Jean began getting ready for bed.

The room quieted down quickly after that, and soon Jean clambered up into her four-poster bed and drew the crimson curtains shut. Jean sighed pulling up the sheets and covers. She always felt safe inside this bed with the curtains pulled around her. Nothing could get in. Jean had had an eventful day and soon felt her eyelids longing to be together. As Jean drifted off into sleep she was somewhat aware of Alice and Mary talking.

"James and Lily look so happy together," said Mary.

"Yes," said Alice, "I wonder how Sirius feels about being placed second to Lily."

Both of them laughed. "He's gotten real flirty with everyone lately. I saw him last term with lots of girls, but he never was with them for long."

Only Alice laughed that time. "Looks like he's getting restless. With James not around he doesn't know what to do with his time. We all had better watch out..."
Jean awoke the next morning with the crisp, winter sun shining through her bedroom window. Her eyes snapped open; her body already awake. Jean lay there for a moment, hidden in her crimson bed curtains, their comfort and seclusion spanning the decades, lying motionless under her sheets. Jean sighed softly. She would be beginning the first day of her classes, another milestone for Jean is this time, and potentially a painful one at that. She would be wandering the halls of Hogwarts in a time before she was even born. She would be reliving memories that hadn't yet occurred; yet knowing each inevitable outcome. Jean heaved a great sigh. Part of her had hoped Dumbledore would have provided a solution to her predicament and she would have slipped back into her own time. But, still part of her wanted to do this for Harry, to be able to give him a bit of happiness in the darkness that awaited the both of them in the future. Jean steeled herself; she had endured harder things before, she assumed, and she could play the part she was meant to play.

Jean parted her curtains slightly and saw that the other four occupants of the room were still slumbering soundly. Slightly confused, she looked over at her watch, which rested on the bedside table and saw that she had awoken a full hour and forty-five minutes before she needed to. Jean didn't mind though, liking the idea of some early morning peace. She unwrapped herself from her bed sheet and pressed her feet down onto the cold, stone floor. Jean skittered as quietly as she could over the floor and slipped into the bathroom. After undressing, she stepped into the shower, turning it to a low setting, so as not to disturb her fellow roommates, and to the hottest temperature it could go.

Jean stood under the stream of water, breathing in the heavy steam, feeling her hair tighten and tease itself in the humidity. She closed her eyes, catching a few more minutes of light sleep while standing. When Jean opened her eyes she was leaning up against the wall, her skin turning a light shade of pink from the heat. Jean shifted and turned her arm over. The mark Bellatrix had given her had scarred over, but it had done no more than that. In the heat of the water the word looked angry and red, and some of the lettering was swollen. Jean's belief grew stronger, as it did every time she looked at it. Bellatrix had cursed her knife and, like Harry with Umbridge's brand, would wear that ugly word on her arm for the rest of her life. With her other hand, Jean turned the water from hot to cold. Stepping out of the stream, Jean allowed her arm to be chilled, the letters returning to normal, looking more like a flesh toned tattoo before shutting the water off completely.

Jean wrapped herself in a towel and returned to the main room, hunkering down in the damp and fluffy material to insulate herself against the cold that awaited her. Jean's roommates were still sleeping, but every now and again, she heard one of them shift behind the curtains. Jean's clothes were laid out and neatly folded on the chair beside her bed, her shoes and socks underneath its spindly legs. Jean dressed quietly and quickly, her skin getting gooseflesh from the chill of the January morning. When she had finished, Jean examined herself in a mirror that was wedged in the corner of the room. She lightly pulled out the slight crinkles in her skirt and collar. This is what Jean missed the most about Hogwarts. She missed the normalcy of a school uniform. Jean tugged on a loose string hanging from the Gryffindor emblem stitched into her sweater until it broke. Satisfied, she turned and exited the room.

There was still about twenty minutes until the rest of the girls from the dormitories would awake, which meant it was a good two hours before before the first day of class began. Jean left Gryffindor Tower and walked slowly down to the Great Hall, treading softly because most of the portraits were still sleeping, their heads leaning up against their frames.
When Jean reached the Great Hall there was not a soul within it. The long tables were bare and scrubbed clean, the pale light of the morning collecting on their tops in silvery, rippled pools. Jean sat down at the Gryffindor table at the spot where the Marauders were sitting the previous night. After taking a seat, a single golden plate appeared in front of her, accompanied by a set of silverware and a cup. In front of that was a bowl of fruit filled to the brim and a platter of toast with a levitating tier of butter and jam. Jean sifted through the bowl and collected a fistful of plums. Carefully, she peeled off their skins and ate their fleshy insides, slowly enjoying the juices running over her tongue and down her fingers. She didn't take toast.

When Jean had finished her light meal she pushed her plate away. The plate and accessories vanished, leaving it bare and as freshly scrubbed as it was before. Jean sighed and looked over the room. Even completely empty, the Great Hall instilled within Jean a powerful sense of home and security. The entire castle did. Although it was not at the same level as Harry, Hogwarts was the only home in which she truly belonged. Her parents were supportive of her abilities, and encouraged her, but they couldn't understand everything that was in her world, both the wonder and the danger. That was the biggest reason Jean had in justifying erasing her parents memories. Jean felt her heart ache inside her chest when she thought of her parents. She hoped they were safe, and happy. She couldn't risk checking in on them even unknown to them. Jean's heart also ached again for Harry and Ron.

Jean eased herself out of her thoughts and looked at her watch. She had been sitting there longer than she realized. The castle was waking up and its inhabitants were beginning to make their way down to breakfast and onward to their lessons. Jean pushed herself away from her seat and began walking out of the Great Hall. She didn't want the rest of the student body to wander in and find the newest addition to their number sitting alone in the completely empty room.

Jean was slowly walking through the corridor watching the portraits stretch and open their sleepy eyes and the suits of arms shift from one foot to another until she heard the sound of voices getting louder and closer. Jean froze, recognizing the voices. They belonged to the Marauders, Lily, and her other roommates. They must have congregated somewhere to walk down to breakfast together. Jean suddenly felt cripplinglly nervous. Without thinking Jean quickly ducked into the nearest room she could find, which was a girls bathroom on her left. Jean turned her ear towards the door and listened to their idle chattering rise and fall as they walked down the hall. Jean felt her heart hammering in her chest as she sighed, closing her eyes, turning around and sinking into the door. Her doubts returned, her fear at the task she was expected to do, and all too soon her sadness. When Jean opened her eyes she realized with a jolt where she was. This was the bathroom in which she was cornered by the mountain troll that Halloween night, the night when Harry and Ron had saved her, the night they became the best of friends.

It was like a dam had burst inside Jean. Her knees buckled, and she sobbed against the door until her shoulders shook. "I can't do this. I can't do this…” she repeated over and over. After a while Jean managed to move, exiting the bathroom and wandering down the halls, her vision fuzzy through red-rimmed eyes, still swollen from saltwater. She would go to Dumbledore, she would go to the Ministry, a part of her would even to the Death Eaters if it could ensure her a route back to the people that she loved. Jean wiped her wet eyes and let out a watery whimper. "I just want to go home," she said to empty space.

Jean suddenly heard the distinct sound of stone grinding against stone. She sharply twisted her head and saw there was a large set of stone doors materializing out of the wall. Jean's jaw dropped slightly and her eyes widened as the features on the entrance to the Room of Requirement became more distinct and tangible. She hadn't realized where she was in that part of the castle. Jean pushed on the door and slipped though it.
The room this time was large and dark, massive columns lined both sides of the long hall that was created. As Jean walked deeper into the room, she more and more began to see an object at the end of the hall. Jean let out her breath when her eyes became adjusted to the dark, or perhaps it was the faint light that seemed to be emanating from the now visible Mirror of Erised.

It was just like Harry and Ron had described to her. The edging around the mirror was gold and ornate, its reflected script written elegantly at its head. The glass within was shining and Jean could feel the age of it, the deep magic that resided inside. At first, Jean saw her own reflection in the glass, but as she approached, her image slowly faded into the darkness and was replaced by two other shadowy figures, steadily sharpening the nearer she got.

Jean's face bloomed. "Ron," she whispered, "Harry."

The pair of them smiled in turn.

Jean reached out and touched the glass, letting her palm fall heavily onto it. She looked at each of them, her eyes sparkling with both happiness and held back tears. "I miss both of you so much." Jean looked over at Ron and she felt her heart break all over again. "Ron," she said. "I should have told you that I loved you a long time ago. I'm sorry that I went to the Yule Ball with Viktor. I only did it to make you jealous. And I'm sorry that I didn't talk to you during sixth year when you were dating Lavender, and that I went to Slughorn's party with Cormac to get back at you." Tears were falling down her face again, and her eyes saw Ron's death all over again. "I'm sorry for everything." Jean's face fell forward onto the mirror and it cut her even deeper to feel the cold and not Ron's warm and breathing chest underneath her cheek.

But then the side of her face got warmer, as if there was something living pressed against her cheek. Jean felt a sensation, as if someone's fingers were touching her arm. She looked over her shoulder and then back at the reflection of Ron and herself. The image of Ron's hands were moving, stroking the forearms of Jean's reflection. Jean smiled a little bit and looked up into Ron's face. In his eyes, it looked like that everything Jean had just said he already knew. Jean brought her head back down onto Ron's chest and enjoyed, even his illusionary embrace for a moment longer.

Jean's crying had subsided, and when her tears had dried to salt stains on her face she pulled her head back and tilted it over to Harry. Jean smiled at him. "Harry," she said softly, "my best friend. I hope that somewhere, somehow you're happy." She paused. "You deserve to be happy after everything." Jean reached up and touched the side of his face and would have sworn that his smile got a little bit bigger.

Jean stepped back and wiped her face with the sleeve of her robes. Her watch told her that she had a few more minutes before the start of class. She looked back at Ron and Harry, still smiling at her through the mirror. "I'll be back," she said, "I promise." To Harry, that statement had more than one meaning for Jean.

Jean hurried out of the Room of Requirement hearing the stone grind again as the door disappeared back into the wall as she departed. Jean reached into her leather school bag and pulled out her timetable, reading it quickly as she walked down the corridor. Her first class of the day was Transfiguration, which was not far from where she was.

Jean entered the classroom at the tail end of the group. The Marauders and Lily were already sitting down at one table. Lily was the one to see her first, and like a domino effect heads swiveled back to look at her. Jean felt, with a sudden rush of nervousness, like it was her first day of first year. Jean smiled stiffly and forced her legs to move into the class. In her own time during her first days of school Jean, as Hermione, was labeled such an unbearable know-it-all it had almost ended she and Ron and Harry's friendship before it began. She never really outgrew the trait, rather
everyone around her had gotten used to it. She wondered if this group of students would be as forgiving when so unseasoned to her character.

Jean sat down at the end of a table that was separated slightly from the table where the Marauders sat by a person-sized gap. Lily sat closest to her and she next to James, then Sirius, then Remus, and then Peter. Lily waved at her and Jean waved back, pulling out her textbooks as she did.

Everyone heard the door close and Professor McGonagall walked through the space that separated Jean and Lily. In one hand she carried her wand and with the other she carried a cage filed with chameleons. McGonagall set the cage on her desk and Jean watched the reptiles hook onto the bars and each other with their toes, their eyes shifting around in every direction.

McGonagall turned around to face the class. "Before we begin," she said. "I would like to introduce our newest Gryffindor, Miss Jean Granger, who is a transfer student from the Salem Witch Institute in Boston, Massachusetts."

Jean's eyes widened, thunderstruck that the professor was drawing attention to her. Professor McGonagall gestured with her hand for Jean to stand up, which she did so hesitantly, pasting on the most pleasant expression she could muster. The Gryffindors smiled appreciatively and the Slytherins scowled in the way she expected. After a beat, Jean sat down.

McGonagall tapped her wand on the cage, opening the door, and began levitating out the chameleons to each student in class. "To start off this term," she began, "we will be performing a little something old and a little something new. You have all learned in your Charms classes how to conceal an item, and in this class you have learned how to transfigure a living thing into inanimate objects. Now, you will be performing both." Professor McGonagall scooped out the last chameleon from the cage and placed it on her desk. "Today you will be transforming chameleons into handbags." She brandished her wand at the reptile. "Lacerta Sacculus." The chameleon fluidly turned from its original form into a light blue purse with a braided strap and a brass buckle.

James' hand shot up.

Professor McGonagall looked at his hand for a long moment before deciding to call on him. "Yes, Mr. Potter."

"Professor," he said his hand arching backwards and joining his other hand on the back of his head as he lazily stretched out in his chair. "Why would any of us men need to learn how to transfigure anything into a handbag?" Sirius laughed and even Remus cracked a smile.

McGonagall looked like a person well seasoned to James Potter. "Because, Mr. Potter," she responded, "I suspected that after six years of trying to date Miss Evans, you'd want to learn every trick in the trade on how to continue to date Miss Evans. Forgive me for trying to do you a favor."

Now it was Lily's turn to laugh. James looked sheepishly up at his Head of House whose stern lips turned upward slightly before she continued.

"The practical magic for this spell is concealing an object you may be carrying, which is why that not only does your chameleon need to be transformed into a hand bag, but it also must maintain its ability to camouflage." When McGonagall finished speaking she was back in front of the class standing beside the transfigured chameleon. She reached out her hand. "Observe." When she wrapped her fingers around the strap it vanished. However, upon closer inspection, Jean and the rest of the class realized that it had not disappeared but was blending in perfectly with what was behind it. McGonagall lifted her arm and the purse blended in with the brown stone and rough texture of the classroom wall. She then slipped it over he shoulder and the purse just and quickly
blended with the shiny material of the professor's emerald green robes. McGonagall placed it down on her desk and the purse restored itself to its original color. She then transfigured the chameleon back into its original form and put it back in its cage. "Now, I warn you," she said, "this is a complex spell. Even some of the top students in this class may struggle."

Lily and three of the Marauders looked eager for the challenge. Peter looked ashen faced as he sank down slightly in his chair, staring blankly at his chameleon. Jean, however, wasn't worried at all. She had studied and practiced the spell immensely before eventually deciding to go with the bag with the infinite bottom that she carried with Harry and Ron as they hunted for Horcruxes. "When you are ready," said McGonagall, "begin."

Jean watched passively from her seat Lily and the Marauders attempt the spell. Peter tried valiantly, however, he only succeeded in turning the chameleon the color of the desk, which could be accredited to the chameleon itself. Remus had transfigured the chameleon into a double handled briefcase that went between camouflages well. The only fault with it was that it still had toes and a tail. Lily had the same problem; two of her black spots on her white bag had eyes shifting within them. Sirius had managed to create a very masculine satchel but he could not manage to get it to blend. It only shifted slightly to the color of the desk when Sirius banged it on the wood aggressively before it returned back to the original color. James had the most prowess in the group with the spell. He had created an incredibly feminine purse perfectly and was shifting it back and forth between his robes and Lily's hair that hung down over her shoulders. Lily looked over at Jean and subtly rolled her eyes, batting James away from her head afterwards. "Are you struggling Miss Granger?"

Jean jerked her head out of her thoughts to see Professor McGonagall standing over her, watching Jean's chameleon creep over her desk. "No professor, I'm not struggling."

McGonagall gestured that she wished to see Jean perform the spell. Jean nodded her head and lifted her wand, aware that the five people to her left had turned their heads to watch. "Lacerta Sacculus." In an instant the chameleon had turned into a multi-colored draw string sack; similar to the one she carried when she was back with Ron and Harry. Jean wrapped her fingers around the strings and just as quickly the bag matched the color of the wood. She jerked it upward, and the bag disguised itself within her school robes.

McGonagall blinked, clearly surprised. The Marauders and Lily had similar expressions. "Very... very impressive, Miss Granger."

Jean nodded and Professor McGonagall walked onward into the Slytherin section of the class. Jean looked back over at the Marauders. Lily was grinning at her enthusiastically. James, Sirius, and Remus looked at her approvingly. Peter didn't look at her; he was prodding his chameleon with the tip of his wand, hoping to cause some sort of reaction.

After a while Professor McGonagall brought both James and Jean to the front of the classroom with their handbags. She held one in each hand and the moment her fingers grasped the strings and straps they, as usual, molded to their background. However, at closer inspection James' bag was not as quick and Jean's. McGonagall moved the bags in front of James and Jean's school robes and again Jean's bag proved to be the faster. "Nicely done, Miss Granger," said the Professor. "All right everyone that will be all for the day."

James and Jean walked back to the rest of their group where they left the bags on the table for McGonagall and left the classroom.
"Jean," said Lily walking up beside her, "you did fantastically in class."

"Thanks," said Jean modestly. "It was nothing. I actually already learned the spell before."

"Really?" said James, walking by Lily now. "Did your previous school teach you it earlier."

James and the rest of his group were walking into what could be a touchy subject. Jean swiftly tried to steer them away. "I looked it up," responded Jean.

Sirius laughed good-naturedly. "You sound like Remus," he said clapping Remus on the shoulder. "Now he can study with someone of common mind and we don't have to pretend to be interested."

James laughed along with Sirius and Peter joined in after a beat. Remus and Lily rolled their eyes. Jean smiled, happy that at least her internal tension was diffused by Sirius' jest.

"What class do you have next Jean?" asked Lily.

Jean pulled out her timetable and scanned it. "Defense Against the Dark Arts," she said.

"Excellent," said Lily, "all of us have the same class."

James huffed out a groan and Sirius shared similar sentiment. Jean looked over at them. "Not your favorite subject?" she asked.

"No we like it," said James, "Sirius and I want to become Aurors actually. "It's just…" James paused, trying to formulate his words correctly.

Sirius beat him to it. "The company is less than appealing."

Jean looked at Sirius and saw that his face had fallen flat and expressionless, like he was mentally preparing for something. Jean quickly understood. It was just like during her old time. Any person in this high a level of Defense Against the Dark Arts was either going to be a Death Eater or an Order Member.

Jean wondered for a moment if Dumbledore had already founded the Order of the Phoenix, and if so how strong was Voldemort. Jean's thoughts wilted a little. She had managed to get away from everything and everyone else in her life, but she had not managed to get away from him.

Before she could think or say anything else, she was shuffled into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. The Gryffindor and Slytherin sides of the classroom were clearly defined by a huge gap in the middle of the room, separating the desks to the point that they looked too squished together. The Marauders, Lily and Jean shimmied into the Gryffindor section, sitting down all at one table. As Jean sat down she jumped at the sight of a massively huge man leaning idly against the desk at the front of the class, scanning the entering students with an intense set of dark eyes.

"Who is that," whispered Jean to no one in particular.

"That's our Professor," whispered Sirius. He seemed to feel the need to whisper in the man's presence, "Magnus Kinshield. He used to be an Auror, and he is one of the most active wizards against dark wizarding activities, apart from Dumbledore of course."

Jean nodded, still looking at the man. "Why did he stop being an Auror?"

Sirius shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know, but James and I heard from his dad that Dumbledore requested him."
Before any more could be exchanged, Professor Kinshield stood up and the whole room fell instantly silent. He walked down the space between the students and firmly shut the door. Jean was suddenly reminded of Professor Moody, or rather Barty Crouch Jr. as Professor Moody. Professor Kinshield came back up the classroom and leaned back against the desk. "In preparation for your N.E., the second half of every class we will be reviewing information you have already learned. In turn, you will be pressed harder to understand the material as it is given to you." Kinshield paused, as if he was waiting for some kind of verbal protest. There was none. "To start with today, we will be practicing a piece of very advanced magic known as the Patronus Charm. Does anyone know what the Patronus Charm is?"

Jean's hand rocketed into the air. Kinshield idly pointed at her. "Miss Granger."

"A Patronus Charm is a magical shield used for protection against Dementors."

"In what way," countered the professor.

"The Patronus Charm is fueled by the caster's happiest memories, which is difficult due to the fact that happiness is what Dementors feed upon." She paused, shuddering slightly remembering the cold crippling effect the Dementors, particularly the ones that Harry fought during their third year. "A powerful Patronus Charm usually takes on some kind of form."

Kinshield nodded before standing up and producing his wand from the folds of his robes. "Miss Granger described the spell perfectly. The Patronus Charm acts as a shield between the caster and the influences of the Dementors. She also is correct in saying that a powerful Patronus creates a form." He held out his wand. "Expecto Patronum!"

The power of the spell sent Jean's hair whipping back behind her head. She squinted her eyes due to the light exploding from Kinshield's wand. A massive lion emerged from the tip and stood regally in the center of the classroom, its tail swishing, wrapping around the professor's legs. The animal shook its mane, silvery hairs shimmering with its own light. It leapt off the ground and towards the door. Jean watched as the Patronus dissolved and faded away before it touched down again.

Professor Kinshield holstered his wand within his robes. "Now I want you to form a line and everyone will attempt it."

Each of the Slytherins and Gryffindors present attempted it with a varying range of success. There were the ones like Remus, Lily, and James who managed to produce columns of silvery smoke and light, and there were others like Peter who was barely able to conjure much of anything.

Jean watched behind Sirius who was next in line after Peter who was standing in front of the class becoming increasingly discouraged and frustrated as he jerked his wand stiffly around in the air.

"Expecto Patronum—Expecto Pat—no. Expecto—Expecto—"

"Expecto Patronum," supplied Kinshield.

"Right. Expecto Patronum. Expecto Patronum!" Peter let his wand arm fall as he prepared to slump back to the back of the class.

Jean quickly weaved around Sirius and grabbed Peter by the wrist of the hand that was holding his wand. "You're trying too hard. You're forcing it. Here."

Jean lined Peter up in a way that she was behind him, holding his wand arm by the wrist. "Now close your eyes and find a happy memory." Jean began drawing on some of the descriptions Remus
and Sirius from the future had used to describe their school years. "A moment where you and your friends are laughing, and having fun going on an adventure," she paused, "and no doubt getting into trouble." Jean felt Peter's arm relax and his pulse slow beneath her fingers, and knew he had something within his mind. "Now say the words."

"Expecto Patronum," Peter said softly.

A column of light shot out of Peter's wand, pulsating with warmth passing through Peter's hand into Jean's

Jean smiled softly. "Good."

Peter opened his eyes to see the results of his spell, which held for a few more seconds before it tapered off. Peter's chest puffed up and with a grin he walked off to where Lily, Remus, and James were standing.

Jean took her place back behind Sirius. Professor Kinshield looked at her as Sirius stepped forward. Sirius brandished his wand and held it out in front of him. He seemed to be taking some of Jean's advice given to Peter. Jean saw Sirius' face relax, and once again was reminded of how youthful Sirius had been before Azkaban had ravaged his features for twelve years. His cheekbones were not sunken in, but full with a color of one who loves the outdoors. Jean detected the slight shadow of a beard trimming his jaw. His eyes, which were at the moment closed, were not hollow and lifeless the way she had remembered, but vivacious and mischievous. Sirius' eyes opened and Jean subtly turned her face away.

"Expecto Patronum," Sirius said. A light erupted from the tip and after a second something more. The silvery light began to solidify and take form. Sirius was so surprised to see Padfoot taking shape he accidentally ended the spell.

"Very good," said Professor Kinshield. "That's the best we have seen so far." Sirius looked like he wanted to try the spell again, but Kinshield continued. "Let's see if Miss Granger can do better."

Sirius shifted to the side and Jean took his place. She took out her wand and closed her eyes, searching for a suitable memory. Her mind lingered on the first time she had ever beheld magic, when she found out she was a witch. She also strayed over to a collection of thoughts of she and Ron's time together. Jean felt her heart flutter, and ache. Her mind settled upon a memory where she, Ron, and Harry were enjoying each other's company. They were just talking. They weren't scheming, or worrying about Voldemort, or arguing. They were having one of those rare golden moments where they were being normal students and friends. Jean opened her eyes and waved her wand. "Expecto Patronum."

There was a glow and her Patronus blossomed fully formed from the tip of her wand. The silvery otter swam around in the air, swirling around Jean's body before weaving though the people in the room. With one final twist the otter dissolved though the door like it was diving into water.

There was silence for a moment, and then Professor Kinshield spoke. "Perfect." Kinshield pushed himself off the desk. "Alright, everyone sit down."

Everyone filed back to their seats. As they did, Sirius spoke to James loud enough for Jean to hear. "Looks like Lily is going to have some competition."

Lily elbowed James in his side when he laughed.

When class had settled Kinshield was once again perched on the edge of his desk. He rolled his
wand over his desk, underneath his palm. "Verbal pop quiz," he said. "Raise your hand if you know the answer. What are the three Unforgivable Curses?" A young woman in the Slytherin section raised her hand. "The Imperius Curse, the Cruciatlus Curse, and the Killing Curse."

Professor Kinshield asked another question. "What is the name of a witch or wizard who can willingly transfigure themselves into an animal?"

Sirius answered this time. "An Animagus."

The questions continued getting progressively harder. For a moment Jean forgot where she was and whom she was with, forgot everything that was troubling her. She got lost in the thrill of being a competitive student. And then…

"What are the five signs that could identify a were-wolf?" Jean's hand went into the air, along with several others, "in human form?" Several hands went down, Jean's remained.

"Miss Granger," said Professor Kinshield.

"A werewolf," Jean began, "can be identified in their human forms by a large amount of calloused skin on the palms of their hands and the soles of their feet. Also, due to the stress of their transformations, werewolves in their human forms may have stretch marks on their skin, or in certain cases, show signs of rapid aging. There is also the probability of regular mild to severe injuries on the person because of the high possibility of injury during the full moon. And…" Jean's voice tapered off when, out of the corner of her eye, she noticed her fellow Gryffindors sitting beside her. All of the Marauders including Lily were sitting ramrod straight in their chairs, determinedly looking forward. Remus had gone white and had slid down slightly in his chair.

Jean's breath stopped in her throat, realizing her unintentional error. She was armed with knowledge to discover Remus' greatest secret, a secret, which she already knew. Jean found her voice again. "I'm… I'm sorry professor, I don't remember any more."

Professor Kinshield glanced at the hourglass on his desk. "No matter, Miss Granger, class is over anyways. Everyone have a great rest of your day. Remember to be regularly studying for your N.E.W.T.s."

The class dispersed and as Jean was gathering her books she noticed the rest of her companions were eyeing her warily, subtly putting distance between her and Remus, who slid quickly our of the room.

When the Marauders, with Jean trailing slightly behind, exited the classroom and into the corridor Remus had already gone.

"Where did Remus go?" Jean asked when she meshed back into the group.

"Probably had to hurry off," said James dismissively. "I think his next class is on the other side of the castle."

Jean could tell that James and his group were making a huge effort to distance themselves from her and at the same time were trying to be casual about it. Jean gave in and gave them a foothold. "Well, I think my next class is that way." She jerked her thumb over her shoulder.

"O.K, we'll catch up with you later," said Sirius, "bye."

Jean watched as James spearheaded his way though the crowd of students with Peter and Sirius on either side of him. Barely behind them was Lily, her hand locked inside James'. She looked over
her shoulder and gave Jean a small wave as James pulled her away.

Jean returned it. She didn't blame them in the slightest for their attitudes or their actions. She understood why everyone who knew Remus' secret would be so protective over him, especially against a person with apparent knowledge on the subject of lycanthropy. For Remus, so much could be gained in the next few months, and at the same time so much lost if someone discovered and ousted him.

Jean sighed, shifting her satchel to her shoulder and turned on her heel to continue down the corridor in the opposite direction. Even with all of the Marauders and Lily's legitimate reasons, it still hurt to be intentionally ostracized, and it further disappointed her that her knowledge, once again, put her at odds with potential new friends.

Jean reached into her pocket and pulled out the folded up piece of paper that was her timetable. She had Ancient Runes next. At the pace that she walked, Jean just squeaked in on time. For the first few minutes Jean had her back pressed to the wall, simultaneously listening to the instructions and looking for a seat. She found one in the last row in the back of the class. Jean hurried to get over there and get seated. In her rush of pulling out parchment and textbooks, she brushed her quill off her desk. She huffed to herself and when she was collected bent down to retrieve it. But another hand had beaten her to it. Remus held Jean's quill out to her and she accepted it. "Thanks," she said quietly.

Remus still looked stiff and above all surprised that Jean was sitting there beside him.

"Where is everyone else?" asked Jean.

Remus shrugged his shoulders slightly. "I think James and Sirius are in Care of Magical Creatures and Lily is in Divination. Peter has a free period."

Jean nodded and turned back to her desk. She didn't attempt to initiate any more conversations with Remus, giving him the ability to approach her on his own time. Remus and Jean sat side by side in silence, diligently translating runes from their textbooks for almost half the class before Remus finally spoke.

"You did really well in Defense Against the Dark Arts today," he said, "you seem to know a lot about werewolves."

Jean was internally shocked, marveling at how blunt Remus was on the subject. She surmised that when it came to this matter, Remus couldn't afford to be coy. Jean rewarded Remus' blunt statement with a blunt response. "Yes. I was very close with one back in Boston."

This caught Remus off guard. "You...you were?"

Jean nodded, taking a moment to string out a story that would be relatable to Remus without seeming too coincidentally similar. "Yeah," she replied, "one of my friends had a younger brother who got bitten. Over the years I got really close to him."

Jean saw Remus' eyes soften and his face relax. "How old was he when he was bitten?"

Jean tilted her head as if she was attempting to remember. "Around nine or ten, I think. It was a sad thing really. He wasn't allowed to go to school after that."

Jean saw the subtle signs of Remus getting tense, a result of his frustration with how wizarding society dealt with werewolves. "Did you pity him?" Remus asked after a moment.
"I pitied the opportunities lost to him, yes. His parents home schooled him to the best of their ability, and his brother taught him everything he could over the holidays. I came over often and helped him on things he didn't understand."

Remus was fully engaged in the conversation now, abandoning his work, and even twisting sideways in his chair. "Were you never afraid?"

Jean shook his head. "Not at all. He isn't dangerous or a thing to be shunned or locked away in an attic somewhere like a lot of people would believe. Just because he is a werewolf doesn't mean he isn't also a person. I believe they should be treated as people, despite what they can transform into one night a month."

Remus shook his head a smile growing on his face. "You are a rare breed Jean Granger."

Jean returned his smile. "Oh, not as rare as one might think."

It was then that the pair noticed the rest of the class gathering up their items and leaving the room. Remus looked back at Jean. "Come on," he said, picking up his things, "let's meet up with the others for lunch."

When Remus turned around Jean couldn't help but grin at his back, happy that she had regained his trust.

Remus and Jean walked together from the classroom to the Great Hall discussing their partially abandoned Ancient Runes assignment. Jean noticed as they neared the Gryffindor table James, Sirius, Peter and Lily craning themselves around each other, watching she and Remus. She quickly turned back to Remus before they realized she was watching them. "There they are, Remus," she said.

Remus and Jean weaved their way to the others. James and Sirius shifted giving Remus a seat between them. Jean sat down on the end beside Sirius.

Lily leaned around James to address the pair of them. "How was class," she asked.

"Great," said Remus pleasantly as he began serving himself, "learned a lot." He pinched a deviled egg between his fingers and bit off half of it.

Jean listened without looking as she ate, understanding the subtle hints of the underlying conversation. She hid her pleasure at the fact that the entire gathering almost physically relaxed when Remus finished speaking.

After Sirius was satisfied with Remus' testimony he reached down underneath the bench and pulled out a textbook. Jean read the title before he opened it up on the table, *The Magic of Muggle Life by Wendy Glass.*

"What are you doing Sirius?" asked Jean.

"A Muggle Studies paper that's due tomorrow," he answered as he thumbed through the pages.

James heard Sirius and whipped his head around. "Sirius," he said, "you had the whole holiday to write that paper."

"I forgot," Sirius.

"My dad told both of us to do that paper on Boxing Day when we wanted to play Quidditch in the yard."
"And what did we do that day, James?" Sirius asked.

"Played Quidditch."

"Exactly; and I forgot to write my paper." Sirius bent down again and pulled out a fistful of parchment and a bottle of ink. "Besides," he said, producing a quill from his pocket, "you have forgotten plenty of papers yourself."

"Yeah," said James, "only when they were not easy to write."

Sirius laughed his bark-like laugh. "Of course it would be easy for you," he said, "you could ask Lily anything you wanted and could have written the perfect paper in hours."

"What did you have to write about?" asked Jean.

Lily was the one that answered. "We had to write about a muggle career, and describe what they did, particularly how it differed from magical activities."

Sirius suddenly jerked his head up as if a brilliant idea had struck him. He looked over at Jean. "Jean," he said, "your parents are muggles. What did they do again?"

"They are dentists. They take care of people's teeth."

Sirius looked confused. "Can't they do it themselves?"

Jean had to pause for a second. She had forgotten how hard it was to talk to wizards about muggle things that were seemingly normal to her, like her parents' careers. "Well, yes. They are just there to make sure teeth are being cared for properly."

Sirius sarcastically rolled his eyes and chuckled. "Muggles are so needy." With a flourish, Sirius dipped the tip of his quill into his inkpot and pressed it up against the parchment. "Alright," he said, "What do dentists do?"

Jean cocked her head sideways, thinking for a moment. "Dentists take you into a little room. They sit you in a big chair and shine a light into your mouth. Then, for about thirty minutes or so they clean your teeth, make sure you don't have any gum disease or stuff like that, and if you have a cavity they drill it out."

Sirius stopped writing with a jolt. "Wait, what?" Jean's statement not only grabbed Sirius' attention, but James, Remus, and Peter's as well. Lily hid her laughter in her hand.

"Well," said Jean silently enjoying this, "when a muggle gets a cavity, which is when the tooth or part of the tooth has gone bad in a sense, the dentist takes a tiny drill and chips away at the bad part of the tooth until its gone and then they put a metal cap on it to protect the exposed tooth."

Sirius was staring at Jean slack jawed. "That's barbaric."

Jean shrugged her shoulders. "That's how muggles do it." She paused. "Wait till I tell you about pulling teeth and braces."

Jean spent the next hour giving Sirius a dissertation on dentistry, the latter writing two full rolls of parchment. Lily and the others ate and listened to Jean throwing in a comment or two every couple of minutes. When Jean had finished and Sirius had reached the end of the page Lily shuddered. "I was so happy when I learned how to take care of all this stuff magically. I hated going to the dentist."
Jean laughed lightly. "I was glad too; although, it wasn't too bad for me. I got to wait in my dad's office, which was neat. He had an aquarium. He also had this mouth with fake teeth in it that he used with young children so he could show them exactly what he was going to do so they wouldn't get scared." Jean paused a small smile. "When I was seven I started losing teeth. I pulled all of the false teeth out one day. Dad had to superglue the teeth back in. He was never able to use it again because they kept falling out. He keeps it on his desk now as a joke between us."

Jean pulled herself out of her memories before she delved so deep that it hurt her. She thought how at this moment her parents could be meeting, and even though they would never move to America she knew that they would fall in love and be starting a life together sometime soon. With an ache, Jean recalled the parents that she left behind in her own time did not know that they had a daughter. Jean spoke before anyone noticed her extended silence. "Lily, what did you and James write about in your papers?"

"I wrote about my mum's job," said Lily, "she's a florist. And James wrote about my dad's job. He's a police officer."

Jean nodded as Lily swiveled around in her seat. "Remus, Peter what did you two write about? I never asked."

Remus pushed away his plate. "I wrote about mailmen. That's virtually a non-existent job in a magical community. Owls do most of the post delivery."

Peter shifted slightly in his seat, "I wrote about librarians, because I thought the professors would like that; if I wrote about something...scholarly." In comparison to Remus, Peter didn't seem as pleased with his response.

While Sirius rolled up his parchment and stuck it back in his satchel Jean pulled out her timetable and scanned down to the current part of the day. "Do we all have Potions next?"

James nodded. "It's a good walk from here. We had better get going."

The Marauders, Lily and Jean gathered their things and walked as a group down to the dungeons where the Potions classroom was. The January weather made the corridors in this area of the castle damp and drafty. Jean suppressed a shudder, which Sirius noticed.

"Cheery place isn't it," commented Sirius, "hard to believe the Slytherin House lives down here."

Jean nodded, crossing her arms to contain her warmth. After a moment she spoke. "So," she said, "James' dad tells you to write you're papers?"

Sirius turned his head and looked at Jean. "I've lived with James at his house in Godric's Hollow since I was 16. His mum and dad have been like second parents to me." He laughed lightly. "They didn't know what they signed up for when I showed up on their stoop that night."

Jean smiled, she never got tired of his laugh; it was a rare thing for the Sirius of her time to laugh. Jean knew that the conversation was turning towards a personal and complicated subject for Sirius, especially for the Sirius that Jean remembered, but she concluded that it would be more peculiar if she didn't ask. "What about your parents?"

Sirius' face fell slightly, and for a moment Jean saw the jaded and somber Sirius that she was used to. The Sirius that was trapped inside his family's house, hidden from the word, left alone with only his guilt and frustration for company most of the time. "My parents and I had a falling out," he said
quietly, "it was better for everyone when I left." He paused. "You could say that I'm the black sheep of my family."

"White sheep," said Jean.

"Excuse me?" asked Sirius.

"White sheep." Jean repeated, "Your name is Sirius Black; thus, you're the white sheep of the Black family."

The Sirius from Jean's time evaporated, and was replaced by a large grin. He slung his arm over Jean's shoulder. "James," he said, "she has brains and a sense of humor. We should have gotten her to come to Hogwarts sooner."

Jean tilted her head to hide her charmed blush.

The group sobered when they entered the potions classroom and sat down at their tables laden with the day's potion ingredients and several black pewter cauldrons in front of them. Jean noted that Professor Slughorn was teaching. She looked around. Everything in his classroom was the same as she had last seen it, with one exception. Perched on the edge of his desk was a small glass bowl with an even smaller white fish swimming about inside.

Jean's eyes continued to circle the room. Once again the class was staunchly divided between Gryffindors and Slytherins. Jean jolted slightly when she noticed one particular Slytherin that was sitting closest to her group of Gryffindors. Severus Snape would not change in the slightest in looks from now till when Jean would first meet him. He still was pale and lanky with shoulder length black hair hanging limply about his face, his mouth turned down in a seemingly irremovable scowl. His onyx eyes flickered and moved, as if he sensed someone staring at him and Jean wrenched her gaze away. It was only then that she noticed the rather planned and formulaic way that the Marauders, Lily and herself were sitting in regards to Severus Snape. Peter was sitting closest to him, then Remus, then Jean, and then Sirius after her. It seemed that she, Remus and Peter were unofficial buffers of sorts between Snape and Sirius who sat on the other side of Jean. James followed Sirius and last was Lily sitting nearly half the room away Severus. Jean wondered for a moment why Lily was not also used as an additional barrier between Sirius, James and their schoolyard rival, but she didn't have time to dwell on it for long because at that moment Professor Slughorn asked for his students' attention.

"Good afternoon everyone. Welcome, welcome," said the professor as he bounced cheerily around the front of the room. "I hope everyone had a pleasant holiday." Professor Slughorn stopped in front of his cauldron, which was in front of a blackboard. "If we are all ready we will get started." He tapped his wand on the blackboard and words began writing themselves in white chalk. "Today's potion is a tad tricky for those who are making it for the first time, and very dangerous if one should incorrectly concoct it. The Draught of the Living Dead."

Jean visibly deflated at his words.

"What's wrong?" asked Sirius quietly.

"I hate this potion. It's horrible to make."

Sirius paused for a second. "Well, I'm doomed then."

Jean rolled her eyes and nudged Sirius lightly in the side.

Professor Slughorn continued speaking. "For the one who can make the best sample of this Potion
will be rewarded with a belated Christmas present." He held a glass bottle in his hand about the size of his palm. Inside the bottle was a silver liquid with a blue tint to it. "When exposed to air for an uninterrupted 60 seconds the potion will evaporate and create a snow flurry wherever you want one." Slughorn sat the potion down next to his fishbowl. "Have at it."

For Jean, the creation of the potion went as disastrously as it did the first time. Mistakes that she made before and corrected were replaced by mistakes she made presently. Everyone was having similar luck. Cauldrons were exploding, students were getting burned and the classroom was filled with a choking plethora of multicolored smoke. Only two students were successful: Severus who moved silently and swiftly without ever opening his textbook and Lily who made slower but still positive progress.

At the end of the hour Professor Slughorn could find fault with neither. "I'm very impressed," said Slughorn after examining each sample of Snape and Lily's potions carefully. "I can go years without one student creating a perfect brewing of this potion and now I get two at the same time. Remarkable. One-half of the reward will go to each of you. Congratulations."

"Pff," scoffed Snape. "Keep it all, I have no need of it."

Snape passed the vial into Lily's hand. Jean noted how James stiffened.

"Thank you, Severus," said Lily quietly.

"Well," said Slughorn attempting to keep his cheery mood, "class dismissed, then."

Snape took his portion of his reward and enveloped himself back into the folds of black and green Slytherin robes that in mass departed from the potions classroom. The Marauders and Jean lingered while Lily talked for a short moment with Professor Slughorn before she joined them.

"What did Slughorn want?" asked James when they were all outside in the corridor.

"Oh, the usual," commented Lily, "he wanted to make sure I was coming to all of his student dinners." She laughed. "He is so funny when it comes to the students he wants in his club. He's waiting with baited breath for one of us to be the next big thing." She paused. "Speaking of dinners," she turned to James, "James, the Great Hall is going to be so crowded. Can't we bring everyone up to our rooms where we will be more comfortable?"

"Sure," said James, "I don't see why not." He looked over at Jean. "And Jean hasn't had a chance to see the Head's dormitory before."

The Head's dormitory was less a dormitory and more a personal suite. The entrance, which was halfway between Gryffindor and Ravenclaw Towers and one floor beneath opened up into a small but spacious sitting room with a couch a loveseat and three wingback armchairs surrounding a large square coffee table. All of this sat in front of a large grated fireplace. Past the common area was wide stone staircase, which divided off to two separate bedrooms on either end of the room. Lily told Jean that each bedroom was around the size of a normal dormitory that was meant for five people to share and both had their own personal bathroom. To the left of the staircase, tucked into a windowed nook was a simple table that looked like it could sit around six. When the Marauders, Lily and Jean arrived at the room the table was already heavily laden with food that would feed twice their number.

They ferried the food from the table to the rug-covered floor around the coffee table. They ate and talked idly for hours until the sun dipped below the horizon. By that time Jean was curled up into one of the armchairs watching Sirius and Remus play gobstones, and Peter lightly sucking a sugar
quill while organizing chocolate frog cards that he pulled from about twenty boxes. Seven of the enchanted amphibians hopped around on the table casually being plucked up by whomever was closest.

Lily and James sat together on the couch. Lily leaned over and pulled Professor Slughorn's prize from her bag and set it on one of the end tables, uncorking the stopper as she did. In about a minute flat, white flakes began falling steadily from the ceiling. Lily leaned back resting her head in James lap and stared up at the magical snow. James ran his fingers through Lily's hair, which was gathering the white flecks on its red tresses. Lily's emerald eyes looked into James' and Jean watched as James bent down to kiss her.

Jean instantaneously thought of Harry and Ginny and how Harry never knew how much his parents loved each other even in its earliest of stages. For Jean it was heartbreaking watching everyone sitting there without a care in the world knowing how much they would go through, what they would lose. Jean couldn't help it. In hindsight, she thought that maybe it was Lily's hair. She remembered Ron, and what was lost to her, and her internal peace she had been slowly gathering all day suddenly shattered.

"Jean," Lily said. Jean jerked suddenly batting her misty eyes furiously. "Are you alright?"

Jean nodded vigorously, thinking that if she kept moving she could keep herself together. "Yeah," she said quickly and quietly, "yeah I'm fine."

Jean subtly turned herself slightly away from the group watching the flames crackle and pop around the wood in the fireplace, determinedly ignoring Lily's lingering gaze.
Hermione felt Ron's back trembling as he hoisted his arm over her and saw the flow of crimson seeping from his hand, staining her thigh. Hermione looked over Ron's shoulder and saw Bellatrix Lestrange sauntering over to the pair of them, her heels clicking against the dark stone floors. She twirled her wand betwixt her thumb and forefinger. Hermione saw the Death Eater smile and speak but Hermione could not hear her words, for her heart was pumping loudly within her ears. Hermione saw a flash of green light, exactly as Harry had described from his earliest of memories. She felt Ron spasm against her; then grow uncommonly still. Almost in slow motion his head rolled onto Hermione's shoulder staring up at her with blank and empty eyes.

Hermione felt herself being pulled away, gently but firmly. As she felt the distance growing between them, Hermione wrapped her hands into Ron's dirty and bloodied shirt. "No!" she protested loudly refusing to let go. All the while, Ron's eyes bore through her own into her mind, into her inescapable memory. Her only wish was for him to blink. "Ron. Ron!" Her fingers gave way to the invisible force removing her. "No..."

"No!" Jean shot up in her bed breathing heavily. Her fingers were digging into the scarlet comforter wrapped around her body. A thin layer of sweat lay shining on her shivering skin. Jean heard the sound of sliding fabric and jerked her head over to the noise. Alice's head, crowned with a damp white towel, poked though Jean's crimson bed curtains.

"You had another nightmare," Alice stated softly.

Jean twisted, and rolled in the opposite direction out of the bed. "I'm fine," she said.

It was the fourth week she had been here, twenty years in the past. January was on its last leg with February right around the corner. Jean's nightmares about Ron's death had grown in intensity and in regularity to the point where not a night went by without her traumas revisiting her. Worse yet, her sleeping problems began to show in her day-to-day life. Shadowy circles began to develop under her eyes, and slowly she began to withdraw into herself away from her current set of classmates.

Jean shuffled through the room in her socks and nightgown ignoring the looks of her roommates who slowly drifted back to their morning routines. Alice sat down on her own bed and began to systematically unwrap the white wooly turban from her hair, drying her brown tresses as she did. She alone continued to stare at Jean as she moved. Marlene had her face pressed up to a mirror and, almost obsessive compulsively, was applying mascara to her eyelashes, while to her left Dorcas was standing in her underwear with her front to the wall clipping her bra across her back.

Jean entered the bathroom where Mary was brushing her teeth. Jean nodded at her reflection in the mirror as she stripped down and slipped into the shower with a metallic swish of curtain rings. Jean slid to the bottom of the tub as the steam rose around her. She pressed her head to her knees and closed her eyes, catching a few moments of rest without really falling asleep. Her foot slid forward, her toes blocking the drain. The water pooled around them.

Jean stayed curled in the bottom of the bathtub with the water running lightly over her hair until she was beyond sure that the other occupants of the room had departed for breakfast. Lazily she flipped the faucet off with her foot and slid out through the shower curtains. Jean gritted her teeth as she dragged a brush through her more unmanageable hair than usual before she preformed a spell on it to make it presentable. She stared at herself for a long moment in the mirror before she
departed the bathroom with a swift shut of the door.

Jean dressed quickly, renewed with a purpose. Silently and swiftly she descended Gryffindor Tower and exited through the portrait hole, traveling well-practiced steps towards her destination. Jean forced her mind to clear itself of every thought except her one desire, and after a couple of sweeps past a normally blank stone wall the secret entrance to the Room of Requirement revealed itself. Jean looked around to make sure there was no one to notice her before she entered.

Jean felt the constriction in her chest lessen as she walked down the columned room and the Mirror of Erised became visible out of the shadows. By the time Jean reached the reflective glass the images of Ron and Harry were already there smiling at her from a life she couldn't get back to. Jean spent a few minutes staring at them, talking softly to them, as she had before when her nightmares and her dark, oppressive thoughts drove her to seek out even the phantom forms of her friends. When the vicarious presence of Harry and Ron had given Jean enough comfort, Jean leaned up against the mirror pretending she was embracing them twenty years from where she was. The logical part of her brain whispered that continuing this was unhealthy for her but Jean shushed it, focusing on the moment. However, Jean couldn't help but agree with her logical side on some aspects. Her relationship with Ron, Harry and the Mirror of Erised was beginning to look like an aspirin advertisement. Take two for the pain and you'll last all day.

Jean pulled herself away from the mirror and the images within, knowing she had class in a few minutes. She turned and left, making no verbal or mental promise that she would return, but everyone in the room knew that it was only a matter of time before she would.

Jean was the last person to enter the Charms classroom. Professor Flitwick, younger that Jean had ever known him to be, was charming several thick books to the ground to aid him in reaching the top of his teaching podium. The classroom was designed in the shape of a horseshoe with rows of desks creating a staircase towards the ceiling, each row slightly higher than the last. The Marauders and Lily were sitting on the topmost tier with her roommates sitting one row beneath them. Jean ascended the narrow walkway to reach them and the seat that they had saved for her between Lily and Sirius.

Due to her tumultuous sleeping patterns, Jean sat barely paying attention to the lesson in front of her. Jean's tired eyes shifted from left to right, watching the people around her as Professor Flitwick's voice washed over her. To her right James and Lily were sitting very close together. James' arm had snaked around her middle and had dipped into the front pocket of Lily's robes. After a moment, Lily's hand slipped down to join his. Over to Jean's left, past Sirius who looked almost as glassy-eyed as she did, saw Peter staring blankly at his textbook pages while Remus indicated to things with the tip of his quill, attempting to speak without moving his lips. When Jean's eyes swiveled forward she saw a blur of dark brown as Alice's head quickly swung back to the front.

A small piece of parchment was pushed into her hand. 'You ok?' Lily's flowery handwriting asked.

Jean picked up her quill. 'I'm just tired.'

Lily drew a frowny face next to Jean's response.

Sirius, who had apparently been reading Jean and Lily's conversation over Jean's shoulder fished around in his pocket and produced a light brown circular candy wrapped in a clear wrap, much in the way a peppermint would be, and placed in directly over Lily's picture.

Jean cocked her head sideways and drew a question mark out beside the object.
"It's a coffee candy," Sirius said quietly, "you'll like it."

A small puff of steam emitted from the sweet when Jean removed the wrapper. However, when she picked it up it remained cool to the touch. When Jean put the candy into her mouth rich coffee mixed with a hearty helping of French vanilla cream washed down her throat. She closed her eyes and pressed it up to the roof of her mouth, swirling it around with her tongue.

Sirius watched Jean's face lift and chuckled. "You're welcome," he said louder than he meant to.

"Is there something you would like to say, Mr. Black?"

"Yes Professor," said Sirius smoothly, "could you repeat what you last said, we can't hear you up here."

Professor Flitwick magically magnified his voice so much that Jean couldn't help but take accurate notes on enchantments that repel muggles from magical places.

When Charms class was dismissed the large group that consisted of the Marauders, Lily, Jean and her roommates converged into corridor to walk to Muggle Studies. Everyone but Jean took Muggle Studies and after that Alice and Lily had Arithmancy before they all met up again in the early afternoon for Herbology, leaving Jean with a two hour free period.

When Jean's company left her in the empty corridor she decided that she would get caught up on her homework in the library. Jean readjusted the strap on her book bag and made the trek down one floor and halfway across the castle. The only sound in the library was the sound of Madame Pince's shoes echoing on the other side of the library. Jean dropped her bag to the ground, creating a louder sound than she anticipated due to the forced silence of the room. After enduring a hushing from Madame Pince from ten bookshelves away, Jean pulled out her Charms book and began writing her essay about what, in her opinion, was the best way to conceal a magical community within a muggle environment.

Jean was more than halfway though with her paper when something began to nag her out of the corner of her eye, something tucked away in the corner closest to her. She turned and stared at it for a long moment, the delicate golden gate of the Restricted Section. Jean's fingers twitched as she felt them move, almost of their own accord, taking her parchment and tucking it into her bag. Jean's eyes went past the bars into the shadowed shelves. The answer to her silent prayer that filled her body every time she looked into the Mirror of Erised could be hiding just beyond her reach. The Restricted Section taught Tom Riddle about Horcruxes; surely it could provide Jean with information about time travel.

Jean's deep thought was intruded upon by Madame Pince passing in front of her with a trolley laden with books. "Do you need anything, dear?" she asked pleasantly.

Jean started, trying instantly to cover it up. "No," she said, attempting nonchalance, "no, I'm fine. Thank you."

Jean busied herself, looking like she was preparing to leave, all the while keeping a subtle eye on the librarian. As soon as Madame Pince was as far away as she could possibly be Jean bolted, holding her still open bag awkwardly upright and whipping her wand out with the other.

"Alohomora," Jean whispered. The gate quietly opened itself and Jean slipped within. Jean pressed her bag tightly up against a bookshelf and began her frenzied and frantic search. Her fingers lightly darted over the spines reading the titles as she did.
"Time travel," she whispered to herself, "Time Turners. Please, give me something."

Jean pulled a book from the shelf that had a promising title. However, on further inspection it was a history book. Jean closed the book, frustrated, and attempted to put it back. It didn't slide all the way back onto the shelf. Jean pressed on it firmly and heard the quiet sounds of crushed paper. Jean removed the book again and looked into the gap and saw a dark object lying slantways at the back of the shelf. Jean reached in and pulled it out. The book she held in her hand was smaller and thinner than the books surrounding it, explaining how easy it was for a book to get stuck there. Jean turned the little, black book over and read the title, written in bold silver lettering. *The Department of Mysteries: What Lies Within.*

Jean's eyes widened as she backed up against the stacks. Slowly Jean slid down the shelves, curling up on the floor with the book propped against her knees as she thumbed through the pages.

The Department of Mysteries proved to be ever mysterious, for each topic covered in the book was no more than half a page long at best. The section devoted to Time Turners was particularly sparse.

*Time Turners, invented by Swiss wizard Georg Ainshem, are magical artifacts, which can be used to send a witch or wizard back to a predetermined time. Time Turners are the main topic of Ainshem's recently published book, The Magic of Science.*

*Time Turners, which at the time of this publishing, have only been in existence for five years, continue to be extremely controversial in wizarding societies. In the United Kingdom, it is illegal to possess a Time Turner without Ministry and Department of Mystery personnel approval. Time Turners deemed illegally acquired are confiscated and stored within the confines of the Department of Mysteries. As of now, there is growing turmoil among D.o.M. staff over the fate of Time Turners, some arguing that they should be a carefully monitored and carefully used magical artifact, or if they should be destroyed outright.*

*For more information on Georg Ainshem, refer to his biography, A Modern Magician.*

Jean, although frustrated that the book contained nothing of use for her, was intrigued with the argument between the employees at the Department of Mysteries. Having used a Time Turner regularly before, Jean knew that it was good for innocent, practical, time management purposes. Jean also knew that a Time Turner could help aid in the escape of a high security prisoner and a hippogriff from Ministry justice. Time Turners were tools, but they were also dangerous tools.

Jean was about to shut the book when a section, no longer than a paragraph, grabbed her attention. Her eyes focused intently on the print as she read.

*The Veil: an ancient magical artifact that resides in the heart of the Department of Mysteries. Built at an unknown time for an unknown purpose, it possesses a tremendous amount of volatile and unpredictable magical powers. The staff of the Department of Mysteries is trained to observe and study with extreme caution.*

"Madame Pince?"

Jean jerked back to reality violently, standing up quickly and shoving the tiny book into a sliver of a gap between two larger tomes. Jean pressed her body up against a shelf and forcibly calmed her rapid heartbeat as she listened to the sound of the librarian's shoes traveling over to the girl that called to her.

"Yes, Alice," Jean heard Madame Pince say to her roommate, "what can I do for you."
"I think I left my Arithmancy book in here yesterday. Did you by any chance pick it up?"

Madame Pince paused. "I may have it behind my desk. One moment."

When the sounds of Madame Pince receded Alice walked closer to Jean, who remained unseen. Another set of shoes came with her.

"So, Jean has nightmares?" Lily's voice asked.

"Yes," said Alice, literally on the other side of the book shelf that separated Jean and herself, "almost every night now. And when she starts screaming…” Alice paused. "I have never heard anything like it."

Madame Pince returned at that moment. "Is this it?"

"Oh yes, thank you very much," said a relieved sounding Alice. Her relaxed voice made Jean notice how tightly her body was pressed to the bookshelf. She pulled away.

Jean watched thought the bars Alice and Lily's backs as they left the library. She sighed silently picking up her bag and slinging it onto her back. Quietly, she crept out of the Restricted Section and left the library.

The fact that Lily and Alice were talking about Jean's nightmares didn't sit right within Jean. She wasn't surprised though. Her nightmares were terrible things to behold as she dreamt them; Jean could only imagine what it was like to watch her experience them. Her black thoughts took shape into the form of her nightmares. Before her waking eyes she saw the blood from Ron's hand splatter across her face, the dagger that had separated Ron and herself from their escape boat, red and silver on the black floor, the feeling of the curse that had killed the boy that she loved passing through her body. There was even a moment, a flicker of a memory, of Harry's face, his eyes widening, his face dropping, realization of what was happening, and then he was gone.

Jean internally shuddered and quickened her steps, as if to get away from her dark dreams, unconsciously seeking her daily addiction.

Jean's path to the Room of Requirement lead her to the landing of the staircase that descended to the Entrance Hall. Jean paused, for the doors were thrown open and the fierce winter sunshine pulled her out of her daze. Jean squinted slightly and looked out past the courtyard and onto the lawn, dotted with black robed students. Jean looked at her watch. Lily, along with Alice had class for the next hour, but James, Sirius, Remus and Peter all had a free period now. With the weather on the upward swing to spring she figured the boys would be taking advantage of the fresh air. On the spur of the moment, Jean deviated from her route and went out onto the castle ground seeking them out.

Jean internally shuddered and quickened her steps, as if to get away from her dark dreams, unconsciously seeking her daily addiction.

As Jean walked she saw the small stone building that was Hagrid's hut. Jean had to resist the temptation of walking over to the circular structure, its chimney emitting a stream of blue-grey smoke. Jean's mind flew over and into the house though, remembering she, Harry and Ron having
tea with the loveable half-giant. She wondered if the Marauders were frequent guests of Hagrid. Jean thought not, even in her old time only Harry, Ron and herself were students that were close enough to Hagrid to go over to his house extensively. In actuality Harry was the one that was the bridge that formed Ron and Hermione's friendship with Hagrid. Ron and Hermione probably wouldn't have known Hagrid at all if Harry hadn't developed such a close relationship with Hagrid when he found out he was a wizard. Jean hid a smile, remembering the story Harry had told her of how Hagrid came to tell him he was a wizard on his birthday. The idea of Harry's cousin sprouting a pigtail made her laugh.

Jean sat down on the grass at the base of the tree, leaning back against the trunk. There were no leaves yet, so the sun passed though the bare branches, warming Jean despite the cool air. Jean tilted her head and looked at the sunlight ripping over the lake. Every now and again the shadowy figure of the giant squid meandered to the surface, then submerged.

"Well, well. Crabbe, Goyle, what do have we here?"

Jean tensed up like a bucket of ice water had been thrown on her. She stood up quickly and turned to see Crabbe and Goyle Sr. flanking none other than Narcissa Black.

Upon seeing Narcissa for the first time, Jean's initial though was that the future Mrs. Malfoy did not age well. The woman in front of her was far prettier than the one she remembered. She had platinum blonde hair cut to just below her chin and curled into ringlets. She still had that pinched face Jean remembered and Draco's sharply cut eyes. Jean recalled Mrs. Malfoy and herself to be around equal height, but the shiny leather heels Narcissa was wearing gave her an additional inch or so. Jean was silently amazed her heels weren't sinking into the soft earth. Narcissa was also wearing robes that seemed specifically tailored to flaunt her figure.

Jean noticed that aside from the fathers of the Crabbe and Goyle she knew, there were two other boys also with Narcissa. One was Severus Snape, who looked mildly interested at best, and another boy she had never met but recognized instantly. Regulus Black was shorter and slimmer than Sirius, a Seeker's build Harry would say. Regulus also had a more boyish face. If Jean remembered correctly Regulus was around fifteen. The brothers shared the same dark hair and the same grey eyes of their family, but the main difference that Jean noticed was that Regulus' face, though younger, was hard and harsh. His face did not emit much emotion and his eyes were guarded and cold. It reminded Jean of when she had first met Sirius after he had escaped from Azkaban.

Narcissa garnered Jean's attention again when she stepped forward, crossing her arms as she did. A very large and very noticeable diamond engagement ring glittered on her finger. "Oh yes," Narcissa said in a sweetly civil voice. "You're the Griffindors' stray." Narcissa laughed and her company laughed along with her. Narcissa stopped and stepped forward again, getting into Jean's personal space. Jean didn't give the Slytherin the satisfaction of her stepping backwards. "So, tell me Granger," said Narcissa quietly, their faces centimeters apart, "was your blood too filthy for your old school?" She paused. "Pity, for me at least. Your old school seems to have much better class than Hogwarts." Narcissa spat 'Hogwarts' out like it was a curse word.

Jean wouldn't have thought that anyone could be better than Draco Malfoy at being a schoolyard bully, but she was slowly beginning to believe there was one. Having heard enough, Jean forgot that she wasn't supposed to know Narcissa's name yet. "Go away, Narcissa," she said turning away from the group.

Narcissa's arm suddenly shot out and gripped Jean's forearm, forcibly turning her around. "Don't turn your back on me you filthy little Mudblood," she shouted, "Look your betters in the eye when
they speak to you!"

Narcissa's fingernails were digging into Jean's arm right over the place where the word Narcissa was currently screaming at her had been carved into her skin by her sister, Bellatrix. The cursed scar flared up in pain and Jean yelped as she struggled to get out of Narcissa's grip, instinctively reaching for her wand in self-defense.

Narcissa seemed to have wanted this reaction, for her wand was already pointed at Jean's face before Jean got her wand halfway out of her pocket.

"Expelliarmus!"

But that was not Narcissa's voice. Narcissa's wand arched high into the air and landed in the grass between Jean and Narcissa and Sirius, his wand pointing directly at his cousin.

Narcissa's grip on Jean's arm had slackened enough for Jean to free herself. She began to walk quickly towards Sirius and he closed the gap between them. Crabbe scrambled forward and scooped up Narcissa's wand before Sirius could step on it, which Jean was pretty sure Sirius would have done if given the chance.

Narcissa followed a few steps behind Jean, shoving Crabbe out of the way looking more than mildly irritated that he was in front of her.

When Jean reached Sirius, he looked away from Jean and up at his cousin. "That's enough Narcissa," he said.

Narcissa ignored him. "Look, Regulus. It's your Mudblood loving blood-traitor brother, come home at last." Sarcasm was almost physically dripping from her words.

Sirius lashed out, roughly grabbing Narcissa's shoulder and jerked her towards him. In the same motion Sirius wrapped his arm around Jean's shoulder and tucked her into his side, angling himself in a way that he separated Jean and Narcissa with his body. "I said that's enough," Sirius hissed. "Back off."

"Or what, Sirius?" Narcissa laughed in his face. "You can't do anything to me."

"I'll tell Bellatrix that you slept with Rupolphus while they were engaged."

Narcissa slapped Sirius so fast that neither him nor Jean had time to react. A guilty flushed crept into Narcissa's cheeks. "You wouldn't dare," she said, her lips curling back into a snarl.

"Oh, I would," Sirius countered, "and you know dear, sweet Bella would believe me." Sirius paused, seeming to enjoy having Narcissa cornered. "Leave her alone."

Narcissa's fingers twitched as if she was debating whether to slap Sirius again. Her eyes flickered over to Jean's face and lingered there for a moment before she went back to Sirius. With a huff, Narcissa jerked her shoulder out of Sirius' hand, turned on her heel, snatched her wand out of Crabbe's hands, and marched back to the castle, the rest of the Slytherins in tow.

Sirius watched the Slytherins depart, not moving until he was beyond certain they were not returning. Jean felt his pulse beat rapidly within him. She knew that Sirius was angry, but she knew from knowing him in her previous time that he was more incensed not about the mockery directed at the both of them but at the fact that, in front of her, Narcissa had revealed that Sirius had relations within that particular group of Slytherins and also the insinuation that Slytherin was his home.
Sirius let out a long sigh when the group of Slytherins disappeared within the confines of the castle. Sirius looked down at Jean but Jean didn't return his glance. Her quivering lip and her rapidly blinking eyelids were the only indicators of her insides going to pieces. She heard Sirius let out another sigh and began to guide her the short distance to the greenhouse for Herbology.

James stood outside the glass greenhouses built flush to the castle. His eyes were scanning the lawn seeking out Sirius or Jean or both. His eyes landed on the pair as they ascended the small hill to his location. "Hey Sirius w—" but when he saw Jean, James stopped midsentence. "What happened?"

"Narcissa," said Sirius grimly passing James into the greenhouse.

Sirius steered Jean through the workbenches and all the students who turned their heads, a variation of curiosity and concern on their faces. Jean stared at the ground. Her month long emotional rollercoaster had finally reached its peak and not halfway through the throng of students Jean, in front of everyone, began to silently sob into her hand.

Sirius quickly took Jean to a corner of the green house overgrown with vegetation. Once they were hidden by the large leaves and the rippling vines of the various magical plants Sirius turned Jean so that she faced his front and Jean cried a little more audibly. "Hey…hey," he said gently. He pulled her hands away from her eyes. "None of that now. You'll ruin your face."

Jean let out a small laugh at that and struggled to regain her composure. "I'm sorry," she said, hastily fanning her eyes instead of rubbing them red. "I don't know why I'm crying." She paused. "It's not like I haven't been called a Mudblood before." She slapped her hands on her sides. "It's just," Jean paused again to breathe through a shuddering sob, "I hoped here things would be different."

Sirius was under the assumption that Jean was talking about the differences between her old school and Hogwarts. Jean however was grieving the difference between the times she was straddling, and the fact that the differences she expected were not the actual differences between 1978 and 1998. For Jean all the good things of her old life had been taken away, but not the bad things. Jean was overwhelmed by the idea that her friends and everyone she had ever known had been taken away from her, but somehow the prejudice against muggle-borns and Voldemort had still followed her through her life. And for that reason alone Jean felt an amazing sense of kinship with the Sirius Black she remembered twenty years in the future. For he was the only one who could relate to what it is like to have everything you ever loved taken from you and are still saddled with your sorrows no matter what drastic life change you go through.

The Sirius presently in front of Jean watched silently as she calmed herself down. He molded his face to look concerned and sympathetic and forcibly held it there to keep in check his severely shortened temper. He hated that anyone had tormented one of his friends to tears because of the ideal of pureblood superiority, which he himself represented by being pureblood but did not support. He hated even more that it was his relatives that were the tormentors and that his new friend now was aware of the connection between them. But Sirius suppressed his own inner turmoil to help Jean deal with hers. Once Jean had stopped crying, without a word her wrapped his arms around her and pulled her to his chest. "I'm sorry," Sirius whispered to the top of Jean's head.

Jean rested the side of her face of Sirius' chest, lulled into an almost trance like state by the rhythm of his breathing and the way his body swayed from one foot to the other. Some part of Jean's mind was keenly aware of how Sirius' fingers felt running through her hair.

Sirius and Jean emerged from the shrubbery around the time class started. By that time, James had informed Lily and the rest of Marauders of what he understood of the situation. The group migrated to the back of the class where Jean and Sirius had sat down.
If anyone had asked Jean what she learned in Herbology class that day she couldn't have told them, but she worked as methodically and mechanically as a robot, speaking only when directly spoken to with short, monosyllabic answers. Every minute or so, someone sitting around her subtly glanced in her direction, especially Lily, whose big green eyes begged her to speak. Everyone's attention was so devoted to her that Jean suspected that only she noticed that Peter had mistakenly grabbed the wrong plant without protective gloves, and that his palms burst into hives so terribly that he had to be excused early from class to go to the hospital wing.

For the next several hours James, Sirius, Remus, Lily and Jean lived their lives like a relay race with Jean as the baton. Immediately after Herbology, Sirius passed Jean to James so he could go off and vent his own frustration and irritation from the whole Narcissa ordeal. James and Jean took a few minutes to back track to the Marauders tree to make sure Jean hadn't accidently left anything since she departed in such a hurry. James then walked Jean back to the entrance of the castle and passed Jean off to Remus in the Entrance Hall because James had to first track down Sirius and then get both of them to Quidditch practice. Remus and Jean shared a light lunch together, discussing their shared classes' assignments. After about forty-five minutes of diligence and patience, Remus had gotten Jean to speak in normal sentences again, and for the moment, Jean had shrugged off her hidden depression.

Lily walked up to Remus and Jean for the last few lines of their conversation, seeming more than pleased that Jean was speaking and interacting with others. She touched Jean on the shoulder. "Hey Jean, History of Magic starts in a few minutes. Do you want to walk with me there?"

"Sure," said Jean. And Jean was passed from Remus to Lily, and the both of them walked to the History of Magic classroom."

Jean and Lily arrived just in time for class and sat in the exact middle of the classroom. Their ghostly teacher, Professor Binns, was nowhere to be found. After a few minutes, the students broke into clusters of conversation.

"So, Jean," said Lily cautiously. "What happened back in Herbology? James said it was something about Narcissa Black but he didn't know much more than that."

Jean turned and looked at her, all the while pulling her ink, quill, parchment and books out of her bag. "Just the usual," said Jean casually. "She was harassing me about being muggle-born." Jean shrugged her shoulders. "I guess today I didn't take it well."

Lily nodded sympathetically, understanding the baggage the pair of them must sometimes undertake by being muggle-born. More time passed and Professor Binns still hadn't arrived. Jean noticed that Lily was looking at her peculiarly although Lily was attempting to look like she wasn't. "Jean," said Lily slowly, sending out cautionary probes with the hesitancy in her voice. "Alice told me something today." Jean felt her body tense. She had suspected that Lily would breach this topic, but even still, Jean had no idea how to respond. Jean sat almost unnaturally still and listened. "Alice told me about your nightmares; how they've gotten to be almost every night," Lily paused, "how they've gotten worse." Jean didn't want to lie to Lily and she was tired of brushing off her dreams like they were nothing when everyone looked at her. Jean took a deep breath looking straight down at her desk rather than at Lily, doing her best to be vague, but truthful. "Not that long ago," Jean began quietly, "something happened to me. Something bad."

Jean's voice turned into a yelp. Through the desk she was looking at so intently slid the silvery body of Professor Binns.
"Everyone quiet, please," he said, phasing out of Jean's desk and into several others as he made his way to the front of the class.

Professor Binns' sudden appearance through Jean's desk caused her to start, jerking her arm and accidentally knocking over her ink pot, spilling it all over her fresh parchment. Jean sighed, exasperated but internally relived that she had escaped the conversation with Lily about her nightmares. Quickly, Jean rolled her sleeves to the elbow and gingerly picked up the soaking parchment with the tips of her fingers, using her wand to magically draw out the ink and, in a shiny black stream, guided it back into its pot.

Firmly choking the neck of the bottle with the stopper, Jean turned to look at Lily, ready to roll her eyes comically at Professor Binns' entrance.

Lily was staring hard at her desk, not looking at Jean, and yet looking at her at the same time. Jean saw in Lily's eyes something that she had never seen before, anger burning behind her emerald eyes. All the cheerful moods that once resided with her orbs had been consumed by the blaze. Lily's eyes shifted and stared for a short but pregnant moment before they jerked back forward, the flame increasing intensity.

Jean followed Lily's eyes over to her arm, her exposed elbow turned just right on her desk, revealing the scarred letters on her skin. Jean turned her arm away from Lily and slowly unrolled her sleeves until they reached her wrist. Lily did not look again.

Despite the fact that he was thirty minutes late for class, Professor Binns insisted they do the full length of class because he wasn't late. Almost everyone in the class had voiced a protest during some part of their overtime except for Lily ad Jean. Lily hadn't spoken a word since Professor Binns' arrival, and she still looked furious. Jean was busy watching Lily.

When class at long last dismissed Jean and Lily paired off and went down to the Great Hall for dinner. Lily's movement was tense and stiff, as if she was forcing herself to move. Jean followed along mutely behind her. They entered the Great Hall and made their way around several students to reach the Gryffindor table.

Jean saw James walking towards them. "There you are," he called out, "where have you been?" When James saw the look on Lily's face his own face instantly sobered. "What happened?" he whispered when Lily reached him. But Lily brushed past him and walked over to the long table, James following close behind. Jean followed the pair and sat down on the other side of James. Sirius and Remus were sitting across the table.

As the group began serving themselves, Jean saw, out of the other Marauders' line of vision, James touching Lily's elbow, giving her a questioning look. Lily didn't respond. Jean knew that Lily was too polite to talk about what was boiling inside her with Jean in front of her. Jean decided to extend her a kindness, figuring that the longer she was here, the higher the chance of the others mistakenly seeing it. Lily's reaction was enough; Jean had no desire to replicate it four more times, at least. Jean reached forward and grabbed her plate. "I have some homework I need to do. I'm going to take this to the Common Room and eat while I study."

"Okay," said Lily in a monotone voice, finally feeling motivated to speak.

As Jean rose from the table Sirius caught her attention. 'Are you sure?' he mouthed, still conscious of the events from the afternoon.

Jean nodded her head and with her plate left the Great Hall.
Jean fully expected the Common Room in Gryffindor Tower to be completely empty. She was wrong. When the Fat Lady's Portrait swung open, Jean saw Peter curled up in one of the crimson, wing-backed chairs, nibbling from a plate sitting on the coffee table. "Hey," said Jean quietly. Jean was keenly aware of the fact that this was the first time she and Peter were alone in the same room together. If this situation had been in Jean's old time, they probably would have attacked each other.

"Hey," Peter returned, picking up a piece of ham and popping it into his mouth. "What are you doing here?"

"I'm going to study," Jean said. "What are you doing here?"

Jean saw Peter shift his body around in the seat. "Sometimes," he said, "the Great Hall is a little too…crowded."

Jean looked at Peter while her mind flew back to something Harry had told her about his years at a muggle school. Harry's cousin, Dudley, had on many occasions made it impossible for Harry to sit with any of his classmates during mealtimes because of the rumors Dudley sent flying around his peers. Harry had told her that many times he ate his lunch alone in a bathroom stall. Jean realized with a well-concealed jolt that she had not realized that Peter was not in the Marauders' company in the Great Hall. A small portion of her mind was fairly sure that the others had not noticed either. Jean did something that at one time she did not think herself capable of doing. She sat down on the couch cushions closest to Peter's chair and ate quietly with him.

Jean had finished her meal and took out her Charms paper that she had been writing all day and finished it while Peter lazed about in his chair beside her. She had just finished the last sentences when she heard the sound of the portrait hole opening. Jean looked up and was more than mildly surprised to see Professor McGonagall entering the room. The Deputy Headmistress looked at Jean, her lips pressed into a thin line on her pale face, her fingers laced tightly together over her robes. Standing behind her was Lily, James, Remus and Sirius. "Miss Granger," said McGonagall, "Professor Dumbledore would like to see you." Her tone made it clear that this was not a request.

Jean scrambled to stand up, her brain reeling with shock and happiness. Professor Dumbledore had done it; he had found a way to send her home. "Yes, Professor," Jean said, concealing her excitement as she quickly walked to her Head of House. Professor McGonagall put a hand on Jean's shoulder and steered her out of the room. James, Sirius, Remus and Lily followed them.

"Should I come too?" Peter called out, rising slightly from his chair.

"That will not be necessary, Mr. Pettigrew," said Professor McGonagall curtly and the portrait hole swung to a close behind her.

Jean and McGonagall walked side-by-side without saying a word, the professor's hand still on Jean's shoulder, guiding her though the corridors leading to Dumbledore's office. The three Marauders and Lily continued to follow them. Jean looked over he shoulder at them in confusion. Dumbledore wouldn't have included the foursome following her if the meeting was about the topic she originally assumed.

Before Jean could ask what the purpose of her meeting with Dumbledore was the group had already arrived at the hidden entrance to the Headmaster's office. The golden statue seemed to be anticipating their arrival, for when the group was within a few feet of it the statue, without prompting, began to rotate, revealing the staircase hidden behind it.

Jean and Professor McGonagall with Lily, Sirius, James and Remus behind them ascended the tight
spiral staircase that ended at the large wooden door of the office.

Professor McGonagall knocked on it and called though the wood. "Headmaster, I have Miss Jean Granger with me, as you asked."

"Yes, come in, please," answered Dumbledore.

McGonagall opened the door and led the party into the large circular room filled with books, delicate silver objects, the gilded cabinet in which Dumbledore kept his Pensieve, and the collage of sleeping portraits of previous headmasters. Dumbledore sat behind his desk, his folded hands resting lightly on it. The candles about the room reflected off his glasses perched at the end of his crooked nose in brief bursts of light when he looked up. "Miss Granger," he said pleasantly. Dumbledore extended his hand and indicated to one of the wide overstuffed chairs angled in front of his desk. "Please sit down." Jean walked over to one of the chairs and once she was comfortable Dumbledore turned and looked at McGonagall. "Thank you, Minerva," he said, "you may go."

Professor McGonagall nodded curtly. Jean turned in her chair and watched the professor leave. Lily and the three Marauders stayed where they were in the back of the room. Jean's eyes lingered on the looks on their faces. James and Remus looked concerned. Lily looked angry, but Sirius looked furious. Jean turned her head back to the front, wondering more than ever why she was called here.

"Miss Granger," said Professor Dumbledore garnering Jean's attention. "I would usually open a conversation with pleasantries, but considering the circumstances, I will get to the point." Jean nodded once, now not knowing what to suspect. "Miss Evans," said Professor Dumbledore, "accompanied by Mr. Black, Mr. Potter, and Mr. Lupin, informed me that there was an incident between yourself and Miss Narcissa Black this afternoon."

"Yes sir," Jean responded, "she called me a Mudblood, sir."

"I see," Dumbledore said quietly. "Was that all that happened?"

Jean nodded. "Yes sir."

Dumbledore paused and looked at her for a long time before he spoke. "Miss Granger, I'm going to have to ask you to roll up your sleeves."

Jean froze, wondering why she was called here about the scar on her arm, which Dumbledore had already seen it on the first day she arrived. She did as she was told and pulled up the sleeve of her robes revealing the word. Jean heard from the back of the room the sounds of Remus, James and Sirius seeing the mark for the first time. The omnipotent cloud that was their presence in the back of the room darkened even more. Dumbledore took Jeans’ arm in his hand and ran his fingers over the letters carved into he skin. Jean winced slightly, even when barely touched her wound sometimes still stung. "Miss Granger," said Dumbledore slowly, "Did Narcissa Black or any students at this school do this to you?"

Jean had to force her jaw not to drop, understanding everything. When Lily had told the others they had come to the conclusion that Narcissa had at one point done this to her, and that was the source of her nightmares. Jean shook her head in a way that the audience behind her could clearly see it. "No, Professor, no. This happened…" Jean's tongue stopped moving as the images of the true events of her injury ran through her mind like a speeding car. "This happened before I came here."

"I see," said Dumbledore relinquishing Jean's hand, "then if this act has not been committed at my school there is nothing more I can do here." Dumbledore was doing his best to end the
The four in the back of the room began to move, their mood still black but more relaxed now than before. Jean stood and walked a few steps to join them.

"Miss Granger," said Dumbledore from his desk. "Could I borrow another moment of your time?"

Jean nodded, "Of course." She turned and saw the rest of her companions lingering at the door. "It's fine," she said quietly when they showed no signs of leaving. "Go. I'll catch up with you later." With a small, but genial smile, she coaxed them out of the room.

Jean turned and returned to the seat she had occupied. Dumbledore was still sitting behind his desk silently.

Jean spoke after a moment. "I got all excited for nothing it seems," Jean said casually. "At first I thought I was being brought here because you needed to tell me something about my…situation."

"Which is why you are still here, Miss Granger."

Jean shot up out of her chair and with her palms down and fingers splayed onto the wood she leaned over Dumbledore's desk. "You found something?" she said excitedly, "Oh, thank you. When can I go home?"

Dumbledore was silent for a long moment and when he did speak he did so reluctantly. "Miss Granger," Dumbledore said quietly, "there is no way to send you back to your time."

Jean felt her heart fall from her chest and into her feet. "What?" she said, feeling all the air leaving her lungs, "What?"

"Time Turners," Dumbledore continued," are relatively new pieces of magic. They are untested, and have proven to be volatile and dangerous. On top of that, they have only been able to go into the past, a direction you do not wish to go any further."

Jean felt herself falling. She reached out and grabbed the arm of the chair behind her to support herself as she steadied herself into the seat. "This…This—I don't understand. But—I…I—" Jean jerked her head up towards Dumbledore, her eyes wide.

Dumbledore stood up and walked around his desk. "I know what your going to ask, and the answer is no. I will not risk the life of my student by firing Killing Curses at you." Dumbledore knelt on the ground and Jean stared at his hand that reached out and held hers. "I'm so sorry, but you will have to remain here."

Jean felt her body shaking. She looked up into Dumbledore's kind blue eyes that at one point she thought she'd never see again. What an exchange she had to make in order to. She shook her head slowly. "No," Jean said numbly, pulling her hand out of her professor's. "No…It can't be…No!"

Jean stood up quickly and before Dumbledore could stop her, she was sprinting for the door. "Miss Granger, wait. Jean!"

Jean thought she heard Dumbledore call out her true name, but she couldn't be sure. By that time she was already down the stairs. Jean ran blindly though the empty corridors her body instinctively taking her to her safe harbor while her mind drowned itself in her misery. It was only a few minutes before Jean saw the stone doors of the Room of Requirement materializing. Jean wrenched open the doors before they fully manifested and ran down the dark empty room, the Mirror of Erised appearing at the end of it, Ron and Harry's faces trapped behind the glass. Jean crashed into
the mirror sobbing hysterically the moment she made contact. Her fingernails clawed at the glass as if she could fight her way to them. Jean's body was spent as well as her mind. Only a few minutes after that explosion of energy Jean slunk down the front of the frame and curled up beside the mirror and cried quietly for a long, long time.

At one point a broad pillar of light broke through Jean's darkness and created an elongated shadow across the floor of the room. She tore her face away from the mirror she had for so long been staring at and saw a figure walking towards her. She stood up quickly.

"I thought I might find you here, Miss Granger" Dumbledore's voice echoed in the dark, cavernous room.

Jean rubbed her now suddenly tired eyes. "What time is it?" she asked.

"Thirty minutes till midnight," said Dumbledore. "But do not be alarmed. It's alright, you have had a very trying day." By that time Dumbledore had reached Jean. He looked at the Mirror. "It seems you are the most recent student to have discovered the Mirror of Erised." He paused. "And with that look on your face, it seems that this is not the first time you have looked into its depths.

"No sir," said Jean.

Dumbledore sighed, reaching out and lightly touching the glass. "I have told many students before you that this mirror is more of a curse than a blessing and that greater witches and wizards have wasted their lives in front of it. Dumbledore looked at Jean. "Do you see them, your friends, inside?"

Jean nodded. "Yes."

Dumbledore paused. "You must learn to live again, and not use this as a crutch, or this pain that you feel will never relinquish its hold."

Jean sighed. "I just miss them." She paused, letting out a watery sigh. "I care for them so much." Jean closed her eyes, only opening them when she felt Dumbledore's arm wrap around her shoulders and draw her close.

"May I give you a thought?" asked Dumbledore. "I believe that if things went tonight the way that you wanted them, you would have left a group of people who would miss you very much. People, who on this night, proved to both me and you that they care for you."

Jean cocked her head sideways remembering how the people she had known in this time looked in the back of Dumbledore's office. How sad and angry they looked; how hurt at the fact that someone had harmed her; how they cared for her.

Jean let out a long breath, leaning her head up against Dumbledore's shoulder. When Jean looked into the mirror, for a moment, Jean saw herself and her professor standing side-by-side looking into the glass before it dissolved into the image of Harry and Ron. "Professor, can I ask you something? What do you see in the Mirror?"

Now it was Dumbledore's turn to sigh and for a second Jean saw the flicker of pain from his own burden. "I see what you see," he said, "My family that I have lost, and that I am incapable of recovering."
Jean stopped going to see the Mirror of Erised and over time her nightmares gave way to restful slumber as Jean acclimated herself to the time she was now permanently living in. Jean had integrated well into the Marauders day to day life, waking up and spending her evening hours with her roommates, studying with Lily, Remus, and sometimes even Peter, and sitting on the chilled Quidditch stands in her winter clothes watching James and Sirius practice with the rest of the Gryffindor team. The process was slow and subtle, but one day Jean found herself waking up and finding that she was happy.

The early February weather was unnaturally warm that Saturday morning. The sunlight streamed through the windows, surrounding Jean in a womb like warmth with the red fabric of the curtain. Jean lied still with her eyes closed, listening to the movements of Alice, Dorcas, Marlene, and Mary waking up and one by one departing the room to their weekend activities. When the room had settled back into silence, Jean buried herself deeper into her bed sheets, sliding her way back into slumber. It had been a long time since Jean had had a lazy Saturday.

"Jean," said a voice, reaching Jean through her semi-permeable state of unconsciousness. "Jean, wake up."

Jean peeled her eyes open and stared into the over bright eyes of Lily Evans, her head peering though the bed curtains. "Lily," said Jean groggily stretching and rubbing her eyes with the back of her hands. "What is it?"

In Jean's opinion, Lily looked far too perky for a morning they did not have to be awake for classes. She looked like she had been awake for hours. Her hair was pulled back in a headband and she was wearing jeans with a flowing floral print shirt covered in a dark brown jacket. Lily also wore a huge smile on her face, her whole frame practically vibrating with excitement, as if she was privy to a wonderful secret. Lily leaned farther into Jean's bed and whispered, "How would you like to go to Hogsmeade today?"

Jean cocked her head sideways, her lethargy still lingering over her. "But we aren't allowed to go to Hogsmeade today," she said.

Lily laughed lightly, the sudden mischievous streak surprising Jean while Lily pushed open Jean's bed curtains, letting the bright sun cascade over her. "When have rules ever stopped those boys before?" Lily did have a point, Jean surmised. Rules had never stopped Harry, Ron, and herself. She had no reason to believe it would hinder the generation before them. Lily took a few steps away from the bed so that Jean could shimmy out of the sheets. "Come on, get dressed. James is already waiting downstairs."

Jean smiled, wondering if Lily or the others would have allowed her to say no. Lily sat down on a chair and watched as Jean rolled out of bed, showered, and quickly got dressed in her jeans, her trainers, a long sleeved shirt, and a white belted coat, topping her head with a white knitted hat. Jean's small but satisfactory wardrobe was another credit to Dumbledore's kindness. Since Jean's street clothes she had so unexpectedly arrived in were so torn and blood stained, Dumbledore had paid out of pocket for new clothes for Jean. Dumbledore had also bequeathed Jean with a small allowance, which he gave her at the beginning of each month. On the past two occasions she had received this gift, Jean immediately returned it in order to pay her professor back for her books, school materials, and clothes he had graciously given her.
Jean inspected herself in the mirror before turning and walking over to Lily who already stood by the door. "Alright," said Jean, "lets go."

As Jean and Lily descended down the tight circular staircase, Lily looped her arm with Jean's to pull her down faster. "Oh, I'm so excited! This is your first time to Hogsmeade. We are going to have so much fun." Jean, as she was towed along behind the redhead, had a sneaky suspicion that this was one of the first times Lily had so blatantly broken school rules and was caught up in the excitement and the thrill that was the Marauders life on a daily basis.

When Lily and Jean entered the Gryffindor Common Room it was empty save for James Potter sitting on the couch, his long legs stretched and crossed at the ankles on the coffee table. James swung himself into a standing position when Lily and Jean reached the bottom of the steps. "I heard you coming all the way down the stairs," he joked as the two women approached. "If we get caught, I'm blaming you, Lily."

Lily smacked James on the chest, but with her hand still in contact with his shirt, Lily drew herself up close and kissed James quickly on the lips. "Where are Sirius, Remus, and Peter?"

"I took them on already," James responded, "there's too many of us for one trip."

James reached down into one of his back pockets. As he did so James glanced up at Jean, his smile similar to Lily's. "Ready to see something cool?" James produced a mottled colored folded up piece of thin fabric, fluidly opening it with his fingers. Jean's eyes widened, instantly recognizing the Potter family's Invisibility Cloak, even before James tossed it over his shoulders, his body dissolved into nothing, leaving only his head. Jean suppressed a smile, a wave of nostalgia washing over her. She remembered when Harry did the exact same thing. When Jean wasn't expecting it, it gave her quite a shock to see Harry playing chess with Ron with just his head and his hands. "What do you think?" James' voice interrupted her thoughts and Jean jolted back to reality, remembering that she was seeing the cloak for the first time.

"It's amazing," Jean said, reaching out for the unseen material. It felt silky and lighter than air under her fingers. "Where did you get it?"

"My dad gave it to me," he said, parting the fabric with his fingers, revealing both it and the rest of his body. "It's been in our family for generations."

Jean nodded, seemingly fascinated.

"Alright," said James, adjusting his cloak to make room for Lily and Jean. "Get under here you two. I don't want to leave Sirius, Remus, or Peter to their own devices for too long."

Lily and Jean got under the Invisibility Cloak with James and the three of them shuffled out of the common room, out the portrait hole, and down the corridors. It was slow progress but immensely easier than when Jean had attempted this before. At seventeen, cramming two boys and one girl, one of which was much taller than the other two, was significantly harder than squeezing an average height boy and two small girls underneath a piece of fabric designed for one person. With a speed Jean didn't think was possible under the circumstances, Jean, James and Lily made their way down the corridor containing the statue of the one-eyed witch, which concealed the secret passageway to the Honeyduke's cellar.

"Get closer to me," James whispered to the pair of them as he shifted closer to the statue. Carefully James parted the fabric, with one hand keeping the opening from getting larger and revealing them, the other pulling out his wand from his pocket and gently pushing it through the small hole, his wand immediately making contact with the statue. He tapped his wand three times on the humped
back of the witch and muttered, "Dissendium."

With a low popping sound the stone back of the witch shifted, revealing the secret passageway. Jean moved with James as he got as close as he could to the statue. "Lily, you first," he whispered quickly. Lily swapped spots with James and, with one foot on the pedestal of the statue, hopped into the opening. "Okay, Jean," said James.

Jean shifted and used James' hand to get up on the base and eased herself down into the dark hole. The dim light of a wand illuminated Remus, whose wand was the source, Lily, who stood by Peter, and Sirius. The latter stepped forward, extending his hands and wrapped them around Jean's midsection, gently lowering her to the ground. Not a moment after Jean was settled, James mutely landed onto the ground beside her and the secret door slid to a close.

James followed Remus' suit and created a light with his wand as well, making it just light enough to see around them. James took the lead with Lily and began to make their way through the tunnel. Remus and Peter followed them, and Sirius and Jean brought up the rear, Sirius too lighting his own wand.

There was not much conversation on their underground trek except with the person immediately beside them, most of their concentration being taken up by pecking their way across the rocky, uneven floor. Jean felt her foot catch on something and stumbled forward slightly. Jean felt a hand synch itself around her elbow.

"Careful," said Sirius, reeling her back upright. His hand lingered on Jean's arm as he lowered his wand arm closer to the ground, guiding the pair of them across the pitted surface.

"How did you find this place?" Jean asked.

Sirius laughed low in his throat, as if he was amused with something. "Lots and lots of looking," he said. Sirius extended his arm farther out to see past their other companions in front of them. "We're nearly there," he said, "come on."

The combined illumination of the three wands revealed a flimsy staircase ascending a few feet off the ground and ending at the stone ceiling. James nimbly dashed up the arcaic wooden planks, Lily following on his heels. Peter lit his wand and he, Remus, and Sirius shined their wands at the ceiling while James ran his fingers over the ceiling looking for the seams of the hidden door in the Honeydukes basement. James coughed once and rubbed dust away from his glasses that had fallen on him when he reached up.

"It seems that no one has used this passage in a while," Jean commented quietly to Sirius.

"We used to use this passage all the time," said Sirius, "but around fifth year we...uh...err...started using another passage. This one works better for the number we have."

Jean understood what Sirius was trying to steer away from. During the Marauders' fifth year James, Sirius, and Peter had succeeded in becoming Animagi and could, without being spotted, use the hidden tunnel beneath the Whomping Willow and enter Hogsmeade via the Shrieking Shack. Using that passage with Jean would steer her closer to Remus' secret. As James began pushing up against the door, a fine layer of dust and dirt covering his shoulders, Jean began to ponder over the situation of Remus and his 'furry little problem.' At the rate of which she was interacting with the Marauders, it was only a matter of time before she accidentally discovered it or accidentally revealed that she already knew. Jean didn't know which one was the least acceptable option. Jean had already seen the Marauders' reaction to people who had knowledge about werewolves, proving that Remus' secret was something the Marauders carefully protected. She wondered how Lily
discovered it, since she also reacted similarly to the Marauders and withdrew from Jean until Remus vouched for her. Jean wondered how many arguments James and the others had on Lily's behalf when it came to Lily knowing Remus' secret. If it took Lily seven years to be worthy in the Marauders' eyes of such knowledge, Jean shuddered at how long it would take for her to gain their trust.

Jean's thoughts came back to the present when, with the grinding of stone against stone James had heaved the door away from the secret entrance and stuck his head up through the opening to ascertain if the basement was empty. With his hand, he motioned for everyone to come up as he pulled himself through. Lily, Peter and Remus went after James, followed by Sirius, who turned around and pulled Jean up into the Honeydukes basement.

The Marauders, Lily and Jean carefully crept around the maze of stacked boxes containing Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans, chocolate frogs, pumpkin pastries, and sugar quills, and slowly ascended the stairs that creaked under every slight change of weight. James once again paused and listened through the door before pushing it open. "Welcome to Hogsmeade," said Sirius to Jean.

Jean had not seen Honeydukes or any part of Hogsmeade since last May at the end of her sixth year and she couldn't contain the pleasant emotions that gushed from her at the sight of the interior of the candy shop covered from floor to ceiling in a rainbow of colored packaging, the automatons in the front window advertising the newest product and the equally as cheery and colorful lane of buildings past the window. Jean looked up and on the ceiling there were several revolving light fixtures, which, like a kaleidoscope, reflected light off the numerous glass cabinetry. Jean felt a tug on her sleeve and was pulled out of her thoughts and the memories that came along with them. She looked at Sirius, and behind him all the others. They all had warm expressions on their faces, vicariously enjoying Jean's seemingly first time in the magical village. "Come on," said Sirius, guiding Jean toward the door, "we have so much to show you."

The six Hogwarts students stepped out onto the street in front of Honeydukes, Jean's head swiveling from one side to the other. It was like reuniting with an old friend. Everything was there, polished and untouched, no Dementors, no Ministry officials, no Aurors, and no Death Eaters. Jean was thirteen years old again when Hogsmeade was shiny and new to her with her friends beside her. Jean wanted to rediscover everything. "What are we going to see first?" she asked the people around her.

"Well," said Remus methodically, going down the list of everything one could see and do in the hamlet, "there's Zonko's, which is a joke shop, and there's The Three Broomsticks, and Dervish and Banges—"

"Come on Remus," James interrupted. "Let's just give her the grand tour. You'd like that right, Jean?"

Jean nodded to convey her enthusiasm, happy that she didn't have to choose and risk exposing herself. She also wanted to give the Marauders the gift of letting them tow her around like it was her first time in Hogsmeade, and all the excitement it seemingly gave them.

"Alright then," said Sirius, "let's go."

James, Sirius, Remus, and Peter blazed the trail while Lily and Jean walked a few steps behind them, enjoying the sights in and around Hogsmeade's red roofed buildings as they traveled down the street to Zonko's Joke Shop. The last time Jean had seen the building it had been dark and boarded up, falling into a state of dilapidation due to the rise in Voldemort's power. Now the business was booming, the bright windows polished to shine in the sun, doors thrown open emitting a discordant symphony of whistles and bangs from the collection of items within. A neon
sign emblazing the name seemingly wrote itself as it circled the emporium in a never-ending stream of glowing purple cursive. Inside were floor to ceiling dark shelves, shoved together so closely you could only pass between them in a densely packed two person wide line, overflowing onto the multicolored tile floor with dung bombs, nose biting teacups, and things Jean had never even seen before. Jean and the rest of her group dispersed and wandered from aisle to aisle. Jean saw Peter passing Lily a wedge of off green frog spawn soap, using the now empty space in the shelf as leverage for getting to things higher than his height would allow him to reach. Lily held the seemingly offending item by the tips of her fingers, the corners of her lips turning down into a sharper and sharper angle. She quickly passed it into Remus' hands and the latter smiled at her back while she vigorously rubbed her palm on her pants leg. Jean smiled at Lily too and continued to walk through the surprisingly congested aisles. At the front near the counter Jean saw Sirius and James leaning over a glass case as the shop-keeper scooped out a paper bag full of Hiccuph Sweets, thumb sized pink cubes that if you didn't look carefully could be mistaken for gum, much to the amusement of the giver. When James and Sirius split the payment of the package the pair went through the aisles and collected their remaining compatriots and left the joke shop. Even on a day not designated for school trips, Zonko's was still uncomfortably crowded with locals and neither Jean nor her friends wanted the other shoppers to notice the out of place Hogwarts students.

Once outside, Lily immediately took the lead and guided them next door to Gladrag's Wizardwear. Lily took Jean by the hand and towed her back to the women's section showcasing on magically turning display hangers the colors and styles of the upcoming spring. The four boys that followed drug their feet, increasing the distance between themselves and Lily and Jean, a look of begrudged toleration on their faces. Lily rolled her eyes and leaned close to Jean's ear when they reached the rotating hangers. "Let's try things on until the boys go crazy."

Jean had a suspicion that Lily's choice of words had more than one definition. Jean was surprised. Until today, Jean had never pegged Lily to have a mischievous streak. It had to be the Marauder's influence, particularly James. A warm feeling filled Jean's chest when she thought about how Harry and Ron had brought out her more wild side from time to time. "Oh, I couldn't possibly," said Jean, politely declining, searching for a lie to avoid confessing she had no money of her own and relied on Dumbledore's allowances. "My bra straps are too wide for me to think anything without sleeves looks good on me."

Lily rolled her eyes good-naturedly and laughed before her eyes caught something on the rotating racks. "I like this," she reached out and plucked a sleeveless spring dress off of the hangers and examined it. It was a cream colored dress with large purple flowers printed onto the fabric in what looked like wide strokes of a paintbrush. "I'm going to try this on. Be honest."

Lily went to the back of the store and slipped inside a dressing room. As Jean followed Lily, James approached her shortly followed by Sirius, Remus, and Peter.

"Is Lily trying something on?" asked James as he came to a stop beside Jean, both looking at the trio of wooden doors that made up the dressing rooms.

Jean nodded. "She said to be honest."

James laughed and folded his arms into his chest, leaning back on his heels, waiting for Lily to emerge.

The brass doorknob turned and Lily came out wearing her outfit clearly pleased with herself. She twirled in it once. "What do you think?" asked Lily.

"I think it looks really nice, Lily," said Jean. James and the other boys echoed similar sentiments.
Lily smiled and went back inside the dressing room. A moment later she cracked the door open. "James," she said through the sliver. "Can you unZip me?" Lily backed her back up to the space in the door. James reached though the gap and pulled the zipper through the stubborn fabric. Peter blushed and shifted away from the sight of Lily's bare back, an act that made Remus chuckle at him. Jean wandered a few feet away to a low lying table that had a large silver bowl set on it containing pairs of earrings. Jean ran her fingers through the baubles, pulling out a pair. She placed one of the set in her ear and looked at it in the small, round mirror beside the bowl. The earring was a round black stone, encircled with a single ring of gemstones. As she examined them they reminded her of Sirius, the color being his surname and the star he was named for.

"Those are pretty."

Jean hoped that she didn't jolt as much as she thought she did when Sirius spoke behind her, his grey eyes reflecting back in the glass. "You think so?" As Jean spoke she, without thinking, reached up and started fiddling with her hair.

"No," said Sirius, he reached out and wrapped his fingers around her wrists; pulling her hands away from her face, "don't hide them." With the tips of his fingers, Sirius brushed Jean's hair away, exposing the side of her face and the length of her neck. "There," said Sirius.

Jean couldn't be sure, but for a moment she could have sworn Sirius' fingers lingered on her skin.

Lily decided not to buy the dress saying that it was still too cold for a spring dress and that it would sink down to the bottom of her drawers and never be seen again. At this point the Marauders had become so bored and restless that James begged to go to Sprint Witches, the Quidditch supply store at the end of High Street and across the road. Lily rolled her eyes as she walked, already consenting to what she was protesting, knowing that she would be given no other option "Your going to spend all day in there James," Lily groaned. "What haven't you looked at that wasn't there two weeks ago?"

James and Sirius both gave Lily looks of shock. "Lily," said Sirius flabbergasted. "They just got the new Nimbus model. It's the fastest broom in the world right now."

Jean hid a smile remembering Harry and Ron and how they talked Quidditch for hours on end. Jean couldn't resist the thought of an inside joke with her from-the-future self "What Nimbus model is it?"

"The Nimbus 1001," said James.

Jean chuckled in her head, imagining Harry's reaction to such an outdated broom being the cream of the crop in his father's time in comparison to his Firebolt or even his old Nimbus 2000. She imagined Ron would say he could run faster than the broom could fly and mentally laughed even harder.

At the end of High Street the group divided. James, Sirius, Remus, and Peter went to Sprint Witches while Lily and Jean meandered around outside, window-shopping in nearby stores. While Lily was busy examining items through the thick panes of glass of Dervish and Banges, Jean watched the boys through the large display windows of the Quidditch store. Sirius and James were taking turns holding the new Nimbus 1001 almost reverently yet methodically examining its aerodynamics, its weight, and its balance. The shopkeeper stood a few inches behind them answering all their questions. Jean smiled. He must have known them and half suspected the pair of them to fly out the door with the new broomstick. Remus was on the other side of the store. Jean could see him through the snitches and the quaffles placed on clear pedestals running his fingers over the backs of books that took up a small corner, seemingly more interested in the history of
Quidditch than actually playing it. Beyond him, Peter was looking at a reinforced steel box of bludgers that apparently could fly faster and hit harder.

Jean winced at that thought and turned away to look at what Lily was looking at in the Dervish and Banges window. But Jean stopped, something else catching her eye. At the end of the lane extending off of High Street was a multistoried grey building built of stone and colorless wood. It sat slanted on its foundation and seemed to only be supported magically. Near the door, a wooden sign in the shape of a hog's head, bloodied around its severed neck, its snout open in a post mortem grimace, swung on rusty chains in the light breeze. The door beside the sign creaked open and a tall but stocky man stepped out wearing a work apron and holding a broom, with which he began to sweep the stoop. A small white goat tottered outside beside him and began to nibble on the nearby shrubbery. Jean had seen Alberforth Dumbledore only a few times in her old life and the rest she had learned from Rita Skeeter's book she had picked up in Bathilda Bagshot's house. When Jean looked at him she saw the similarities between the barkeep and the Headmaster of Hogwarts. They both were around the same height though the younger brother was by far the broader man. Alberforth did not have Albus' long silver beard, but he did have one sticking out prominently from his chin. Jean couldn't be sure from the distance but she thought Albus and his brother shared the same bright blue eyes.

Alberforth paused as if he sensed someone was watching him. He looked up at Jean, their eyes locking for a moment before she looked away.

"Jean," Jean turned her head and looked over her shoulder at Lily who was standing in the doorway. "Are you coming in?"

Jean nodded. "Yeah."

Lily was right. James, Sirius, Remus, and Peter stayed in the Quidditch shop for a very long time. Jean and Lily could only occupy themselves with the odds and ends of Dervish and Banges and the surrounding shops for so long before they sought them out. Lily found the Marauders first, Jean just a few paces behind her, gathered at the back of the shop with the storeowner. "James," said Lily, "can we hurry it up, please? Jean and I are starving."

James looked up from the Nimbus 1001 on the counter; in his hand was a packet of ordering forms. "Give us ten minutes Lils. I'm in the middle of back ordering this broom. This model is so new and so popular that it's already sold out."

Lily let out a sigh before Remus spoke up. "Why don't you two run along ahead? We'll finish up here and meet you at the Three Broomsticks."

"Okay," Lily responded, then turned to James. "We'll eat without you if you take all day," she said, poking him the chest when he turned to look at her.

"Lily-flower," said James, "when have we ever been known to miss a meal?" He chortled and leaned forward kissing her on the forehead. "I'll meet you there," he whispered against her skin, "I promise."

Lily reached up and pulled down James' chin, his lips coming to a rest against hers. They kissed for a few seconds but the act was so tender and so intimate that Jean felt in the back of her mind that she should look away; but she didn't, James and Lily's love too beautiful to turn her eyes from. Lily smiled against James' lips and pulled away. Lily turned and Jean walked next to her towards the exit.

"Get us a good table."
"No promises, Sirius," responded Lily.

Sirius peeked his grey eyes over the magazine he was reading, languidly lazing against a wall. "Love you too," he called.

Lily rolled her eyes as she closed the shop door and with Jean walked out into the street. Lily swung her arm over Jean's shoulders. "Jeans," she said as the pair walked. "I'm so glad you came here. They wear me out sometimes." Lily huffed out a laugh and Jean smiled.

"Especially Sirius?" asked Jean.

Lily nodded her head vigorously. "Yes, especially Sirius. Merlin, I thought James had a big head before I started dating him but Sirius takes the gold in that department." Lily laughed a little again before the tone of her voice sobered. "But he is really sweet," she continued, "and you'd never find a more loyal friend than Sirius when it comes to the people he cares about." Lily paused. "All of them really. They have been the best of friends since day one of school and they have only gotten closer over time." Lily paused again and Jean thought she could see a subtle shift in her features. "I'm kind of jealous really," she said quietly, "of what they have. It's rare. Sometimes your best friend from your childhood isn't your best friend when you become an adult." Lily inclined her head slightly away from Jean, and for a brief moment Jean saw her green eyes cast a gaze far away from either of them. Jean wondered to whom she was referring to.

Lily's eyes suddenly widened as she came back to earth. "Oh shoot," she said quickly. "I forgot." Lily turned to Jean. "Jean, would you mind if we made a quick stop at the post office? I need to pick up something."

"Sure," said Jean instinctively turning towards the post office and taking a few steps before she remembered that she wasn't supposed to know where it was and let Lily take a leading position. "What are we picking up?"

For the second time in recent minutes Lily had a less than cheery look on her face. "A pain potion for my owl. He hurt his wing."

"Oh, I'm sorry," said Jean. "What happened?"

Jean saw Lily's head bend a little towards the ground, a flush creeping up her neck. "My sister," said Lily, her voice suddenly wooden, "Petunia. She and her husband were having dinner with my parents when my owl flew through the living room. She hit it with a book she threw as it went out the window." She laughed darkly. "I got a very pointed letter from her after that." Lily looked up at Jean. "She's a Muggle."

Jean nodded, not saying anything. A spark of frustration and anger crackled inside her chest at the thought that Petunia Dursley tried to make Lily's life as miserable as she tried to make Harry's. "I'm sorry your owl got hurt." Jean's voice was equally as subdued as Lily's.

Lily swallowed. "It's okay. She only bruised his shoulder." Lily after a moment got into a better mood, along with Jean. "Hey Jean," Lily asked as they neared the post office. "You never get any mail from your family. Do you have a way to get into contact with them?"

Jean stiffened, realizing that she'd have to come up with something to explain why her parents never wrote to her, or she back to them.

Lily's eyes suddenly got huge and Jean saw in her face that Lily felt like she was a terrible friend. "If you want to borrow Archimedes any time you want," she said, "I'm so sorry I didn't offer—"
"It's okay Lily. My parents and I...we don’t talk too much. They never understood," she gestured with her hand to everything around them, "all of this." Jean felt horrible, her latest lie weighing down her tongue. Her parents were wonderful people and supported her in ways she could never thank them enough for. But, there was a reason why she obliviated her parents and sent them to Australia, to protect them from her life and the dangers within it, as she had to do now by severing them from her completely. "It's one of the reasons I decided to leave the Salem Witch Academy and come to Hogwarts. It made things easier." Jean looked over at Lily and saw that her words had pushed Lily deep inside her own thoughts. Jean knew what she was thinking. Lily was at the bridge that Jean crossed over when she decided to erase her parents' memories; the choice all muggle-born children faced, the crossing over completely into the magical world, as they had to, as they were meant to, and leave the muggle world and everything they knew in it behind.

When the pair entered the post office they silently parted to opposite sides of the building. Lily went to the counter and told the witch who worked there what ailed her owl and listened to the recommendations of what she should buy. Jean went to the wall that displayed all the caged owls for sale.

There were mostly barn owls with a couple of silvery grey screech owls intermingled with them. There was one great horned owl, whose feathered chest puffed up when Jean looked at it, that boasted on the sale tag that it could make international deliveries. However, the one that caught Jean's attention was the snowy owl directly to the great horned owl's left. The owl had more grey in its feathers than Hedwig did, but the differences stopped there. The owl twisted its head, its over bright yellow eyes staring at her. Jean put her fingers up to the bars of the cage and the owl fluttered off its perch, tottering over clumsily to nuzzle its feathered face against her fingers. Jean smiled, remembering Hedwig and how affectionate she was with Harry. Hedwig was Harry's only friend during the summer months and they were close. Jean remembered how devastated he was after he had lost her while he was escaping Death Eaters as he fled from Privet Drive.

"Boy, Lily," Jean and Lily jerked their heads up, startled by Sirius' sudden appearance in the door with James right behind him. "When you say no promises, you mean no promises. These are probably the worst seats in The Three Broomsticks."

Jean tried not to laugh at Sirius' tease but Lily had no trouble at all. Lily would have swatted Sirius' arm if James hadn't beat her to it while he walked over to Lily, who was in the process of paying.

Sirius noticed Jean, who turned away from the owl to look at the three of them, and walked over. "It's pretty," he said putting his palm up against the cage.

Jean nodded. "Yeah. It reminds me of one my friend used to have," she said idly.

"You want it?" asked Sirius. "My gift to you."

"Oh, no, Sirius. You don't have to do that," said Jean. "Besides, I'm much more of a cat person."

Sirius pursed his lips and for a moment Jean wondered if Padfoot took offense to that comment. He tapped his temple twice with his pointer finger. "I'll make a mental note of that," he said.

The pair of them turned their heads and saw Lily and James preparing to leave the store. They walked over to them and followed them out onto the street.

"Remus and Peter are already waiting for us at The Three Broomsticks," said James as they walked past the two buildings that separated the post office from the pub. The Three Broomsticks was larger and more put together than the Hog's Head. It was only two stories but it was wider than the Hog's Head was tall. The doors and the large windows were open to let in the fledgling spring
weather. The bristles of the three brooms magically sealed together at the roof's gable quivered as the wind rushed through them. The smells of food and fire whiskey washed out over them accompanied by the chatter of the patrons.

James, Sirius, Lily and Jean slipped in through the door, avoiding the crowd around the bar and found Remus and Peter sitting at a large round table tucked into the corner by the open window. The four of them sat down.

"Rosemerta come over here yet?" asked James, settling himself into his chair.

"No," said Peter, the one angled the best to see the entire interior. "But here she comes now."

Jean turned around to see Madame Rosemerta walking over to them. She looked younger, but at the same time she looked the same as Jean remembered. Her skin still had a tanned hue to it, her spiral curls, tied up onto the back of her head bounced as she walked, and she still had a very distinctive lilt to her voice when she talked. Rosemerta stopped at the table, busying herself with an order pad. "Welcome to The Three Broomsticks. What can I get you to—hey, what are you guys doing here?"

As if he had rehearsed it, Sirius swung himself about in his chair, one arm resting on the table, the other on the chair's back, his legs crossed at the ankles. "Why, Madame Rosemerta," he said, "to see you, of course."

Madame Rosemerta looked at him, one of her eyebrows raised skeptically, but it was clear he had already significantly softened her. "Always the charmer, aren't you Sirius Black," she said.

"Only to the ladies in my life," Sirius responded, his grey eyes glinting.

For Jean, watching Sirius flirt with Madame Rosemerta was like watching a predatory animal, like a lion or a snake. Even she, as a peripheral observer, felt hypnotized by the way he spoke, the way his body moved when he talked, how his eyes shined like sunlit steel when he said something clever. Jean was so absorbed in watching him that she didn't realize Rosemerta had turned to get her order.

"Would you like anything, dear?"

Jean jerked herself back to reality. "Yes," she said. "I'll have a butterbeer and whatever the special is today."

The special of the day was a type of meat stew served with mashed potatoes and boiled carrots. It was warm and delicious, coating the inside of Jean's mouth with fatty grease and gravy, the butterbeer adding an extra layer of sugar. The Marauders, Lily and Jean spent an unknown amount of hours there eating, drinking, and talking about everything and nothing at the same time. When the pub's crowd died down Rosemerta sat herself down at the table and joined in on their conversations brining a free butterbeer for everyone which was everyone's fourth or fifth glass. By the time James looked at his watch Jean, along with everyone else, was full, her face warm and flushed from the butterbeer, lounging in her chair.

"It's getting late," said James, "we should be getting back soon." He turned to Rosemerta who was standing. "Thank you Madame Rosemerta," he said.

"No problem," she said, "you all come back soon."

Sirius kissed the air in her direction and winked at her. Rosemerta rolled her eyes at him, laughing as she disappeared into the back room.
The six Hogwarts students staggered outside, James and Lily leading the way, their arms around each other's waists. Sirius was laughing hysterically at Peter who had mistaken he and James' Zonko purchase as chewing gum and was hiccoughing incessantly. Jean walked alongside Remus at the back of the group.

"Did you have fun today, Jean?" Remus asked.

Jean turned to look at him. "Yes," she said smiling at him. "Thank you all for taking me."

Remus returned the grin. "You're welcome. I'm..." Remus' sentence died in his throat and Jean saw him pale slightly. If she weren't watching him, she would have missed the quick shifting of his eyes from Jean to what was in front of him and back and forth again. Jean turned her head. James had led them off of High Street and was taking them up a path winding its way through the tree line. Jean knew where this path ended. It went to the Shrieking Shack, or more importantly the hidden tunnel into Hogwarts underneath the Shrieking Shack. "Prongs!" Remus shouted. James turned around instantly. "Where are you going?" Remus was speaking loudly and deliberately. "Honeydukes is that way."

James had a look of confusion on his face before he saw Jean and his eyes widened in recognition of his unconscious error. He played it off quickly and rather well in Jean's opinion if she hadn't known better. James laughed putting his hand to his head and shaking it. "Oh yeah," he said taking Lily by the arm and walking back down the hill. "I forgot where was going." He laughed again, "Butterbeer has me not thinking straight. That's embarrassing."

The group back tracked to High Street and began to make their way to Honeydukes. Remus was silent beside Jean the entire way.

When the Marauders, Lily and Jean made it to the candy store they quickly darted in, around the counter towards the basement door. James opened it and was down about the first two steps before he came to a dead halt uttering a hushed stream of swear words. "Back up, back up," he whispered urgently, leaning back against the others as he walked himself back up the stairs. James shut the cellar door.

"What is it?" asked Remus.

"He's doing inventory," said James. "We can't get through the way."

The six shuffled out back onto the street all the while Peter trying to articulate through his hiccoughs. "Why—hiccough—why don't—hiccough—wh—"

James jerked his wand out and aimed it at Peter's throat. "Relascreo."

Peter's hiccoughs stopped immediately. "Thank you," he said. "Why don't we just wait until he leaves?"

"It's too risky," said Sirius. "There's no one walking around anymore. If someone sees us they'll get suspicious."

James was quiet, apparently doing some very quick thinking. The Shrieking Shack was the most obvious and easiest choice, but he had to work himself around the variable that was Jean. He reached into his back pocket and pulled out his tightly folded Invisibility Cloak. "I'll take Lily, Sirius, and Peter under the cloak and take them back to Hogwarts. Remus, you take Jean up to the Shrieking Shack. It's off the road so no one will see you. Sirius and I will come back for you."

Jean could tell from the tone of James' voice that he was asking Remus' permission, that if Remus
said no James would without question formulate another plan.

Remus nodded once. "Okay."

The group quickly and quietly retraced their steps, clinging to the lengthening shadows in case anyone happened to be watching from their sitting room window until the paths forked with one continuing down the main road and the other to the Shrieking Shack. The group diverged and as Remus and Jean began walking up the hill she wondered how all of them would be able to fit under the cloak. But then she realized they wouldn't have to. As soon as Jean couldn't see them anymore James, Sirius, and Peter would transform. Wormtail would ride on Padfoot's back and Lily, who would be wearing the cloak, would ride of Prongs. At the speed of a stag and a dog pelting through the woods they'd drop off Peter and Lily and be back in a few minutes.

Jean and Remus walked to the apex of the hill in relative silence. She could tell Remus was tense about she and him being near the shack, that its very existence was because he was a werewolf, a secret he had kept from his fellow students for seven years, a secret he continued to keep from Jean despite the fact that she already knew.

In the gathering dark Jean could make out the Shrieking Shack, several yards back from the high barbed wire fence that separated them. She leaned against one of the fence posts and examined the house. The roof hadn't collapsed, which was the most significant difference between this time and her old time. The siding wasn't rotting and falling off as badly, and half the windows that were supposed to be shattered were still whole. Jean figured the inside was as destroyed as it ever was. There wasn't much defense for furniture against a rampaging werewolf.

Jean shifted and saw that Remus was staring at her. Remus turned his head and looked at the house too. "It's supposedly the most haunted building in Britain."

Jean remembered her telling Ron that at least three times before they even got to the Shrieking Shack. She hid her nostalgic smile in her hand. "Yeah, I think I heard that somewhere before."

"Oh, it's certainly haunted," said a voice behind them, "but by something more surprising than ghosts."

Jean felt her smile slide off her face and shatter on the ground. She turned on her heel just in time to see Severus Snape sliding out of the shadows of the trees.

"What are you doing here, Severus?" asked Remus.

"I could ask you the same thing, Lupin," said Snape smoothly as he stepped forward. "What an example you make to the rest of us lesser students, a Prefect, Head Boy, and Head Girl all running around Hogsmeade." Severus paused. "I wonder what the Headmaster would have to say about that."

"You and I both know that you're not here because of James, Lily, or me. You're here because of Sirius and Jean embarrassing Narcissa."

"That too," said Snape. "Where is the blood-traitor?"

Jean spun around. "Clearly not here," she snapped. She would not be victimized by another version of Draco Malfoy, Severus Snape especially. "Why all the bravado Severus?" she said sarcastically. "Did Narcissa send you to do her dirty work? A reminder to herself of why she keeps you around, perhaps?"

Snape clenched his teeth together, his onyx eyes flashing. "You will not speak to me like that,
Severus' comment did nothing but rile Jean up even more. "Don't get uppity with me Severus Snape," Jean shouted, not caring if she spouted up something she wasn't supposed to know. "I know your not pure-blood, and to them, you and are in the same boat!" Snape curled his lips back onto his teeth, seething, at a loss for words. Jean felt a fiendish sense of satisfaction at being able to talk to her Potions professor the way she had wanted to since she was eleven years old. Jean turned back to Remus, physically blocking off Severus. "Go away Severus, no one wants you here."

But Severus found his voice. "You sure about that Granger?" he called. "You sure about being out here with Remus Lupin all by yourself? You never know what could happen. What's that old Muggle saying again? A wolf in sheep's clothing; or rather, a werewolf in wizard's clothing."

The blood drained out of Remus' face, his jaw dropping into his chest. Jean found her face mirroring his, but after that a cold hand of fury gripped her, snapping her jaw shut and steeling it. She turned around sharply, drawing her wand as she went.

"Stupefy!"

But Jean's voice was not the only one she heard and three bolts of red light hit Severus, one in his chest, two in his back. The concussive shot sent the Slytherin three feet up into the air before he landed on his front. Jean heard the sickening crack of his nose breaking. Jean looked up from Severus to see Sirius and James walking determinedly up the road, their wands still pointing at Severus' prostrate form. James looked angry. Sirius looked beyond furious. Jean unconsciously stepped away from him as the boys approached, standing over Severus, their bodies quivering, their breaths coming out in harsh gasps.

Jean heard the sharp snap of a door slamming shut. Jean looked over her shoulder and realized Remus wasn't there, but had slipped away and shut himself up in the Shrieking Shack. "Oh no," said Jean turning around knowing how angry and hurt Remus must be at the moment.

Sirius and James looked up, remembering that Jean was still there. A look of fear swept over their faces and they quickly walked over to Jean, talking simultaneously.

"Jean, I know it looks bad, but we can explain—"

"—he's safe, I promise—"

"—you can't tell—"

"—please—"

Jean held up both hands to calm them. "Relax guys, I won't say anything."

Jean's words placated James and Sirius. All three turned to the house wondering what to do about their friend within.

"I'll go talk to him," said James, stepping forward.

Jean reached out and caught James' elbow. "No," she said. "I think it would be better if I went and talked to him. Alone."

James was still for a moment before he nodded his assent. "Alright," he said. "What are we going to do about him?" he indicated to Snape with a jerk of his thumb.
"Leave him," said Sirius sharply.

"No," protested Jean, walking towards Sirius. "You can't. He'll freeze."

"I'm fine with that," said Sirius. He looked at Jean. "Jean, after what he said to you, what he said about Remus, you expect us to help him?"

"Yes," said Jean, her face inches from Sirius', "please."

Sirius' grey eyes searched Jean's brown ones for a long moment before he huffed out a sigh. "Fine," he said, "James and I will prop him up against a door, but that's all the kindness he'll get from us."

Sirius raised his eyebrows. "Happy?" he said looking at Jean.

Jean nodded, "Yes."

"Fine." Sirius walked over to Severus and turned him right side up with the edge of his foot. "James, do you want the bad end or the worse end?"

"The bad end," said James and he reached down picking up Severus' legs.

Sirius wrapped his arms underneath Severus' arms, locking his hands around his chest and the pair of them walked down the hill with the unconscious Severus slung between them, Sirius grumbling the entire way, leaving Jean alone to deal with Remus.

Jean magically opened to door since Remus had locked it and stepped inside the creaky house. It was the same as she remembered it; dusty, and looking like a werewolf had run through it. Jean ascended the ramshackle staircase searching for Remus.

She found him in the master bedroom, sitting on the shredded sheets of the four-poster bed, one of the posts torn off and lying on the floor, the other three horribly scarred. Remus stared silently at his laced fingers.

Jean rapped her knuckles on the door and Remus' head jerked up. "Hey," Jean said quietly.

"Hey," Remus dully responded.

"You okay?" asked Jean, entering the room.

"Are you okay?" asked Remus from where he sat.

"You know," said Jean as she sat down on the bed beside Remus, "that was a really low and a really cruel thing for Severus to do."

"You didn't answer my question, Jean," said Remus, turning his head to look at her; his amber eyes shining with unshed tears. "Are you okay?"

Jean distinctly remembered in her third year Ron lying on the bed they were now sitting on, his leg broken from Padfoot dragging him through the Whomping Willow. She had just shouted to everyone within earshot that Remus was a werewolf and Remus was going to check on Ron. The youngest Weasley boy practically snarled at poor Professor Lupin. "Get away from me, werewolf!"

Jean shuddered at the memory, knowing that for Remus there was a very real possibility for that being her reaction, no matter how close they were.

"Remus," she sighed. "I have to tell you something." Jean felt Remus stiffen. "I knew what you were before Severus said anything. I've known for a while now."
Remus looked thunderstruck. "How?" he asked.

"I knew a werewolf, remember?" said Jean, "I know what to look for."

Remus laughed once, that laugh turning into a sigh. He rested his elbows on his knees, his hands supporting his chin. "There's a difference though," Remus said quietly. "He was always kept far away from you. I live in your House, learn in your classes, run around the grounds once a month while you sleep in your bed."

"I don't care," said Jean.

"Why?" said Remus heatedly, his eyes flashing as they turned to face her. "Why do you pass over what everyone else in their right mind should fear?"

"Because you're my friend, Remus. And that's all there is to it."

Remus closed his eyes and Jean could see his composure slipping from him out the corners of his eyes. Jean wrapped her arm around his back and pulled Remus' head into her shoulder. Remus turned his face into her neck. "How could I be so lucky to find such friends?" he let out a watery sigh and put his hand over Jean's, "such wonderful friends."

Jean's hand on Remus' back drifted upward and she stroked the wisps of his graying blond hair. "Why does everyone seem so surprised that there are good people in this world?"

Remus opened his eyes and looked up at her. "Because they are not all that common."

"I know."

Remus pushed himself away from Jean's shoulder and sat up to look at her. "None of the other students know, so you can't—"

"I won't," said Jean.

Remus nodded. "Good," he said.

"Good," Jean mirrored.

Both of them got up and left the bedroom. At the top of the stairs Remus and Jean saw Sirius and James standing in the bottom floor hallway. "Everything good?" James called up to them.

Remus nodded as he and Jean descended. "Yep," he said, Jean's grin saying similar sentiments.

James and Sirius' bodies visibly relaxed. James pulled out his Invisibility Cloak and unfolded it with a flourish. "Alright everyone, under the cloak. We've got a long walk ahead of us."

"I'd rather take the tunnel instead," said Remus, "and you, Padfoot and Prongs, are going to tell Jean your secret now."

"What? Why?" said Sirius.

"Because she knows my secret and it's only fair that she knows yours too."

Jean was silently impressed with Remus and the weight he held in the group when it came to the secrets they kept. "What secret," she asked, playing along with Remus.

Sirius and James looked at each other. "Well Jean," James began, "Sirius, Peter, and I are…" he
Sirius took the reins. "We're Animagi, and we use a secret tunnel to spend time with Remus when he's a werewolf."

Jean had to remember to wipe off the pleased look that they were telling her all this and replace it with a look of scandalized shock. "You're Animagi?!! When? How?"

"That Jean," said Remus, "I believe is another story for another day. Come on, it gets drafty in here at night."

"Says the seven foot werewolf with the thick fur coat," said James. "Talk to me if you want to talk about cold and drafty nights."

Remus chuckled, in far too good a mood to let James' jest bother him. Remus walked into the front hallway and pushed aside a rug, revealing the trap door, which he opened. Remus and James jumped down into the tunnel, Sirius following them. Sirius turned around. "Consider this you officially becoming a Marauder," he said reaching up to help her in.

Sirius' fingers wrapped around Jean's waist and her fingers wrapped around his wrists as Sirius pulled Jean into the flooring, closing the trapdoor on top of them.
Jean sat in the almost empty Great Hall spooning porridge from a large bowl into a smaller one in front of her. Small groups of students pooled around sections of the four tables eating their breakfasts and talking quietly amongst themselves. Jean was the first of her group of Gryffindors to arrive at the Great Hall. Every so often Jean turned her head to see if someone was sleepily stumbling into the room.

Jean was halfway through her breakfast when Lily wandered in. Jean raised her hand and waved the red head down, who sat on the opposite side of the table. A moment later an empty plate appeared in the front of her along with a small tray of scrambled eggs and links of sausage. A mug appeared beside the plate filled to the brim with steaming hot black coffee along with a tiny container of cream and a dish displaying a small pyramid of cubed sugar.

Lily did not take the cream or the sugar, rather, before even serving herself, pressed her lips to the rim of the mug. Quickly, Lily pulled her upper lip inside her mouth to cool it but after a moment Lily's eyes closed and her face relaxed. She let out a hot and heavy breath scented with the Columbian brew. "Wonderful," Lily sighed.

Jean chuckled. "Why are you so tired?" she asked.

Lily swallowed another mouthful of coffee. "James needed help with a Charms paper…"

"So, he forgot it," Jean supplied.

Lily nodded. "Yeah. I ended up finishing it because he needed the sleep."

Jean raised her eyebrow at Lily. "Why does James need the sleep?"

"Because he's…well," Lily swiveled her head from one side to the other before he leaned her head closer to Jean's. "Tonight's a full moon," she whispered.

Jean's eyes widened in understanding. Remus was going to turn and spend his night as Moony, with Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs watching him the entire time. Jean would have pondered this for longer if a shrill screech hadn't rattled her thoughts. Jean and Lily both looked up at the tawny owl circling in downward spirals over their heads, a rolled up Daily Prophet clenched in its talons.

The owl clattered clumsily across the table towards Lily, releasing the newspaper in front of her. The leg that did not hold the newspaper extended the tiny leather pouch attached to it. The owl clicked its beak.

While Lily was paying the owl for her paper Jean scanned some of the headliners of the front page. Jean felt her heart stop, and an eerie sense of familiarity crept inside her as she read the bold black print: **Muggle-Born Witch And Family Mysteriously Disappear.**

"Lily," said Jean quietly. "Can I borrow that for a moment?" She indicated to the Daily Prophet resting by Lily's wrist.

Lily nodded; continuing to eat her breakfast while Jean slowly unfolded the newspaper, her eyes quickly shifting as she read the article.
It was confirmed by Ministry Officials today that Clarissa Binnington, 20, along with mother and father, Roger and Dorothy, went missing in the late hours of last night. Roger and Dorothy Binnington are two Muggles living near Gloucester while Clarissa is a recent graduate of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry with a promising future of becoming the Muggle Studies teacher at said establishment.

The Aurors do not yet know if this disappearance is connected to the other five disappearances of muggle-born witches and wizards and their families in the past ten months. Aurors Kingsley Shackelbolt and Alastor Moody, who recovered the bodies of muggle-born wizard Edward Huggins, 27, along with the remains of his aunt and uncle, Kristen and Julius Godfrey, and muggle older brother Patrick state that "even though it has not been officially confirmed, there has been a discussion among the members of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement of a possible correlation between the Binnington family and the other disappearances."

The Minister of Magic encourages the magical community to remain calm but cautious. Do not travel alone or at night, always have your wand at hand. Be aware of your surroundings and, if you feel the need, place a defense spell on your home. Above all, the Minister would like to assure the magical community that Aurors are working night and day to find the source of these disappearances and to cooperate if needed.

The Ministry is currently offering a 1000 galleon reward to anyone who can provide relevant information on these cases. As of today, there has been no news on the Caulderwell brothers, or the Rhodes, Wyatt-Preston, and Beagle families. —Angelica Mills, Daily Prophet.

Jean stared at the still muggle photograph of Clarissa Binnington and her mother and father, seemingly at her Hogwarts graduation. Jean couldn't help but see similarities in Clarissa's life and her own, particularly how there was a time in which her own family photo could have been posted on a page of the Daily Prophet.

"Why so serious, Jean?"

Jean jerked her head up. James, Sirius, Remus, and Peter, during the time she had been reading the paper, had walked into the room and sat down at the table.

"Funny, Sirius," said Jean, latching onto the statement and using it to transition out of her somber mood. Jean smiled as she tightly rolled up the newspaper and passed it back to Lily.

"So," said Jean, "what are we going to do today?"

"Remus, Sirius, Peter and I are going to the library to study and finish our homework so we can get everything out of the way for the weekend."

If Jean hadn't known any better, the words that came out of James' mouth would have tipped her off. James, along with the rest of the Marauders' faces were set and there was a business like air surrounding the group as they ate. They were operating on a very precise and very discussed schedule of operations concerning the day and especially the night to follow. James continued to speak as he ate. "You and Lily are welcome to join us, if you want."

Jean nodded, along with Lily. "Sure," she said.

Jean, Lily, and the Marauders finished their meal, gathered their books, and went off to the library. The library was surprisingly full; a small cluster of students took up almost every table. They passed Alice, Dorcas, Marlene, and Mary sitting at one. They waved and Jean and Lily waved back. Finally, the six students found an empty table to accommodate them in the back of the
library. A nearby window cast light on the wood. James sat at one end of the table and paired off with Sirius, who sat on the right corner, and with more diligence and determination than Jean had ever seen from the two of them began to plow through their studies. Lily sat beside Sirius and directly across from Remus. Between them sitting at the other end of the table was Peter. Remus and Lily had apparently tag-teamed the responsibility of helping Peter out when he needed it. Jean sat across from Sirius on the left corner by James.

The group was unusually quiet as they worked, keeping mostly to themselves, broken up by the crisp flipping of pages, the muted conversation between James and Sirius, and Peter's whispered requests for help to either Remus or Lily. Jean found it hard to concentrate. As she lazily scanned her notes her eyes drifted over to Remus, hunched over a piece of parchment his quill scratching out his spindly handwriting.

"You're staring, Jean" said Remus, looking up from his work.

Jean swung her head back down. "Sorry," she muttered, busying herself with her textbook.

"You nervous?"

"No," said Jean returning her gaze back to Remus.

"You don't have to lie to me Jean."

"I'm not nervous. It's just…rather new." This was a partially true statement. Jean in her third year knew for a few months about Professor Lupin's secret. However, on the night Peter escaped and she and Harry had to rescue Sirius from the Dementors, seeing Remus transform into Moony unnerved her, made it all the more real for her. Even though she would never judge Remus because of the actions of his other half, she did see how powerful and dangerous Moony could be. The fact that Wolfsbane hadn't been invented yet and that Peter, James, and Sirius would be with him in a tiny house didn't make her feel any better. Jean saw first hand how much damage Moony could do to Padfoot.

"It's not so new for me, Jean," said Remus. He laughed a little which relaxed Jean. "We'll be fine. We're always very careful."

With some of Jean's initial tension assuaged, her curiosity got the better of her. "Does it hurt?" she asked.

"Yes," said Remus matter-of-factly. "It hurts a lot. Try to imagine my human body getting remolded into the body of a wolf that's a foot taller than me. Bones grow and shrink or go away entirely. My muscles would reweave themselves, my face elongates, and I sprout hair all over my body." Remus paused. "After a few minutes I go numb to the pain. I guess that's when I go away and Moony comes in."

"You don't go away," said Jean, "You just…switch places for a while."

Remus laughed. "That's a more pleasant way to put it."

Jean asked another question. "Do you remember anything afterwards?"

Remus didn't answer for a minute, thinking. "At first, I didn't remember anything. I got lost in the pain and blacked out, waking up hours later in my parents' cellar. Over time, when, I guess, I became accustomed to it, I remember brief flashes of things." Remus paused again. Jean saw his eyes grow distant as if he were recalling those memories, trying to glean more from them. "I sometimes remember lights, smells, a brief second of an image." Remus looked over at Jean.
"When James, Peter, and Sirius learned how to become Animagi, Moony became more focused. I could focus and by extension remember more things, though not much more." Remus stopped and made a face as if he was remembering something curious. "I remember Sirius a lot, come to think of it."

"We're both canines," said Sirius, "we share certain similarities. Moony can probably read Padfoot's body language."

Remus laughed lightly. "Probably." Remus turned back to Jean again, his voice calming somewhat. "I also can remember things when I am...hunting. Moony gets an adrenaline rush of sorts and both he and I have a more heightened awareness of things." Remus looked over at James. "I don't think James has ever forgiven me for first thing I remember killing. It was a deer."

"I still haven't," said James not looking up from his work.

Remus rolled his eyes at James and Sirius laughed at the two of them. After a while the other three Marauders joined him. Jean didn't know whether they were laughing because of the memory Remus had shared and the running joke that was between Prongs and Moony because of it, or if they were laughing because their humor was the only thing capable of diffusing the undercurrent of tension that flowed throughout the day. The Marauders stopped abruptly when Madame Pince, pushing a trolley full of books, passed by their table, pausing to look at them.

Out of the corner of her eye Jean saw Sirius' chest expand as he took a deep breath. Jean's eyes widened, imaging 'Hi Madame Pince' exploding from Sirius' lips and echoing around the relatively quiet room, jarring everyone therein out of their thoughts. Lily saw it to and Jean watched her lean into Sirius. Jean could practically see through the table Lily putting all of her weight on Sirius' foot with her own. Sirius' breath huffed out in a series of small coughs. Madame Pince stared at them for a moment longer and then moved on.

Jean pushed her face deeper into her book, her face set, her mind lingering of Remus' last words. She had always known that Remus' biggest worry with becoming a werewolf every month was that he could bite someone, and the guilt that would follow Remus for committing someone to a life that even he did not want. The obvious never occurred to her that Moony was very capable of killing something or someone.

Remus looked at her and guessed her thought process. "Did the big bad wolf finally find something that scares you?"

Jean neither confirmed nor denied this. "I just never thought about it before," she said quietly. "How often have you...you know."

"Not very often," said Remus, "and less often now that I have Wormtail, Padfoot, and Prongs with me. Together, they can keep me under control and I have much better behavior if I'm running around instead of cooped up inside the Shack. Running uses up my energy. It keeps me calm and tires me out. I'm less likely to injure myself and I can think more clearly. However, it is still Moony's night and I'm just along for the ride."

"Have you ever been in control?" Jean asked.

"No," said Remus, "never completely, and not for any length of time. But sometimes when Moony has used up a lot of his energy I feel myself come to the surface of his subconscious and he gives way to me. It's only small influences that I have been able to do: look left, move your ears, flick your tail. It comes and it goes."
Remus and Jean's conversation drifted off into silence and the rest of the group did not talk much for the rest of the afternoon, quietly studying so that they did not have any schoolwork looming over them for the next couple of days, each, in their own way, preparing for the upcoming looming night. Even though Jean didn't speak to Remus she continued to watch him as the hours ticked by and the subtle changes that were a precursor to his imminent transformation. Remus got paler as time passed and almost visibly grew thinner as if he was rapidly coming down with the flu. Remus' back slowly but steadily hunched over the table, his arms tucking themselves into his torso. His movements slowed as his strength seeped out of him until they stopped all together. Jean lost track of how many minutes she watched Remus sit motionless, blankly staring at nothing; the number jarred itself out of her head when Remus suddenly jerked, as if a large muscle in his back had spasmed. His breath came out in a sharp gasp, which he quickly stifled. Stiffly, Remus tilted his head and looked out the large window to see the sun dyed the color of pomegranates lounging on the coniferous canopy of the Forbidden Forest. Remus stared for a minute before, with as much normalcy as he could muster, rose from the table, leaving everything, and left the library. After a minute as if it were the most normal thing in the world, Lily reached across the table and placed all of Remus' belongings inside his satchel, tugged it over to her side of the table and placed it by the legs of her chair.

The remaining Marauders, Lily and Jean waited in the library as the sun drifted down behind the tree line. They watched subtly and attentively the other students drift slowly out of the library as night came upon them making sure that nobody held lingering gazes and suspicions about Remus' exit. Only when they were the last remaining people in the library did they move.

They walked quickly, yet casually, seemingly with no point or purpose. Lily passed Remus' satchel to Sirius before she and James broke away from the group and proceeded towards the Head Boy and Head Girl dormitories leaving the trio that was Peter, Jean and Sirius.

The three entered the Gryffindor Common Room, which was at that moment empty. Sirius and Peter immediately picked up their pace and dashed up the stairs to their room. Jean, now alone, waited in the Common Room. Jean glanced over at the large window on the wall opposite the staircase. Even though Jean had lived in this tower for the better part of six years she never really looked to see if the whomping willow could be seen from it. Jean walked over to the window. Through it, she could see in the fading light flashes of red and orange flame from the fireplace in Hagrid's hut, twinkling at her through his own windows. She followed from Hagrid's hut the dark and massive shadow that was the Forbidden Forest until she reached the rocky knoll on which the whomping willow was planted, just a few yards from the silvery glass that made up the greenhouses. Even from a distance and even in the dark the whomping willow was massive. Leafless, the limbs branched out to form open palms or curled onto themselves into fists. Jean squinted to see if there, concealed at the base of he willow, was the shadowy form of Remus Lupin, but he had long since descended into the roots and waited in the Shrieking Shack.

Jean looked over her shoulder when she heard the two pairs of feet descending the stairs. Sirius and Peter were dressed warmly with thick, dark denim jeans. Peter was wearing a maroon and dark green striped zip up sweater and Sirius was wearing a black leather motorcycle jacket. Around that time the portrait hole opened seemingly by itself. James pulled the Invisibility Cloak off of his head and it lay in almost invisible folds on his shoulders. "You ready?" he asked.

Peter and Sirius nodded and walked over to James. Jean joined them by the exit to the Common Room. "Be careful," she said.

Sirius stepped towards her. "Don't worry. It's not out first time doing this." Sirius paused, looking at Jean. "But, we'll be careful."
Jean nodded once.

"Come on, Sirius," said James over by the door. "We have to go."

Sirius reached out and touched Jean's shoulder and rubbed his thumb over the ridge of her collarbone. "Don't wait up," he said.

"Bye, Jean," said James.

"Bye," chimed in Peter.

Sirius just looked at her one more time with his grey and glinting eyes before the portrait hole closed on them.

Once again alone Jean returned to her place by the window. She sat on the sill, her feet curled up underneath her, her face pressed to the cool glass. Her eyes scanned the grounds. Grass, darkened by nighttime shadows, whipped around in the breeze. Suddenly the whomping willow froze, its limbs and trunk no longer moving. Jean squinted and saw a dark colored stag and dog appear out of thin air and quickly descended into the earth.

"Have they gone?"

Jean jerked her entire body around, spinning itself into a standing position. Her breath calmed when she saw that it was only Lily still in her school uniform with a pack strapped to her back. Quickly she lifted her hands, palms forward, when she realized she had started Jean. "Sorry," she said.

Jean let out the breath she had been holding. She turned back to the window. The whomping willow had resumed its thrashing. "They just did," she said.

Jean sat down on the windowsill and Lily walked over to join her. "I can't see anything from the windows in the Head's dormitory." Lily pulled her bag off her shoulders and swung it to her feet. "I feel like if I'm here somehow I'm more helpful."

Jean nodded, silently agreeing. Jean looked over at Lily who sat beside her on the windowsill. "So," Jean began, "When did you find out about Moony?"

"Last September," said Lily, "when James and I started dating."

"And?" prompted Jean.

"I didn't handle it as suavely as you," Lily said. "I wasn't judgmental or anything but I was surprised, really surprised. I was definitely more surprised than you. I couldn't believe that one of the rumors about him was right."

"There were rumors?" asked Jean.

Lily nodded, "Yeah. Most people believed the story about his mother being really sick. But, among others, there was a rumor that he was a werewolf." Lily paused. "That was one of James and Sirius' biggest arguments that I have ever seen," she said quietly.

"James and Sirius had a fight about you knowing about Remus?"

"Sirius is really protective of Remus, more than the other two."

"Why do you think that is?" Jean asked, even though she had a small hunch.
Lily shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know," she said. "I never asked. There's an unbreakable wall set around certain subjects for Sirius."

"Like what?" asked Jean. She was genuinely curious. This was a Sirius that she was unfamiliar with.

"Remus for one," said Lily, "his family for another."

Lily and Jean drifted off into silence; both of them knew from their respective experiences that the subject of Sirius' family was something he kept close to his chest. Jean glanced up at the onyx sky as a cloud shifted, revealing the silvery moon. "Remus should have turned by now," Lily commented.

"Has Moony ever hurt them?"

"He hurts them almost every time," said Lily, "and once he put Sirius in the hospital with a broken foot. But, he's never done any serious injury to them. James and Sirius turn into really big animals. I think as long as they are together they can control Moony, and if anything does happen Peter is so small he can slip away and get help without attracting Remus' attention."

Lily suddenly jerked away from the window. "Dang, I forgot." Lily sank down onto her knees and began to frantically dig around in her backpack.

"What?" asked Jean.

"I was so busy with James' paper last night I forgot I had a potion due to Slughorn on Monday. Lily pulled out of her backpack a small, pewter cauldron and a silver stand to set it on. Using her wand, Lily conjured a small fire that flickered brightly beneath the cauldron a few inches above the floor. Lily finally pulled out her Advanced Potion-Making book, her slender fingers quickly skimming through the leaves to find the page that she needed. When the paper settled and Jean got a good look at the print stamped onto the page her eyes widened. The handwritten notes, scratch marks and added instructions in the potions book looked very, very familiar.

Jean looked up at Lily. "Your notes look like the notes in Severus Snape's book," she said, not knowing any better way say it.

Lily's eyes scanned over the notes in her book as if they were so normal to her she had forgotten that someone might think them unusual. "Yeah," said Lily, "he gave them to me back when Sev and I were friends."

Jean was just barely able to keep her jaw from crashing into the floor as her mind scrambled to process that the nicest person she had ever met was close friends to a man she had only seen either snarling or stone-faced, close enough to earn the endearment of a nickname. For one wild moment Jean wondered if Bellatrix's curse had not sent her back in time but rather threw her into a parallel universe where Bellatrix was the Muggle Studies teacher and Voldemort owned a candy store.

"You were friends with Severus Snape," Jean asked incredulously, "but he's so…"

Lily nodded. "I know, I know. It was a while back. But, we were best friends when we were children. He lives near me in a place called Spinner's End. He taught me all about magic." Lily laughed lightly. "He told me this grand story about Hogwarts and dragons and griffins and Quidditch and that it was all waiting for us. He made me feel like there was a place somewhere that I could belong where I wasn't abnormal, where I wasn't a freak." Lily's voice drifted away and Jean saw that Lily was lost in her memories back in a place where everything was wonderful and..."
new and there wasn't such a thing as Purebloods or Mudbloods or everyone in between.

"What happened?" Jean asked softly.

"We grew up," Lily stated. "We picked different friends. We chose different sides. The line was drawn in the sand for a long time. I was just too blind and stupid to see it. But, one day James and Sirius were harassing Severus. I stepped in and told them to stop. Snape snapped at me and said," Lily paused and to Jean it seemed like she was fortifying herself. "He told everyone in earshot that he didn't need help from a Mudblood like me."

Jean could hardly believe what she was hearing, or what she was about to say, but yet everything she knew about Severus Snape suddenly seemed to make sense. "I'm sure he didn't mean—"

"I know he was angry and upset," Lily interrupted, "but that's no excuse. I don't want to be placed on some pedestal when he thinks every other muggle born is less than the dirt he walks on. I won't turn my back on the people of my magical heritage just for sake of one friend." Lily paused again and then spoke softer. "I just thought…I hoped…he would be kind of like Sirius. That he would be able to rise above the life he was thrown into."

Even though Jean knew that Sirius would not appreciate the comparison between Snape and himself, Jean felt that Lily had made a valid point. Sirius had the potential to be almost exactly like Snape. Jean had seen flashes of it as he lurked around the dilapidated Grimmauld Place bitter and world-weary. But, as of now, Sirius had beaten the odds set against both him and Severus Snape and was…happy-go-lucky? Gallant? Handsome? Jean pursed her lips at her own thought, which had snuck into her mind quite unexpectedly.

"Speaking of Sirius," a sly smile spread across Lily's face.

"What about Sirius?" asked Jean.

"I've seen the way he looks at you," said Lily.

"He's been looking?" Jean paused. "I thought Sirius looked at everyone."

Lily laughed and nodded her head in agreement. "Oh, he's a charmer," she said, "and he's dated his fair share of girls but…" Lily paused and Jean could see that her tongue was turning in her mouth, trying to articulate the worlds that she wanted. "I don't know. After knowing him for so long I can tell that he's not quite his normal self when it comes to you." Lily laughed. "He's less Sirius and more serious."

Jean laughed along with Lily. "You're crazy," Jean said.

"Maybe," said Lily, "but I have seen how he looks at you."

Jean and Lily stayed in relative silence for a while, Jean sitting on the windowsill still watching the moon travel across the sky and the whomping willow thrash in the silvery moonlight, Lily cross-legged on the floor, her face alit in the magenta glow of her completed potion she bottled in a glass vial. They were still several hours from dawn but both Lily and Jean felt their eyes growing heavy. Jean eventually turned and put her back up against the window with Lily leaning on her legs. Jean dozed, her sleeves slipping up to her elbows, revealing the cursed scar on her forearm. She felt Lily's touch and opened her eyes. Jean looked down at Lily who stared impassively and at the same time intensely with her green eyes, her fingers framing the pale pink word etched into her skin.

"I remember Clarissa Binnington," Lily said quietly, "She was a Ravenclaw. She was an Assistant
Librarian on weekends. She dated the Hufflepuff Keeper." Lily ran a fingernail over the raised marks. "What really happened to your arm?"

Jean leaned her head against a pane of glass. "I was attacked," she said simply. She glanced down at her arm and at Lily. She'd give her the truth but not the entire story. "by a group of pureblood supremacists."

"I'm sorry," said Lily. "Do you think that the people that attacked you are responsible for Clarissa and the others' disappearances?"

"It's possible," said Jean nonchalantly. She was trying to be vague. She had to be. She didn't want to scare Lily before the real horrors hit, or give reason for Lily to think that she knew more than she said.

"It's going to get worse isn't it," said Lily, not really stating a question, "the disappearances of muggle-borns and their sympathizers?"

Jean nodded once. "I think so," she said. "We both need to be careful."

Lily took Jean's hand; the one attached to her scarred arm, and held it close to her. "I'm glad you're here Jean," Lily whispered, her eyes wide but staring at nothing. "If everything does get worse I don't want to be alone in it."

Jean squeezed Lily's hand. "You were never alone in the first place, nor will you ever be."

Lily returned the squeeze; the lids of her eyes shutting as sleep tried to take her. "Neither will you."

In the early hours of morning when the sun was just beginning to creep its way through the carpets of the Common Room the portrait hole swung open seemingly on its own. The empty air rippled and the mottled colors of the Invisibility Cloak appeared, parting to reveal James and Sirius, who supported Remus with his shoulder. James picked up Wormtail off his own shoulder and placed him down on the floor where he promptly turned back into a person. The Marauders heard a rustle from the center of the room and turned to see Lily asleep on the sofa, cocooned in a crimson comforter from a dormitory bed.

James' hazel eyes softened and he walked over to Lily kneeling down over her and intimately kissed her on the lips.

Lily shifted underneath his ministrations and opened her eyes. She smiled into his mouth and reached up, weaving her fingers into his dark hair. James pulled back slightly. "Hey," he whispered.

"Hey," Lily answered. She stretched and yawned. "I fell asleep. Jean must have put me on the couch." Lily looked over James' shoulder at Remus, still being held up by Sirius. He didn't look injured, just exhausted. "Hey Remus," said Lily quietly "how are you?" She directed her next question to James. "How was everything?"

"I'm okay," said Remus as Sirius passed his slight frame onto Peter. "I'm just really tired but, for once, I don't need to go to the Hospital Wing today."

"It couldn't have gone more smoothly," said James. Smoothly still meant that James and Sirius had earned a few scratches on their faces and arms but they were nothing in comparison to what they usually returned with.

Peter with Remus were already halfway up the stairs when James extended his hand and helped
Lily up off the couch. Sirius trailed behind them to the portrait hole.

"I'm glad both of you are okay," said Lily when the portrait hole opened. "I'm glad you didn't come back with bruises the size of bludgers."

"Give us a few hours," said Sirius, "then we'll see how pretty we are."

James rolled his eyes. "Bye Sirius," he said, "we'll see you in a few hours."

"Bye, Sirius," chimed in Lily.

"Bye," said Sirius. He closed the portrait hole as the pair walked away.

Alone in the Common Room Sirius walked over to the stairs. When he reached the landing where the stairs forked, one leading to the boys dormitory and the other leading to the girls, Sirius' grey eyes glanced up towards the staircase leading towards the girls dormitory. On the spur of the moment Sirius shifted into Padfoot and languidly loped up the steps, the staircase not recognizing him and turning into a slide to shoot him back to the landing.

Sirius ascended the winding staircase until he reached the door with the Seventh Year sign on it at the top of the tower. Padfoot pawed open the door. The room was dark because the window curtains were shut. Sirius strained to see the silhouettes of the five beds. Padfoot saw Jean sleeping in her bed, her comforter removed and downstairs, the bed curtains thrown open haphazardly. The great black dog crept over to the sleeping girl cocooned inside her crisp white sheets. With his surprisingly human eyes, Padfoot watched the rise and fall of her breath through the blankets, the curls of her hair that pooled around her head as it sank into the folds of the pillow. Jean's hand hung limply off the bed. Sirius loped forward and took the cusp of her sleeve in his muzzle before placing his large paws on the bed and gently dropping Jean's arm onto her chest.

Padfoot turned his head and for one long moment he stared at Jean's sleeping face before turning, lowering himself to the ground, and padding silently out of the room.
When Jean finally woke up the sun was high in the sky and she was wrapped in a ramshackled cocoon of white sheets. Jean shot up in bed, seemingly aware of the lateness of the hour, her head swiveling around the room. Alice, Marlene, Dorcas, and Mary had all gone, leaving their beds in various degrees of neatness. Jean stretched and swung herself out of bed. She stood in a long, hot shower to wake herself up before she threw on a shirt and a pair of sweatpants and meandered barefoot down the circling staircase to reach the lower levels.

Jean had reached the landing before she spotted Sirius lounging on the crimson sofa in the same clothes and leather motorcycle jacket he had worn last night his feet crossed at the ankles on the coffee table. Jean's comforter, which she had given to Lily after she had fallen asleep, was folded up beside him. Sirius looked at Jean. "Morning," he said, "or rather, afternoon, I should say."

Jean raised her eyebrows as she descended the last few steps. She knew it was late but she didn't think it was that late. "What time is it?"

Sirius bent his wrist and looked at his watch. "Almost one," he said.

"Oh, wow," said Jean raising her eyebrows slightly, "I didn't think I'd sleep that late."

"Yeah," said Sirius, "me neither. If I did, I would have brought lunch up."

It was then that Jean noticed the breakfast spread across the coffee table. As per Hogwarts tradition, there was enough food to feed three times as many people present. There was a large platter topped with a teetering tower of syrup soaked pancakes surrounded by smaller dishes of eggs, bacon, fruit, and biscuits. Jean raised her eyes to Sirius, the curve of her lips asking her unspoken question.

Sirius shrugged her shoulders. "You missed breakfast. No one should pass up the opportunity to eat breakfast food." Sirius picked up one of the plates and passed it to Jean before he served himself on the other one. "But, I did tell you not to wait up."

Jean accepted the plate and sat down by Sirius. "It was fine. Lily and I had fun." Jean picked up a piece of bacon from the pile and nibbled on it. "Thank you," she said.

"You're welcome," Sirius responded.

Jean took a muffin and put it on her plate while Sirius served himself pancakes. "So," said Jean trying to sound casual, "was everything okay last night?"

"It went fine," said Sirius through his chewing. Jean saw a single red scratch mark along his jawbone as it moved and two more marks across the hand that held his fork going up past his sleeve.

"But Moony scratched you," said Jean.

"Moony scratches, bites, and bruises me every time. He's done a lot worse. If Moony didn't break any of our bones or land any of us in the Hospital Wing, including himself, then I say this is one of the best nights we've ever had."
Jean nodded. "So Remus didn't have to go to the Hospital Wing?"

Sirius shook his head. "No. Moony was very docile last night. Most of the damage he did to us was when he just turned. Moony is just raw strength and anger when he just turns and he lashes out at anything that moves. He calmed down after a few minutes and then he recognized us. After that, we left the Shrieking Shack and ran though the woods. Most of the night we did laps around the lake. Then, around four in the morning, Moony went back to the Shrieking Shack and fell asleep. The three of us took turns watching him; me, then Peter, then me, then James, then me, and so on until he turned back."

"Why?" asked Jean.

"Why what?"

"Why did you watch Remus twice as much as James or Peter?"

Sirius huffed out a sigh and he pushed his now empty plate away from him. "I'm a little overprotective of Remus. If anyone ever found out about him I'd feel... responsible."

"Why?" asked Jean, pushing her plate away from her as well.

"Because I..." Sirius paused and then started his sentence again, "I let someone find out once."

"How? Who?" asked Jean, feigning surprise since she already knew what Sirius and Remus from the future had told her about this story.

A bitterly sarcastic smile slid across Sirius' face. "That's the best part of it, or worst, depending on how you look at it. It was Severus Snape." Jean saw Sirius roll his eyes in a self-criticizing way as he flopped his head onto the top of the couch, staring at the ceiling. "It was last year. Snivellius was snooping around more and the contention between the four of us and him had reached boiling point. One day he caught me alone and he said something snarky about Remus and the rest of us."

Sirius paused and closed his eyes for a long moment before opening them again. "I don't even remember what he said, but it set me off. I turned to him and I told him that if he'd go out tonight and take a long stick and poke the knot at the base of the whomping willow and follow the tunnel then he'd find out where Remus went every month. Later that night, when James, Peter and I were getting ready to go out, James could see that I was tense and anxious."

"You were feeling guilty," supplied Jean.

"No. Well, not for what you might think. I wasn't feeling guilty about Snape probably dying or Remus potentially killing him. What worried me most was if Snape survived and he saw Remus, then he would tell and I'd have ruined Remus' life." Sirius paused and Jean saw his eyes grow dark. "He's so smart, and so good. I couldn't stand that I may have done that to him. So, I told James what I had done." Sirius laughed at his own statement but again there was a tone of self-criticism in the lilt of his voice. "He almost broke my jaw he punched me so hard. James went after Snape. He trailed after him though the tunnel hoping to grab Snape before he got too far but he wasn't fast enough. James got to the Shack and Remus was already transforming with Snape staring slack-jawed at him. James, being the good friend, didn't want to expose out secret Animagi abilities, so he grabbed Snape and tried to lead him out the way they came instead of easily turning into Prongs and being able to hold Moony off long enough to get them outside. James hoped that the trapdoor would keep Moony inside the Shack, but it only bought them a few minutes. Moony came barreling though the tunnel and James kept pushing Snape forward all the while screaming at Moony to get him to recognize him. Moony was almost on top of them when James and Snape got out from underneath the Whomping Willow. The tree did the job it was planted there to do and..."
kept beating Moony back underground whenever he tried to go after them. One of the branches hit both James and Snape. It gave James a concussion and dislocated Snape's shoulder. By then Peter and I had gotten there and we took the pair of them to the hospital wing."

Sirius stopped talking and reached down to take a long sip from his glass of orange juice. He rested his lips on the rim of the glass before continuing. "The four of us were in the hospital wing for about fifteen minutes before Professor Dumbledore stormed in accompanied by Professor McGonagall and Professor Slughorn. The moment Madame Pomfrey said Snape was able to leave, Dumbledore took him off to his office and threatened him with expulsion if he ever revealed what Remus was to anyone."

"Did he come back to punish you?" asked Jean.

Sirius shook his head. "No," he said, "I think he trusted my friends to do it for him," Sirius cracked a small smile, "and he was right."

"What happened?" asked Jean.

"Well," said Sirius, "when dawn came Madame Pomfrey went out to go get Remus. She found him just inside the roots of the Whomping Willow. Moony had been trying to get out all night and the tree kept beating him back." Sirius paused again and Jean saw his face darken. "He shattered so many bones. I can't even remember how many, enough for Madame Pomfrey to use a bottle and a half of Skele-Gro." Sirius paused once again and closed his eyes, cupping his chin with one of his hands.

"You don't have to say any more if you don't want to," said Jean, speaking softly.

"No," said Sirius opening his eyes, "its fine. Remus woke up that afternoon. He just shot up screaming because he remembered Snape being in the Shack when he transformed. When Remus didn't see Snape in the hospital wing he though he'd bitten him…or worse killed him. Finally, he calmed down enough to get it through to him that Snape wasn't even badly hurt. Remus then asked how Snape managed to get into the Shrieking Shack in the first place. Everyone got all quiet then. James and Peter just looked at me and soon Remus followed his gaze. Then I told him. I told Remus that I told Snape how to get past the Whomping Willow and that I hoped what he saw would teach him a lesson."

Sirius smacked his lips together and when his mouth reopened he blew out a breath. "Remus about fell out of the bed trying to hit me. James helped him stay upright and he screamed and screamed at me. He yelled that I had almost ruined his life, that now Snape could tell someone at any moment that he was a werewolf and the he'd have to leave school. Then he started yelling at me about things I hadn't thought about. He said that if he had killed Snape then he would have gone to Azkaban and Dumbledore would have been sacked as Headmaster for letting Remus into Hogwarts in the first place and probably would have gone to Azkaban as well. He said James could have gone to jail too if he turned into Prongs to save Snape and himself…and on and on he went. I was so ashamed of myself that when Remus yelled at me to go and not come back I slunk out of the hospital wing with my tail tucked between my legs—metaphorically speaking—and all through that time James didn't say a thing. He just kept looking at me with eyes I never want to see on his face again. It was a look of complete and absolute betrayal." Sirius trailed off. "That was one of the worst days of my life."

Jean nodded to encourage Sirius' talking, however she inwardly winced knowing that there was one day worse for Sirius concerning James Potter. "What happened after that?" asked Jean.

"James and Remus didn't speak to me for that entire month. Peter didn't speak to any of us. He
doesn't know what to do when James, Remus, or I are on opposing sides. When the full moon came again I was sitting in the Common Room just to make sure James and Peter made it down okay. They were halfway through the portrait hole when James looked over at me and called 'Come on, Padfoot. Get over here.' The three of us went down to the Shrieking Shack and Remus transformed." Sirius suddenly let out a bark like laugh. "Moony seemed to remember me and all my stupidity. He chased me out of the Shack with Prongs trotting along behind us with Wormtail perched on his antlers. It got to the point where I had to turn back into a human and climb a tree because I was so tired. Moony kept me treed all night, stalking around the tree and jumping up and snapping at me with me clinging for dear life. Prongs with Wormtail stood a few yards back, making sure I didn't fall off or anything. When morning came Moony turned back into Remus. He leaned up against the tree and looked up at me and I looked down at him. We smiled at each other for the first time in a month. As we walked back to the Shrieking Shack Remus leaned over and whispered to me 'I hope I taught Severus a lesson about not snooping around other people's business.' The four of us decided to skip school that day and we spent it in the Shack playing Exploding Snap and Gobstones and drinking Fire Whiskey."

Jean laughed when Sirius ended his story. "I'm glad you guys were still friends after all that. I can't imagine what this place would be like if you didn't like each other."

"Dull," Sirius supplied, "and rather uninteresting."

Jean laughed. When she stopped and looked around the still empty Common Room. "Speaking of dull and uninteresting," said Jean still rotating her head, "where is everybody?"

Sirius shrugged his shoulders. "Out and about I would assume. I can't keep track of all my friends all the time."

"Well," said Jean turning he head back to Sirius, "since no one is around I want you to do something."

"And what would that be?" asked Sirius.

"I want you to turn into Padfoot."

Sirius laughed, obviously amused. "Right here and right now?"

Jean nodded. Yeah, I've never seen you as a dog." That wasn't actually true but, upon recollection, Jean thought that Sirius would look rather adorable as a dog if he weren't skinny and shabby from being on the run from Azkaban or living in a mountain cave eating rats.

Sirius laughed again and stood up turning around so that he could face Jean. Almost before she realized it, Sirius, in one fluid movement, turned into Padfoot. She blinked, staring at him. Padfoot was a large dog with wide almost wolf-like feet built like a water dog's. His shoulders were wide but his body was lithe and trimmed with a trail of fur fanning off his chest and down his stomach. His muzzle was narrow as well and his ears stood up and turned towards her like a German Shepard's though not as large as a German Shepard's ears. Set in Padfoot's face were Sirius' eyes, like flecks of glinting steel inlaid in a field of onyx. Padfoot's thick, bushy tail swung between one black leg and the other.

Padfoot yipped at Jean his tail wagging as he splayed his front legs and lowered his head, his tongue hanging out of the side of his mouth. Jean tentatively reached out her hand, not entirely sure if this was what he wanted. Padfoot leaned forward so that the crown of his head rested inside her palm. Jean curled her fingers around his thick, dark hair. It was soft, as if it were still human hair.
Jean's hand drifted to the side, her fingers dipping back behind his ears, her fingernails running through Padfoot's fur. Jean raised her eyebrows at the low hum of contentment that came from Padfoot's chest "You like that don't you?" said Jean. Jean curled her fingers and ran her nails harder over his skin.

Padfoot tilted his neck farther and farther to the side as Jean worked her way down his neck. When she reached his shoulders and chest Padfoot stretched out and rolled onto his back. Jean looked at him from her position on the sofa before she rolled her eyes and with a laugh she slid off the sofa and onto the floor. On her hands and knees Jean worked from Padfoot's head downwards again, scratching him behind his ears and rubbing her palm over his chest and forelegs, all the while his tail wagging vigorously. When Jean reached Padfoot's stomach Padfoot yipped, his hind leg beginning to twitch until when Jean reached a certain spot on Padfoot's body and he turned back into a person. "Stop, stop," he said laughing as he leaned forward and grabbed both of her hands. "It tickles."

Sirius' laughing subsided when he looked down at his hands still lingering on top of Jean's. He flexed the fingers on his right hand and stared at them pointedly before rolling his head so that from his position on the floor he could look around. Sirius released Jean's hands and reached to grab something underneath the coffee table. As he sat up, Jean saw him slip a ring onto the fourth finger of his right hand.

"What's this?" asked Jean, reaching out and taking Sirius' hand so that she could see the ring better. It was a very masculine ring with a wide silver band. In the center was a black circular stone. Around the stone written in very detailed calligraphy Jean could make out the words *Toujours Pur.*

"It's my family ring."

Jean looked up at Sirius confused. "But I thought…" she trailed off.

"I had it on when I left home. I wear it to spite them, I guess. I want to remind them that, whether they want me or not, I'm still a Black."

This was something new for Jean. She had never heard of this ring before or Sirius expressing a desire that he wanted his family to remember he existed. "Do you one day want to go back to your family?" asked Jean.

Sirius' eyes widened and he shook his head vehemently. "No," said Sirius, "never. Not after what they almost did."

Jean nodded for him to continue, his ringed hand lying now forgotten in both of her own.

"When I was fifteen my parents came to me and told me that my father and uncle had decided that I was going to marry my cousin, Bellatrix. She's Narcissa's older sister."

Jean tried to keep the breath she sucked in at this information from being too loud but failed at it. Sirius misinterpreted it as shock that he was expected to marry his cousin.

"It's not that uncommon in my family. My mother and father are distant cousins as well. Neither Bellatrix nor I were very fond of the idea because, well, we're not very fond of each other. Bellatrix was about to start her seventh year and I was about to start my fifth year when our parents told us this. Bellatrix is more loyal to our family traditions than I will ever be so it didn't take long to convince her that it was our familial responsibility to wed. During that year both of us kept really quiet about our betrothal, Bellatrix because she was embarrassed that she was saddled with the only Black ever put in Griffindor and consorts with muggle-borns and blood-traitors to boot. I was
adamantly against the entire thing and was hoping that this situation changed, like it was prone to do. Bellatrix once told me that I was meant to be engaged to my cousin Andromeda, Bellatrix's older sister, but she married a muggle and was promptly kicked out of the family."

"That sounds harsh," commented Jean.

Sirius nodded somberly in agreement. "That's what my family is like. You marry anyone less than a pureblood and they'll throw you out like garbage." Sirius raised the hand that the ring was upon and with his pointer finger indicated to the writing that wrapped its way around the black stone in the silver. "Toujours Pur," he said, "always pure; a very enduring family motto." Sirius paused, twisting the ring around on his finger. "I was sixteen years old and it was the middle of summer. My mother, father, aunt, uncle, Regulus and Bellatrix were there. It was after dinner and Regulus and I slipped away from the group to our respectable rooms thinking that our extended family was preparing to leave. I was already angry because my mother had been her usual self over dinner. Bellatrix was already in my room before I even noticed she opened the door. I didn't know why she sought out my company because I was always such a point of anger for her. I asked her what she was doing in my room. She walked over to me and pinned me up against the wall. I tried to push her off me but she wouldn't let up. I didn't want to push on her any harder because I didn't want to hurt her. Bellatrix pressed her whole body against mine and whispered into my ear that she was going to save me from myself, that with our marriage I was going to be brought back into the fold; that I was going to be steered to where I rightfully belonged." Sirius paused and Jean could tell that they were reaching the difficult part of the story, the part that was the catalyst in him leaving his home forever. Jean didn't speak, but listened intently even to Sirius' silence. "I asked her where she thought I belonged. With this great presentation of rolling up her sleeve she revealed this mark covering her entire forearm." Sirius motioned to his own forearm. "It was a brand burned black onto her skin. There was a skull and coming from its mouth was a large snake coiling around her arm"

Jean nodded, incapable of speaking. She was stunned at what Sirius was telling her, of what Bellatrix had shown him. Jean didn't need Sirius to describe the Dark Mark and she wished that he hadn't. The image was already sandblasted into her memory, particularly Bellatrix's.

Sirius continued to speak, not noticing how the color had drained from Jean's face. "I just stared at the mark on her arm. Bellatrix whispered in my ear 'You belong with us, and when you are mine they will never let you go.' And then she grabbed my chin and kissed me hard. That broke me out of stupor." Sirius' statement also broke Jean out of her thoughts. "I practically picked Bellatrix up when I pushed her out of my room. She fell onto the floor in the hall and I slammed the door on her. After that, it was a rush of adrenaline and motion. I magically enhanced my school trunk and stuffed everything that could fit into it. Then I made it weightless and floated it down into the backyard. I went out the window and climbed down the house. I went into the shed and grabbed my broom and threw it and my trunk into the passenger cab of my motorcycle and I rode my motorcycle to James' house. Bellatrix, now without a potential husband, was hurried into a slap dashed and loveless union with Rudolphus Lestrange and, according to Narcissa when she's shaming me on the subject, deals with the family's shame and embarrassment that the least valued Black ran out on her. I never went back to Number 12 Grimmauld Place again."

"You ran away," stated Jean quietly. Then she caught the look in Sirius' eye and how his face was set. Silently, she let out a breath. "You were afraid."

"I still am," said Sirius. Sirius let out a long sigh. "I've never told anyone that before, not even James. And Lily doesn't know about the whole Moony and Snape thing." Sirius looked at Jean and she saw a soft smile play across his face. "There's something special about you."
Jean shrugged her shoulders modestly. "I'm a good listener."

Sirius laughed and Jean joined him after a beat. "So," said Jean, "how did James' parents take you moving in with them?"

"Mr. and Mrs. Potter took me in without question. James is pureblood so his parents know my parents. Honestly, they were surprised I didn't make a run for it sooner." Sirius let out another bark like laugh. "Although, Mrs. Potter threatened to turn both James and I out on more than one occasion. We are such troublemakers together. Mrs. Potter was the sweetest and most good-hearted person I ever knew, but when you got on her bad side," Sirius whistled, "she's was spitfire."

"Was?" asked Jean, her body deflating.

Sirius looked at her curiously and then his eyes widened in understanding. "That's right, you don't know. You weren't here when..." Sirius' face slackened and somber and his eyes drifted far away. "James' parents were much older when he was born, far older than any of our other parents." Sirius swallowed and blinked. "She died," he said simply. "She died last spring. Cerebrumous Spattergroit. Hardly lasted a week." Sirius let out a shaky breath, his eyes suddenly over bright. "James and I just barely made it home in time to see her. The Healers said that she maybe could have survived it, but her age..." Sirius tapered off.

"I'm sorry," said Jean, not knowing what else to say.

"It's alright," said Sirius. "I forgot you didn't know."

"She sounded like a wonderful woman."

Sirius nodded slightly. "Yeah. She was."

Jean caught the catch in his voice and knew that it was more than that. She was the only mother he had ever known. Jean watched Sirius twist his ring around his finger by the dark stone. A part of her wanted to reach out to him again but her hands remained rooted in her lap.

"She reminds me of one of my friend's mother," said Jean, attempting to cheer Sirius up and wipe away the face she saw so often on him in his future. "Whenever he or his brothers or my other friend did anything to set her off all you could do was hunker down and hope you didn't get caught up in the crossfire."

"You never talked about your friends from Salem before," said Sirius, "what were they like?"

"Hmm?" said Jean, confused about why Sirius was talking about her friends from Salem and then she remembered. "Oh. No, I guess I haven't. I had two friends back in Salem; two best friends." Jean chuckled lightly. "We got into so much mischief. Some people called us the 'Golden Trio'." Jean used air quotations around her words.

"One member shy of Marauder status," joked Sirius.

"Yeah," answered Jean. "I was the resident Moony for the three of us, always trying to be the voice of reason. But, boys will be boys, and they just went off, more often than not with me going right along with them." Jean's voice slowed to a stop and, seemingly like Sirius, she had this need to tell him everything, or rather, everything that she could. "One of them died before I came here... that's... that's the reason I came here."

Sirius didn't speak but his eyes bore a look of silent encouragement.
"I was ganged up on by a group of people who didn't like muggle-borns. They gave me this." Without looking, Jean tapped the place on her sleeve that covered her cursed scar. Jean saw Sirius' lips press themselves in a thin line and his eyes flashed in anger. "My friends stepped in and things got out of hand... And they killed him, right there in front of me." It was the blandest and most non-descript way that Jean could tell that story but Sirius couldn't know any more than what she told him. Jean also thought she couldn't articulate any more details. Even though she had stopped actively grieving for Ron and her subsequent abandonment of Harry, thinking about it still hurt and talking about it made it worse. "After that," Jean continued, "everywhere I went, and everything I did was just a memory of him. I couldn't take it. So I left, and here I am."

Sirius had curled his fingers into a ball, which his chin rested upon staring sightlessly at the floor. "I'm sorry," he murmured quietly. "I'm so sorry. I can't even imagine."

Jean folded her knees into her body. "Yeah," she said, her voice growing thick.

Sirius glanced over at her. "You loved him, didn't you?"

Jean nodded into her knees. "Yeah. But I never told him."

Sirius sighed. "That's too bad." Sirius looked down at his hands, his nervous fingers finally going still. "We both have very sad stories, don't we Jean?"

"You have no idea," murmured Jean, more to herself than to him.

The pair sat in silence for a while before Jean finally unfolded herself rapidly blinking her red-rimmed eyes. "Sirius," she said.

"Yes," Sirius replied.

"Can you do something for me?"

"Anything. Name it."

"Distract me," said Jean. "Tell me a story. Tell me about something you did with James, Peter and Remus." She paused for a beat, not caring that she wasn't supposed to know about this. She just wanted to laugh and for Sirius to laugh with her. "Tell me about the Marauders Map."

Sirius raised his eyebrows at her. "Now how do you know about that?" he asked good-naturedly.

"As I said before," answered Jean. "I'm a good listener."

Jean and Sirius spent an unknown amount of time swapping stories. Sirius did most of the talking, narrating his adventures with the other Marauders. Jean didn't know when her head ended up resting on Sirius' shoulder but when she realized it she didn't remove it.

"...and we dived under the Invisibility Cloak," said Sirius, "and that's when we realized that in the rush we had dropped the map. Filch was reaching down to pick it up and we were all like 'oh no!'. And then..." Sirius stopped mid-sentence when his watch beeped. In the act of looking at his watch, Sirius' arm finished wrapping its way around Jean's waist. "Dang," said Sirius, "its almost five. I have Quidditch practice."

"Aww," said Jean, "you were getting to the best part."

Sirius laughed. "I could always stay if you want."
"No," said Jean. "You have to go."

"What would you say if I said I wanted to stay?"

"I would say," said Jean, "that you need to go to Quidditch practice. If you didn't James would be mad at you and he'd blame me."

Sirius rolled his eyes. "Fair enough," he said. Sirius got up and Jean watched him ascend the dormitory stairs until he was out of sight.

When Sirius was gone Jean got up as well. She pulled out her wand and waved it at the breakfast spread lying on the coffee table the entire time and sent it back down to the kitchens far below her feet.

Jean had just sat back down when the portrait hole swung open and Alice, Mary, Marlene, and Dorcas walked in. "Hey guys," said Jean. "Where have you been all day?"

"We were about to ask you the same thing," said Alice.

Jean looked at the foursome, confused. "Was I supposed to be somewhere?"

"It was a Hogsmeade day," supplied Dorcas.

"Yeah," added Marlene, "You slept in and Sirius said he'd wait for you and he'd walk you down."

"Sirius said this?" asked Jean.

"Yeah," answered Mary, "why?"

It was at that moment that Sirius sauntered back down the stairs dressed in his Quidditch uniform with his broom slung across his back. "Ladies," he said smoothly as he sauntered by the group.

Jean leaned around Alice and stared at Sirius as he walked away. As Sirius passed though the portrait hole he looked over his shoulder. Jean couldn't be sure because it happened so fast, but she was fairly certain that as the portrait hole swung shut Sirius winked at her.
Fifteen minutes before the start of the Quidditch game and the stadium was an overflowing sea of crimson and emerald broken up by a smattering of yellow and blue islands. The uncharacteristically warm March weather had some people experimenting with short sleeves as part of their wardrobe. Jean was such a person, wearing a crimson blouse and a pair of blue jeans. She had a sweater, but it remained folded in her lap due to being sandwiched between Remus and Lily with Peter sitting on the other side of Remus. Lily was not one to be tricked by the weather and wore a bright red turtleneck sweater and carried in her pants pocket a pair of striped scarlet and gold knitted gloves. Remus also seemed to follow Lily's thought process and wore a beige jacket. It looked liked he had transformed into Moony in it and the elbows had off colored patches sewn onto them but Jean thought that it was money well spent since she was fairly certain that this was the same jacket that Professor Lupin was wearing when she had met him on the Hogwarts Express when she was thirteen years old. Far below where they sat James and Sirius, a Chaser and Beater respectively, were preparing for the highly anticipated match against Slytherin.

Alice, Marlene, Dorcas, and Mary were sitting one row behind Lily, Jean and Remus but the crowds were so dense and as a result the surrounding conversations so collectively loud that Jean could only hear either Lily or Remus. "So," said Jean, speaking to the latter. "How has the Gryffindor team been this year?"

"We've had a great season with James as team captain. Slytherin has been the only team that's been good competition against us."

"I see," said Jean. Gryffindor and Slytherin in a heated contention for the Quidditch Cup. No matter where or when one went some things never changed. "Is Slytherin playing nice?"

Lily heard this question and leaned in to answer before Remus could. "Jean, I think you know the Slytherins well enough to answer that question." Jean laughed lightly and nodded.

Jean heard something that sounded like a megaphone being turned on. The sounds around her subdued somewhat but she could still hear Peter crunching on popcorn in her ear.

"Good afternoon, Hogwarts," shouted a young man's magically magnified voice, "I'm Thomas Finn your Hufflepuff commentator…"

"And I'm your Ravenclaw commentator, Dianna Wickerbee and welcome to today's match: Slytherin versus Gryffindor!"

The stadium cheered, whistled, applauded and stomped their feet literally shaking the wooden stadium knowing that the two teams would hear it. As Jean clapped she leaned over to Lily. "Why are there two commentators?"

"There are actually four commentators, one from each house," supplied Lily. "The two commentators from the two houses that aren't playing commentate, otherwise…” Lily paused. "Well, things get a bit intense between the commentators and the team members or themselves."

Jean's eyes widened slightly. For her entire Hogwarts career there's only ever been one commentator and it hasn't mattered what House he or she was in. Jean couldn't believe it, but the inter-house rivalries were actually worse here then where she had come from. Jean leaned around
Lily and looked at the pair of commentators in the box. Thomas Finn was a tall, lanky looking Seventh Year with a chestnut blond color to his hair and the hintings of a beard on his chin dressed in the Hufflepuff black and yellow; but that wasn't what grabbed Jean's attention. Jean stared at the girl who looked to be around a Sixth Year. She had white blonde hair curled into tight ringlets with blue and silver ribbons tied in her hair. Even at a distance, Jean could see the brilliant blue color of her eyes. Jean wondered, but she couldn't be certain, Luna wasn't around to ask.

"Gryffindors," shouted Finn, "your house team: Potter, Lowry, McKinley, Black, Miller, Harris and Kostova!" Seven streaks of crimson shot out from underneath the stadium, circling past the crowds of Gryffindors below them before they flew to center field. Jean was able to pick out James at the point of the flight pattern flanked by the two other chasers, Lowry, a girl with red hair styled into a pixie cut, and McKinley, a boy of seemingly Indian descent with what looked like a small earring in his right ear. Sirius and the other beater Miller followed behind the trio of chasers, the brown haired boy looked several years younger than Sirius and seemed to be mimicking Sirius, who had his bat swung back over one shoulder and was balancing it with the tips of his fingers. Harris, the keeper followed, centered behind the two beaters. His white blond hair that was slicked into a ponytail whipped around behind him. The seeker, Kostova, flanked Harris and was slightly behind him. Standing on the ground Kostova couldn't have been more than five feet. Her hair was as black as Sirius' and was pulled into a ponytail as well. She looked to be around thirteen.

The Gryffindor team continued to circle towards center field when Diana spoke with her magically enhanced voice. "And now, introducing your Slytherin House team: Spindler, Greene, Collier, Peet, Rosky, Brunswick, and Black." The Slytherin team flew into the stadium in similar fashion as the Gryffindor team. Spindler and Greene flanked Collier, a black boy around the age of fifteen. Even before the match and an entire Quidditch pitch away, his calculating eyes were already sizing up James and the other chasers up. The beaters Peet and Rosky followed them. From the way Rosky looked at Sirius and the way Sirius returned his glare Jean could tell that the two had spent years battting bludgers at each other's faces. Brunswick, the only female on the Slytherin team followed the beaters. The keeper, even from a distance, looked like she could rival an American football linebacker. She wasn't overweight but her shoulders were wide and her arms were huge and muscular. Whereas the Gryffindor team had chosen the tactic of a small yet nimble player, the Slytherins opted for placing a physical barrier between the quaffle and the goals. Regulus trailed behind the pack of emerald uniforms looking all the more like his older brother when mounted on his broom that had a handle as black as his name.

Eventually the two teams finished their circuit and came to a halt in the center of the Quidditch pitch hovering just over the ground.

"And now the referee, Madam Hooch," provided Finn.

Madam Hooch flew forward on her own broom, her hair far darker than Jean had ever seen before but still sporting that spiked look to her hair. "Captains," she said, "shake hands." James and Rosky flew down from their respective positions and landed on the ground. In front of Madame Hooch they shook hands briefly, releasing as though the contact had sent an electric shock through their arms. It satisfied the referee and she directed the pair back to their brooms who quickly took to the air. Madam Hooch magiked the reinforced box that held the four Quidditch balls out of thin air with a wave of her wand. She kicked the side of the case with her foot and the lid opened. The two black bludgers exploded out of the box and the brief flash of light that disappeared instantly signified that the golden snitch had followed them. Madam Hooch flew on her broom to where she was hovering a few feet off the ground. She blew her whistle and at the same time threw the quaffle upward.

"The quaffle is in the air," Diana said. Six chasers dove for the dark red ball. "And the match has
Out of the initial fray James caught the quaffle as it fell. He turned on a dime and started speeding towards the Slytherin goal posts. "Potter has the quaffle with Sirius Black right beside him," said Finn.

Sirius flanked James, his eyes scanning the skies around the chaser. Miller was on the other side of the pitch covering Lowry and McKinley also flying toward the goals. James had made it a good way down the pitch before Spindler caught up with him. Effortlessly James passed the quaffle across the pitch to McKinley. But the Slytherin chasers had thought ahead. While Spindler was chasing down James, Greene and Collier had flown past the other two Gryffindor chasers and were waiting for them when the quaffle landed in McKinley's hands. Collier charged McKinley, forcing him to pass the quaffle backwards to Lowry. Miller flew in front of Collier to prevent him from following the quaffle back to Lowry. Greene steered around Collier and Miller while Lowry veered around the entire group, speeding towards James and the goalposts. James doubled back to Lowry both Sirius and Spindler following him. Greene was chasing Lowry down, Miller on his heels. Spindler sped up and blocked Lowry's way to James. Lowry arched her arm back and prepared to throw the quaffle anyways. But instead of throwing it over Spindler to James, she threw it straight down. McKinley was flying several yards beneath Lowry, Collier hovering around him. As soon as the quaffle was in McKinley's hands it left them, and around the time Spindler realized the quaffle had gone in an unexpected direction the quaffle was in James' arms again as he flew towards the goal posts to the sound of Gryffindor applause. Rosky shot a bludger in James' direction but Sirius deflected it, leaving James open to lope the quaffle into the left hoop.

"Gryffindor scores the first goal of the match," said Finn in his megaphone voice, "they now lead by ten."

Slytherin gained possession of the quaffle after the Gryffindor teams' goal. Greene, who was the farthest down the pitch, was flying towards the Gryffindor goal posts both the Gryffindor and Slytherin chasers hot on his heels. Greene took aim and shot the quaffle at the center hoop. Harris intercepted it in the air, catching it firmly in the center of his chest.

Harris threw the quaffle to James who was approaching him on his left who then immediately turned around for the trip downfield again. The Slytherin team had a new strategy for this situation. While Greene was chasing down James, Collier accompanied by Rosky blocked James' line of flight. McKinley flew below James, trying to get in the passing formation that worked so well for them previously, but both Spindler and Peet guarded him. Lowry was too far from James to successfully throw a pass to.

But James did something that Jean had never seen before. James lightly tossed the quaffle up into the air and then proceeded to dismount his broom. As he and the quaffle fell, James swung his broom like a golf club and hit the quaffle with the bristled end of his broom. The quaffle arched high into the air covering the large distance between James and Lowry, who caught it as if she was waiting for it all along.

"A magnificent pass by James Potter," said Diana. Lowry scored in the right hoop of the Slytherin goalposts. "And another ten points for Gryffindor."

James had since remounted his broom and had swept over the section that Jean and her group of friends were sitting in to rejoin his teammates. "James is really good," said Jean to no one in particular.

"Yeah," Lily answered. "I told him he should consider professional Quidditch after school."
Jean nodded, not speaking. She never thought about James being anything but an Auror. She wondered if James would have gone on to play professional Quidditch if Voldemort hadn’t risen to power and inspired him to become an Auror and an Order member.

Slytherin was in possession of the quaffle briefly before McKinley intercepted a pass between Collier and Spindler. McKinley flew to Slytherin's trio of white hoops to take a shot on goal. Brunswick caught the quaffle.

"Nice catch by the Slytherin keeper," said Finn.

Brunswick arched her arm back and threw the quaffle. The quaffle looked like it had been fired out of a gun, flying over half of the distance James had batted the ball with the end of his broom.

"Er…nice throw by the Slytherin keeper," added Diana with an odd mixture of confusion, surprise, and awe in her voice.

"I think she practices with shot put balls," said Lily to Jean who was still staring slightly slack jawed at the sky.

Jean nodded once. "I'd believe that."

The Gryffindor chasers and beaters were clustered around the Slytherin goalposts clearly not expecting the Slytherin keeper to have a rocket launcher at the end of her arm, so when Collier caught the quaffle he had an impressive lead. Peet and Rosky both fired bludgers into the pursuing Gryffindor pack, forcing them to break their flight pattern. Sirius hit a returning bludger but it was too little to late. Collier scored in the left hoop, Harris missing it by inches.

"And Slytherin scores their first goal of the match," said Finn.

The Gryffindor team collected themselves and regained possession of the quaffle. James took point as his fellow chasers peeled away from him and he sped down the pitch.

"It looks like Potter is trying to score all by himself," said Diana.

It looked that way. James was flying fast, his body pressed to the handle of his broom with the quaffle tucked into his chest. He nimbly out maneuvered the Slytherin chasers that dove at him and Sirius and Miller batted away the bludgers aimed at him. All the while the other two Gryffindor chasers kept their distance. James was nearing the trio of goalposts clearly aiming for the left hoop. Brunswick began floating her way over for an easy catch. The Slytherin keeper was halfway between the center and the left hoops when James arched his arm back to throw the quaffle. But, as he did so, his fingers relaxed around the ball so much that the quaffle was practically falling out of his hands.

From out of nowhere there was a streak of red. McKinley passed behind James, inches from his back, and grabbed the quaffle out of his open palm. McKinley flew a few feet while Brunswick turned wildly trying to reach him before McKinley launched the quaffle into the right goal hoop.

"McKinley scores!" shouted Finn, "Gryffindor leads thirty to ten."

The Gryffindor side of the stadium applauded heartily as both teams reset themselves. Slytherin originally had possession of the quaffle but as Spindler passed it to Greene James intercepted the ball and began making his way down to the Slytherin side if the pitch. James attempted to pass the quaffle to Lowry but the quaffle was intercepted by Collier who, like James, began to try to get to the Gryffindor end of the field. While James, Lowry, and McKinley pursued Collier, Sirius a little ways away from his position flanking James and began to circle Collier just out of his line of sight.
Spindler and Greene were ahead of Collier and Collier threw his arm back to pass the quaffle to them.

Sirius made his move. As Collier threw the quaffle, Sirius hit a bludger at Collier. The bludger made contact on Collier's upper arm just above the elbow. The blow spoiled Collier's throw and the quaffle fell down to where Lowry was waiting to catch it.

"Hit him again, Sirius!" Both Lily and Jean turned to look at Remus, who shrugged his shoulders. "What?" Lily and Jean were too marveled at Remus' sudden show of sports enthusiasm to notice that Lowry had scored another goal for the Gryffindor team.

"Another ten points for Gryffindor," said Diana.

Greene gained possession of the quaffle. After flying a few yards he passed it to Collier who muscled his way past James and McKinley who lunged at him. Lowry circled around Collier trying to cut him off but Collier passed it to Spindler just before she could get in front of him. Lowry sped past Collier in pursuit of Spindler. They were neck and neck, Lowry wrestling Spindler for the quaffle and Spindler determinedly keeping it away from her as they flew headlong down towards the Gryffindor hoops.

"Argh!" Lowry peeled wildly away from Spindler, gripping her shoulder and almost hitting the stands as she did so.

"Lowry has been hit by Peet's bludger," said Finn. Lowry steadied herself, waving away both Madam Hooch and James as she rotated her shoulder, a grimace periodically appearing on her face.

Spindler, immediately after Peet had hit Lowry with the bludger, passed the quaffle to Greene who carried it all the way to the goals. Jean watched Harris prepare himself, his eyes following Greene's every move, mentally blocking out every other distraction. Because of this, Harris didn't notice Rosky coming at him. The Slytherin beater aimed a bludger in Harris' direction. The bludger hit Harris' ankle and sent him pin wheeling off his broom, making it impossible for him to catch the quaffle. With one hand Harris grasped his broom and he wrapped his other arm and one of his legs around the white hoop he crashed into.

The Slytherin team knows how to use their beaters," commented Diana, "and have earned another ten points."

After Slytherin scored, James got possession of the quaffle. All three of the Slytherin chasers pursued him, forcing him to pass to Lowry before they completely boxed him in. Lowry was still hurting from the bludger that hit her in the shoulder. Lowry had her less dominant and uninjured arm wrapped around the quaffle and the fingers on her injured arm had a death grip around the handle of her broom. Both of the Slytherin beaters were following her and two of the three Slytherin chasers were flanking them, intending to outpace them and cut Lowry off downfield.

For the first time since the beginning of the game, Sirius peeled away from James. Miller followed Sirius to Lowry. Both of the Gryffindor beaters had a bludger. Sirius and Miller lined up on either side of Lowry shielding her with their bodies. They proceeded to pass both bludgers between each other in front of Lowry as they charged down the field.

"I don't believe what I'm seeing," said Finn, impressed, "Sirius Black and Miller are using the bludgers as a barricade and battering ram to get Lowry and the quaffle down the pitch."

There couldn't have been a better word other than 'battering ram' to describe what Sirius and Miller were doing. As Collier approached on one side Sirius fired one bludger at him, hitting him square
in the chest. It knocked the wind out of him and almost knocked him off his broom. Miller did the same thing when Spindler came upon them on the other side. Spindler dodged, narrowly missing the bludger.

Finally, Lowry, Sirius, and Miller made it to where McKinley was. McKinley indicated with his head to see if Lowry wanted to take a shot on the goals. Lowry vigorously shook her head, the pain in her arm evident on her face. McKinley nodded once, understanding. McKinley seemed to have picked up some of James' tricks. When Lowry attempted to pass to McKinley, he stood up on the front end of his broom when the quaffle came within range. His broom acted like a seesaw with the front end of his broom getting, very quickly, significantly lower than the bristled end of his broom. The quaffle connected to the bristled end of his broom. Like a catapult, the quaffle got shot from the broom. The quaffle flew through the left ring, the ring farthest away from Lowry and McKinley and Brunswick, who was guarding the ring closest to McKinley.

"Gryffindor scores!" shouted Diana.

Greene got the quaffle after the Gryffindor goal for a moment but James had wrestled it away from him so quickly that Sirius hadn't had time to get back to him. James doubled back quickly and took a shot on one of the hoops. Brunswick, who was still feeding off her frustration at missing the previous shot, caught the quaffle by the tips of her fingers. James' eyes widened and he wheeled around trying to catch the quaffle when Brunswick launched it hard and fast into the air.

As Sirius was flying back to James, Sirius noticed Rosky lining himself up with James with a bludger on the end of his bat. James didn't notice the imminent threat to his person. Both of his hands were extended, his eyes trained on the quaffle as it flew. Sirius shouted something that Jean could not hear as he shot forward to James. In his haste, Sirius couldn't quite manage to get his bat to deflect the bludger and missed the ball by about a foot. The bludger hit Sirius at the point where his collarbone connected to his shoulder. Sirius did successfully manage to protect Rosky's intended target, James' upper arms and hands.

Jean clapped her hands over her mouth as she watched Sirius arc over James, spiraling from the blow, and crash-land on the edge of the stands. For a moment, Sirius just lay there seemingly stunned his legs and hips dangling off the edge of the stands, his head face down in the wooden boards, arms spread-eagled out beside him. James abandoned his pursuit of the quaffle when he realized Sirius had been hit, allowing Spindler to grab the quaffle and score an easy goal past an equally as distracted Harris, who was staring downfield at Sirius as well.

Sirius finally peeled himself off the ground and remounted his broom and slowly rose back in the air. Jean politely clapped with the rest of the spectators as he did so.

"Go Sirius!" shouted someone. "You can do it, baby!"

Jean abruptly turned her head in the direction of the encouragement and endearment. The voice belonged to a Ravenclaw girl that looked around seventeen years old. She had hair as dark as ebony that curled into tight ringlets that surrounded her slender face. "Lily," asked Jean, still looking at the girl, "who is that?"

Lily followed Jean's gaze. "That's Matilda Maybelle. She's a seventh year Ravenclaw. She and Sirius dated a few times." Lily paused and rolled her eyes. "When she's not dating Sirius she's sort of the 'president' of his 'fan club'." Lily used her fingers to make air quotations around her selected words.

Jean raised an eyebrow. "Sirius has a fan club?" she asked.
Remus laughed once and leaned closer to the girls. "I think you know Sirius enough to answer that question."

Jean split her time between watching Sirius return back to his teammates and Matilda Maybelle, who was still standing up on the stands clapping and cheering for him. Her eyes were bright and shining like pieces of silver. The sunlight played in her hair like it was a polished stone. There was a dimple in her cheek whenever she opened her mouth. Jean subconsciously ran a hand through her hair that had never managed such pretty curls.

James wasn't paying attention to either of them. As soon as he ascertained that Sirius was for the most part unharmed he went on the warpath. James got possession of the quaffle and muscled his way past Slytherin after Slytherin his face set with no intention of passing the quaffle. James flew right up to Brunswick so forcefully that it made Brunswick back pedal until she was practically in the hoop. James took the quaffle in both of his hands and threw it behind his head and jumped up above his broom. As he fell back onto his broom James threw the quaffle so violently that Brunswick dove out of the way of the quaffle less it hit her in the face. But James wasn't finished. As soon as Spindler gained possession of the quaffle for the Slytherin team, James wrestled it from him and once again rocketed down the pitch. James didn't invade Brunswick's personal space this time but he came dangerously close before he dismounted his broom, holding onto it with both hands. James kicked the quaffle with the soles of both his feet and the quaffle went through the left hoop, hitting the rim so hard it spun wildly into the stands. The crowds dodged the quaffle as they would dodge a bludger. James attempted his feat a third time but, by then, the adrenaline of Sirius being injured protecting him from a bludger had left him. He shot wide and Brunswick caught it.

With another amazing throw, Brunswick passed the quaffle to Collier. James was too spent to give chase and the other two Gryffindor chasers who until that moment had been doing everything possible to stay out of James' way were in no position to pursue Collier either. Collier took a shot on goal and scored. The last three goals took less than five minutes.

The match resumed its regular pace after that, but only briefly.

"Greene has possession of the quaffle," commented Finn, "Passes it to—"

"Regulus Black sees the snitch!"

Diana's outburst sent everyone's head on a swivel looking for the Slytherin seeker. Regulus Black shot like a bullet across the pitch his hand outstretched, eyes trained on the little golden ball Jean could barely see.

"And here comes Kostova," said Finn.

The Gryffindor seeker swerved up beside Regulus but a little bit behind him, desperately jostling for position around Regulus.

"Can she make it?" asked Diana.

"I don't know," responded Finn, "Regulus has the faster broom."

Jean glanced up at Sirius who was staring intently at his brother and his teammate as they flew around the field. Sirius shouted something at Miller Jean couldn't hear over the roar the spectators were making for the seeker they supported.

Miller chased down a bludger and passed it to Sirius. During that time, Sirius stood up on his broom, balancing on it, holding the end of his bludger bat with both hands. When the bludger came
within range Sirius hit the bludger like one would hit a baseball towards the two seekers with pinpoint accuracy.

The bludger clipped the end of Regulus' broom, making him spin away from the snitch. Kostova wheeled around both the bludger and Regulus. Kostova reached out both of her hands and curled her fingers, smiling triumphantly when she felt the snitch's wings beat against her palm.

"Kostova caught the snitch!"

"Gryffindor wins!" Finn and Diana shouted simultaneously. But both of them, even with magically enhanced voices, were drowned out by the Gryffindor fans. Kostova descended to the ground and was immediately swarmed by the six other Gryffindor players. Jean watched them move off the pitch in one red and gold mass.

Lily nudged Jean's elbow. "Come on," she said, "let's go."

Jean, Lily, Remus and Peter nudged their way through the spectators to reach a set of stairs that lead down to the Gryffindor locker room. The door was thrown open and there were already several people inside by the time the foursome arrived congratulating and celebrating with the team.

"James," Lily called through the crowd, "James."

James parted the sea of people. "Hey, Lily," he said. James reached forward and literally picked Lily up and kissed her on the cheek. "How'd we do?" he asked. "I think we did good if I do say so myself."

Lily laughed and returned James' kiss on his cheek. "You all did very well, James," she said. Jean smiled, knowing that Lily was trying to not stroke James' easily inflatable ego too much.

As people continued to funnel into the locker room, Jean was shuffled to the back of the space. The Gryffindor team was spread out in the crowd. James, Lily, Remus, and Peter were talking to some people around them. Miller was smashed between two boys that looked like his brothers and Harris was in the middle of snogging what had to be his girlfriend. Kostova and McKinley were standing close together watching Lowry get bandaged up by Madame Pomfrey who had somehow made it into the locker room as well. Jean pressed her back up against the wall, trying to stay out of everyone's way.

"Um, Jean?" Jean turned, and all the blood in her body rushed to her cheeks. "My clothes are behind you."

Sirius' head and upper part of his chest were sticking out from behind a shower curtain. His black hair was still wet from the water, dripping drops onto his shoulders and across his well-defined chest, getting caught in the patches of dark hair that grew there. The broad shoulder that was exposed sported the yellowed tinges of the bruise where the bludger had hit him, but somehow the coloring complemented his tanned skin.

Jean blinked once, then twice, before she reached back behind her and grabbed Sirius' clothes that were lying folded up on the bench behind her.

Sirius reached out his arm for his clothes, the hair on his arm slicked to his skin. As he did so the slackened shower curtain revealed Sirius' hip, his pelvis, and one of the lines that would form a V on a man's pelvis plunging sharply down until she could see no more. Sirius' warm, wet fingers touched Jean's skin as he grabbed the pile of folded clothes. "Thank you," he said and ducked
behind the shower curtain.

It was several seconds before Jean even thought to move.

Sirius emerged, his damp shirt clinging to the divots in his abs, smoothing out his hair with his fingers. He turned to look at Jean but he didn't wink at her like he normally did. He just stared at her, delving into her eyes like two silver spades into subtle brown earth, and she didn't look away. A corner of Sirius' mouth curled upward. "The steam had made your hair a little frizzy." Sirius reached out and ran his fingers through Jean's hair.

"Did it?" said Jean, attempting to pull her hair back into a ponytail as she spoke.

"Don't," said Sirius gently as he stopped her. "It looks cute."

Jean looked up at Sirius, releasing her hold on her hair. "Really?"

Sirius nodded. "Yeah."

The moment was broken by Matilda Maybelle's voice echoing in their ears. "Sirius," she called moving her way towards him, "Sirius!"

Sirius turned from Jean towards the Ravenclaw girl with the perfect bouncing curls, a smile appearing on his face. "Hey Mattie. I heard you cheering me from all the way up in the air."

"You did brilliantly, Sirius," said Matilda. "I knew you would."

Jean from her position on the wall unconsciously pulled her hair up into a ponytail as she silently watched Matilda jump at Sirius and wrap her arms around his shoulders.
Jean had her head propped up against her hand and was idly drawing circles on the corner of her parchment with her quill. Her eyes drifted between Professor Kinshield, who was lecturing about curse breaking, and the back of Sirius’ head. It had been almost two weeks since the Quidditch match against Slytherin and even though Jean never showed anything from the outside looking in, her mind was buzzing with inner turmoil like a hive of angry bees. She was attracted to Sirius; that much Jean was certain of. He was gallant and handsome and played the part of Prince Charming to a T. Yet, there was definitely a flair of deviance to him. Prince Charming had traded his white horse for a leather jacket and motorcycle. No better description of Sirius Black could ever be made. Jean was reminded of her little fling with Viktor Krum back in her fourth year. That was the part of the charm of both Viktor and Sirius; the fact that they were so unlike Jean, and that they were so unlike what she expected; the bad-boy with the heart of gold; the Casanova with the sensitive and understanding side. And, to be honest, she liked being attracted to a man that every girl was attracted to and to have that affection be returned, even though it could be in her head and she had no way of proving that Sirius didn't do this with every girl.

But, from time to time, when Jean talked to Sirius, his hair grew short and red, his eyes turned blue, and Ron Weasley was laughing with her again. She may have liked Viktor, and now, maybe Sirius, very, very much, but she loved Ron. Even though she knew he was dead and also in a time he did not exist yet, she loved him. And if she liked Sirius for some of the same reasons she liked Viktor is that less than her original love for Ron? Also, it took Jean nearly seven years to admit that she truly loved Ron. Almost her whole life as a witch and with Ron had been leading to a moment that now would never happen. Could she so easily replace one man for the next?

And then there was the matter of Matilda. Ever since the Quidditch match it seemed like everywhere she went the Ravenclaw girl was there and radiant as ever with her tight dark curls and grey eyes. Jean could tell that Matilda was very fashion conscious as she clicked around in her heels with her sharply pleated skirts. And every time Sirius was anywhere in the vicinity it seemed like Matilda was drawn into his gravitational pull. Whenever she saw the pair of them together she couldn't really shake the feeling that the pair of them were meant to be together. She had no way to contradict this thought. For all she knew they could start dating again, might get serious, might have even gotten married if Voldemort and Sirius’ imprisonment hadn't torn them apart. For all she knew this could be part of the shadowed past that neither Remus nor Sirius ever talked about, like countless other things.

But then, there was that way that Sirius looked at Jean. It was that look he gave her in the shower, that soul piercing stare that was so unlike the way he looked at others. And every once in a while, for a brief second, his stone colored eyes kindled with an unseen fire. His eyes were doing so at that very moment. Jean shifted he gaze slightly and she and Sirius locked eyes, a second later he looked away.

Jean's thoughts were broken when Professor Kinshield sharply clicked his chalk on the blackboard. Kinshield stared out over his classroom. "It's like lecturing a roomful of dead-eyed puppets." He looked up at the notes he was scratching down on the blackboard. He pressed his lips together for a moment. "I didn't like learning this either." With one sweep of his wand the board had cleaned itself. "Alright everyone, put your books away, stand up, and take out your wands." Peter, among others, peeled their faces off their desks to listen to their professor for the first time in many minutes. "I'm going to teach you how to duel."
James, Sirius, and Remus instantly became alert and almost rocketed up out of their seats to help Professor Kinshield move all the desks to make a space for the class in the center of the room.

Once the students had settled down and were standing and staring at Kinshield did the professor begin.

"Now," he said, rolling his wand in between his palms as he walked back in front of the green and red robed students, "to start with, there is the etiquette of beginning a duel. Potter," he said, pointing at James, "get up here and help me." James took a few steps forward. Kinshield brandished his wand in front of his face. James did the same. "First," said Kinshield, "we bow." Kinshield, followed by James a second later, executed a deep bow from his waist. "Then," continued the professor, "we would turn to where our backs are facing each other and walk the agreed upon number of paces. For our purposes here, we'll do five."

James and Kinshield turned to where their backs were pressed against each other and began to walk the five paces. As they did so Kinshield continued to speak. "Once this is completed you turn," Magnus turned and raised his wand, "and begin the duel."

James jerked his wand up, slightly taken aback that his professor was aiming at him, and he wondered if he really was going to duel Kinshield.

Kinshield lowered his wand after a beat and grinned at James. Kinshield pocketed his wand.

"Alright everyone," said Kinshield, "pair off. I'd like you to use disarming spells only for right now and we will advance as we go."

The Gryffindors and Slytherins paired off. Kinshield walking around the room to watch and advise his students as they began their dueling. James and Sirius immediately paired up and were already walking back the five paces to begin the duel. Remus had also paired off with Lily, which left Jean with Peter. Jean looked over at Peter who looked back at her, coming to the same conclusion she did.

"Well," said Jean, "shall we?"

Peter rapidly nodded his head a few times. "Sure."

Jean and Peter found a clear space in the room away from the other duos of students. Jean raised her wand and Peter quickly followed suit. They both bowed, Jean straight backed and deep still keeping her eyes locked on Peter to see that his bow was a small bending of his shoulders. It looked like his body was curling into his chest. His fingers were constantly readjusting around the end of his wand. Jean righted herself, walked the five paces, turned and took aim. "You ready?" she called out.

Peter nodded his head with the same frantic bobbing motion he had done earlier only this time he didn't speak. Jean decided to not cast a spell until Peter had done so. "Expelliarmus!" Peter eventually said.

"Protego," Jean countered, the weakly cast disarming spell bouncing harmlessly off her magical shield. "Expelliarmus," Jean said immediately after her first spell. Peter's wand flew out of his fingers and Jean caught it in her free hand.

Peter looked at her sheepishly. "Sorry," said Peter glancing down at his feet. "I'm not really good at this."

"You did fine," Jean said, trying to sound encouraging. "The spell was cast well." Jean didn't want
to say anything more than that. There was a part of her that was very insistent that advising Peter Pettigrew on anything related to magical combat would be counterproductive in the long run.

"Jean, Peter?" Jean looked over her shoulder at her professor. "Switch partners with Remus and Lily, and try some stunning spells this time."

Jean immediately gravitated towards Lily, leaving Peter for Remus. Remus could help Peter and not feel conflicted about it.

Lily and Jean walked back to the place where she and Remus were previously dueling. Jean and Lily bowed, turned to where their backs faced each other and walked five paces away from each other before they turned and took aim at each other. "Shall we?" asked Lily.

"We shall," answered Jean.

Lily was the first to fire off a spell. "Expelliarmus!"

"Protego!" Jean once again cast the magical shield in front of her. Jean could feel that Lily's spell was stronger than Peter's was. Jean held her spell longer and concentrated her magic more to prevent Lily's spell from reaching her and stealing her wand away.

Lily took advantage of Jean having to block her first spell and whipped her arm around to cast another one. "Stupefy!" she said.

Jean didn't have time to conjure up another protection spell and had no choice but to duck, the red beam of shimmering light shooting over her shoulder. Jean tried to balance herself as she spun out of Lily's way trying to switch her wand into the opposite hand so she could fire a spell from the arm closest to her opponent.

As Jean struggled to right herself, Lily once again took aim and cast a spell at Jean. "Immobilus!"

Jean once again dodged Lily's spell, bending her body in a way she didn't think she could have done if she wasn't dueling. Finally, Jean got her wand into the desired hand. "Rictumsempra!" she shouted still in her slightly contorted position.

Lily dropped her wand as her arms wrapped around her stomach, her hands cupping her sides. When her knees hit the floor the peals of laughter began to burst from her mouth. Lily lay on her back rolling from one side to the other, her heels periodically kicking the floor as Jean's spell continued to work on her.

As Jean righted herself, Professor Kinshield walked over to the pair, pulling out his wand as he did so. He aimed at Lily's thrashing frame on the floor, her midsection still spasming from her laughter. "Finite Incantatem."

Lily's laughing immediately ceased. Lily rolled onto her back relaxing her abdomen and took in great gulps of air before she began to pick herself up. As Lily recovered, Professor Kinshield turned to Jean. "That was very clever," he said. "Not many people think of switching to their less dominant arm to cast a spell."

Jean looked down at her wand. The hand that held it was definitely not the hand she used most often, if ever. Jean thought that without the adrenaline that came from her sparring she wouldn't have been able to change hands so easily. And then Jean thought suddenly that without Harry's training in Dumbledore's Army she probably wouldn't have changed hands at all. Jean put her wand back into her dominant hand. "I didn't really think anything of it," she responded.
Kinshield nodded once. "Impressive," he said. "Mr. Lupin," he called out. "Why don't you take a
turn with Jean now. Miss Evans," Kinshield looked over his shoulder at Lily who was now
standing, but still measuring out her breathing. "When you are ready, pair up with Peter."

Lily and Remus once again swapped partners and Jean squared off against the werewolf. As they
proceeded through the etiquette part of the duel Professor Kinshield drifted away and meandered
among the rest of the students, although he frequently looked back at the pair.

When Jean and Remus were the allotted number of steps away from each other, they turned and
raised their wands. "You ready?" asked Remus.

"Yeah," said Jean. Jean was the faster of the two and struck first. "Expelliarmus!"

"Protego," countered Remus, Jean's spell bouncing off his magical shield. Almost before his first
spell had died away Remus cast a second spell. "Stupefy!" Because Remus had cast his spell so
quickly after he had cast his first the spell shot wide and Jean easily stepped out of its way. But
Remus took advantage of Jean's relaxed defense, for her wand arm had dropped when she stepped
away from Remus' spell. Just as quickly as Remus cast his second spell he cast his third. "Avis
Oppugno!" Remus didn't have to be accurate with this spell. It was like buckshot. The single
column of white light scattered into many tiny white balls, which morphed into a flock of bluebirds
the size of figs.

Jean knew that a magical shield would not protect her against physical entities. She wildly shouted
'Finite Incantatem' before the sharp bills could reach her. The birds disappeared in puffs of blue
smoke and grey downy feathers, expanding into a semi-permeable wall between the two students.
Jean took advantage of the fact that Remus' vision was impaired. "Tarantallegra!"

Remus felt his legs jerk out from underneath him as he danced across the floor in a sporadic, stiff-
legged jig. Remus let go of his wand and flung his hands out to the side in order to keep his
balance.

"Finite Incantatem!" Jean whipped her head around, unaware that Professor Kinshield had already
returned to them, if he ever truly left in the first place. "Miss Granger," said Kinshield, spinning the
end of his wand on the tips of his fingers. "If I didn't know any better, I'd say that you have learned
how to duel before."

Jean shifted slightly on the balls of her feet, the conversation sailing into dangerous waters about
how exactly she knew so much about magical combat. "I knew a little," she said bashfully, trying
to be modest. "We had a dueling club back at my old school, but it wasn't around for very long."

Kinshield nodded once. "I see." He drummed his fingers on his wand. "Well, perhaps you would
like a combatant that is a little more…resilient. James," James stopped what he was doing and
looked over at his professor. "Some of your father's skills as an Auror have rubbed off on you I
suppose?"

"Yes, sir" said James, puffing up his chest a little bit.

"Then get over here and spar with Miss Granger before she beats the rest of your friends bloody."

James raised one eyebrow both in surprise at Jean, and in apprehension at Kinshield's request. "You
sure, sir?"

Kinshield's mouth stretched into a thin smile. "Positive," he said. "She can handle herself, I think."

Jean, followed by Remus, Lily and Peter, who had abandoned their own practicing, walked over to
James who stood by an observing Sirius. Kinshield lingered beside them, no longer paying attention to his other students.

James and Jean raised their wands and were about to turn around and walk the steps but Kinshield interrupted. "Never mind all that," Kinshield said, waving one hand to stop them. "Go."

James was fast, faster than Jean had ever anticipated. "Conjunctivitis," James shouted and the spell hit Jean right in the face. Jean's eyes reddened and began to swell shut. Jean stumbled backwards, instinctively trying to rub the irritant out of her eyes, but the action only made the itchy, swollen seeing impairment worse. Half blind now, Jean struggled to orient herself.

"Expelliarmus," said James, thinking that this would be the end of the duel.

Jean heard him though and in a snap she brought up her wand. "Protego!" James' disarming spell was absorbed by Jean's shield. Jean's fingers still clutched at her wand.

As soon as Jean's shield spell was dying away, James pulled off another feat of speed. "Engorgio!" James cried aiming down at Jean's foot.

Through the hazy curtain draped over Jean's eyes, Jean glanced down and watched her foot, ankle and calf swell up like it was stung by a swarm of wasps till it was almost twice its original size. Jean tried to lift her leg but it was dead weight, not responding to any of her attempts at motion. Jean knew that this was what James was hoping for. Unable to see and now practically immobile, it was only a matter of time before James would beat her. Jean lowered her wand from James and aimed it at her own leg. "Reducio," she said. Jean's leg began to deflate, returning to its normal size and with it her use of the appendage. But, the swelling was not going down fast enough, and James was walking towards her.

Then, something happened that James, Kinshield, the people watching, or even Jean never expected. Jean had a combination of a flashback and a panic attack. Through her blurred vision James' figure changed shape, with every step taking a form of a person that Jean feared, a person that longed to see Jean in this predicament, helpless, and with no help coming for her. Lucius Malfoy, Fenrir Greyback, Voldemort, and finally Bellatrix Lestrange. Her painted lips twisted into a sadistic smile, her eyes glinting like firelight on coal. "I like doing it better this way, anyways," she whispered.

Jean's survival mode kicked itself into overdrive. She raised her wand and took aim at Bellatrix, and through the façade, James. "Serpensortia!" From the tip of Jean's wand burst a snake, twisting and writhing as it slithered through the air, jaw unhinged, fangs glistening with venom. James started with a shout and stumbled backwards as Jean continued to fire spells in quick succession. "Expelliarmus! Petrificus Totalus!" James' wand hardly had any time to fly out of his slackened grip before his arms snapped to his sides, his legs locked together and he fell flat on his back with an audible thud.

James' graceless crash landing to the floor got the attention of all the students in the classroom. They all stared at Jean, who wasn't looking at anyone but James. After a beat she broke out of her stunned trance and scrambled over to James to lift the curse.

"James, James." Jean said as James regained the use of his body. "Are you okay? I'm so sorry. I didn't mean to."

"Are you kidding?" said James interrupting Jean's stream of apologies. "That was incredible. You're fast!"
"Yes," commented Professor Kinshield. "You're very fast."

Jean looked up at Kinshield, once again uncomfortable with his praise and what topics of discussion it could lead to. "Thank you, sir" her voice wavering slightly for she was still concerned about James who was gingerly picking his sore body up off the floor.

"Uncommonly fast."

The tension that was now suddenly between Jean Granger and Magnus Kinshield was so tangible it could be cut with a knife, even though no once else noticed it. Jean looked up at her professor for a long moment. "Yes. Thank you, sir," her eyes saying that this was the end of their conversation. Kinshield relented.

In ordinary circumstances this would probably bring about the end of the dueling practice as well as the end of the class session. However, Kinshield was not the ordinary professor and James was definitely not the ordinary student. "Hey, Sirius," he called out when he was finally standing. "Why don't you have a go with Jean."

Sirius raised one eyebrow and subtly looked over at Jean. The almost imperceptible shrug of her shoulders signaled to him that it was his decision. Sirius tilted his head slightly sideways. "Alrighty then."

The students had clustered around the pair when they faced each other wands raised both no longer bothering with the proceedings. Kinshield sat down on the edge of his desk. "Don't hold back," he said. Jean wasn't sure if he directed his statement at Sirius or herself.

Sirius smirked and did a little half bow with his arms halfway out and down by his hips, palms facing forward like he was a gentleman receiving her at a gala. "Ladies first," he said.

"Expelliarmus!" shouted Jean, being very conservative with her spell selecting considering she had flattened James with only the power of nostalgia.


"Protego!" said Jean.

"Come on," Sirius goaded, "you can do better than that."

A cold shiver ran down Jean's spine almost paralyzing her. Those were Sirius' last words on this earth before his cousin's spell pushed him into the empty archway, concealed at the heart of the Department of Mysteries, never to be seen again. Jean shook herself out of her daze. She was not helping Sirius by casting easy spells at him. "Stupefy!"

"Protego!" Sirius was clearly pleased that Jean was trying harder, and he began analyzing her as a challenge. "Rictumsempra!"

"Protego!" Jean cried out again. She felt a surge of energy shoot through her arm as Sirius' spell collided with her own, almost shattering its defenses. Jean could immediately tell that this was not just skill; Sirius was naturally a good fighter.

When Jean and Sirius' spells in essence cancelled each other out, Sirius fired off another one. "Tarantallegra!"

Jean was so sapped of energy from her last magical shield she could not conjure another one. With
absolutely no grace at all Jean jumped out of the way of Sirius’ spell, but she was not fast enough to
dodge Sirius’ Confundus Charm. Jean felt like she was moving in slow motion and her eyes had
turned into a kaleidoscope. First there was one Sirius, then three, and then five, back to three, back
to one, and over and over again. Jean knew she was beaten but she could at least attempt to take
Sirius down with her. Almost drunkenly, Jean aimed her wand using Sirius' cheeky triumphant grin
as a target.

Sirius felt like invisible ropes had suddenly wrapped themselves around his legs. The grin that Jean
had targeted so well slid off his face as he tried to balance himself and not fall down. Sirius was too
little too late, especially when Jean, still trying to shake off the influences of the spell Sirius had
cast on her, tripped over him.

Both Sirius and Jean fell into the wall of students that had developed around them, knocking
students every which way before they crashed into the ground, Sirius partially pinned beneath
Jean. The impact cleared Jean's head enough for her to interpret what was going on around her. She
looked down at Sirius, slightly stunned and scandalized to find him lounging underneath her, his
locked legs almost being straddled by her own. He grinned at her as if he had planned the whole
incident on purpose. "Well done," he said.

Before Jean could say anything she heard a loud volatile crack. In the domino effect caused by
Sirius and Jean falling into their fellow students a wand had misfired. Jean glanced up just in time
to see a white bolt of light sail across the room towards Professor Kinshield.

Kinshield saw it too, and his eyes widened. The professor hopped off his desk seconds before the
white light connected with the wood and enveloped it in a ball of fire.

"Merlin's beard!" Kinshield shouted, wrestling is wand out of his robes. "Aguamenti!"

As Kinshield showered his desk with the stream of water pouring from his wand, Jean pushed
herself to her feet and scurried over to the desk, pulling out her wand as she did so. Seeing that
Kinshield was adequately handling the blaze, Jean snatched a pile of papers lying on his desk to
keep them from catching fire. Jean stepped back a couple of paces and glanced down, jolting at the sight of a gold Ministry of
Magic insignia staring up at her. Her eyes quickly scanned the handwritten letter. Magnus, I can't
spare you anymore, not with this new Muggle family that's gone missing. I'm sorry. Do what you
can, but remember to keep it quiet. Constant vigilance! –Alastor Moody P.S Give my regards to
Dumbledore.

"Thank you, Miss Granger," Jean jerked her head up at the sound of her professor's voice. "You
spared some important papers for me."

"Not a problem," said Jean softly, extending the pile to Kinshield. She flashed him a small smile,
hoping that it would distract him from the questions behind her eyes.

Kinshield took the papers and looked back at his desk, which was blackened and still smoldering.
"Well, I guess that concludes class for the day," he laughed a little. "I have to go hunt for a new
desk." The rest of the class laughed along with their professor as they collected their things, except
Jean, who mutely allowed herself to be herded into the hall.

Later, in the Great Hall, when the group had reconvened after their respective classes for lunch,
Jean was still silent; rolling her pasta around on her fork as she mentally reread the mysterious
letter over and over again.
"Are you alright Jean?" asked Peter, breaking Jean out of her musings. "You're not eating."

Jean looked up at Peter who sat across the table from her. "Yeah," she said, "there is actually." The idle chatter of the group came to a stop as they turned and looked at their newest member. "James —"

"I'm on your mind?" James joked, "I'm flattered."

Jean laughed lightly, rolling her eyes. "No, seriously—"

"Oh, you're thinking about me," said Sirius, joining in with James, "that's much better."

Jean sighed, a smile creeping onto her face. "Honestly, Lily, how have you lasted these six and a half years?"

"I have no idea," answered Lily glancing over with feigned weariness at James and Sirius who continued to heckle each other over which one of them Jean was really thinking about to amuse the young woman in question.

"I'm listening, Jean," said Remus, "even if Lily and I's children are not."

Jean smiled sweetly as Remus. "Thank you, Remus," she gushed overdramatically, "it's so nice to be listened to."

The group slowly sobered up after that and gave Jean their attention now that she wasn't wearing the somber face she was thinking with. "Okay, listen," Jean began again. "James, Professor Kinshield is a retired Auror, right?"

"Yeah," said James.

"Why did he retire only to start teaching?" prompted Jean.

"Because he's old?" guessed Sirius.

"No," said Remus, "it can't be that. There are older Aurors than Kinshield still in the field.

"Then he was tired of it," said James. "He was Head of the Magical Law Enforcement for more than twenty years." James looked over at Jean. "What brought this up?"

"Well," answered Jean. "You know those papers? The ones I grabbed off Professor Kinshield's desk when it caught fire? There was a letter, a letter with the symbol of the Ministry on it."

"But," said Peter, "James said that Kinshield was the Head of the Department for more than twenty years. He probably still has friends working there. Maybe one of them wrote to him."

Jean shook her head. "This wasn't a 'Hi, how are you?' kind of letter. He was getting instructions."

"Jean, said Lily gently, "are you sure you weren't still confounded, even a little, when you read that letter and that's what you think it said?"

Jean shook her head, this time more vigorously. "No, I wasn't confounded." Jean had no idea how to prove to her friends that she wasn't confused, but then an idea came to her. She looked back at James and Sirius. "Does the name Alastor Moody mean anything to you?"

James' face suddenly morphed into the face that Jean was originally wearing and he stared intensely at Jean, now taking in every syllable coming out of her mouth. "Yes."
"I've only been here for a few months," said Jean. "How could I know that name if it wasn't in that letter?"

James didn't say anything after that. Sirius looked at James and they exchanged glances before he turned back to Jean. "What are you saying Jean?" asked Sirius.

"I'm saying," said Jean "that even though he's our Defense Against the Dark Arts teacher, Professor Kinshield is still working for the Ministry."
James Potter's birthday was considered by most of the students at Hogwarts to be a school holiday and was usually a joint corroboration between Sirius, Remus and Peter. Now, for the first time, the responsibility extended to Lily, who spearheaded the operation. On the morning of March 27th, Lily and Jean, who was taken on as Lily's chief assistant, woke up as early as legal traveling into Hogsmeade was allowed and, bundled deep inside their coats and snow boots, and waded their way through the snow to the village.

"I'm just happy today's a Sunday and a Hogsmeade weekend," said Lily to Jean as they passed the train station signifying that they had entered Hogsmeade. "Last year the boys had to make a bunch of trips to sneak everything back into the castle without getting caught. For half the party they just sat in the armchairs in the Griffindor Common Room, too tired to move.

Jean laughed light-heartedly at that. "So what's first on the agenda today?" she asked.

Lily pulled out a piece of parchment that when unrolled was the length of her elbow to her wrist and covered with her tiny, immaculate handwriting. "Well," she said, "I think we'd better start at the back of the village and work our way forward so we don't have to carry the cake around."

"That sounds like a smart plan," supplied Jean.

Hogsmeade Village was a completely different place when populated by students spilling out of every door, their faces pressed to the panes of every window. The sixteen and seventeen year olds strolled lazily up and down the lanes, talking about lunch and classes and debating whether or not it was worth it to trek all the way up to Dervish and Banges or to just lounge in the Three Broomsticks by the fireplace drinking glass after glass of butterbeer. The fourteen and fifteen year olds were throwing snowballs at each other glad to be free of the classrooms and corridors for a moment, every once in a while something sparkling and new catching their eye from inside a shop. The thirteen year olds were running pell-mell like out of control pinballs on bumpers trying to see the places they missed on their last visit. Jean chuckled at the memories from both of the time frames she had lived in. "It's nice to walk around without having to worry about hiding," Jean commented.

"Yeah, it is," Jean laughed. "Sneaking around Hogsmeade was actually James and I's first date.

"Really?" asked Jean.

Lily nodded. "Although, it got really close to failing to launch." Lily laughed lightly for a moment. "I was so mad at him for bringing me to Hogsmeade illegally that I almost turned around and went back through the tunnel in Honeyduke's basement. But, with not small amount of charm mixed with begging, James towed me to Madame Puddifoot's. The place was empty and we sat by the window and ate lunch. We talked. We talked and talked and talked."

"What about?" asked Jean.

"Oh, everything," answered Lily. Lily paused for a moment and looked at Jean in a sideways glance. "Well," she said, "not everything. More like everything James was allowed to talk about."
But, something...I don't know, clicked, during that conversation."

"Clicked?"

Lily nodded. "Yeah. I felt...safe...when I was talking with James. I don't think I ever felt like than when talking to someone before. I felt like that I could be honest with James; that I didn't have to cover up or gloss over anything in my life. No baggage was too big for him to carry, and the same for me when James spoke. I felt like, for the first time, I wasn't just hearing words but I was actually listening to them. Does that make any sense?"

"I think so," answered Jean. Jean didn't know if she could articulate it like Lily had done, but she felt like there definitely was something in the conversation she had with Sirius when he brought her up breakfast in the Common Room that was similar to what Lily was describing.

"What happened after that?" asked Jean.

"Well," said Lily. "We got quiet. And then James leaned forward and he kissed me, and I kissed him back, and we've been inseparable ever since."

"Sounds like one for the storybooks," commented Jean.

Lily laughed and rolled her eyes good-naturedly at Jean. "I don't think James and I's love will ever amount to anything put to paper."

Jean shrugged her shoulders. "You never know."

Lily and Jean arrived at Sprintwitches and pushed the door open, a bushel of sliver bells jingling in an off key cacophony overhead. They passed through the uneven shelves filled with tightly folded Quidditch clothing and broomsticks mounted on small pegs jutting out from the wall. They reached the counter by the time the shopkeeper came out of the storeroom.

"Can I help you?" asked the elderly man.

"Hi, yes. My name is Lily Evans. I'm here to pick up an order."

"Evans..." said the shopkeeper, mentally reviewing his backroom stock. "Evans. Ah, yes. One moment please." The shopkeeper retreated into the room he had just vacated leaving Lily and Jean to their own devices. Lily idly drummed her fingers on the countertop while Jean with the tip of her finger turned an issue of *Quidditch Unlimited* towards her. On the cover was an image of Ludo Bagman, now in the prime of his Quidditch career lounging seductively against his broomstick, which was propped up in the corner of the shot. Every so often he brushed his hair away from his face and gave a crooked smile at his unseen audience. The shopkeeper returned with Lily's order, wrapped in brown paper packaging and tied with strings. "Here you are Miss Evans."

Lily undid the strings and folded back the packing paper to reveal what she had bought for James' birthday. It was an all weather broomstick-riding cloak. On the outside it looked like a rain slicker but on the inside it was fleecy to ward off the cold. The hood and the wrists had drawstrings so they could be pulled flush to the skin. Large black buttons lined the cloak so it could be closed around the rider's chest. Lily was obviously pleased. "Thank you," she said, "it's perfect." Lily reached into her pocket to pay the man.

Armed with their spoils, Lily and Jean jutted across the street to Wiseacre's Wizarding Equipment. When the pair passed through the threshold of the store, Jean marveled at how much a tiny, single-story building could hold. Everything was snugly stored on shelving stacked so close together that hardly one person could get down the aisles. Yet, despite the cramped quarters, no one ever left the
store without what they came in for. Lily and Jean muscled their way though the throngs of shoppers, Jean's eyes glued to Lily's back and Lily's gaze trained on the labels at the end of each aisle.

"There," said Lily at last, "that next aisle on the right."

Jean and Lily shifted over in that direction until they finally freed themselves from the main crowd and peeled off into the collection of shelves labeled in curly brass lettering Event Planning.

"What are we looking for?" asked Jean, once they were finally able to turn and look at each other without getting forcibly shuffled along through the shop.

Lily shrugged her shoulders. "Just pick up anything that strikes your fancy." Lily and Jean separated to scour the shelves for a good fifteen minutes before Jean relocated Lily. Jean had grabbed two rolls of wrapping paper and a set of streamers that had little glass jars filled with tiny multicolored fireworks hanging down from the shimmering ribbons. Lily had in her arms a box of candles, which acted like sparklers when lit and a metal can of confetti that levitated back to the ceiling after it hit the ground and would continue its pattern of rising and falling for over eight hours. Lily leaned over to examine boxes of party blowers that shouted things when you blew into them. "Congratulations," Lily murmured, reading the labels aloud, "It's a girl.' Ah," Lily reached forward and picked up the blue and white box. "Happy Birthday." Lily turned to Jean. "Did you find anything?"

Jean showed Lily the streamers and extended Lily a roll of rainbow striped wrapping paper. "Here," said Jean, "for you to wrap James' cloak."

"Thanks," said Lily. As Lily took the wrapping paper Lily saw that Jean kept a roll of navy wrapping paper spangled with glittering stars for herself. Lily looked up at Jean. "Jean," said Lily, "you didn't have to get James anything."

"Oh, I didn't get him anything," said Jean. "I made him something. Back at my old school I developed quite a talent for knitting."

Lily and Jean navigated their way back to the front of the store, paid for their purchases, and escaped the establishment, breathing in the crisp cool air of the outside world that was not regularly recycled by shoppers. Lily pushed the straps of her bags up to her elbows and pulled out her shopping list. "Where to next?" she said to herself. As Lily looked over the items she needed to buy, Jean turned her head and looked down the lane, The Hog's Head falling into her eyesight. The heavy snow collected in drifts on the roof, the beams almost sagging under the weight. The front steps were also enveloped with snow and from the shudders and windowills hung collections of icicles, which on any other building in Hogsmeade would look cheerful and decorative, but at The Hog's Head it looked almost foreboding, like mismatched teeth. "What are you looking at Jean?"

"That building over there," Jean pointed at The Hog's Head.

Lily followed Jean's finger. "The Hog's Head? No one ever goes there, Jean."

Jean turned and looked at Lily. "Why?" she asked.

Lily shrugged her shoulders. "Because everyone goes to The Three Broomsticks."

Jean turned her head to look back at The Hog's Head. She didn't know why she had the sudden urge to support Mr. Dumbledore's franchise but, considering how much help The Hog's Head had
been for Harry, Ron and herself, especially during the initial founding of the D.A, Jean felt she owed The Hog's Head a little customer loyalty. Jean started walking towards it.

"Where are you going?" Lily called out after her.

Jean motioned for Lily to follow. "Come on Lily. I'm hungry and I don't want to walk all the way to The Three Broomsticks." Seeing that Jean would not be swayed, Lily glanced up skeptically at the building she had barely thought about before she followed her friend.

There was no one inside the pub, excluding the owner and one man who sat hunched over the bar, his cloak drawn up past his neck. Jean, with Lily following closely behind, walked over to a table by the window and sat down. The chairs seemed to grate particularly loudly against the stone floor as they settled themselves due to the fact that there was hardly a soul inside the room. Jean looked out the window and watched the fat flakes freeze themselves to the glass. "This is nice," said Jean.

Lily nodded, her head still on a swivel as she took in her surroundings. "At least we didn't have to fight for a table."

At that moment Aberforth Dumbledore came out from behind the bar and walked over to Lily and Jean's table, pulling out a notepad from his pants pocket and a pen from the top of his ear. "What can I get you?" Aberforth asked, skipping all pleasantries.

"Oh, um..." stuttered Lily, not ready to order.

"I'll have the soup of the day and tea, please," supplied Jean to buy Lily a few seconds.

"Vegi soup... tea," Aberforth muttered under his breath. He glanced up at Lily. "And you?"

"I'll just have the special," said Lily, not knowing what it was, "and I'll take tea as well."

"Beef stew," said Aberforth, "and more tea." Without another word, he shuffled away.

Lily looked up at Jean. "Well, that was pleasant," she said softly in good-natured sarcasm. Jean couldn't help but crack a smile at the corner of her lip. Even though Jean had only seen Aberforth Dumbledore a handful of times, she couldn't see the man equaling his brother's social graces. Jean heard a clattering sound behind her and at that same moment Lily's eyes widened to the size of saucers. Jean turned around to see a small goat wander out from behind the counter, stare at them for a moment and then retreat to where it had come from. Jean heard rather than saw Lily subtly push her bags to the base stand of the table and further barricaded her purchases by pressing her leg against them, sandwiching them between the table's leg and her own.

Aberforth came out a few minutes later with a pot of tea and cups and two bowls containing the beef stew and the vegetable soup respectively. Aberforth set the items down on the table. "Enjoy."

And the same as before, he went back to the bar without another word.

As Lily was fussing around to serve Jean and herself some tea, Jean watched Aberforth's back. When Aberforth turned a corner to go back into the storeroom, Jean noticed a large, gilded portrait hanging up on the wall. There was a girl wandering around inside the magical canvas. The teenager brushed her wispy blonde hair away from her face and her twinkling blue eyes followed Aberforth as he passed in front of her. When he disappeared from her sight, her eyes swept the room, locking on Jean's own eyes. A small smile formed on the painted child's face. With one hand she twisted her fingers into a length of her hair and with the other, with a slight wiggling of her digits, she waved at Jean. Jean waved back, and Ariana Dumbledore's smile grew wider.

"Who are you waving at Jean?" asked Lily.
Jean put her hand down. "Just that friendly portrait over there," she said, pointing.

Lily turned and looked over her shoulder but the girl had bashfully ducked out of the image, leaving an empty canvas. Lily turned to look back at Jean. "Apparently a shy portrait as well." Lily and Jean both laughed lightly and Lily put a spoonful of stew into her mouth.

Lily held it there, and held it there, and held it there. Her mouth readjusted slightly and her lips tightened to give her a better hold. After a long, pregnant pause Lily pulled the spoon from her still tightened lips with a long drawn out movement. "Jean," said Lily, her spoon resting of the rim of the bowl. "Taste this."

"Why," asked Jean, who was already sipping her own soup. "What's wrong with it?"

"It's the best I have ever eaten." Lily spoke deliberately and her face was one of absolute seriousness.

It was Jean's turn to make a face and Jean dipped her spoon into Lily's bowl and brought it to her mouth. The meat was so soft and pliable it practically melted once it touched her teeth in a miniature explosion of carrots, potatoes and celery flavors. The gravy was warm and thick as it coated her tongue and the back of her throat. Even the gristle was delicious and Jean sucked on it as it clung to her gums. "That's really good," said Jean, trying to savor the spoonful even as she swallowed.

"It's better than Rosemerta's, I think," said Lily.

"That's because Rosemerta has to water everything she cooks down for all the mouths coming in and out of her door all day." Aberforth's voice echoed around the almost empty room. Lily continued to eat and Jean hid her small smile behind the rim of her teacup.

The room settled back into its usual silence with Lily and Jean quietly eating their meal and the lone man at the bar still sitting silently by himself. There wasn't a word spoken until Jean and Lily had finished and were collecting their items to leave.

"Here's your bill, Magnus."

Kinshield uncurled himself from his position on the barstool and dropped a few sickles on the bill before nodding at Aberforth and pushing himself into a standing position.

"Professor Kinshield," said Lily, slightly stunned to see her latest Defense Against the Dark Arts professor in The Hog's Head of all places.

Kinshield walked towards the two girls in a few long strides. "Hello Miss Evans, Miss Granger," he said pleasantly, nodding at each of them. "Out shopping are we?"

"Yes, sir," Jean replied. Lily nodded mutely.

"Well, don't let me keep you." Kinshield opened the door of the pub and let Lily and Jean exit first before he followed them. "Have a nice day," he said, and then he tucked his hands into his pants pockets and strode out into the snowy street.

Lily and Jean watched their professor disappear into the crowd before they too began walking. "I don't think I've ever seen Professor Kinshield in Hogsmeade before," commented Lily as the pair turned a corner back onto High Street, "and the last place I would have expected it was The Hog's Head."
"Maybe he's one of the three people that know The Hog's Head serves great food."

Lily rolled her eyes and nudged Jean's shoulder with her own. "You're probably right. Come on, we'd better hurry. We've still got a few things to pick up and we still need to set up the room."

Jean nodded once. "Where are we going now?"

"Honeydukes."

Jean and Lily walked past Zonko's Joke Shop and into the candy store next door. As usual, Honeydukes was one of the most peopled shops in the hamlet, apart from Zonko's and The Three Broomsticks. Smaller, slighter students weaseled their way past Jean and Lily's bodies to thrust their hands into the giant glass jars holding containers of Chocolate Frogs and Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans. Now that the building was populated the room acted like a giant rotating door, shuffling people in through the front, circling around to the register, collecting what they wanted during the journey, and circled back out. It was in this manner that Lily and Jean traversed through the store until they could reach an open space at the counter. An attendant with a powder blue beehive hairstyle and horn rimmed glasses was there to greet them.

"Hi," said Lily before the lady could open her mouth. "I'm Lily Evans. I'm here to pick up an order."

The woman seemed relieved that Lily was so prompt and to the point, considering that a long and bustling line was once in front of the two witches and was now behind them. "One sec," she said, holding up one finger tipped with a long candy colored nail. "Be right back." In a flash the woman had ducked into the storeroom down in the shop's basement.

Lily and Jean watched her descend the stairs, their hands clamped to the counter to not be towed away by the crowd that moved around and against them. "I'm starting to wish that this wasn't a Hogsmeade weekend," Lily said under her breath as she pressed her body into the glass countertop to let a pack of people pass.

"I'd settle for just being able to use the cellar tunnel," responded Jean.

Mercifully, the attendant reemerged from the basement carrying in one hand a large cardboard ice cream tub, easily the size of her torso, and with the other an equally as large white cake box.

"Here we are," said the woman placing the items on the counter. "Is that everything?"

"Here Jean, take this," said Lily pushing the ice cream carton in Jean's direction. As Jean picked it up she read the Victorian style printing: *Bertie Bott's Brand Every Flavor Bean Ice Cream 'A Different Flavor With Every Scoop.* While Jean was wrestling with the ice cream tub that was literally the size of her upper body, Lily quickly lifted the lid of the cake box, beaming at what she saw within. "That's everything," said Lily. Lily quickly paid the woman and the pair crusaded their way back across the congested store to the front door.

"Let me get the door for you guys." Jean was incredibly grateful to the disembodied voice just beyond all the things she was carrying, for if it wasn't there Jean would have seriously considered kicking down the door.

"Thanks Dorcas," said Lily as she and Jean shuffled around their ex and current roommate respectively.

"No problem," replied Dorcas. "Is that all for James' party?"
"Yup," Lily popped her lips on the last consonant and readjusted her packaging. "Are you coming tonight?"

Dorcas nodded. "Yeah. I asked Alonzo Kripkett if he wanted to come with me but he said he was busy. So I'm just going in a group with Alice, Marlene and Mary." Dorcas turned in to look at Jean. "Are you bringing anyone Jean?"

Jean shifted from one foot to the other and looked between Dorcas and Lily. "I didn't know I was supposed to bring a date," she finally said.

"You don't have to," supplied Lily. "Usually once everyone is there, people start dancing all night. Some people like to come as couples."

"Oh," said Jean. "Well, I guess it's probably a good think I'm not going with anyone. I'll be too busy helping Lily play host."

Dorcas smiled. "Yeah, Lily's going to need all the help she can get." Dorcas casually shrugged her shoulders. "I just figured you'd be going with Sirius. But then he'll probably have his hands full if Matilda Maybelle comes and smothers him all night." Dorcas laughed lightly. "Well, I've got some shopping left to do and you two obviously have your hands full so I'll se you tonight. "Bye Lily, bye Jean."

"See you later Dorcas," answered Lily, and Dorcas ducked back into Honeydukes.

"Well," said Lily, when it was just she and Jean again, "On to The Three Broomsticks."

Lily and Jean walked down the street for a little while, quieter than they had been all day. "Lily," said Jean softly, almost not breaking the silence at all. "How often does Matilda come to James' parties?"

"Umm," said Lily, thinking, "since she and Sirius first started dating, so around fourth year I think…wait…oh." Jean turned and looked at Lily. "Now I get it."

"What?" asked Jean.

"You," said Lily, "are jealous."

Jean let out an exasperated sigh. "No I'm not."

"Yes you are Jean Granger. You are jealous. You don't want Matilda anywhere near the party because you don't want Matilda anywhere near Sirius."

"Alright, now you're just being silly."

"Am I?" pressed Lily.

"Look," said Jean, "can be just grab what we need from The Three Broomsticks and get back to Hogwarts? My arms are falling off."

Lily huffed, but also noticed the weight in her own hands. "Okay," she said. Lily and Jean walked into The Three Broomsticks.

Because it was after the lunch hour the pub was less crowded than it had been, but it was never the less still peopled with patrons. Lily and Jean weaved through the tables and chairs until they reached the bar. Madame Rosemerta was standing there cleaning the thick and clouded glasses.
Rosemerta looked up and when she saw the pair she smiled and put down her dishcloth. "Hello dearies," she said as the two witches stopped in front of the counter.

Lily heaved her packages up to the wooden platform to rest her arms. "Hi, Madame Rosemerta. I ordered six cases of butterbeer."

"Six cases?" said Madame Rosemerta. "All that's for you? Whatever could you need it all for?"

"It's James' birthday,"

"I see," said Rosemerta. She paused for a beat. "Good luck with that." Jean wasn't sure if Madame Rosemerta meant good luck throwing the party or good luck getting through it.

"Thank you," said Lily as Rosemerta ducked down underneath the bar and pulled up one wooden case of butterbeer after another until all six were sitting in front of Jean and Lily. Lily reached through the boxes to pay the bartender.

"How are we going to carry all this?" asked Jean, staring wide-eyed at the cases.

"Magically," said Lily. The red head whipped out her wand and pointed it at the cases. "Wingardium Leviosa." The six cases rearranged themselves into a small pyramid before they levitated off the bar. With Lily holding her wand at an awkward angle the formation of cases came to float beside her. "Back to the castle," said Lily, her voice showing how tired she was of their trek through the village.

"Thank Merlin," said an equally exhausted Jean. Together, the pair lugged their haul out of The Three Broomsticks and out of Hogsmeade back up to Hogwarts.

"Don't think," panted Lily as she and Jean walked along the forested road that lead to the castle gate, "that you've escaped our talk about Matilda."

"What else is there to talk about?" asked Jean. "Matilda is obviously attracted to Sirius, and I haven't seen anything that says Sirius doesn't like her back."

"Yeah, but Sirius is like that with every girl."

Jean rolled her eyes. "Not helping, Lily."

"Except with you," added Lily.

"Really not helping," answered Jean.

"You misunderstand me," Lily amended. "It's like with James and I. Before we started dating James was exactly like Sirius and flirted with every girl in the school. But, he always treated me different, treated me like I was special. It's the same with you and Sirius, I promise. You've just never seen it and Sirius doesn't know how to say it."

Jean looked over at Lily. "Are you saying Sirius doesn't know how to express his feelings?"

"I'm saying that Sirius wears a mask. He shows what he wants people to see and hides behind his armor what he doesn't. In all the years I've known them, I don't think Matilda has made a chink in it. You take pieces off every time you talk to him. You're the only person he lets his mask drop in front of. When I see him with you, I feel like, for the first time, he's comfortable in his own skin, all of it."
Jean didn't answer Lily immediately. Her mind drifted back to the conversations she had had with Sirius, and how genuine he seemed to be. Jean had convinced herself that she was thinking her conversations with Sirius were deeper and more intimate than he had with others because she was in fact falling for him, but in actuality there was no difference. But, now Lily was pointing out there was, and that more than one person had noticed, as shown by Dorcas' comment that she assumed Jean and Sirius would be going together to James' party. But then, Matilda was Matilda Maybelle, arguably the belle of the school, who, in most cases, would have the story book ending and live happily ever after with the handsome Black family heir and it would be the most natural thing in the world, while Jean was simply Jean Granger.

"Lily," said Jean as they passed through Hogwarts' gates. "Be honest."

"Okay," said Lily.

"When were Matilda and Sirius last together, or talking about getting together?"

"Oh, I was hopping you wouldn't ask me that," moaned Lily.

"Why?"

"Because," began Lily, "they were talking about getting back together over the holiday. James said that Sirius was writing to her and it seemed to everyone that once term began they would start dating again. But then…" Lily trailed off.

"Then?" prompted Jean.

"Then you came along," answered Lily, "and threw everything for a loop."

Jean chuckled. "Yeah, that's me," she said, "the wrench in the chain."

Lily laughed a little at Jean's self-criticizing comment. "You know," Lily said after a beat. "From one muggle-born to another, wrenches aren't all that bad. They fix things, tighten things together, and make things work better than ever before."

Jean glanced over at Lily and leaned her shoulder into hers. "Lily," said Jean, "from muggle-born to muggle-born, your metaphorical pep talks are really appreciated."

Lily smiled at Jean. "You're welcome."

At long last, they arrived at the Head's dormitory for the party was going to be held in the Common Room. "Finally," said Lily, dropping her load on the sofa, Jean doing the same seconds later. "If only the room could fix itself." Lily began to unpack. Jean, on the other hand was preoccupied with the newest addition to the room. It looked like a jukebox, but it was unlike any jukebox she had ever seen. It was at least three times the size of a normal jukebox and had eight speakers jutting out from it that looked like the horns of megaphones the size of basketballs. "Jean." Jean turned around to look at Lily, who was already scattering confetti around, the moment it hit the floor starting to rise towards the ceiling. "The records for that are up in my room if you want to go grab them."

Jean nodded. "Sure." Jean jogged up the small staircase to Lily's room. It was half the size of a Griffindor dormitory, but Lily had it all to herself. The bed sheets and curtains were Griffindor crimson and she had a mahogany wardrobe and dresser that framed her personal fireplace. On top of the dresser were pictures of Lily and her friends, as well as Lily and James. The moving picture of the couple waved at her from their place in what looked like a muggle park as they sat, Lily in James' lap, in a swing. Every so often James wrapped his arm around Lily's waist and planted a
kiss on her cheek. Jean smiled at that, briefly wondering if this photo had made it into Harry's album that was given to him by Hagrid at the end of their first year. She hoped so. Underneath the windowsill that was just to the left Lily's bathroom, was a record player and a bright pink record box. Jean bent down and grabbed the box of records and returned to the Common Room.

Lily had finished with the confetti and was currently magiking up the streamers, making the room look like a sparkling snowstorm accompanied by the northern lights. "I found them," said Jean as she ascended the stairs.

"Great," said Lily. "Just take them out of the box and put them on the couch."

Jean sat down on the sofa and began pulling records out of the box for Lily to put into the jukebox, reading the covers as she did so: The Hobgoblins, The Rhythmic Runes, Spellbound, and…"

Jean held up the record and glanced up at Lily, who was finishing with the streamers, an incredulous eyebrow raised. "Really?" Jean said.

Lily looked at Jean and gave her a mischievous grin when she saw what record Jean was holding. "What?" she asked. "Am I not allowed to enjoy muggle music too?"

Jean slipped the record out of its sleeve and held the black vinyl out towards Lily. "Can we?" Jean asked.

Lily pulled the record from Jean's fingers and guided it into the machine. Lily twirled her wand and held it like it was a microphone. In a few seconds the sounds of Queen began streaming out of the speakers.

*Is this just real life?*

*Is this just fantasy?*

Lily grabbed Jean and pulled her up from the couch, Jean laughing all the while, she too turning her wand to hold it like a microphone to sing along with Lily.

*Caught in a landslide*

*No escape from reality*

Remus entered the room to the sounds of "thunderbolts of lightning" and Lily and Jean belting into the ends of their wands, swinging themselves around the jukebox, hair whipping through the air as they banged their heads.

"Uh, Lily?" said Remus. "Sorry for interrupting you ad Jean's karaoke practice, but where do you want all this?"

Lily danced her way over to Remus, still singing into her wand.

*Nothing really matters*

*Anyone can see*

*Nothing really matters*

*To me*

Remus nodded. "Alright then. I'll just put it on the table."
Lily laughed as the song clicked itself off. "Thanks, Remus."

Remus followed Lily into the room. Behind him was a long train of levitating plates laden with enough food to feed the entirety of Hogwarts. Peter brought up the rear of the procession, kicking the door shut behind him. "Complements of the house elves," said Remus when Lily and Remus reached the long table pushed up against a wall. Jean, Lily, Remus and Peter began arranging the plates on the table until there was only one space left to be filled. Lily picked up the tub of ice cream and put it on the end of the table. Lily popped the lid off the ice cream carton and stuck four scoops into the desert as well as slid the cake out of its cardboard container.

Jean looked at the cake shocked and somewhat horrified. The cake was a rectangle with gold frosting trimmed with red icing along the edges. In the middle of the cake there was another rectangle made of red icing, and in the middle of that rectangle was another one. It was the strangest birthday cake that Jean had ever seen. There wasn't even any lettering on it.

"Lily," said Jean, trying to sound casual. "Is this cake supposed to look like this?"

Lily looked over Jean's shoulder at James' cake and nodded. "Yeah," she said. "It's like that to be portable." Lily pulled out her wand. "Watch." Lily tapped her wand on the middle of the innermost rectangle. Jean watched as a second tier rose out of the first and a third rose out of the second all covered in golden frosting with a crimson trim. 'Happy Birthday James' was written on the tiers. When the cake had finished its ascension, Lily placed the sparkler candles into the cake. Lily took a small step back and everyone looked at the confection, satisfied.

"Where's Sirius?" Remus asked.

Lily whirled around towards Remus, now her turn to be alarmed. "He's not with you?"

Remus shook his head. "I've been overseeing this in the kitchens all day," said Remus gesturing to the spread.

"Jean and I have been at Hogsmeade." Both Lily and Remus fell silent. Not knowing where the most rambunctious Marauder was located on his best friend's birthday was not necessarily a good thing.

"I saw him today," Peter piped up.

Lily and Remus both looked up at Peter. "Where and when and with anything I should be worrying about?" asked Lily.

Peter shook his head. "I saw him with James this afternoon. They were going out to play Quidditch."

Jean who was the closest to the window squinted through the panes to make out what she could of the Quidditch pitch way off in the distance. "I can't really see anything," Jean said, "but that doesn't mean they're not there."

Lily ran a hand through her hair. "I can't worry about Sirius right now," she said mildly flustered. "I have to set up the rest of the room."

"Lily," Remus interjected. "The rest of the room is set up."

"Oh," said Lily seemingly taking in her surroundings for the first time: the confetti, the streamers, the party favors, the food, the cake, all perfectly in their place, "so it is. Well, Jean. I guess you and I can go wrap our presents."

Jean went up to Griffendor Tower to both change into a coral colored A-line tea length dress with a pair of strappy tan heels for the party and to wrap James' present. When she returned to the Head's dormitory she brought Alice, Marlene, Mary and Dorcas along with her. Students were already filtering into the room and were milling around chatting, nibbling at the feast on display and listening to the jukebox, including the guest of honor who had his hands wrapped around Lily's waist and was kissing her soundly, his new riding cloak draped over his arm. "I take it he liked your gift," Jean commented as she approached her friends.

Both James and Lily laughed, breaking their kiss. "You could say that," said Lily.

Jean extended her wrapped present to James. "Happy Birthday," she said beaming.

"Aww," said James taking the package, "thank you Jean. You didn't have to." James' fingers tore at the wrapping paper, and out of it unrolled a long knitted scarlet scarf. On one end, just before the tassels there was a dark brown antlered stag standing majestically with his head turned as if he was overseeing some unseen landscape. James lightly ran his fingers over his Animagus form. "Jean," said James, touched, "this is wonderful. Thank you so much." James pulled Jean into a hug.

"You're welcome," said Jean, still smiling.

After Jean's gift, James unwrapped Remus' present, which was something akin to a flashlight to go on the handle of a broomstick, and Peter's gift, a poster of James' favorite Quidditch team, the Falmouth Falcons, their motto 'Let us win, but if we cannot win, let us break a few heads,' written in steely silver beneath the team. James attempted to run the items up to his bedroom but was stopped mid-step.

"Hi James," said Matilda, "Happy Birthday." Matilda, with her ever perfectly formed curls, swished up to James and gave him a quick hug. The sequins sewn to her skintight black dress rippled as she moved making her look like a rainbow colored disco ball. Through her black peep toed shoes topped with large ruffled bows, Jean could spy dark red toe nail polish.

"Thanks, Matilda," said James once she released him. "And thanks for coming. You wouldn't happen to know where Sirius is do you?"

"I haven't seen him all day," said Matilda looking visibly deflated at the fact that Sirius wasn't already there, but she perked up a second later, "but if I see him I'll point him in your direction."

James nodded his thanks. "Excuse me," and James ducked away to put his things in his room.

Once James left, Matilda turned and smiled at Lily, Remus, Peter and Jean who were all left standing there before she turned and skipped away to seek out her Ravenclaw friends.

Lily subtly leaned closer to Remus, her lips still spread from the smile she put on for Matilda. "Should we be worried?" Lily asked through her teeth.

Remus' eyes were roaming around in his head, looking for pockets of dungbombs or other pranks that may have escaped his notice. "I'm not sure yet," said Remus, still searching.

Sirius was still a no show even after all the guests had arrived, even after James had blown out his candles and people started passing around slices of cake. But just as everyone started chattering again the door banged open. Sirius stood in the entranceway, blue jeans, leather jacket, and motorcycle boots. "I," said Sirius dramatically, "have arrived, and I come bearing gifts." Jean noticed that Sirius was carrying not one but four cases of Fire Whiskey.

Lily noticed what Sirius had brought as well and her jaw dropped. "Sirius Black," she whispered,
stunned.

Remus walked up to Lily as Sirius dropped the bottles of Fire Whiskey onto the coffee table and the crowd converged on it. Remus glanced at Lily who had her face in her hand, her thumb and forefinger rubbing her temples. "Lily," said Remus, "do you want some advice?"

"Yes," said Lily, her voice muffled through her palm.

"My advice is, that once you have ascertained that whatever Sirius is up to does not involve arson, property damage, or student endangerment, the best thing you can do is just go with it."

"Spoken like a true Marauder," said Lily, lifting her face up. "How?"

Remus passed Lily a glass of Fire Whiskey and kept a glass for himself. "Have a drink."

Sirius' arrival was like the cue that everyone was waiting for. The music was cranked up to the point that the liquid within the glasses were vibrating against the surfaces they sat on and everyone grouped together on the impromptu dance floor in a semisolid mass of gyrations and sweat. The continually falling confetti clung to their hair and stuck to their skin, reflecting the lights from the miniature fireworks, unknowingly passing them to the other as they moved against each other. Jean thought it was quite a sight to see.

Jean spent most of the evening since the dancing started dancing around with her roommates or admiring the general splendor from the fringes. Jean did dance with Remus for a while, laughing a little at his expense as he tried to balance his drink on the tips of his fingers every so often taking long sips from it even as people jostled against them. But, when Jean had gone to get herself a drink, she saw that a pretty blonde haired girl had started dancing with Remus and the two seemed to be enjoying it so much she didn't want to cut in.

Jean leaned up against one of the wing-backed chairs, cradling her glass in her cupped hand. Jean's eyes gravitated to the red of Lily's hair and how it almost turned various shades of purple when certain fireworks flashed, like a rare exotic bird. James was running his fingers through her hair, pushing it away from her shoulder and ghosting his fingers across her skin. Lily smiled up at him, her thumb dipping into his pants pocket to pull him closer. Jean smiled too. She was glad her friends were having fun. Even Peter seemed to be having a good time. He was over by the large snack table, grazing, his head bobbing around to the music as he talked to a couple of Hufflepuff boys that looked a few of years younger than him.

Jean's smile took a misstep however when she saw Sirius and Matilda grinding up against him. The corners of her lips pulled themselves farther and farther downward as she watched Sirius' hand brush over her hips and lean around her body to whisper something into her ear. Sirius pulled away from Matilda and wandered through the crowd, pausing momentarily to slap James on the shoulder and speak a word or two to him. Once Sirius was free from the dancing he poured himself another drink and leaned against the table taking large gulps from it and talked to Peter and his small group. It wasn't even a few minutes until Matilda's sparkling form emerged from the crowd as well. Matilda smiled sweetly at Sirius and he returned it. The pair went back to dancing, Sirius towed by the ends of his fingers.

"What are you doing over here?" Lily's appeared beside Jean so suddenly that Jean almost sloshed her drink all over Lily.

"Nothing," said Jean, swallowing some of her drink that had come so dangerously close to the rim. "Just being a wallflower."
Lily stared at Jean for a long time before she took her own glass, tossed her head back, and drained its contents before slamming it down on the end table. "Come on," shouted Lily through the noise. Lily grabbed Jean's wrist and was practically pulling her to the middle of the room.

"What are you doing?" asked Jean, struggling not to trip over her own heels.

"Take a leaf out of Remus' book," answered Lily.

"And that is?"

Lily and Jean reached the center of the dancers and Lily spun Jean around and started dancing with her. "Just roll with it."

Lily and Jean danced together for a while and Jean could feel her dissatisfaction at seeing Sirius and Matilda together melting away. Jean noticed that Lily's eyes were constantly fluttering around as if she were trying to see past Jean, or around her. Finally, Lily honed in on something and her emerald eyes lit up. "Sirius," Lily waved her hand to get his attention. Sirius approached the pair alone. Lily began shuffling Jean towards Sirius. "Dance with Jean for a while. I'm going to get a drink."

Sirius cocked an eyebrow and smiled broadly. "Alright."

Like a baton being passed in a race, Jean was transferred between Lily and Sirius. Lily never came back. Lily made a wide circuit around the dance floor and Jean could see that Lily was dancing with James again. Jean thought she saw Lily wink at her through the throngs of moving people.

But after that moment, Jean was completely focused on Sirius and the fact that his body began moving against her own. "You having fun?" Sirius asked.

Jean nodded and smiled. "Yeah."

Sirius returned the grin she gave him. "I'm glad."

If Jean was asked how long she and Sirius danced, she could not tell you. But, after a while, Jean felt Sirius' hand drop slowly, almost casually, if she was not aware of every move he was making. Sirius' hand cupped the wing of her hip and the other was beginning to creep its way across her ribs on the underside of her breasts. Jean felt the tip of Sirius' nose brush against her curls as his hands drew her closer and closer to his body. If Jean barely reclined her head, it would have been resting on his chest. Jean moved her neck and felt his jacket against her scalp. She loved the smell of Sirius' jacket, of Sirius. Right now it smelled predominantly of alcohol, but underneath that it smelled like the Forbidden Forest, like freshly cut grass, and whenever Sirius leaned around her shoulder to speak to her, Jean caught the faint scent of spearmint toothpaste. Jean, emboldened, laid her hand down on Sirius' hand that was resting on her hip. Almost instantly, Sirius turned his hand and laced their fingers together.

It was not long after that curfew came and the thought of detention or loss of House points was enough to push most people to the door, including Matilda. Since their were only a few people left, Sirius got it into his head that they should play a game with what was left of his birthday present to James. Sirius made James run up to his room and get all of the Chocolate Frog cards that he had. "The rules are," said Sirius, determinedly trying to shuffle a deck of cards that wasn't designed to be shuffled, "without looking, you pick a card a stick it to your forehead. We answer questions about who you are and if you guess wrong you take a drink. If you guess right, everyone else takes a drink."
Everyone was enthused with the idea, but after several rounds, even the dedicated stragglers departed for their dormitories, leaving only the Marauders. However, it was only Jean, James, Lily and Sirius who were still actively playing anymore. Remus had his head leaned against the wall, the image of Albus Dumbledore looking on bemused at the firework display in the streamers. Remus on the other hand looked unnaturally mesmerized by them, his mouth drooping slightly and his eyes blinking slowly, completely unaware that Peter was asleep up against him, his own Chocolate Frog card crushed into Remus’ shoulder.

Jean looked at the remaining competitors, fairly certain that the person on her head was Armando Dippett. Jean formulated a question to hopefully guess correctly and win the round. "Am I a predecessor to Headmaster Dumbledore?" Jean asked.

"You're a pretty lady." Jean looked over as at Sirius, humorously exasperated. "Sirius, you told me I was a man."

Sirius propped his head up on his hand, his elbow teetering unsteadily on the floor. "You're a very pretty lady," Sirius repeated.

"Yes," said Lily, speaking over Sirius. "You are Dumbledore's predecessor."

"You're a pretty Lily too, lady." James was swaying back and fourth like he was on the deck of a ship, the image of Rowena Ravenclaw plastered to his forehead looking seasick.

Lily looked at Jean. "I think they're done," she said.

Jean nodded once in agreement. "Yeah."

"But…” James protested. "No. It's my birthday."

Lily looked at James and peeled the card off his forehead. "It's three in the morning, James. Your birthday is well and truly over."

James stuck out his lower lip, but his upper lip soon followed, completing the purse to his mouth, begging to be kissed. Lily gave James a half smile before cupping his chin and kissing him. "Happy Birthday," she whispered.

"Thank you," said James, his lips still pressed to Lily's.

Lily and James broke apart and Lily surveyed the scene. "Well, we're not getting these three back to Gryffindor Tower, that's for certain. James, put Remus and Peter in your bed, you can crash out here with Sirius on the couches, and Lily can sleep with me."

"No," said Jean. "James is worse off than me. I'll stay out here with Sirius and make sure he doesn't smother himself on a pillow or something."

Lily nodded once. "Okay."

James perked up, giving Lily a devilish look. "So does that mean—"

"No," said Lily, glaring daggers at her boyfriend.

"But—"

"Your bed can fit three people perfectly fine James."

Jean raised both her eyebrows but quickly beat them back down. "I'll get Sirius on the couch then."
James went up his set of stairs with Remus on one shoulder and Peter on the other, Lily jutting up to her own room as well. Jean looked down at Sirius who was sitting cross-legged on the floor. Jean grabbed Sirius by his forearms and unfolded him from his sitting position. In Sirius' act of standing up and simultaneously falling down, Jean managed to land Sirius on one of the sofas and dragged him across the cushions the rest of the way. "Merlin," said Jean under her breath. "When you're dead weight you're a ton. Jean at last got Sirius situated just time for both Lily and James to return with the comforters from each of their beds.

"Here," said Lily, both she and James giving Jean their crimson comforters. "Are you sure you want to stay on the sofa. James can always sleep here, or me."

"I'm fine," said Jean, "really."


"Goodnight." Jean reached up and enveloped Lily in a hug. "Thanks for everything."

Jean felt Lily's arms tighten around her. "You're welcome."

Jean watched James and Lily leave the Common Room. "Alright, if you promise to stay on the absolute opposite side…" But then the couple was too far away and Jean could no longer make out what Lily was saying.

Jean once again turned her attention to Sirius. She unfolded the comforter and threw it over Sirius. But Sirius' arms whipped out from underneath the fabric and before Jean could pull away, his arms wrapped around her waist. With a small yelp, Jean was pulled on top of Sirius. "Sirius?!" said Jean when she felt her legs settling between Sirius' "What are you—"

"I want to ask you something. " Sirius' eyes were out of focus and his voice was gruff and garbled but his hands held her tightly.

Jean felt a blush creep up her neck more red than the bed covers that were between them. "Okay," said Jean slowly.

"Why did you not dance with me all night?"

Jean blinked, confused. "Sirius," she said gently, "don't you remember? I did dance with you all night."

"No," retorted Sirius. "You danced with me for the rest of the night, after you stopped dancing with Lily." He paused for a beat. "I saw you dancing with Remus while I was left to play keep away with Matilda."

Jean tilted her head sideways. "But I thought you liked Matilda," said Jean, "really liked her. I heard that you wanted to date her."

Sirius' eyes suddenly became over bright, like the moon wasn't shining from the window onto his eyes, but rather the moon was shining out from within them. Sirius slowly shook his head. "No," he said, almost in a whisper. "I don't want to date Matilda. I don't want to date anyone like Matilda."

"Why?" asked Jean.

Sirius sighed. "I'm tired of everybody who says they care about me never seeing past," one of Sirius' hand released Jean's waist and he vaguely gestured around his face, "this."
"I don't understand."

"Matilda doesn't see past what I allow everyone to see," said Sirius with surprising lucidity. "She doesn't want to see." Sirius' pointer finger idly ran up and down the ridges in Jean's spine. "Your different. I've told you things that I've never told anyone, not even James, my best friend in the whole world." Sirius brought up his free hand and cupped the side of Jean's face. "And you don't just accept them. You want to know." The silence between them was tangible and it lasted the length of an eternity. "I have another secret." Jean felt Sirius gently pulling her face toward his. A breath caught within her and her lungs wouldn't let it go. Jean was so close to Sirius' eyes that in the vast expanse of grey she could detect the tiniest flecks of blue. "I think I kind of like you."

The blush that was creeping up Jean's neck had reached her cheeks and she let out the air her lungs were holding in one long breath. Jean glanced down and nervously fiddled with the zipper on Sirius' jacket. Jean was sure that that her heart was trying to hammer itself out of her chest. Jean closed her eyes and leaned a little into Sirius' hand that was still resting on the side of her face. Jean reached up and covered Sirius' hand with her own. Jean took one long steadying breath. "Sirius I..." But when Jean opened her eyes and saw that Sirius' were closed and his face was relaxed around them she realized that Sirius had fallen asleep.

Jean laughed shortly and smiled a bittersweet smile. Gently, Jean moved Sirius' hand off her face and settled it on his chest, but left the arm that was looped around her waist where it was for the moment. With her fingernail, Jean pushed part of Sirius' hair away from his face and let her hand linger there, dropping down and tracing the underside of his jaw, feeling the slight bristle of stubble underneath her touch. She could kiss him, she could kiss him and he would never be the wiser. His lips were a hair's breath away. Jean leaned down past Sirius' lips, past his cheekbone, the breath from her lips warming the shell of his ear. "I think I kind of like you too."

Sirius didn't move until eleven o'clock in the afternoon, and even then Sirius could be considered an early riser because, other than Jean, no one else had made a sound, much less come out of their rooms. Sirius shifted and turned over, peeling his eyes open only to snap them shut with a groan. "Jean," Sirius moaned burying his head into the sofa. "Could you be the most wonderful witch in the world and turn off the sun?"

Jean chuckled and placed her Daily Prophet on the coffee table and went over to the window where the midmorning sun shone through the glass. Jean pulled the curtains shut, bringing the room into a state of semidarkness.

"Thank you," said Sirius, uncurling himself and turning over to look at Jean. When he sat up, Sirius wrapped a hand over his eyes, leaning his head back over the arm of the couch. "Oh, my head," he said, "everything's all fuzzy."

Jean extended Sirius a glass of orange juice. "Do you remember anything?" she asked casually.

Sirius shook his head. "Not really." Sirius was about to take a drink of orange juice but stopped before it reached his lips. "Why?" he asked, looking up at Jean as she sat back down and picked up her paper. "I didn't do anything too terrible did I?"

Jean shook her head. "No," she said smiling at him as she opened the pages of her paper again, "not a thing."
The Midnight Watch

Chapter 12: The Midnight Watch

The night of the full moon started like any other. Remus subtly ducked out of the Marauder's company when the sun cast red shadows on the crimson Common Room. James and Lily followed a few minutes later. When evening came James returned with Lily and his Invisibility Cloak in tow, and Sirius and Peter descended from their dormitory dressed in loose, comfortable clothing befitting the early spring weather. Without much conversation James, Sirius and Peter left via the portrait hole and Lily and Jean sat down by the window to watch the Whomping Willow swing and swipe at the ground beneath its roots, freezing momentarily for the three invisible boys to drop down into the secret passage, and then start thrashing all over again.

Lily was curled up in one of the red wing backed chairs she had pulled over to the window, half asleep inside her pale pink sweater. Jean had her head propped against the pane, idly drawing circles in the condensation when the portrait hole suddenly swung open. Jean raised her head, the warm embrace of sleep falling off her when he saw Peter enter the room. "Peter," said Jean, stunned and confused, her voice rousing Lily from her slumber.

Peter sounded like he was having as asthma attack. He was white and shaking and sweat stained the rim of his collar. Peter swallowed audibly before regaining the use of his voice. "Moony got away from Padfoot and Prongs," said Peter, still wheezing from his apparent sprint as he spoke. "He's hurt them."

Jean and Lily shot up from their seats, wide-awake. "What?" said Jean, her eyes wide with alarm. "What happened?"

Peter, who was on the verge of bursting into tears from the stress of the situation, cowed under the gaze of the two girls, wringing his hands and shifting from one foot to the other. "It all happened so fast," said Peter, his voice becoming shrill. We were on the way back to the Shack and Moony smelled something. He started running towards the middle of Hogsmeade. Sirius tried to stop him and they started fighting. I—" Peter broke off and once again swallowed with a glug. "I heard something break."

Jean felt her breath leave her in a rush. She reached out and braced her hand against the wall. Images of Padfoot's large, black form dwarfed by Moony as they wrestled each other snapping, scratching and snarling until Sirius was crippled by the sickening crack that rang in her ears as if she were the one that heard it flashed before her eyes. Jean barely heard anything, even as Peter continued speaking. "Prongs tried to keep Moony away from Padfoot. Moony bolted and knocked him over. James thinks his ribs are cracked."

Lily shoved her feet into her shoes. "Where are they?"

"They're at the edge of the village, near the path to the Shack."

Jolted into action, Jean pushed herself away from the wall. "Take us."

In his hurry, Peter had not thought of taking James' Invisibility Cloak with him and the threesome could not risk using the secret tunnel into the Honeydukes basement and travel by night through the middle of Hogsmeade, especially with a werewolf running around. Lily reached into her pocket and pulled out her wand. "Lumos."
"No." Peter grabbed the tip of Lily's wand, forcibly extinguishing the small, white light. "We can't risk Filch finding us, and he's got this new cat that walks around with him too." In the low light from the torches on the wall Jean saw Peter shudder, and wondered if Wormtail had had a bad run in with Mrs. Norris.

Quietly, Peter, with Lily and Jean following him, shuffled half blind through Hogwarts, relying only on their memory, until at last they descended the grand staircase to the Entrance Hall and pushed open one of the great, wooden double doors. It was a cloudless night and the large full moon cast its unhindered light onto the grounds, illuminating the wet grass, moving under their feet as if the trio ran through silver fire. The dark, massive shadow of the Whomping Willow loomed before them, and they slowed to a stop when the tree, almost as if it sensed their presence began thrashing, straining from its roots to reach them.

Peter held out his hands to make sure that Lily and Jean stayed at a safe distance before, in a blur of motion, he transformed. Jean watched the large, brown garden rat weave his way through the grass that was now taller than he was, completely unnoticed by the violent tree that was still determinedly swinging at Lily and herself.

Wormtail clamored up the gnarled trunk of the tree and pressed down on the large, twisted knot that protruded out just above the roots. The many limbs of the Whomping Willow froze, now magically paralyzed and Lily and Jean jogged towards Peter, who had transformed back, hurriedly beckoning them to the entrance of the hidden tunnel.

The passage was damp and darker than the last time, and Jean's hands sunk into the muddy walls as she, Lily, and Peter pulled themselves along. Lily took out her wand and lit it again and Peter followed suit.

Peter climbed up the rickety wooden ladder first and pushed open the trapdoor hidden under the threadbare rug. When Jean rose into what was the front hall of the Shrieking Shack, the smell of animals washed over her, like a house with too many indoor pets. There were long scratches on the wall and from the dustings of sawdust on the floor beneath them she realized they were recently made. Beside the shavings, imprinted in the dust of the unclean house, she saw paw prints. Padfoot was a large dog, and seeing his prints next to Moony's, which were almost double the size, reminded Jean how massive the werewolf was and that he was still somewhere out there. Jean let out a shaky breath, remembering the night when Remus forgot his Wolfsbane and Moony charged her and Sirius, not as strong as he was now due to his imprisonment, having to drive him off, and later when she and Harry had to avoid and evade Moony again while they rescued Sirius from the Dementors. Jean felt a hand rest on her shoulder. She looked at Lily. "Come on," she said. She too was looking down at the prints.

Peter, Lily and Jean went out the front door of the Shrieking Shack and descended down the steep forested path to Hogsmeade. It was almost dawn, and the nighttime blacks were beginning to be replaced by greys, navys, and cyans. Jean could begin to see what was more than a few inches in front of her face. She saw at the tree line, beside the garbage cans and washing lines that collected at the backs of the hamlet's houses, a body in the road.

"James." Lily raced forward, her knees skidding on the gravel road when she landed beside him. She put her hand under his head and gently lifted it from the ground.

"Hey, Lily," whispered James. His breath was fast and shallow to keep his ribs from hurting him. Green and purple bruises spanned over his collar bone and down under his shirt. Peter knelt down beside Lily, but Jean moved past all three of them. A few feet away, slumped up against the side of a building was Sirius. Sirius had yet to turn back into a person and the large, black dog lay
sprawled against the wall, his back right leg bent back at a painfully unnatural angle. Jean got
down on her hands and knees beside him, her fingers running through Padfoot's wet and tangled
hair. "Sirius," said Jean, trying to get his attention. "Sirius."

Sirius seemed to realize that someone was speaking to him, but didn't know who or where it was
coming from. Weakly, he turned his head back and forth, every so often letting out a high pitched
whine.

"Sirius," Jean said again, hoping that she could at least get him to focus on her voice. "I know it
hurts, but you need to try to change back." Jean could tell Sirius was trying. Twice Jean saw Sirius'
form blur as if her eyes were going out of focus from looking at him too long, but whenever his
shape solidified Sirius was still a dog. "Come on," Jean continued to encourage, "we can help the
pain stop, but only if you change back."

Padfoot's pained keening turned into a human shout and Sirius' back arched and his eyes screwed
shut as both his broken and unbroken bones lengthened and morphed to become human again. Jean
held Sirius as he rolled towards her body to keep him from injuring himself further. Jean followed
the line of Sirius' arm to where his hand clasped at the break. Jean once again marveled at Moony's
size and strength, for he had managed to break Sirius' femur. "Jean?" Jean looked at Sirius, his
eyes over bright and his pupils wide. He seemed to have just realized that Jean was there. He
gulped in air in gasps as he tried to control his breathing and settle the tremors that ran through his
body. "What are you doing here?

"Peter brought us. Lily's here too."

"You shouldn't have come," Sirius moved slightly, grunting and gritting his teeth. It's too
dangerous." Sirius' face suddenly went slack and he whipped his head back and forth, looking
around the lane. "Moony," he said urgently, "Where's Moony?"

"It's alright," said Jean trying to keep him calm, "everything's fine. Moony ran off."

"No, we have to find him." Sirius reached up and grabbed Jean's shoulder and attempted to stand.

"Sirius, what are you doing?" Jean tired to keep Sirius sitting, an easy thing to do since he could
hardly move his leg without immense pain. His body had started to shake again and there was a
sheen of cold sweat on his forehead.

"The sun's almost up," said Sirius. "We have to find him first." Sirius' strength gave and he
collapsed onto his back, breathing rapidly through his nose, his hand once again drifting down to
grip his injury. "If someone else does, they'll find out his secret."

Jean knew that Sirius was right and that as long as Remus was alone and away from the Shack he
could be discovered. Once James and Sirius were safe somewhere she and Lily and Peter were
going to have to go after him. Jean turned to Lily, but before she could open her mouth Lily was
already speaking.

"Who's that?"

Jean turned in the direction that Lily was looking, and saw a group of people coming towards
them, a group of people wearing long black cloaks with their hoods drawn over their heads so Jean
couldn't make out their faces. Her blood ran cold and Jean felt her heart stutter. The pack of
strangers drew their wands out.

Lily yelped as her wand was magically pulled from her hand and flew through the air to be caught

by the caster. Jean felt invisible strings tugging at her wand as well. Her grip tightened up so much that her knuckles whitened as she brought her wand up to her face. "Portego!"

The magical shield protected her and her wand in a pale, shimmering, half-sphere. The moment that Jean felt that her wand wasn't going to leave her she cast another spell through her original. "Expelliarmus!" Even though the sun was beginning to rise Jean could barely make out the dark colored wand that spun in graceful circles towards her in the darkness.

When Jean grabbed the wand, almost in the same instant Sirius grabbed her. "Get down!" Sirius yanked Jean to the ground, throwing his arm over his body as their unknown assailants turned towards her, all of their wands raised.

"Stupefy!"

For Jean, it was like hearing a rocket engine pass over her, a deep continuous roar accompanied by a blinding stream of red light. Her hair was blown back by the force and the closeness of the magic warmed her skin, almost numbing it. She turned her face into Sirius' neck.

"Stop!" shouted a voice. "Wait! They're just kids!"

Jean felt more than saw the chorus of spells diminish and turned her face towards the approaching figure, his face illuminated by the tip of his wand.

"Professor Kinshield?"

Magnus Kinshield stood in front of his compatriots as big and broad shouldered as ever, looking at each of his students in turn and Jean silently knew she was not to speak. His golden hair hung to just below his shoulders in stark contrast to his black robes and his brown eyes flashed with a fire that almost came from within them rather than his wand. In the glow from Kinshield's wand, Jean saw that there were five others behind him. The one who held Lily's wand had his hood pushed back as well. With a jolt, Lily realized that it was Kingsley Shacklebolt. Jean wondered for a moment why Kingsley was here and not at the Ministry, considering he had such a high office, but then she remembered that there would be twenty years from now and the younger Kingsley Shacklebolt in front of her was probably a normal Auror whom the department sent out into the field. And then it struck her, and Jean had to actively keep her jaw from dropping. They were all Aurors.

"Miss Granger," said Kinshield casually as if he were speaking to her in class. "May I have Mr. Penwick's wand back, please?"

Jean just then remembered that there was a wand in her hand that was not her own. She nodded mutely and extended it out to her professor who gave it back to the flaxen haired youth behind him.

Kingsley approached Kinshield and the latter took Lily's wand from him. "I'll take this from here. They're my students."

"Yes, sir," said Shacklebolt.

Kinshield raised his voice to the others. "Everyone, back to your rounds. Oh, and gentlemen," he added after the crowd began to disperse. "This didn't happen."

Jean looked on at the accompanying Aurors and realized that the only thing Kinshield could have done more was to magically wash the incident from their minds. With a collection of nods, they followed Kinshield without question, the memory as good as forgotten. Once Kinshield was the only Auror left, he approached.
"He can't walk," supplied Jean when her professor walked towards Sirius and herself.

Kinshield glanced over at Lily and Peter, who were picking James up off the ground before he pulled out his wand. With a wave, Kinshield conjured a stretcher and, with Jean's help, shifted Sirius onto it. Kinshield then levitated the stretcher and Jean walked along beside it with James, Lily, and Peter following along behind them as they made their way though Hogsmeade.

"Where are we going, professor?" asked Jean.

"To The Hog's Head," said Kinshield.

The tavern and inn stood at the end of the lane, light gleaming though the windows as if it was expecting them. Aberforth Dumbledore was awake and dressed for the day, taking chairs off the tables where they had been put for the night. He looked up when he heard them enter.

"Aberforth," said Kinshield as he made his way past the tables and the bar to a set of stairs that lead up to the few rooms that made up the top floor of The Hog's Head. "Make sure that no one disturbs us."

"Yes, sir," said Aberforth. The silver haired man looked over at the students who followed silently and uncertainly behind their professor. "Shall I inform the Headmaster about his derelict students?" he asked.

"No need," said Kinshield as he ascended the narrow rickety staircase. "I'll take care of that."

Jean, accompanied by Lily and the three Marauders, followed Kinshield down the grey and unadorned hallway, stopping at the last of the doors on the left. The room within was magically enlarged. It contained two small beds and two hammocks hanging from the walls above them. There was also a bed that was in front of what seemed to be the bathroom door. The bed looked like it could be folded and unfolded into a box the size of a briefcase as needed. The orange embers of the low fire crackled and popped inside the stone fireplace. From the trunks that were shoved under the beds and fighting for space with the desk chair, Jean could tell that the Aurors had lived here covertly for a very long time. Lily and Peter propped James up against the doorframe of the bathroom on the collapsible bed while Jean and Professor Kinshield moved Sirius off the stretcher and onto one of the beds. Kinshield went over to the desk that was squished between the second bed and the door. He picked up a small glass vial filled with a liquid the color of peaches and passed it to Sirius. "Here," he said, "this will help numb your leg until we can get you to Madame Pomfrey." Sirius tossed the liquid back like a shot as Kinshield moved out through the main door."I'll have the barkeep Floo the Headmaster and he can come and collect you."

Sirius tossed the glass container aside and pushed himself up into a standing position, wobbling unsteadily on his good leg.

"Sirius," shouted both Lily and Jean, alarmed. "Sit down."

But Sirius didn't listen to them. His face set and his eyes determined he dragged his lame leg across the room for a few short steps before reaching Kinshield, gripping the professor's shoulders to keep him upright. "You need to go find Remus before anyone else does. He's out in the woods."

Jean didn't know if she ever saw Magnus Kinshield more taken off guard than she did at that moment. "He's out of the Shack?" Kinshield said, gripping Sirius' forearms. "He didn't bite you, did he?"

Sirius looked visibly frustrated that Kinshield hadn't left by now. "No, Moony can't hurt us," said
Sirius hurriedly. His grey eyes glanced out the window. "The sun's coming up. He'll be safe now, unless someone else finds him, so are you going out to get him, or do I have to?"

"Sirius, that's enough," said James sharply, an unspoken warning in his voice. Lily stared at Sirius, stunned that he would speak to his professor in such a short, demanding way. Peter's head swung between the two other boys, wondering if Sirius would turn around and have a go at James for snapping at him. Jean looked at Kinshield, who remained silent. She could almost look though his head and see the cogs turning within his brain until they synced up with a click.

"You're Animagi."

Jean heard Lily's breath leave her and James' back slump against the doorframe with a thump. Sirius, however, remained unmoved. He tilted his head slightly and looked at Kinshield, who was, with his eyes, asking Sirius to deny his accusation. "Professor," said Sirius, quietly. "I mean no disrespect, but I think that's not the most important thing right now."

Kinshield's lips thinned and his fingers drummed against his knee. The tension growing between student and teacher was almost palpable, but neither would yield to the other, Kinshield, weighing his potential actions against this newfound information and Sirius, impassive and steadfast in his protection of Remus' secret, even at the cost of his own. Whitewashed rays of sunlight fell though the window. Sirius huffed. "Please," he said. Jean detected a hint of pleading in his voice.

Kinshield's eyes swiveled around the room before he nodded. "Stay here," he said, and he quickly ducked out of the door.

Now without his pillar of support, Sirius braced his hand against the wall. His unbroken leg shook from the strain as he walked his way back across the room. Jean guided him as he collapsed onto the bed.

"Sirius," said James at last. "Do you know what you just did?"

"I did what I had to to protect Moony." Sirius shifted so that he was sitting with his back against the wall, his legs hanging over the side of the bed. He flopped his hand over his eyes. "Jean," said Sirius, speaking through his fingers, "you'll visit me in Azkaban, right?"

Jean sharply turned her head towards Sirius. "Don't joke like that Sirius." James' voice was sharp and somber simultaneously.

"We," stuttered Peter quietly, "we won't go to Azkaban, will we?"

But neither Sirius nor James answered Peter. James slung his arm around Lily's shoulders and pulled her into his side, his thumb running over the edge of her collarbone. Lily glanced up at him for a moment before she settled her face into his chest, idly playing with the buttons on his shirt.

Sirius reached down to readjust his broken leg, grimacing when it resisted. Jean reached over and helped him hold his leg just below the knee. "Here," she said, moving Sirius' limb the desired inches.

Sirius sighed, now comfortable. "Thank you."

Jean nodded, no emotion on her face. "How is your leg?"

"I can't really feel it," said Sirius, "it's numb and tingling, like my leg has fallen asleep."

Jean glanced down at Sirius' leg wondering what the damage looked like under his pants leg. She
imagined it was twisted and bruised in shades of yellow and black and red before she pushed the image from her mind. Her eyes traveled upward over his torso and down his arms. She was relieved to see that he only sported a few cuts and scratches and nothing worse on his body. The hand that was not spread over his eyes was splayed on the bed sheets. Between two busted knuckles was the silver loop and black stone of his family's ring. Tentatively, she reached out and, with the edge of her fingernail, she traced the outline of the onyx adornment. "I'm glad you're not hurt," Jean said quietly.

Sirius pulled his hand away from his face and looked at Jean. His gaze almost seemed to pull Jean's eyes to his. "Jean," Sirius began.

But Jean's eyes suddenly looked away. "Remus," Jean said, and Sirius' eyes followed her.

Kinshield had returned, kicking the door shut behind him with his foot. Remus was unconscious in his arms, his long black cloak wrapped around him. Remus' sandy haired head was slung up and over Kinshield's shoulder and his legs hung limply down from where Kinshield held them just under the knees. Only his bare feet were showing from underneath the cloak. Jean looked on; impressed that Kinshield was strong enough to carry a tall seventeen-year-old boy, slender though he was. Jean stood up and placed herself at the head of the bed while Kinshield gently dropped Remus onto it. Jean reached over and readjusted the cloak covering Remus' bare chest.

Kinshield walked across the room, grabbing the chair from under the desk, spun it around, and straddled it in front of the door, his arms resting on the chair's back. "So," he said, lifting his finger and vaguely indicating to everyone in the room. "You're all Animagi."

"No," said James. "Only Sirius, Peter, and myself."

"But, Miss Evans and Miss Granger also knew."

"Yes, sir," said James reluctantly.

Kinshield drummed his fingers on the wood. "Why are the two of you running around then?"

Kinshield waited a moment for someone to speak. Peter, who was sweating on his upper lip, was paralyzed by silence, his eyes flitting around as if he were trying to find a way to escape. James was breathing heavily, his hand trying to rub away the pain in his chest. Sirius couldn't answer because he didn't absorb much since Remus broke his leg until Jean coached him into turning back into his human shape. Jean mutely looked down at Remus, who still hadn't woken up, arms crossed, a far away look in her eyes. "Well?" prompted Kinshield.

"James, Peter, and Sirius," said Lily, "were walking though the woods. Remus started to run towards the village. Sirius and James stopped him, but before he ran off. He hurt them and Peter couldn't get them anywhere by himself. Peter," Lily faltered, still uncertain about speaking to her professor about her boyfriend and her friends' secret abilities. "Peter turns into a very small animal and was able to get away and he went and found us. Jean and I were planning on finding Remus once we got James and Sirius somewhere safe."

"Which is why Dumbledore made the Shack for Remus in the first place," said Kinshield, his voice a blend of frustration and anger, "to keep him from running wild and to keep other people out of danger."

"Danger?" Remus shifted under the cloak, coming out of his sleep. His golden eyes were dazed and confused, blindly searching for something to orient him. "Who's in danger? What's going on?"

Jean leaned down over the bed and Sirius shifted to hold Remus' leg reassuringly. "Everyone's safe,
Remus," Jean said gently. Remus' eyes zeroed in on her face. "Everything's all right."

"Jean?" said Remus, still trying to get his bearings. "Where are we?"

"We're in The Hog's Head."

Remus brushed his hair out of his face and looked over at Kinshield. "Professor?"

"Mr. Lupin," said Kinshield coolly.

Remus looked around the room, taking in everyone in it. His eyes suddenly got huge and he sat ramrod straight up in the bed, the cloak falling off of his naked shoulders and pooling around his hips. "What happened?"

Sirius squeezed Remus leg to get his attention. "Nothing," said Sirius. "You just…got a little rough with us."

Remus saw Sirius' broken leg lying awkwardly on the bed and Remus' pale face whitened even more. "Did I do that?" he almost whispered.

"I'm fine," said Sirius simply, "we both are." Sirius indicated at James who raised his hand off his chest and waved it once at Remus.

Remus didn't look as fine as both Sirius and James claimed to be. His fingers, which were splayed on the cloak and the bed covers, were shaking and his straightened spine crumbled and folded into his chest. "I got away from you." Remus raked his hands through his sandy hair. "Oh, Merlin. I didn't bite anyone, did I?" Remus looked up and there was a desperate almost wild look on his face. For a moment, Jean saw Moony behind Remus' eyes.

"No," said Sirius reassuringly, "you didn't." James nodded in agreement.

Remus slumped, his elbows resting on his knees and his face in his hands. Jean took the opportunity to draw Kinshield's cloak back over his shoulders. Kinshield was silent through the entire exchange but none of the students forgot he was there, watching them intently from his place in front of the door. Lily watched him rest his chin on his knuckles. "You all care for each other very much," he said, garnering the others' attention, "and in the short time that you have been my students I can see that there are no secrets among you," Jean shifted and brushed her hair away from her face as she looked away from Remus, "and you would do anything to help one of your own, no matter the risks or consequences." Kinshield stood up and turned to open the door. "I will speak with Professor Dumbledore and we will decide what is to be done."

"Professor," said Jean finally speaking, but silently hoping she was wrong. But, if she was right, then she had a responsibility to her friends, both now and in the future.

Kinshield's fingers rested on the doorknob. "Yes, Miss Granger?"

"Why are there Aurors hiding in Hogsmeade?" Sirius looked around Remus, who had straightened and turned to look at Jean. Lily's eyes were green galleons and Peter was fidgeting in his seat again. James was looking at Kinshield and he seemed to be trying to recall the faces of the shadowy strangers they met in the lane.

Kinshield released the doorknob and strode into the center of the room, his boots making ominous thuds as he walked, all the while emotionlessly staring at Jean. To Jean, he looked bigger and fiercer than ever, even without his cloak, but Jean refused to allow herself to buckle to him. "And how," said Kinshield, speaking deliberately, "would you come to that conclusion, Jean Granger?"
"I know the man you were talking to, Kingsley Shacklebolt, is an Auror. Why would an Auror and a person who claimed to be a retired Auror, in the company of other men, be walking around Hogsmeade in the middle of the night?"

Kinshield laughed, but it did nothing to ease the tension in the room. "I'm sure plenty of people have told you you're a very clever witch for your age, but has anyone ever told you that you may be too smart for your own good?"

Jean didn't answer.

"Dumbledore hired you because you're an Auror, didn't he professor?" Remus readjusted Kinshield's cloak as he shifted to face him.

Kinshield ran his hand over his face and returned to the desk chair and sat down in it, legs splayed, elbows on the knees, and fingers fisted together in front of him. "Yes."

"Why?" came Peter's mousy voice from his spot in the corner.

Kinshield once again rested his chin on the tops of his hands. "Have any of you ever heard the name Voldemort?" Jean felt all the warmth rush out of the room and the chill that remained tightened her lungs. She nodded stiffly, not aware of whom among her companions said yes or no. "He's a dark wizard," continued Kinshield, "with a growing following. Some Aurors, myself included, believe that this group may be responsible for the missing muggle-borns and their families you may have read about in the papers."

"You mean like Clarissa Binnington and her family?" asked Lily.

Kinshield nodded once. "Yes," he said. "Dumbledore thought the same and sought me out last summer." Kinshield paused, seemingly debating as to whether he should continue on. "We have," he began, "no reason to believe this could happen…but there are a lot of young, inexperienced muggle-born witches and wizards at Hogwarts." Lily gasped, putting her hand over her mouth. "The Aurors here, if necessary, offer a first line of defense."

Jean watched her fellow students absorb the information that she was already aquatinted with, but was never the less hard to swallow. In the back of her mind, Jean knew that Voldemort would one day work his way back into her life, as he was now, for the first time, working his way into everyone else's. It was almost other worldly to see future members of the Order, particularly Remus and Sirius, take Voldemort's initial rise to power so calmly, not knowing what that truly meant and how it would affect and change their lives so completely. Jean wandered back in her memories, wondering what her reaction was to the story of Voldemort and his rise to power, now on the cusp of its beginning. She didn't recall. It saddened her to think that she couldn't remember a time when she had known about magic and not known about the struggle against the Dark Lord. "Let us help you."

Kinshield looked up at Jean, that rare look of surprise once again on his face. "I beg your pardon?"

"I agree with Jean." There was a tone in Lily's voice that Jean had never heard before, the sound of grim determination steeling her fear. "Let us help you and your Aurors."

"You're students," said Kinshield simply, "I won't risk your safety."

"But we're not the young, inexperienced students you're trying to protect," said Remus.

"You said in your letter that you wanted more people and Alastor Moody couldn't give you any." Kinshield looked sharply at Jean and Jean almost shrugged her shoulders, seeing that she and the
other Marauders were backing him into a corner.

"Well, that settles it," said James slapping his knees as if they had just concluded discussing something as mundane as next week's History of Magic essay, "we'll help you."

Kinshield let out an exasperated sound. "None of you have any skills in magical combat."

"So train us," countered Sirius, "consider it an 'I'll scratch your back if you scratch mine' type of situation."

Kinshield was about to fire back another rebuttal but paused and raised his eyebrow at Sirius. "Are you blackmailing me?"

"It would be nice," said Peter, semi-successfully summoning James and Sirius' bravado to him, "if no one else found out about we three being Animagi and no one else found out about your hidden Aurors."

"That would be nice, Peter," added Remus, who was now lounging against the pillows. "Very nice."

Kinshield looked somewhere between bemused and irritated. "And where does me training you come into all of this back scratching?"

"Oh, it doesn't," said James, "but you'll do it anyways."

"And why's that?"

"Because you like us so much." Sirius sounded so smooth and so smug that Jean was silently begging him to wink at Kinshield, as he would have done with anyone else. Lily looked the same way, and if Sirius winked she couldn't be sure that she wouldn't burst out laughing. But, Sirius didn't, presumably because he wanted to keep both of his eyes.

Kinshield raked his hand over his face and through his hair. "That is true, for better or worse." He sighed. "I supposed I'm doing someone a service," he said, indicating to both James and Sirius, "since they'll be teaching you two the same thing in a few months." Magnus Kinshield stood up from his spindly desk chair and walked pasts his students towards the fireplace tucked in the cramped corner. "I can't promise that you'll be anything useful, but since you have my hands tied," Kinshield picked up a flowerpot hanging from and iron bolt hammered into the stones. He scooped out a handful of grey glimmering Floo Powder. "Friday night. My office. Nine o'clock. Tell no one." Kinshield tossed the powder into the empty fireplace and within seconds it filled with shimmering emerald flames.
Private Lessons

Chapter 13: Private Lessons

With the addition of secret defense training under Professor Kinshield, the Marauders plus Lily and Jean's schedule became frantically clustered at the tail end of the term with practice for the Quidditch finals, studying for their N.E.W.T.s, as well as their nighttime practice with the undercover Auror. The congested agenda had Jean busy from sunup to sundown leaving her exhausted and sleeping deeper than she had in a long while.

On one such Friday afternoon in April when the weather was consistently warm, Jean trudged up to her dormitory, her eyes heavy from the heated, pollen-laden air. She dropped her satchel on the floor with a thump and slumped over onto the covers of her bed, her head sinking onto her fluffed pillows. The windows had been opened and Jean listened to the rustle of new leaves and the twittering of birds and if she listened hard enough the dull murmur of students far below the on castle grounds.

Jean felt herself beginning to fall into an afternoon nap before a knock on her door roused her. She let out a strain of garbled syllables and reluctantly opened her eyes.

"Jean?" said Lily, her braided hair falling over her shoulder as she leaned around the dormitory door. "James and Sirius are at Quidditch practice. I thought you might want to come down and watch with me."

Jean shifted, running her hand over her eyes. "I thought they weren't holding practice today," she said, shaking the grogginess off of her.

"Ravenclaw's players are joining them so they can practice against a full team," Lily explained. "This is the only day they could get together."

"Ravenclaw?" said Jean, tipping her head up to Lily.

"Yeah," said Lily, "but if you're too tired that's fine too."

"No," said Jean, swinging herself upright, "I'll come." Jean reached for a pair of blue jeans hanging over the back of a chair. "Let me change clothes first and I'll be right down."

Remus and Peter were already sitting in the stands and the two house teams were up in the air, whirling around like rippling ribbons of blue and red. Farther down, a cluster of Ravenclaw students had gathered to spectate as well. Jean scanned the backs of their heads, searching for raven ringlets.

"Hey," Jean turned and looked at Remus, who had just realized the two girls had arrived. "I was beginning to wonder if you were coming down at all."

Jean and Lily sat down on the bleachers one row behind Remus and Peter. Remus was reclined, his ankles crossed and his elbows bracing his upper body while his amber eyes followed the flyers through the sky. Peter was hunched over a spell book. "What are you reading Peter?" Jean asked.

Peter uncurled himself to look up at Jean. "Professor Kinshield suggested that I should use spells that distract more than disable because I don't have to target a particular person. He thinks that if my assailant is handicapped by his atmosphere than I'll have a better chance of disarming him."
Jean nodded. Peter turned another page. Jean's eyes lifted upward, searching through the scarlet clad players several feet above her. Sirius was flying with his fellow beater while the Ravenclaw pair of beaters circled them. Sirius and Miller were passing a bludger between them while the opposite pair were attempting to hit them with the other violent ball. James and the other two Gryffindor chasers were down the pitch scrimmaging with the Ravenclaw chasers. Spiraling higher and higher Kostova and the Ravenclaw seeker were speeding after an unseen snitch.

"They seem to be playing well," commented Lily.

"Yeah." Remus pulled up his shirtsleeve to look at his watch. "Not for much longer though, at least for James and Sirius." Lily nodded once at the subtle reminder that Professor Kinshield was expecting them tonight.

The two teams broke for a short break. The fourteen floated down onto the ground and sprawled out on the grass, stretching their limbs and idly chatting. James touched Sirius' shoulder and indicated towards Lily and Jean and the other Marauders before they both flew up to them. "Hey," said James dismounting from his broom and landing loudly on the wooden benches. He bent down and kissed Lily, who pulled away shortly afterwards. "What?"

"You're sweaty," said Lily rubbing her lips together.

Jean watched James laugh and dart down to kiss Lily again before she could pull away. Jean felt a thump beside her and turned to see Sirius spread out on the seating, his arms crossed and behind his head. "You look tired," said Jean casually.

Sirius nodded his head. The sun put highlights in his hair and the heat made his eyes heavy. Jean watched his muscles relax and his body slump into the uneven slats of the stand. The ties of his Quidditch robes were coming undone, revealing the lower part of his neck shining, with sweat. Jean ran her fingers over Sirius' broomstick, tangling them in the pliable bristles. "You know," said Sirius, looking at Jean out of the corner of his eye. "I don't think I've ever seen you fly before."

Jean pulled her hand away and tucked it into her lap. "That's because I don't like flying." Jean hadn't had too bad an experience on a broom, but rides on a certain hippogriff and thestral were enough to make her kick the habit.

"No one just doesn't like flying," said Sirius skeptically.

Jean rolled her eyes and let out an exasperated sound. "I'm afraid of flying." she said, "I never liked it."

"Well," said Sirius, "we can't have that." Sirius stood up and mounted his broom, pushing himself towards the bottom half. "I'm going to have to break your fear of flying."

"What? No." Jean's eyes grew wide and she pushed herself away from Sirius' hand the beckoned to the top end of his broom.

"Come on," coached Sirius.

"You're mental."

"Jean Granger, get on this broom."

"You know he's not going to quit until you do." Jean looked over her shoulder at James and Lily and Remus who were nodding their heads behind him. Seeing that no one was jumping to her defense, Jean sighed and put her hand on the broom. "If I fall off and land in the hospital wing,"
she said to Sirius, gingerly swinging herself up onto the handle, "you're bringing me flowers."

Sirius laughed. "I'd get you flowers anyways." Sirius pushed off and he and Jean floated away from the stands up into the pitch. Jean gasped and stiffened, clenching the stick tightly. The broom weaved and wobbled and Jean felt her body tipping out into open air. She jerked herself upright, which caused the broom to sway from one side to the other like a ship in tempestuous waters. "Careful," said Sirius wrapping his fingers around Jean's "You'll throw us both off." Gently, Sirius peeled Jean's fingers off the broom. "Just relax and enjoy the ride."

Jean wrapped her hands around Sirius' wrists instead and willed herself to relax. Sirius flew slow and smooth, drawing gentle arcs between the goal posts and long stretches back and forth across the pitch. Over time Jean felt her tension dissipate and she started looking around, watching the stands and the people milling around below her. She turned and looked at Hogwarts. From her perch, Jean saw the school in a panoramic sweep, the sunlight flashing against the stone, rippling like water over the shingles and getting caught in the windows like glass nets. "I've never seen it more beautiful," said Jean, more to herself than to anyone else.

"Me neither." Jean looked up at Sirius who stared down at her. She saw the look in his eyes again, only he didn't look away to hide it and she didn't look away like she hadn't seen it.

"Sirius!"

Sirius and Jean looked down to see the teams reconvening. With a gentle turn, Sirius descended to the stands. Jean moved and only then noticed that her back had been completely pressed to Sirius' chest. Sirius helped her dismount, but before he flew off Jean felt his thumb brush across her knuckles.

The two teams played a mock match for almost an hour before Remus and Peter packed up their things and, along with Lily and Jean, stood in a silent signal to James and Sirius that it was time to dismiss themselves. With James and Sirius half dressed in Quidditch clothes and half in street clothes the six teenagers let themselves into the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. The room had been cleared of the desks except for Kinshield's at the front of the room. On it was a stack of several books of spells, jinxes, and curses either borrowed from the school library or from the Ministry itself. It reminded Jean of the version of the Room of Requirement where the DA secretly met. Jean leaned up against Kinshield's desk next to the stack of books, moving her arm slightly so Remus and Lily could grab some of the tomes and Peter could return his. Jean read the bronze lettering printed on the spine of the forest green cover balanced in Remus' hand: *The Strategies of Magical Combat.*

Jean heard the thump of Kinshield's door closing and the sound of his shoes against the stone. "Good evening, professor," said Lily respectfully while Jean pushed herself off Kinshield's desk.

"Evening," he said reaching the floor. He glanced over at James and Sirius who were leaning against the wall, the latter pulling his hair back into a ponytail. "I trust that Gryffindor is ready for their match with Slytherin?"

"We're getting there," said James, puffing up a little at his professor supporting his team.

"Good," said Kinshield. Jean wondered for a moment what house Magnus Kinshield was in when he attended Hogwarts and wondered if his Patronus being a lion meant anything. Kinshield's face then fell into a serious look as he turned to face his students. The light atmosphere sobered up immediately, the six recognizing that Kinshield had dropped the roll of their professor in favor of their trainer. "You're going to be in pairs today," said Kinshield, leaning up against the place Jean had just vacated. They did as he instructed and divided up, James with Sirius, Jean with Lily and
Remus with Peter. "No," said Kinshield, shaking his head. "Each of you knows the other too well. You know how they move, which spells they favor, on most occasion you will not have that familiarity with your opposition. James," he pointed along with his words, "you pair off with Peter and Remus you go with Lily." Kinshield's assignments left Jean and Sirius, who subtly shifted towards each other. Kinshield crossed his arms, thinking. "No," he said after a beat, "this won't do." His face broke for a moment when his lips curled into a light-hearted smirk. "With the exception of Miss Granger, you all will hold back if you're fighting each other." Kinshield looked idly from side to side and lifted his wand. With its ascent, the flames from the torches on the wall flared up. "Corporalis."

Jean felt a tingling sensation pass over her body akin to the pins and needles of a limb going numb. She shuddered and ran a hand over the back of her neck, her shadow mimicking her. And then it stopped. Jean watched as her shadow bent its elbow of its own accord and picked itself up. Jean looked around and watched the Marauders and Lily stare at there own shadows with a blend of curiosity and trepidation as they stood up in from of them.

"They're tangible," supplied Kinshield, moving to a position where he could aid and observe. "You can hit them and they can hit you. Go." As if Kinshield's voice was all the encouragement they needed, the shadows as one lunged for their counterparts.

Jean didn't think that she was the only one surprised that Peter fired the first spell. "Denevula." From the tip of his wand emerged a thick grey fog that billowed out around he and James and the shadows that prowled around them. Peter's shadow lunged at Peter before the fog could envelop him. With a yelp, Peter was grabbed by his shadow and was pinned to the ground. He struggled and huffed to push himself back up to his feet, but the shadow would not be moved, determined to keep Peter immobilized.

"Peroleure." James parted the thick curtain of fog and Peter felt the weight lift off his back as his shadow was flipped off of him and was pinned flat-backed and eagle-spread on the ground. "Hurry up, Peter," said James, raising his other hand to wrap around his wand arm's wrist. "I have to hold the spell to keep it down and it's struggling."

Peter nodded and reached for his wand that had rolled away from him. "Liga Funes." Thin cords of rope erupted from his wand and wrapped around his shadow's ankles and wrists before winding themselves down the shadow's chest and up its thighs. Peter's shadow struggled for a moment, but realizing that the binding could not be broken became still.

"Nicely done," said Kinshied to James and Peter who turned and grinned at each other, Peter more than James, who looked like he had just won the Quidditch World Cup. Peter picked himself up and entered the fog in pursuit of James' shadow, its counterpart quickly on his heels.

But, James stopped on a dime and turned when he heard Lily cry out from across the room. Lily's shadow had her in its grip, its hands restraining her wrists and determinedly trying to buckle her knees. "Lily," he cried out in alarm, taking several steps towards her before Kinshield stopped him.

"Stay with your partner, Potter," said Kinshield, holding up his hand to emphasize the point. "Trust Remus to keep her safe."

Remus was attempting to do just that, but it was easier said than done. Every time he had a clear shot at Lily's shadow his own shadow attacked him and by the time he had fended off his own shadow Lily's shadow had ducked behind its counterpart. "Lily," he called out, firing a spell at his shadow to keep it at bay, "try to get as close to your shadow as you can."

"This isn't close enough?" said Lily, exasperated, her shadow practically on her back trying to pin
her. Lily's feet shifted to a place where she and her shadow's ankles were almost touching and Remus spied his chance, aiming his wand at the space in the middle of their four feet. "Parumentum!" The floor beneath Lily and her shadow's feet took on a quicksand like quality and they sank into the stone to halfway up their claves. With Lily's shadow trapped and unable to move Lily around to shield itself, Remus walked around until he found an opening to strike. "Stupefy!" Lily's shadow stiffened and then slumped over Lily's shoulder, unconscious. The victory was short lived, however. The remaining shadow took advantage of Remus' distraction and tackled him to the ground, successfully holding him there as Lily scrambled to free herself from the floor.

Jean's eyes flickered over to Remus when she heard the grunt from his impact but just as quickly honed back in on the shadows that danced around her and Sirius. They worked as a pair better than the other sets of shadows. When one moved to the offensive the other protected it. Sirius' shadow lunged for its counterpart with Jean's shadow right behind it.

"Portego," Sirius shouted, bringing his wand up to shield both Jean and himself from the brunt of the shadows combined attack. Sirius' shadow beat at the shield, attempting to weaken it, but Jean's shadow eventually pulled away and began patiently walking up and down the shield, testing it. Finally, on the fringes of Sirius' magic, Jean's shadow pushed its way through.

"Stupefy," said Jean, striking the area at her shadow's feet, driving it back with increasingly stronger spells. "Reducto!" The shadow bobbed and weaved erratically as it dodged Jean's spells, forcing Jean to move forward with it in order to keep the shadow from flanking Sirius, who was still fighting his own shadow determinedly hammering though his shield. "Bombardal!" The smaller explosion chipped at the floor and Jean's shadow jumped away from it. Jean took another step forward, but only when it was too late did she realize her shadow had lured her into going beyond the protection of the shield. Sirius' shadow suddenly abandoned its efforts and lunged for her, its arms reaching for her shoulders.

"Look out," said Sirius, twisting his wand in his hand. "Arabea!" Suddenly, the floor shifted beneath Jean like a rug was being pulled out from under her. With a yelp, Jean stumbled to her knees, Sirius' shadow sailing over her and landing close to Jean's own shadow. Jean grabbed Sirius' extended hand and both fell into a defensive stance against the two shadows.

James and Peter were having an equally as difficult time subduing their remaining shadow. James shot one spell after another but his shadow evaded each of them with the grace and dexterity of a Quidditch athlete. Peter meanwhile was prowling the perimeter, twirling his wand in his hand as James and his shadow circled around each other.

"Peter," said James quickly, his hazel eyes not moving from his opponent, "I can't pin him. Find an opening and hit it with something."

Peter tightened his grip around his wand and aimed, timing his spell at a moment where James' shadow's back faced him. "Iaculum!" A large weighted net propelled itself from Peter's wand and, like a great blooming flower, it unfolded itself and wrapped around James' shadow as well as James himself. The both toppled to the ground immobilized by thick, interwoven ropes.

"Pettigrew," said Kinshield sharply, "don't sacrifice your partner just to subdue your opponent." Peter felt a blush creep up behind his ears, his adrenaline from his previous accomplishment evaporating. He shifted over to James and half-heartedly attempted to free James while at the same time keeping the shadow trapped.

Across the room, Lily was completely oblivious to Peter's chastisement or James' distress. She had all but given up on magic and was wrestling with Remus' shadow that still had its counterpart pinned beneath it. Remus choked out a gasp as he strained forward, grasping for his wand, which
rolled against the edges of his fingers. He shifted and felt some of the circulation return to his legs. Using the balls of his feet, he pushed himself forward just enough to wrap his hand around his wand. "Lily," said Remus, "close your eyes." The werewolf jerked his arm around and aimed the best he could at the shadow. "Lumos Solem!"

Lily pushed her face into her sleeve and rolled away from Remus' shadow, now standing and stumbling backwards, half blind. Remus' shadow reeled back so far with its face in its hands it bumped into the wall. Lily lifted her hand and her wand. "Ligameta." The two iron torches that were on either side of where Remus' shadow was resting against the wall slithered forward like black serpents. They formed into cuffs around the shadow's wrists and pulled its arms back to where it was tethered to the wall. The shadow remained still, stunned and sightless.

Kinshield didn't praise or critique the defeat of Lily and Remus' last shadow. His chin was resting on his knuckles staring silently at the two remaining students. Jean's shadow had broken through Jean and Sirius' defenses. Jean let out a cry that was quickly chocked off by her shadow wrapping one arm around her upper body, dark fingers clamping over her mouth and the other seizing and effectively immobilizing her wand wrist. Sirius' shadow smelled the metaphorical blood in the water and broke off his attack with his counterpart, turning on a dime to swiftly move towards its fellow shadow. Through her struggles, Jean saw Sirius' eyes widen before they tore themselves from her face and targeted the shadow rapidly approaching her. "Levicorpus," Sirius shouted, the beam from his wand hitting his shadow squarely in the back. Sirius' shadow was jerked so suddenly from its run its forehead almost hit the floor as its invisibly bound ankle flung itself into the air and suspended from the ceiling, the body going boneless upon realization that it was beaten.

Sirius made a move towards Jean. "Wait," Kinshield said, his eyes still trained on his pupil. Sirius shifted from one foot to the other, his wand twisting under his hands.

Jean tried to move her feet to knock her shadow's legs out from under it. She tired to pull her shadow's arms away from her face but it held firm. Jean felt cold fingers creeping farther down her wrist, seeking out her wand. Quickly, but carefully, she turned her wand so it was both protected from her assailant and facing up towards it. All she needed was to get her mouth free. Jean acted before she even processed her thought and slammed her head straight back into her shadow's. The shadow jerked backwards, its arm loosening, freeing Jean's mouth. "Incendio," Jean said, her awkwardly twisted wand pointing it at her wrist and the fingers wrapped around it. Jean bit the inside of her cheek when she felt the burn spreading over her skin but she did not lift the spell, watching her shadow's hand flinch and struggle to keep hold before releasing. Quick as lightning, Jean grabbed her shadow's arm and twisted it behind its back, holding her wand against its temple. "Stupefy."

There was a small explosion of sound and color and the shadow shuddered as if it had been shot. It slumped against Jean, forcing her to let go, and crumpled to the floor. Jean looked up and around the room taking in the people in it before for the first time in several minutes. Even James had ceased his struggling within the netting. Kinshield curled his fingers and motioned Jean forward, catching her injured wrist in his hand. "It's a rare thing," he commented, pulling out his wand and running it over the red, peeling mark on her skin, "that someone has the willpower to injure herself in order to subdue an adversary. Be careful with how close you fire a spell though." Kinshield's eyes drifted over to the prostrate shadow. "A stronger spell would have sent a real person to the hospital." Kinshield inspected his work on Jean's hand. Satisfied, he released her. "Well," he said, "now that everyone's blood is pumping..." and the session went on.

Jean settled into one of plush scarlet chairs in the Gryffindor Common Room and thought that nothing would make her happier than to never get up again. James and Sirius were of like mind, slumped across the expanse of the sofa, the former face down in a pillow, his short, spiky hair
sticking up like black shrubbery. Remus kicked his shoes off and braced his feet against the coffee table, his head lolling against the wing of the chair. A heavy heat settled over the room when Peter stirred the fire with the iron poker. The comforting silence only lasted for a little while before Jean heard a thump and the sound of a zipper. Jean unpeeled her eyelids. "Lily," said Jean with a sigh, stunned and amazed that there was someone more scholastically motivated than herself.

James turned his head, looking at Lily's back as she unloaded her books from her bag. "You can't be serious," said James. "We've had a full day; we're exhausted."

"Our finals and, more importantly, our N.E. will be here before we know it. You can't cram for something like that."

Remus reluctantly joined Lily's camp, sliding out of his chair and shuffling over to the tower stairs to retrieve his schoolwork. Knowing he was fighting a losing battle, James pressed his head into the pillow with a huff. "Just for a few hours," he conceded.

"I'm hungry," said Peter, still rearranging the contents of the fireplace. Nobody contradicted him. Quidditch practice and Professor Kinshield's training session had spanned the entire length of dinnertime and not even the empty plates remained in the Great Hall.

Sirius jumped for the life ring Peter extended. "I'll dash down to the kitchens and scrounge for some leftovers." Sirius unfolded himself, grabbed Lily's now empty pack, and walked all the way over to the portrait hole before he paused and looked over his shoulder. "Anyone want to come along?"

Jean thought that she was the only one who noticed his eyes lingering on hers when he scanned the room. She pressed her hands into the armrests and heaved herself up. "I'll go."

Sirius closed the portrait hole with a loud click and followed Jean who was walking down the corridor. Jean stopped mid-stride and turned to Sirius. "I just remembered I have no idea where I'm going."

Sirius laughed, falling into step beside Jean. "You should," he commented, "we should have showed you this place months ago."

"Well," said Jean, "I'm impressed that you know so many of Hogwarts' secrets to show me." Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sirius puff up at her compliment. "We worked really well as a pair today," she added.

Sirius nodded. "I don't know if anyone's ever told you this, but you're a really good fighter, and I don't me just good at spell casting.

Jean casually shrugged her shoulders. "Any muggle-born knows a good jab with an elbow is just as affective as a stunner."

Sirius let out a bark like laugh. "I'll have to remember that." The duo turned a corner and the rows of animated suits of armor jumped to attention with a series of clinks. "You should train to be an Auror along with James and I."

Jean shook her head. "No, I don't think I'd want to be an Auror."

Sirius looked over at Jean, clearly surprised. "Really? I thought that'd be right up your alley. What do you want to do when we graduate?"

Jean paused, not knowing how to answer him. For so long her main goal in life had been living to
see to the end of the war, to fight against Lord Voldemort until he was defeated. She could hardly remember her goals and dreams before the Dark Lord rose to power. But, after casting her mind back into her childhood one ambition did come to her mind. It caused a light blush to color her face. "You'll think I'm silly," she said at last.

"Please," prompted Sirius.

"Well," said Jean, "I'd like one day to go into the Ministry and campaign for the rights of non-human magical creatures, like house elves."

Sirius was clearly making a concerted effort not to let his grin crawl farther up his face, but he couldn't restrain the good-natured chuckle that passed though his tightened lips.

"Don't laugh," said Jean, lightly bumping her shoulder against his.

"I'm not, I promise," said Sirius, trying to sober up his face. "I just...well, I've never heard that one before."

Jean rolled her eyes. "I told you you'd think it was silly."

"No, I don't," said Sirius, "but, if you don't make any headway in that department, I still think you'd make a pretty good Auror." Silently, Jean agreed with Sirius. Her capabilities surprised even her sometimes, but she knew that she didn't want to spend any more of her life fighting against dark wizards than she had to.

Sirius and Jean reached a staircase and paused as they descended when it began to move. Sirius leaned up against the balustrade and crossed his arms, looking down at his feet until he spoke. "Is the reason why you're such a good fighter got something to do with..." Sirius trailed off and gestured to her arm.

Jean almost unconsciously ran her hand over the sleeve concealing the scar marking her as a Mudblood. "You wouldn't be entirely wrong," she murmured, beginning to walk again when the moving staircase came to a grinding halt.

"I'm sorry," said Sirius, "I shouldn't have asked."

"It's fine," said Jean. "It's not a difficult answer. Or rather, more of an answer I can't give completely."

"I understand," answered Sirius. Jean wasn't entirely sure he did, or even could, but she felt the cold parts of her heart that still silently bore the trauma of her troubles warm a little that he at least attempted to do so. "What's it like," Sirius continued, attempting to turn the subject to something lighter, "being a muggle-born. I mean," he paused, his tongue tripping over itself as he reworded his question. "What's it like living without magic?"

"You never asked this to Lily?"

Sirius shook his head. "I never really cared that much before now."

For the rest of their trip Jean narrated life as a muggle to Sirius from electricity to garden hoses and Sirius was so engaged in the conversation he almost walked past the large portrait of fruit that Jean pretended not to notice. "I think I'm going to have to invest in one of those television things—Wait," he stopped walking. "We almost walked past the door.

"You sure you know where you're going?" Jean prodded teasingly.
Sirius looked at Jean sheepishly. "I'm going to have no choice but to show you all of Hogwarts' secrets so you can lead me around." He reached up. "Watch this," he said. He tickled one of the pears in the painted bowl until turned into a doorknob the color of said pear. Sirius twisted it and the entire painting came away from the wall, revealing the secret entrance to the Hogwarts kitchens. "After you," said Sirius.

The cavernous kitchen was clean, the counters were bare, the plates, cups and silverware tucked away, and surprisingly absent of house elves. The only evidence of life was a boiling cauldron laundring the linen napkins. It didn't last long. As if a person had thrown a fistful of poppers to the ground about ten to twelve house elves apparated around them in a quick succession of sharp snaps. Amidst the bowing and bobbing of balding beige heads, the closest one stepped forward, curtsying in her oversized silver pillowcase. "Good evening, sir and miss," the house elf said, the size of her eyes only outshined by the length of her nose, "may Dainty be of any service?"

"Yes," answered Sirius, "we missed dinner. Can you find enough leftovers for six?"

Dainty bounced up and down, her pillow case billowing out to reveal her feet. "Oh yes, sir and miss. Dainty would be happy to." Dainty curtsied again and bounded off with four other house elves in tow.

One of the remaining house elves stepped forward, this one garbed in a twisted up sugar sack. "May Wispy provide you with anything while you wait, sir and miss?"

"Some tea would be nice," supplied Sirius.

The house elf bowed and scurried away as Sirius and Jean sat down in a set of spindly chairs a house elf behind them snapped into existence. By that time the house elves had dissipated to their nighttime routines. Jean watched one house elf balance precariously on the edge of the cauldron, stirring the steaming laundry with a long wooden rod. "Does it set your teeth on edge?"

Jean tilted her head slightly. "There was a time when it would have. I once tried to free the entire staff of my old school by knitting them hats."

"You did not," Sirius sat back in his chair looking both amused and impressed.

Jean nodded. "I did more than that. I set up an interest group called S.P.E.W."

"Spew?" Sirius lifted an incredulous eyebrow. "That sounds...terrible."

Jean let out an exasperated sound. "It stands for Society for the Promotion of Elvish Welfare. We had a booming membership when I left." Booming for its standards, more correctly speaking, but Jean didn't tell Sirius that.

Sirius nodded his head, "It's still spew." Jean swatted his arm with the back of her hand and Sirius laughed it off.

Wispy reappeared then, a silver tea set complete with cream sugar and lemon slices floating on a layer of smoke in front of him, similar to how Harry once described Dobby transporting his Aunt Petunia's cake. "You're tea, sir and miss. Wispy hopes it's to your liking."

"Thank you," said Jean lifting her saucer while Sirius silently busied himself with the sugar.

Wispy's bulbous eyes bulged even more out of his head and he stared at Jean as if he had never seen anything like her. Almost at a loss for words, Wispy bowed his head up and down like a bobble head toy and darted away. Jean glanced over at Sirius, a wry grin on his face, deliberately
"clacking his spoon on the edge of his cup. "Is something funny," said Jean lightly.

"That house elf is going to be flustered till next week," said Sirius.

"Well," said Jean, unfazed, "I think it's sad that house elves get flustered from simply being spoken to politely. I hope, by going into the ministry, I can one day make a difference for house elves and maybe it will one day branch out to others, like werewolves for example."

"You calling Moony a magical non-human," said Sirius somewhat darkly, recalling Jean's earlier statement.

Jean gave him a look. "No, but you know there are others who think that, and Hogwarts can only shield him so much longer." Jean didn't have to imagine what Remus' life would be like when he left Hogwarts and from Remus' description in her previous life she wished she knew less about what awaited her present friend. Remus could hardly keep a job, leaving the position the moment he was exposed, too afraid to even fall in love for fear of disappointment and heartbreak. Even Hogwarts, which had for so long been his sanctuary, couldn't keep him safe forever. And when even that crumbled down around him, he resigned his teaching position with a flurry of letters from concerned parents at his heels. Jean drummed her fingers on her cup. "Why should I devote all my attention to one group's mistreatment and not give a passing thought to an other's?"

Sirius caught Jean's double entendre. Sirius pressed his mouth to the rim of his cup. "If anyone," he said, "could make me care about the plight of the house elves it would be you." Jean sat back in her chair, clearly pleased with herself.

Dainty brought back the leftovers with her troop of helpers and, true to house elf fashion, there was enough food to feed double the amount of people. Sirius unzipped Lily's backpack and stuffed the small pyramid of ham and turkey sandwiches, carrot and celery sticks with an entire glass jar of peanut butter, a bowl of cinnamon covered mixed nuts, and two large flagons of pumpkin juice inside. "Will there be anything else, sir and miss?" asked Dainty.

"No, I think that's everything," Sirius paused, "thanks."

Just like Wispy before her, Dainty looked at Sirius not quite sure what to do with herself. Jean almost laughed at how closely Sirius mirrored the house elf. Finally, Dainty stiffly jerked her head. "Yes, sir and miss. Good evening, sir and miss."

"Good evening," said Jean pleasantly and the house elf blanched again. Jean felt Sirius' arm loop around her waist, gently guiding her to the exit through the small crowd of silent house elves, gaping up at them. Sirius leaned towards her ear. "If they drop dead from shock due to all the 'pleases' and 'thank yous' and 'good evenings' we're giving them, I'm blaming you."

"No one has died from common courtesy," commented Jean.

"Yet." Sirius swung the secret door to the kitchens closed and the painting melded to the wall as if everything under it had always been solid and unyielding, the doorknob returning to the shape of the oil painted pear.

Before Jean could add anything else to the conversation, Sirius held his finger to his lips. The magical torches on the wall were lit low, casting shadows across the corridor. Jean listened, but couldn't hear voices or any sounds of movement. They were out past curfew and the only place Sirius and Jean could be that was farther away from Gryffindor Tower was the dungeons. The two silently crept down the darkened hallways, inching up through the castle. It was slow going. Every noise they jumped at, every shadow they avoided, and every corner they eased around. "This
would be so much easier if we had the map," lamented Sirius, the pair turning a corner more boldly than they normally did. Sirius threw up a hand, stopping Jean in her tracks. A small shadow moved away from the wall. "Damn."

Mrs. Norris was younger, sleeker, and had less grey in her fur than Jean remembered, but that was all she observed in the cat. If Mrs. Norris was here, than the caretaker wasn't far behind. Jean was already moving before Sirius told her to run. Jean and Sirius bolted blindly down the halls, Sirius turning erratically searching for a way to escape, all the while hearing the light footed jog of the pursuing cat behind them. Sirius slowed down when their corridor reached a dead with two halls going in opposite directions from where it had stopped. Sirius bounced from one foot to another, his mind racing through his memory of Hogwarts' hallways, Jean doing the same thing. "I don't remember the fastest way to the tower from here," said Sirius, more to himself than to Jean.

"Mrs. Norris." Sirius and Jean jerked their heads around, Mr. Filch's raspy voice echoing down the not so empty corridor. "Where are you, my sweet?"

Sirius made a snap decision and chose the corridor than went to the left. Jean almost followed him, is she hadn't realized with a jolt that the safest place they could get to quickly was not Gryffindor Tower. "Wait," Jean reached out and grabbed Sirius' hand. "This way." Jean turned Sirius and herself and raced down the right corridor, Jean's eyes trained to the left wall, pushing all thoughts from her head, the sound of Mrs. Norris' pattering paws, and the warm, unfamiliar feeling of Sirius' hand in hers. "We need a place to hide. We need a place to hide." Jean repeated her mental mantra over and over until, right before the two ran passed it, the door to the Room of Requirement materialized. "Here," she said, pulling Sirius over to the large door that seconds before had been solid stone.

Sirius and Jean darted within and slammed the door shut, both pressing their ears to the door trying to control their rapid breathing. Jean heard Mrs. Norris meow and paw at the now invisible door, pacing in a small circle, waiting for her owner. "I knew that cat was trouble the moment Filch got it," whispered Sirius.

Jean marveled for a moment that Mrs. Norris was that old and still spry enough to prowl the halls of Hogwarts twenty years from then. "Is that Sirius or Padfoot saying that?"

"Both," answered Sirius.

The two fell silent and listened harder to the shuffling steps of the caretaker. "Come along, Mrs. Norris, come along." Mrs. Norris lingered for a moment before Jean and Sirius heard the cat prance away.

Sirius breathed out a sigh of relief, pushing himself away from the door and sliding Lily's bag off his back in the same motion. He took in his surroundings, seemingly for the first time. "I've never been in this room before, said Sirius, examining the small mountains of things left there by centuries of Hogwarts students. He turned and looked at Jean. "How did you know this was here?"

Jean laced her fingers in front of her, shrugging her shoulders. "I'm allowed to have one Hogwarts secret for myself."

Sirius grinned, running a hand over the odds and ends that surrounded him. "Well, thank you for sharing with me your secret."

Jean crossed her arms and leaned up against the wall that that at the same time was the door to the room and watched Sirius explore his surroundings. "I'm glad you like it."
Sirius abandoned his pursuits after a few minutes and walked over to Jean. "Sometimes, I wonder how we ever managed without you, Jean. It's strange to think that there was a time that you weren't with us. It's almost like you were always here." Neither Sirius nor Jean seemed to realize how close he was to her until he ran a finger through the loose tendrils of her hair. "Jean," Sirius said softly, "I..." Sirius trailed off, pressed his lips inside his mouth, and spoke again. "Do you remember that day when we talked for so long in the Common Room?"

Jean nodded, "Yes."

"I meant it when I said that I told you things about me nobody else knows, and I think," he added, "there are things about you that only I know."

"You're right," whispered Jean, looking up into his grey eyes that seemed to shine even in the semi-darkness, willing herself not to look away.

Sirius didn't remove his hand from her hair but rather delved deeper into her light brown curls until the tips of his fingers touched her scalp and his thumb rested in the small indentation underneath her ear. "You remember when I left for Quidditch practice?"

"I remember that you asked me to ask you to stay," answered Jean.

"I wish you had," said Sirius.

"Don't be silly, Sirius," said Jean, "you had to leave. Your best friend and your team were expecting you and you needed to be there. It wouldn't have been fair to them and I didn't want them to be angry at you or me for encouraging you."

Sirius looked deflated. "I know I had to but I didn't want to. I—" he broke off and chewed on his lip again. When Sirius looked at Jean again even he seemed surprised to find his hand resting on her shoulder. "I just wish that you had wanted me to stay."

"But I did," said Jean, at last grasping what he was talking about. "I did want you to stay." Her thumb and forefinger tweaked his sleeve.

Sirius looked at her for a long moment before he sighed, his smile bittersweet but his eyes sparkling. "Well, I wish I knew that a long time ago."

"Why?"

"Because I would have done this a whole lot sooner." Sirius tightened his fingers on the back of her head and brought his lips to hers.

Jean never quite believed anyone when they said kissing a certain someone was like fireworks going off. Now she did. Sirius pulled his hand farther up until it cupped the base of her neck and snared his hand in her hair all the while rolling his lips against Jean's mouth, her arms encircling his lower back. They came away for air for a moment, their noses still touching. Sirius ran a thumb along the ridge of Jean's collarbone. He kissed her again, gentler this time, but for Jean it felt even more close and intimate than his overflow of spontaneous passion. His tongue prodded for entrance and skimmed over her teeth. Jean reached into Sirius' hair, feeling a few waves in the sea of blackness along the nape of his neck. His shoulders were broader than she expected brushing her palm over the expanse of his back. She dipped her fingers under the edges of his shoulder blades. Sirius unconsciously moved closer. It was like emerging from a pool the next time they broke apart, cheeks tinged with pink, eyes wide and darkened, their plumped, bruised lips slightly parted in mutual wanting. Their heavy breaths echoed around the room. Sirius rested his chin on the side
of Jean's face and peppered her hairline with small chaste kisses. Jean's arms balanced on his hips, the buttons of her blouse catching on the ties of his Quidditch robes. "We should be getting back," said Sirius, looking down when he felt Jean shift to look up at him, "before Mrs. Norris comes back to catch us." Sirius leaned away from Jean, his hand blindly searching for the door handle.

"Sirius," Jean grabbed onto his wrist before she lost contact with him, "stay." Sirius enthusiastically let himself be pulled back into her arms and back onto her lips.

When the portrait hole swung open, Lily and Remus were sitting in the wing-backed chairs angled towards James and Peter who were sitting cross-legged on the ground, spell books and parchment scattered about them like a papier-mâché snow storm. "There you are," said James, as Sirius and Jean sat down on the love seat, "we were about to send out a search party."

"Well," said Sirius, "Mrs. Norris chased us around half the castle so we had to go the round-about way."

Remus laughed at that. "To think Padfoot, that a cat of all things gave you that much trouble—Wait, where's the bag?"

"What bag?" asked Jean.

"My bag," said Lily. "The bag you two took to carry food in." Lily's eyes landed on Jean and Sirius' hands, more specifically, how they were intertwined together. Lily sat up a little and looked at Jean, silently questioning in the way only a woman could do to another woman. Jean gave Lily a little half shrug, a dimple forming in her cheek. Lily's mouth fell open in a scandalized smirk, not caring about her backpack anymore.

"Oh," said Sirius, remembering when he slid it off his shoulders, "that bag." Sirius looked over at Jean, cocking his head slightly, and Jean glanced coyly up at Sirius. Sirius stood, gently pulling Jean up with their locked hands.

"Where are you going," asked James.

Sirius looked at James as if the answer was the most obvious in the world. "We're going to go get the bag." And just like that, Sirius and Jean had come and gone as quickly as a summer shower.

Remus stared after Jean and Sirius long after the portrait whole swung shut. James looked between the door and Lily, who was still trying to control the emotions on her face. "We're not getting any food tonight, are we?" said Peter.

James turned his head to look again at the hidden entrance, shaking his head and running a hand though his hair, an airy laugh leaving his nose. "Apparently not."
Jean, Lily and the Marauder's next meeting with Professor Kinshield landed on the day after the full moon and the group couldn't be less prepared for their secret session. Frazzled, Jean rushed down corridor after corridor, turning up her sleeve to look at her watch. She had ninety minutes to collect her friends who were scattered about Hogwarts. Jean turned sharply on her heel and skidded into the Hospital Wing, presently unwatched by its ward. Halfway down the room Remus was propped up on a stack of pillows, the undone buttons of his nightshirt exposing the bandaged ribs Moony had cracked during his transformation, with Lily in a chair beside him, using his covered legs as a table. Lily looked up upon Jean's entry. "Hey," she said, placing her quill on the nightstand. "You finish that potions essay?"

Jean patted her satchel, "just now, along with every other bit of homework they've assigned us."

Lily chuckled, nodding her head in agreement. "Well look at you for being on the ball. I'm nowhere near finished with what needs to be done. I feel like I'm about to drop."

"Finals and N.E.W.T.s are only a few weeks away; and then it's all downhill from there," Remus quipped, thumbing through his textbook. The room was quiet for a moment and Lily picked up her quill.

"Lily," said Jean, "you know what day it is right?"

Lily nodded, her head still bent to her work. "It's Friday." Lily gasped, her hand flying to her mouth. "Oh no," she said, her emerald eyes widening. "I completely forgot." Lily glanced up at Jean. "I can't go."

Jean deflated slightly, hoping she didn't show it. "You sure?"

"Jean," said Lily, splaying her hands to showcase what was spread across the lower half of Remus' body. "I'm sorry, but I'm up to my eyeballs in graduation invitations and Remus is bedridden."

"Why don't you go out to the pitch and get James and Sirius," interjected Remus. "You three and Peter can go together and we can come next week."

Jean nodded. "Where is Peter by the way? I haven't seen him all day."

Remus shrugged his shoulders. "I don't know. I assumed he was with you."

"Try looking for him down at the pitch," offered Lily, sealing an envelope and stamping it with the Hogwarts seal.

"I will," said Jean, retreating out of the room. "See you tonight."

"See you tonight. Have a good session." Lily's voice echoed down the corridor after Jean.

Jean checked her watch twice more before she reached the pitch. In the fading light, Jean spied in the sky the Gryffindor team, this time paired with Hufflepuff, their golden windbreakers holding the last remnants of sunlight. Jean leaned out over the railing. "Liz," she called out to the Gryffindor seeker as she flew by. "Liz, can you get James and Sirius for me? It's important. Kostova nodded, looping backwards and up to the clump of players.
James and Sirius broke from the group and glided down to Jean, slowing breaking to a halt but not
dismounting. "Hey," said James, adjusting the sports glasses that wrapped around his face,
"everything all right?"

"Yeah," said Jean, "I just wanted to remind you that it was Friday."

James exhaled long and hard through his nose while Sirius drummed his fingers over the wooden
railing. "It is Friday, isn't it," murmured James to himself. He turned his head. "Sirius, we're going
to have to miss today."

Sirius wilted. "Do we have to," he asked, his digits still tittering over the planks as if he could
worry out an answer from them. Jean placed her palm over Sirius' hand and, although his fingers
were still curved, he stilled. "We're the ones that asked him to do this for us."

"I know," James conceded, "but we have other priorities right now. Slytherin is practicing every
day, too." Sirius was silent for a moment. "It's not for too much longer," James coaxed.

Sirius nodded once. "Alright," he turned to look at Jean. "You, Lily and Peter are going to have to
go without us."

"Lily can't go either," said Jean, "she's writing out the graduation invitations."

James huffed, running a hand through his hair. "I feel bad she has to do that all by herself. Head
Boy and Head Girl should be splitting that responsibility."

"Remus and Lily are keeping each other company in the Hospital Wing so she's not that
miserable."

James seemed placated by that. "Well," said James, "go find Peter then give Professor Kinshield
our apologies."

"You mean Peter isn't here?" said Jean, her head on a swivel around the pitch.

Sirius shook his head. "We haven't seen him all afternoon."

Jean worried her lower lip, thinking. "He wasn't with Remus and Lily either."

James nonchalantly shrugged his shoulders. "You'll find him. He doesn't have that many hiding
places." James twisted his head to look over his shoulder. "We need to head back. Come on,
Sirius."

"I'll be up in a minute," said Sirius. James nodded once, turned and flew away. Sirius swerved to
the side and lined himself up with the railing, slipping off his broom to settle on it. Sirius bounced
the handle of his broomstick against the wood akin to drumming his fingers. "Something's
worrying you," Sirius said.

Jean folded her arms, letting the tension within her stretch like a sore muscle. "Professor Kinshield
wouldn't be here if Professor Dumbledore wasn't worried."

Sirius twisted his body to face her, his fingers gently encircling her arm. "I know you feel anxious
about why Professor Kinshield and the others are here, and you have every right to be." Sirius ran
his finger over the raised skin of Jean's scar hidden beneath her sleeve. Jean found the movement
oddly soothing. "But, Professor Dumbledore brought Professor Kinshield here. They're thinking
about it, planning for whatever they think is coming. Isn't that worth anything?"
Jean shifted, her thumbs slowing spinning around themselves. "A little," she relented, allowing Sirius' words to comfort her in spite of the evidence in her memory stacked against them. "I just…" She drifted off, her mind going back to all of Dumbledore's planning, all of his contingencies and how sometimes they weren't enough. As she thought about it, Jean realized that nothing in Dumbledore's lifetime was enough to stop Voldemort. Jean shuddered.

"What?" Sirius prompted.

"Nothing." Jean shucked her dark thoughts off like a wet cloak. She turned up her sleeve and looked at her watch. "I need to leave now if I'm going to find Peter and get to Kinshield on time."

"Alright," said Sirius. He drew her to him by her arm and kissed her.

"Sirius," said Jean, pulling away from him, "not here."

"Oh, this again," said Sirius laughingly, not relinquishing his hold or the closeness of their bodies. "Honestly Jean, you're the only woman who's never actively advertized I was dating them."

"I'm not trying to keep in a secret," replied Jean playfully, "I just don't want to cause a circus by the whole school seeing us snog on the side of the stadium."

Sirius let out a bark like laugh, gently pulling on Jean's arm until she was practically in his lap, his other arm wrapping around her shoulders. "One day you won't care if I kiss you in front of the entire school." Sirius' voice was low and gravelly but at the same time velvet and smooth. Jean licked her flushed lips. "One day I am going to kiss you in front of the entire school."

"And until that time," said Jean at last unwrapping Sirius' arm to free herself, leaving her statement open ended. She pecked him quickly on the cheek in her movement. "Bye Sirius," she said softly, standing at the same time.

Sirius held up his hand until the tips of his fingers could no longer touch her. "Bye sweetheart," he said, "see you later tonight." Sirius swung onto his broom as Jean descended the stadium steps. Suddenly, Jean felt a strong gust of wind, the soft slap of broomstick bristles against her shoulder, and warm wet lips on her own. Jean looked up, bemused, holding a hand over her eyes as Sirius shot towards the sun.

Once inside the castle, Jean found Peter unexpectedly, almost running into him as he turned a corner. "Jean," said Peter, looking quite surprised. "I thought you and the others would be at Kinshield's by now."

"Yeah, that's why I've been looking for you. Come on, we're going to be late…"

"Jean," said Peter trying to interrupt.

"...The other's couldn't make it. Lily's doing Head Girl stuff and James and Sirius are both at quidditch practice…"

"Jean, wait. I don't want to go."

It wasn't what he said but rather how he said it that made Jean pause and look at Peter. Sirius, James and Lily had all said that they couldn't go. Peter, on the other hand, said that he didn't want to. "When you say that," said Jean, "you mean…"

"That I don't want to," answered Peter, "anymore."
Jean cocked her head slightly, folding her fingers together, a saddened look falling onto her face. "Why?"

Peter twisted his foot and fidgeted, his hands settling in one place and then fluttering to another. His small, watery eyes looked everywhere but at Jean. "Lily," he began, "Moony, Padfoot, and Prongs are good, and you're really good, training with Professor Kinshield, and I'm just not." The pad of his pudgy thumb stirred his wand in his pocket. "I've never been great with magic and I've always been okay with that. I've always been okay with Remus, Sirius and James taking care of all the things I couldn't. But, ever since you moved here and these secret meetings with an undercover auror... It's just embarrassing and I'm tired. I'm tired of trying to keep up. I'm tired of trying to be something that I'm not."

Jean stood there silent for a long time, watching Peter's stringy hair fall into his face as he trembled before her. Once again, Peter reminded Jean of Harry before he found out he was a wizard and how lonely and out of place he always said he was, how no matter what he did, no matter how hard he tried, he never seemed to fit the mold others expected of him and at one point he expected of himself. "Peter," said Jean gently. Peter flinched as he looked up, his eyes almost expecting a reprimand. "I think this is something you really need to talk about with the boys."

"No," said Peter sharply, "I can't tell them, and you can't either. Promise me. I don't want them to be more disappointed in me than they already are."

"You know that's not true Peter. You've been friends since first year. You've been friends this long because of who you are not because of what you can and can't do."

"Just promise me you won't say anything Jean, please." Peter looked up at her and for the first time she saw how Peter looked at Sirius and James and Remus pointed in her direction; a look of undiluted respect, hero-worship. It unsettled her. "I won't tell," she said, "but I still think you should."

Peter sighed, looking away. He adjusted the straps on his pack. "I've gotta go Jean. I've got that potions paper to write."

Jean glanced guiltily at her satchel, knowing that Peter's essay would take twice as long and double the effort for him. "Okay. See you tonight then?"

"Yeah," said Peter simply, and shuffled away. Jean watched Peter's receding form with a pang in her heart but also an uncomfortable twist in her stomach. For the first time in a long time Jean had to remind herself that in her past Peter Pettigrew was a Death Eater.

Jean was already late by the time she skidded to a stop in front of the door to the Defense Against the Dark Arts classroom. She knocked quickly on the door, but when she didn't hear anything she pushed the door open. "Professor," she called out. "Professor Kinshield?" The room looked like it had this afternoon. The desks were arranged in a neat grid. Kinshield's desk was clean and bare. The undercover Auror was not in his usual position perched on the edge of his desk and the flames in the braziers of the wall were low, as if the room was not to be used until Monday morning. "Professor," said Jean again stepping in to the room, the door swinging shut behind her, "are you there?"

"I'm here," Kinshield's tenor voice bounced around the cavernous room. "I'm in my office."

Jean's eyes drifted up to the slivers of light that slipped around the edges of the door atop the stone staircase that scaled the back wall. Jean leaned against Kinshield's desk waiting for her professor to emerge. "It's just me tonight, professor," said Jean. "The others couldn't make it. They asked me to
"That's fine," Kinshield answered, his voice sounding strangely smooth. "Come up to my office and then we'll start."

Jean arched her eyebrow, wondering how they were supposed to train in Kinshield's office, but did as she was told and ascended the stairs to the smaller room. Magnus Kinshield's office looked similar to how Harry described Professor Lupin's office was, if Lupin was less mobile and had the finances to afford better stuff. Bookshelves were almost uncomfortably squeezed around the walls of the room like members in an over crowded elevator. Books were stacked on shelves and stacked on each other within those shelves. Even from the books hung unraveled rolls of parchment and strings of herbs, dangling on their cords between their makeshift anchors. Any bare space that was left was wallpapered in newspaper clippings and wanted posters over lapping in a papier-mâché of newsprint and snarling, haunted faces trickling onto the ceiling and floor. On the mantelpiece above a crackling fire was a row a glass domes that contained skills of magical creatures. The only one Jean was able to recognize was a mountain troll. In the middle of the room, Kinshield stood leaning over his desk. His outer robes were haphazardly tossed over his chair, leaving him in only his shirt and pants. His hair was pulled back in messy ponytail, some strands hanging about his ears. "Professor," Jean prompted.

Kinshield looked up. "Miss Granger," he said straightening, "good evening." Kinshield stepped away from his desk. "You'll have to forgive me, you caught me in an engaging read."

Curious, Jean moved when Kinshield waved her over to his desk. In the cleared space on his cluttered desk there was a book bound in leather that looked like weathered brass. It almost seemed to be emanating its own light. She touched the tome and the pages were as thin as onionskins, almost transparent when she turned them. Written on the pages was column after column of names written in the smallest script Jean had ever seen. "Do you know what this is?" asked Kinshield, standing just behind Jean.

Jean nodded. "It's the book that the names of all magical children are written in the moment they are born." To confirm her own assumption a small but brilliant light appeared at the bottom of an unfinished column. As if being written by a quill tipped with liquid light, a name wrote itself in small, swift strokes of cursive. The words shined for a moment more in a conglomeration of yellows and whites before it faded to a shiny black, like obsidian, looking more like the name had been burned into the page rather than written. Jean ran her finger over the name, Olivia Warren, the lettering comfortably warm.

"Names in this book can be traced back as far as we can trace back magic; no way of writing has ever made an impression on the pages and, despite certain efforts, this book is indestructible. Do you want to know what the most interesting thing is?"

"What?" said Jean, still enchanted by the name of the magical infant born somewhere in the world.

"What?" said Jean, still enchanted by the name of the magical infant born somewhere in the world. Kinshield leaned close to Jean's ear. "You're not in it."

The warmth of the room was sucked away like a vacuum, leaving cold, crippling tension. Jean's eyes were rooted on her betrayer, the language on its pages twisting itself into nonsensical symbols as Kinshield continued speaking. "You fight too well for an auror not be curious about you. It was your biggest give away. I know someone who's fought for their life when I see them. I know what eyes look like that have seen death." Jean twisted around sharply and moved away from Kinshield to keep from getting pinned between him and the desk. She backed pedaled until her spine his the bookshelf. Kinshield's eyes followed her retreat. "What's even more interesting," Kinshield continued, stepping forward, causing Jean to shrink away from him and inch farther down the wall,
"is that you're not anywhere. You have no birth records, magical or muggle. I checked with the Salem Witch Academy and you have no school records either. It's as if you popped into existence the moment you stepped into this castle." Jean jolted away from a flowerpot hanging in an iron brace by the fireplace. She stared at it and the floo powder within. Kinshield's words drew Jean's eyes away from her prize. "Is Voldemort recruiting children now?"

Jean reacted so fast that upon recollection it seemed a blur to her. She seized a fistful of floo powder, but instead of tossing it into the fireplace beside her she threw it with all the force she could muster into Kinshield's face. Professor Kinshield reeled back, rubbing the grey grainy substance out of his eyes. Jean took a smaller handful and dove into the emerald flames shouting through the smoke the only sanctuary that should could think of. Jean tumbled out unceremoniously into Dumbledore's office. The headmaster looked up from his desk, any surprise at Jean's sudden appearance shown only through the slight raising of his eyebrows. "Miss Granger," said Dumbledore pleasantly, "to what do I owe this unexpected visit?"

Jean hastily picked herself off the floor, trailing ash behind her feet. "He knows," she said quickly dashing to his side. "Kinshield knows."

The emerald flames erupted in the fireplace again and out stepped Magnus Kinshield. For the first time Jean didn't see an excellent Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, or an undercover auror secretly working with Dumbledore, but a fully realized auror, tall and intimidating, in pursuit of someone he deemed a threat. Kinshield threw up his wand. "Stupefy!" The crimson bolt of magic shot towards Jean, but before Jean could lift her wand to deflect it, the spell veered off course, bouncing away from her as if it had been hit with a racket and slammed into the wall with such force that it knocked the Sorting Hat off of its shelf and onto the floor and startled all of the portraits awake with various cries of alarm.

"What is the meaning of this, Magnus," Dumbledore thundered, now standing, his wand extended towards the assailant. Now, but not for the first time, Jean saw Dumbledore not as a wizened old headmaster, but the most powerful wizard in the world.

Kinshield lowered his wand slightly, but did not back down. "What's the meaning of this?" Kinshield repeated through clenched teeth. "What's your meaning for all of this?" Kinshield pointed a finger at Jean, who was hovering by the desk. "Who is she Dumbledore? Where did she come from?"

"Her name is Jean Granger," said Dumbledore as if he and Kinshield were chatting over tea and didn't have their wands pointed at each other, "and she's from the Salem Witch Academy in Massachusetts."

"That's not true and you know it, Albus," retorted Kinshield. "How could you let a girl with no records what so ever into Hogwarts? You and I are on the front lines fighting what may be a terrorist cell that we have slim to none information about and you may have let one of their number inside—"

"I'm not a Death Eater!" Jean's cheeks were tinged with pink and her arms were trembling. Both men turned and looked at her. Kinshield lowered his wand completely. "Not many people know that name," he said softly, "and that you know it does not help your case with me. So please, if you are not a Death Eater, tell me who are you?"

Jean chewed on her tongue, knowing no lie she could spin would deceive him for long. She heard a noise clatter in her ear and she turned towards it, letting out a small gasp in surprise. Fawkes had glided down from his pedestal and settled onto Dumbledore's desk. He was nowhere near his burning day as his feathers were bright, brilliant shades of orange and crimson as if his feathers
held the fire that would one day regenerate him. Fawkes fluffed his wings and, with a fluttering hop, he crossed the width of the desk, dragging his great plume behind him. He tilted his head, his eyes round and curious, alit with a hidden light Jean could not see. Almost acting of its own will, Jean's arm reached out and Fawkes pushed his purpled beak into her palm, her fingers gently running over the feathers at the crown of his head. The phoenix warbled and the warm note settled in Jean's heart. She glanced up at Dumbledore who stood slightly behind Kinshield, his face impassive but not despondent. "My names is Hermione," Jean whispered, her name sounding foreign to her, "Hermione Jean Granger," Jean's eyes shifted over to Kinshield, "and I'm from the future."

Jean's words hung in the air like a low-lying fog. Kinshield blinked at her deliberately, his head swinging between Jean and Dumbledore, who watched the pair somewhat cautiously. "You can't be serious, Albus," said Kinshield, "You can't seriously believe what she is saying." Jean let out a huff of air the moment Kinshield's attention was turned away from her. The overstretched rubber band of tension that wrapped around the room relaxed, leaving Jean boneless. Jean's knees wobbled and she crumpled into one of the chairs in front of Dumbledore's desk. She dropped her face into her hand; her heart pounding in her temple, unable to comprehend her secret had been discovered. Would Kinshield tell? Would he attempt to arrest her as a Death Eater? Was Kinshield the top of a slippery slope leading to everyone she knew knowing the truth about her past hidden somewhere in their future? Jean thought about being forced to tell Sirius that someone he called a friend would send him to prison, or telling James and Lily that their son would be left an orphan before he turned two and would be left in the care of relatives that abused him. Jean shuddered. Jean felt Fawkes alight from the desk and settle on her knee, warmth spreading through her body from his weight. Jean tuned back into the conversation a few feet away from her.

"I believe what Miss Granger has told me," continued Dumbledore mildly.

"How can you," said Kinshield, "Dumbledore, she should be in St. Mungo's if she believes what she says is true. Instead, you give her a space in a dormitory. Why? What proof do you have?"

"I have none."

Kinshield crossed his arms, his face stony. "You have none." Kinshield ran a weary hand over his face. "Albus," he said quietly, "I know of your propensity to take in…pariahs…like Rubeus Hagrid and Remus Lupin, and I have respected you for doing so, but Hogwarts cannot be a safe haven for every lost and lonely soul you feel sorry for. I cannot condone it, especially if you give me no evidence to make me believe what this girl has to say."

"I can give you evidence," said Jean suddenly.

Dumbledore turned to Jean faster than Kinshield. "Jean," said Dumbledore, his tone changing, "we discussed this."

"Dumbledore," Kinshield interrupted, "you're the Headmaster of this school, but undercover or not I'm still the Head of Magical Law Enforcement. I will hear what she has to say."

"Professor Dumbledore," said Jean eyeing her headmaster, "I know things that would prove what I say is true that wouldn't tell you anything about the future," she paused, "if that's alright," she added.

"Speak then," snapped Kinshield

Jean continued to look at Dumbledore, trying to read any hidden message he had for her. "It's your decision, Miss Granger," he said.
Jean swallowed, her heart still trying to push its way up her throat. She closed her eyes and breathed a long breath through her nose. Fawkes' readjusted himself and settled on her thigh a wave of comforting heat washing over her. "I know about the Order of the Phoenix."

Kinshield moved towards her so quickly that Jean leaned back in her chair. "How do you know about the Order? How does anyone know that we haven't specifically told, Dumbledore?"

Kinshield ran a hand through his hair and Jean saw the frayed edges of his person that Kinshield kept hidden so well that Jean didn't know they existed until now. "We were so careful."

"I know about the Order because I'm a part of it," said Jean, "in the future alongside Kingsley Shaklebolt, Dedalus Diggle, Arabella Figg," Jean paused for a moment, "Alastor Moody, and Albus Dumbledore."

"I hadn't thought about Arabella," said Dumbledore lightly. "Magnus, remind me to send her an owl."

Kinshield didn't acknowledge that Dumbledore said anything. He squatted down in front of Jean, his hands resting on the arms of her chair. Jean saw a look of curiosity and marvel blended together on his countenance. "How did you get here?" he whispered.

"Almost exactly how I told you, Magnus," supplied Dumbledore. "Miss Granger was attacked by Death Eaters."

"Only," continued Jean, "when the Death Eater fired the curse that," Jean swallowed audibly, "that killed my friend, a part of it went inside me. I blacked out and when I came to I was here." Jean stopped speaking and she glanced down at her arm. She folded up her sleeve, exposing her arm and extended it to Kinshield. "A Death Eater did this to me before I was rescued."

Kinshield sucked in a breath, cradling her arm in his hands. Gingerly, he ran his finger over the lettering of the scar. Despite his gentleness, an uncomfortable pang pulsed through her arm and she grit her teeth. "Have you ever heard of this," Albus?" asked Kinshield, relinquishing Jean's arm.

Dumbledore shook his head. "Never," he answered, "and I know of no way to send her back." Jean shifted in her seat, Dumbledore's words still stinging her even though she had long accepted them. Jean crossed her arms and looked down at Fawkes, who was preening his wings.

Jean jolted when the dam broke behind Kinshield's mouth. "How much is the Ministry working with the Order? What are the names of the Death Eaters you know of?"

"Magnus," said Dumbledore stepping forward and placing a hand on Kinshield's shoulder. "No."

Kinshield spun around and stood in the same potion, pushing Dumbledore's hand off of him. "How can you say that?" he shouted, eyes wild. "We have the greatest tool we could ever ask for tossed into our laps."

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"And what if our enemies learned about that tool?" countered Dumbledore, his voice still calm and mellow. "What if Voldemort took her? Our greatest tool would turn into his greatest weapon. We need to keep Jean safe and to do that we need to keep her secret no matter how tempting what she knows may be."

Jean's eyes dilated, imagining being stolen away in the night and given over to Voldemort. She thought about all of the information hidden inside her head the Dark Lord had the skill and the will power to draw out and could be used to hurt her friends and help her foes: she knew who the members of the Order were, she knew about Voldemort's Horcruxes, she knew about the prophecy.
Jean drew her knees into her chest, Fawkes flying from her legs to the back of the chair. "You can't let them take me," she said, her eyes unseeing. "You can't."

Kinshield knelt down in front of her again, approaching her as if she were a frightened animal caught in a corner. "We won't," he coached, "we won't let them hurt you again, but you don't want to have anyone else go through what you did, do you?"

"No," said Jean, tears spilling over her eyes, seeing once again Dumbledore's broken and spread eagled in the courtyard below the Astronomy Tower, Remus holding Harry back, even in his own grief, as Harry fought to pursue his godfather through the Veil, and Ron's still form slumping over her shoulder, his arm still protectively draped across her abdomen.

"Magnus, stop," said Dumbledore, but Kinshield ignored him.

"Then how does Voldemort rise to power? What are his methods? Can you tell me, please?" Kinshield's eyes were hopeful and desperate.

"I can't," murmured Jean into her kneecaps.

"You can't or you won't," said Kinshield shortly.

"I can't!" Jean's voice broke into a sour noted screech as she yelled at her professor, more images passing through her vision from the too close future, of Lily and James lying dead, of Alice and Frank Longbottom being wheeled into their new home at St. Mungo's, of Sirius, laughing manically in a street full of dead bodies, being hauled off to Azkaban. Jean clapped her hands over her ears, almost rocking back and forth in her seat. "I don't know. I wasn't even born yet."

The uncomfortably long quiet in front of her drew Jean's head up. Kinshield was balanced on the balls of his feet and was completely still, a pallid color crawling into his skin. "You weren't even born?" he said, as if he was trying to decode the meaning of her words, "but you're eighteen. How...how..." His half sentences devolved into nothingness. "How many years from now did you come from?"

Jean slapped her hand over her mouth, realizing her unintentional error, afraid to say more due to how it could affect the people both in and outside the room. "I shouldn't say, professor," she spoke through her fingers, "I've already said too much. Please don't make me."

"Tell me," said Kinshield, his voice as rough and mis-pitched as Jean's was a moment ago. Dumbledore remained silent, blue eyes behind silver trimmed glasses closed, his hands steeped against his lips. "How many years from now did you come from?"

"Twenty," said Jean, letting is slide slowly from her mouth.

Kinshield fell off his feet and sat on the ground, staring at Jean. He pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes and braced his elbows on his thighs. "Twenty years," Kinshield repeated over and over again. "Twenty years." Jean lost track of how many minutes Kinshield stayed on the floor mumbling and drifting off into silence in turn. He stood smoothly, combing back the wild pieces of his hair and tucked in the tail of his shirt. "Our worst feats have been realized then," said Kinshield so coolly it was almost robotic. Kinshield moved towards the door. "Dumbledore," he said.

"Magnus," Dumbledore replied.

Kinshield's hand jittered on the handle. "We'll speak later."

"Of course." Jean suspected that Kinshield didn't want the conversation to end, but rather he
couldn't cope with anything else she could say.

Kinshield stepped halfway through the exit before he turned back. "Miss Granger."

"Yes, professor," said Jean.

"I expect you and your friends same time next week."

"Yes, sir," Jean answered. Kinshield lingered for a moment, his hand flexing over the brass before he firmly shut the door. With the click of the latch, Jean felt like she breathed a full breath of air for the first time in hours.

Dumbledore moved away from where he had been standing during the entire session, pulling out his wand and levitating the Sorting Hat back onto its shelf as he walked.

"You're not going to ask about what he said to me," Jean asked after her headmaster had settled himself into his desk chair.

"Professor Kinshield is entitled to his secrets the same as you and I." Dumbledore looked up, his eyes absent of their usual twinkle. "I hope this reaffirmed what I said about the dangers of telling the future both for what you may or may not know about the past. The future may be altered simply by speaking about it and it may change for the better, but most often for the worst, and the road to whatever end is a hard one, especially for those living it for the first time and I fear even harder for those living it a second."

"Yes, sir," said Jean.

Dumbledore smiled, the twinkle in his eyes returning light a bright star on a dark night. He opened a drawer in his desk and pulled out a roll of parchment. "Now what is Arabella's address," he said to himself.

Jean took her cue of dismissal. Fawkes glided from the chair to the top of Dumbledore's desk. "Professor," said Jean, pausing by the door. "I never gave you a reason to believe what I said, that day we first met. Why did you?"

"Fawkes seems to like you," said Dumbledore and for a moment Jean wondered if he had heard her. "I've always had a high regard for his judge of character."

Jean smiled softly and nodded. "Goodnight, professor."

"Goodnight, Miss Granger."

Jean closed the door behind her as Dumbledore reached out and ran his long, withered fingers through Fawkes' soft orange down nestled at the base of his throat. The phoenix let out another note, which followed Jean all the way back to Gryffindor Tower.
"Ten more minutes," said Professor Flitwick from atop his tower of textbooks above the heads of his students. Jean dipped her quill into her inkpot and continued to scratch through the tail end of her Charms N.E.W.T. The exam had earned the 'nastily exhausting' part of its acronym an hour ago and even Jean felt all the information in her brain squeezed out like a drying sponge. "What is the charm used to animate a Golden Snitch?" Jean tapped the feathered end of her quill on the corner of her mouth, "Viventibus Auro." Jean submerged her quill into her ink again and was more than mildly surprised to hear the shaft clink around in the almost empty jar. Jean propped the side on her head in her hand. "What's the charm used to render fabric invisible, such as with an Invisibility Cloak?" Jean's fingers drifted from her hairline to her eyebrows. "Caeca Fabricae." Jean pulled the parchment farther down and turned it over to discover there were no more questions on her exam. Jean let out a long sigh, letting her quill slip out of her fingers onto the desk. She flexed her knuckles using her opposite hand to massage the digits. Jean rolled her parchment up into a tight rod, glancing around the room as she did so. Lily was sitting closest to her, her fingers running up and down the spine of her quill. The two girls made eye contact and Lily shook her slightly, an exhausted but contented grin pulling at the corners of her mouth. She raked her fingers through her hair curling her crimson locks around the tips. James had pulled his glasses off and was tapping them idly on his completed test. Sirius sat directly behind him, his chair pushed onto its back two legs, drumming his hands on his thighs. Sirius noticed Jean looking at him and gave her a thumbs up. Jean returned it. Jean turned her head to observe the other side of the room. Remus had his head tilted onto the back of his chair, eyes crossed arms crossed. Jean suppressed a giggle at his pitiful display. Beyond Remus sat Peter. He was still hunched over his exam frantically scribbling. Even at a distance, Jean could see the black blot marks of ink coloring his hands. Jean widened her field of vision and noted with an uncomfortable squirm that circling Peter like prowling vultures was a ring of Slytherins, including Narcissa who was examining her fingernails looking bored and Severus sitting ramrod straight, his fingers laced together and attentive, as if he was expecting another exam to be given to him.

"Time," said Flitwick from his position above them, "roll up your parchments and set them on my desk. Thank you and good evening."

Jean stood amid the cacophony of crunching parchment and chairs being scraped across the stone floor. Jean filed into the line and dropped her parchment into the flimsy pyramid being built on Flitwick's desk. Jean, James, Lily and Sirius all converged and loitered in the corridor waiting for Remus and Peter to escape the crowded classroom.

"I'm glad Flitwick remembered what he learned when he proctored our O.W.L.s," chatted Sirius. "Remember when he summoned all our exams at the same time and it knocked him off his desk?"

James tossed his head back and laughed. "I had almost forgotten," he said, "He was like 'Accio' and bam, he was gone."

"The things you two commit to memory," said Lily, rolling her eyes, but Jean was chuckling, trying to imagine her professor's tiny frame being pushed off his desk by a paper powered rocket.

Remus reached out and clapped James on the shoulder, Peter tailing him. "Alright," said Remus still being jostled by students trying to escape behind him. "Let's get out of here before we're trampled." In a huddled unit, the six students moved down the congested corridor towards the Great Hall.
"I'm still mildly irritated that Slytherin gets the pitch tonight and we don't get anything," said James as the group stood on the edge of the landing, waiting for the staircase to swing back towards them, which it did a second later with a deep rumbling grind.

"I know," responded Sirius as they descended, "but the team discussed it and half of us have O.W.L.s or N.E.W.T.s to take."

"And is one more day of practice really going to make that much difference now?" added in Remus.

"I guess not," James conceded.

The six entered the Great Hall, which was pocketed with students surrounded by schoolbooks, frantically studying as they nibbled off their plates placed several inches from them. They found a space at the hectic Gryffindor table and began to squeeze in, each grasping for the plate in front of them. Lily didn't sit and held a golden dish in front of her by the tips of her fingers. "Calamine."

The plate morphed itself into a large wicker basket with a thick twisted handle. Interwoven between the straps of wood were hair like strands of gold. Inside the basket were folded up red gingham napkins.

"What are you doing, love?" asked James as Lily took a glass bottle of lemonade and gently tucked it in between the napkins.

"I need sunlight," she replied, scooping plates and goblets off the table and stacking them inside the basket. "Jean," Lily pointed across the table, "grab that chicken."

The Marauders, Lily and Jean stuffed an entire chicken, a loaf of bread, a salad bowl, two hunks of cheese, and a tray of apple tarts into the basket, which Jean was sure could magically expand before Lily toted it out onto the castle grounds. They settled under the familiar beech tree and ate while the sunlight skimmed the surface of the lake. "This was the best idea ever," said James, biting into his breast of chicken. Lily nodded mutely, sipping on her lemonade. Her head rolled onto James' neck, her hair falling in soft, relaxed curls down his front. Lily closed her eyes, running her fingers up and down the ligaments in James' hand. James tilted his head and pressed his lips into her hair. Jean smiled, placing a fork next to her finished portion of the salad, remembering how Harry liked leaning up against that tree whenever the trio gathered in this corner of the Hogwarts grounds. Jean leaned back and sprawled out on the ground, her fingers tangling in the delicate tendrils of new grass. Through her slanted vision, she spied that Remus had made a sandwich out of the pulled pieces of chicken and bits of the salad. He was rummaging through his backpack with Peter watching him as well, biting into the gooey cream filled center of his apple tart. Sirius was sitting beside her, sucking audibly on a chicken bone as if he was working his way towards the marrow. "Stop that," said Jean bending her arm and draping it over her eyes, "You're not a dog."

"Presently," said Sirius. He pinched the end of the bone and pitched it, sending in pinwheeling into the trees. Sirius twisted and leaned over Jean, his head eclipsing the sun and casting Jean in shadow. Sirius kissed her quickly, a smile cracking his face when Jean moved her elbow and looked out from underneath it.

"Whatcha doing?" asked Sirius.

"Nothing," said Jean, stretching her arms over her head.

Jean watched Sirius flop down beside her. She turned and propped her chin on her arm and stared out over the lake and the dark forest that hugged the edges. "You know there's a giant squid in
there," said Sirius, gesturing to the body of water.

"Really," said Jean, "that's neat." Another wave of nostalgia washed over her, recalling when she genuinely did hear of Hogwarts' giant squid for the first time and how she, Harry and Ron sprinted down the first chance they could and stared at the water, straining their eyes to see its silvery body.

"You know Lily once tried to feed me to it," said James grinning cheekily at Lily.

"I did not," said Lily, "I just threatened to, and I was fifteen at the time." James laughed through her protestations looping his arm around her waist and pulling her close to him.

"And fourteen and thirteen," Sirius added. James tossed a wadded up napkin at Sirius, which he easily dodged.

Jean rolled her eyes lightly, turning over. "Lily and I are going to have to exchange notes," she said, glancing at Sirius. Sirius smirked, leaning towards her. He dropped his hand on the nape of her neck, his fingers skimming over the line of her hair. "Sirius," said Jean when he pressed his brow into her forehead, "people are watching."

Sirius wasn't deterred. "Only a few people." He pecked her lightly on the nose but Jean pulled away with a small giggle when he attempted to drop down to her mouth. "What's the schedule for our other exams?" Jean asked, partially ignoring Sirius flopping on his back with a good-natured huff.

Remus pulled out his timetable, which he was using as a bookmark in his textbook. "We have our Transfiguration N.E.W.T on Monday, Potions two hours after that. We've already taken Charms. Herbology is on Tuesday and…" Remus' face morphed slightly and he unfolded his timetable even more, "and our Defense Against the Dark Arts N.E.W.T. is tomorrow."

James about fell over and Sirius shot up off the ground. "That can't be right, you must have written it down wrong," said James, his face betraying the false calm in his voice.

"Tomorrow's the quidditch final," said Sirius not even trying to hide his distress. "What time does it start?"

Remus' head whipped back to the parchment. "It says 'Time to be Determined'."

"I wonder what that means?" said Jean.

"Well, we can ask him," said Lily, who had rolled up her sleeve to look at her watch. "We're meeting with him in less than an hour. We can just head over there early."

The entire group stood up in mutual agreement, walking quickly across the grounds and the courtyard. The group ascended the main stairs in the Entrance Hall and began to veer to the left into the castle's interior labyrinth, but stopped short when James turned around. "Peter, where are you going?"

Jean followed James' eye line to Peter, halfway up another staircase heading in the opposite direction, already beginning to swing away from them. "I can't go," said Peter, lifting his foot and stepping backwards up the stairs.

"Why not," James continued to press, "this is the last one we can do."

Peter continued to shake his head and slowly moved away from them. "I still need help with Transfiguration," he said, "Professor McGonagall said she would help me."
James was about to call out to Peter again, but Jean put a hand on his arm. "Come on James," said Jean, both throwing Peter a bone, but also disappointed that Peter didn't talk about the true reason he was shirking meetings with Kinshield to his friends, "he doesn't want to go."

James glanced down at Jean then up at Peter, down and up again. "We'll help you with anything McGonagall doesn't get to alright Wormtail?"

Peter nodded, the act almost indiscernible due to the distance he was from them. "Alright."

James raised his hand in farewell and Peter turned and disappeared up the stairs. From his place beside James, Jean spied the hint of sorrow hidden behind his glasses. "Come on, James," said Jean gently, "let's go." James allowed himself to be pulled away from the staircase, already swinging slowly back towards them.

The group continued to quickly weave their way through the Hogwarts corridors, only quieter now. Jean was silently amazed Peter had kept to the decision he had originally told her, especially in front of Remus, Sirius and James. The truth of Peter's absence rolled around in her mouth like a sour piece of fruit. Her tongue twisted and writhed against it, trying to spit it out. Jean's lips pressed together into a tighter line.

"It's probably for the best," said Sirius, garnering a sharp look from Remus.

"That's a mean thing to say, Sirius," he said.

Sirius raised his hands defensively. "I'm just saying that he wasn't very good and I wouldn't blame him if he didn't want to do it anymore."

"He was getting better," said Lily, twisting her fingers. "I hope he doesn't think we don't want him here."

"All I'm saying is that he doesn't want to be an Auror," continued Sirius, "and what will get him to where he wants to go? Passing his N.E.W.T.s."

"Do we know?" asked James suddenly. "Do we know anything about what he wants to do? Or did we just assume he would be trailing behind us forever?"

"What are you on about, Prongs?" asked Sirius.

James shook his head. "Nothing." James came to an abrupt halt, an eyebrow rising above the rim of his glasses. "What is this?"

Jean looked up from James to Professor Kinshield's door. A roster, roughly the breadth of the entrance, was tacked to the door.

"We have time slots to take our N.E.W.T.?" said Lily. "What's he planning?"

"I don't know," said Sirius. "They go all day though. Look, the last time slot is ten minutes before the match."

"There's a few early in the day," said Lily, pointing at the upper left corner of the paper.

"Not enough for all of us," said Remus. "Sirius and James will have to go up there since they're in the match, but then there's only three more spots left."

The group was silent for a moment, the only sound being the scratching of Lily's quill on the
schedule. "We could always put Peter in a later time slot. I'm sure he wouldn't object to waking up later," said Sirius.

"No," said Jean, "put Peter up with you and James. I think he'll like you being there to support him. You two put your names up there too," she said indicating to Lily and Remus.

"What about you?" asked Lily.

"There's a spot here with Alice and the others. I'll go with them and then we'll head down the to the match together."

"You sure?" asked Sirius.

Jean nodded. "Yeah, Peter will like Remus being there and Lily can head on and save us all seats at the pitch.

Sirius was satisfied. "Okay." Jean smiled and ducked under Sirius' arm to scratch her name between Marlene McKinnion's and Alice Prewett's.

James pushed open the door and the group spilled into the classroom. Kinshield was sitting at his front desk, his legs propped up on his desk. He looked up from the thick file he was thumbing through. "You're early," he said, tossing his reading to the desk.

"We came to ask you about our N.E.W.T. and we saw the roster," answered Sirius. "How are we taking it?"

Something that Jean could only call a mischievous glint crackled inside his eyes. "That's my secret," he said.

"What are you reading?" asked Jean.

Kinshield's previous expression slipped off his face and shattered between them. "Also my secret." Jean shifted. While Kinshield hadn't been hostile since discovering Jean's secret he hadn't been particularly warm either. Over the past few weeks Jean was now more than sure she was being singled out for increasingly difficult tasks during their secret sessions, knowing that she could and would take it and also demanded that she rise to the occasion she had presented. Kinshield's austere countenance was short lived though, and it soon gave way to the exhaustion that Jean saw chipping to the surface more and more. He ran a hand over his face. "There's been another disappearance; an elderly witch and her muggle husband, Jason and Desdemona Culpepper."

Lily clapped her hands over her mouth. "Oh, no." she said through her fingers, "that's terrible. Why haven't we heard about it in the Daily Prophet?"

"The Ministry hasn't released it to the press. They don't want to cause a panic." Kinshield glanced down and rested his hand on the files, thumbing at the corner. Kinshield dropped the papers into his desk drawer. "But enough about that," he said, shutting the drawer. "Alastor Moody is doing what he can in London and I'm here with my team and training you." He paused glancing around the room. "Where is Mr. Pettigrew?"

Jean shifted on the balls of her feet, looking out of her peripheral vision at her friends behaving similarly. "He couldn't make it," said Remus at last.

Kinshield let out a long sigh, his hands fisting inside the pockets of his robes. Kinshield's eyes came to a rest on Jean's. She looked away, running a nervous hand through her hair. "No matter then," said Kinshield, removing his lingering gaze from the time traveler. "We will begin."
Kinshield drew out his wand and held it straight up in the air. "Catasta."

Jean actually had to cover her ears from all the unpleasant noise echoing around the room. Half the desks skidded across the room, their legs scraping over the stone floor with shrill screeches, slamming into the classroom's walls as they packed themselves as tightly as they could. The other half moved in the opposite direction, crashing together violently in the center of the room. But when they collided they were like droplets of water coming together as one. Jean pulled her hands away and watched the desks molding themselves into a raised, circular stage somewhat like the dueling platform that was erected during her second year.

"You'll be dueling each other today," said Kinshield, "and you'll be dueling one by one so I can watch you. You will also be limited to fighting in this space. If you fall out or get knocked out, you lose." Kinshield turned towards his students and clapped his hands together. "Who's first?"

James jumped up onto the dais and Sirius made a move to follow him but Kinshield held him back. "Someone you don't normally go up against."

Lily stepped around her professor and Sirius and leapt up onto the stage. James shifted and ran the hand holding his wand through his short, spiky hair. Lily rolled her eyes at his unspoken uncertainties. "Come on James, it will be fine." Lily raised her wand. "I'll try not to beat you too badly."

The corner of James' mouth lifted, but only slightly. He readjusted his grip on his wand. "Expelliarmus!"

"Portego!" Lily shouted, easily blocking the column of light coming towards her. Lily shot a counter spell at James. "Stupefy!"

James conjured up the same shield spell as Lily to protect himself, and the red beam bounced off the almost unseen half-sphere that surrounded him.

"Duel," said Kinshield sharply, "don't just dance around. Someone trying to attack you isn't going to hold back."

"Don't let me win on purpose, sweet heart," Lily coached encouragingly, lifting her wand at the same time, now emboldened by Kinshield's chastisement. "Micorepitus!" A pale white light came from Lily's wand, but before it connected with James exploded with the magnified sound of a shot gun and fanned out in front of James with the brilliance of a newly made sun.

"Better," said Kinshield, holding up a hand to shield his eyes.

Since James was on all fours he didn't feel much of the pulse. Lily was less lucky, tripping and tumbling over her unsteady feet, drunkenly backpedaling towards the edge of the stage. James jumped forward, reaching out and grasping Lily's wrist with his wand hand. As James towed her upright, Lily stared at she and James' hands for a second before she tightened her fingers, pressing
the hilt of James' wand into his wrist. When she was standing, Lily jerked James towards her, pulling his arm back and up against his spine, pinning it further with her torso. Lily wrapped her other arm around James' shoulder to even more immobilize him and pressed the tip of her wand into his lower jaw. "I told you not to let me win on purpose," she said sweetly, kissing him on the back of his neck.

James shrugged out of her grip. "Last time I try to be a gentlemen," he said, even as he spoke, helping Lily leap down from the raised dais.

"I even more hope that that's the last time you underestimate an opponent," said Kinshield, clapping James on the shoulder as he passed. "Next."

Sirius and Remus swung themselves up on the platform, pulling out their wands as they went. Right off the bat the two were far more aggressive then James or Lily ever were. "Reducto!" said Sirius so quickly that Remus didn't have time to lift his wand, forcing him to physically dodge the assault. The spell shot past the shell of his ear and exploded in a crimson blossom on the wall behind him.

"Rectushampra!" Remus returned, but because he was contorted to avoid Sirius' previous spell he shot wide and Sirius easily avoided it.

Sirius pressed his slight advantage and fired another spell before Remus' spell completely passed him. "Levicorpus!"

Remus' eyes widened as the charm wrapped around his ankle. With a grunt he was hoisted feet first into the air. Remus flailed around up-side-down trying to grasp his trapped leg. Out of the corner of his eye, Remus saw Sirius taking aim at him. Remus dug his fingers into the fabric of his pants and hauled himself into a jack-knife position, throwing his wand arm up to the unseen tether. "Interficorpus!"

"Relashio!" said Sirius simultaneously. Jean winced at the impact of Remus' back on the stage, successfully freeing himself in time for Sirius' spell to fly benignly overhead. With a huff, Remus rolled over, but only got to his hands and knees before Sirius moved against him again. "Veris Manicas!" The sleeves of Remus' robes pulled themselves over his hands and tied themselves together in a tight knot close to the small of Remus' back, creating a makeshift straightjacket. Remus struggled and pulled, but the bindings wouldn't give. Sirius laughed lightly, bending his arms behind his head and dropping into a relaxed stance. "Stop struggling Moony," he said tapping the tip of his wand on the crook of his elbow, "you know I beat you."

Remus looked up at Sirius and, to the latter's surprise, the werewolf winked at him. "Not just yet." Hidden within his sleeve, Remus turned his wand up to the black fibers. "Retexere!" Like a frayed piece of fabric being pulled till it was nothing put a pile of string, Remus' robes unraveled themselves from the point his wand touched them. The destruction rapidly worked its way down from the middle of his forearm to the knot at his hands and in seconds Remus was free.

But, Remus was not as fast as Sirius who simply had to pull his arms from behind his head. "Canere Malum Canes!" Sirius said as Remus was rising to his feet.

Remus dropped to his knees with such force the wood under him creaked. His head tucked into his chest, face screwed up in pain, his palms pushing so hard onto his ears it looked like his splayed fingers were delving into his skull.

"Clever," commented Kinshield, "he's using Remus' weaknesses against him."
"What's he doing?" asked Lily.

"He's creating a sound that hurts Mr. Lupin's ears."

"But I can't hear anything," said Lily.

"You can't," said Kinshield, "but a dog can, or a werewolf."

Remus let out a small cry. "Shouldn't you stop them?" asked James, eying his two friends nervously.

Kinshield shook his head. "No. This is how you two should have been sparring," he said gesturing towards James and Lily. "You need to learn how to take a little pain and more importantly you need to learn how to give it. Besides, Remus is still able to keep going."

"How do you know?" asked Jean, who had been silent during the entire exchange, watching the pair of canines hidden inside the two boys' bodies raise their hackles and puff their fur as they circled each other, snapping their jaws and swiping their paws as they battled for dominance. For a moment, Jean drifted back through her memories to the night when Hermione first met Sirius and Moony as well and how the two animals within them burst out of their human forms and fought as the full moon slithered between the branches of the Whomping Willow.

Kinshield looked down at Jean. "I've been at this since I was your age. I know what a body looks like when it's lost the will to fight."

Kinshield gestured back to the duel and Jean saw that Remus had raised his wand somewhat, his teeth clenched together as he said the spell. "Remittet!" The relief on Remus' face was palpable and the unexpected pain on Sirius' face was just as plain. Remus' spell had caused Sirius' spell to bounce back on him and now Sirius was doubled over in unbearable agony while Remus struggled to his feet. "Expelliarmus," panted Remus, Sirius' wand flying out of his slackened grip into his hand. With the super sonic screech broken, Sirius crumpled over gasping as if he had been kicked in the stomach. Remus pointed his wand down at Sirius. "Stupefy!" Miraculously, Sirius avoided the spell, more by almost falling over then actually dodging it. Remus took aim again. "Petrificus Totalus!" Sirius avoided this spell by doing something Jean thought even Professor Kinshield couldn't predict. Sirius lunged for Remus, grabbing him roughly by the lapels of his robes and roughly threw him to the ground, both wands almost rolling off the platform, practically forgotten. As they wrestled, Jean was reminded of a dogfight.

It was over as quickly as it began. Sirius had pinned Remus' wiry body under his, sweat sliding off both their foreheads. "Now," said Sirius, breathing heavily, still hovering over his friend, "I've beaten you."

Remus lightly smacked the side of Sirius' head. "Alright, you animal. Get off me," he said, any tension that occurred between them completely dissipating.

"Well done," said Kinshield as Remus slid from the stage. "Well done to both of you."

Sirius stayed up on the platform giving Jean one of the looks that used to and still continues to fascinate her. "Come on Jean," he said, extending his hand, "while I'm still warmed up."

Jean rolled her eyes at his cockiness and reached for his hand until Kinshield stopped her. "Not this time Mr. Black," said Kinshield, lifting himself up onto the dueling circle.

Jean tilted her head, curious. "You?"
Kinshield didn't answer her query but rather turned and walked towards the middle of the small stage. "Hurry up Miss Granger, we only have so much time."

Jean was somewhat hesitant, considering her recent history with her professor. She exchanged looks with Sirius, who shrugged his shoulders, seemingly unbothered by the turn of the events. "He'll be a better challenge for you than me," said Sirius, slipping down to the floor.

"You're too modest," said Jean, simultaneously taking his place.

"Really," said Sirius spinning on his heel and leaning against the edging. "That good?"

Jean saw the wicked glint in his eye and caught Sirius' double meaning. She let out an exasperated sound, leaning out over him. "I'm going to deflate your head when I get down," she said.

"I'm looking forward to it," said Sirius, kissing the air centimeters in front of Jean's lips. Jean swept a piece of Sirius' hair into his face before she stood and faced her professor.

"Are you ready?" said Kinshield, falling into a stance. His face was set, devoid of emotion. Jean recalled this face when he stepped out of the fireplace in Dumbledore's office, firing spells at her. For a moment, Jean wondered if he was continuing where he had left off.

Jean steadied herself, pushing her flurry of thoughts into the back corner of her brain. "Ready,"

"Don't hold back," said Kinshield.

Jean quickly fired her first spell. "Locomotor Mortis!"

Kinshield avoided the attack swiftly and easily, stepping to the side as it rushed past. Jean was not deterred. "Reducto!" Jean shouted, turning to track his movements. Jean was more successful this time, making Kinshield raise his wand.

"Portego!" said Kinshield, the beam hitting his almost invisible shield. The rosy light didn't absorb into the shield's energy and disappear; instead it hung in the air, suspended like a slowly expanding glob. "Ignisphae!" Like a flammable liquid, the crimson splatter set fire and tightened into a sphere the size of Kinshield's open palm. Jean's eyes widened, as Kinshield arched his arm back, the tongues of flame licking around his fingers. Jean's mind blanked on magic and she dropped down to the floor as the ball of fire sailed over her head, her hands slamming against the wooden desks that made up the raised stage. The corner of Kinshield's lip turned up and Jean realized that she had done exactly what he wanted her to do. Kinshield lowered his wand and pointed it not at her but at the space of the stage between them. "Gyrari!" Jean violently fell over to her side, the force almost dislodging her wand as the stage began to rotate like a merry-go-round, except so fast the centrifugal force was practically pinning Jean to the stage. Jean peeled her eyes open and through the rush of the spinning room watched Kinshield, somehow standing upright, patiently waiting for the fight to leave her.

Using Kinshield as a model, she modified her tactics for the duel. With some difficulty, she reached out and grabbed the edge of the stage. Closing her eyes against the oncoming dizziness she pointed her wand in the opposite direction. "Dien Inclina!"

Jean heard the soft groan of the stage and a sound of surprise coming from Kinshield. Jean opened her eyes and readjusted her grip on the stage, now tilted in a steep downward slide with Kinshield hanging below her, his feet dangling off the edge of the stage. The only thing keeping him attached were his fingers tightly wedged in a gap between two of the desks. Kinshield glanced up at Jean.

"You can give me more."
Irritated more than emboldened, Jean aimed her wand straight at his face. "Augementi Maxima!" A stream of water with the force of a fire hose erupted from her wand and connected with the lower corner of Kinshield's jaw. With her hand still latched to the rim of the slanted stage, Jean leaned forward, trying to summon up more force to physically push Kinshield down the slope.

Kinshield turned his mouth away from the column of water, gasping for air. Half blind, he adjusted his slippery grip and twisted his wand towards the liquid. "Repellunt Crystallum!" Kinshield bounced back the spell, similarly to how Remus repelled the super sonic sounds back to Sirius except that instead of water the droplets elongated into sharp shards of ice roughly the length of Jean's fingers.

Jean yelped, unconsciously pulling herself up and away from the incoming attack. She wildly moved her wand to protect herself. "Corporclausus!" The magical shield, which was so powerful it could even protect her from physical objects, bent and folded like a sheet of translucent plastic as the tiny spears exploded against it in frozen fireworks of frost. Jean's struggle to move away from the onslaught broke the spell that tilted the stage and it slammed back into its original position. Jean ended up flat on her back, her head lolling over to the side of the dais.

Kinshield was now standing, his robes dripping, his blond hair plastered to the side of his head. His breath was coming out in heavy huffs. "Scleus Oppugno!" Instead of a flock of tiny blue robins a murder of large crows, their black feathers glistening in shades of purple and blue against the firelight, burst from Kinshield's wand and circled above his head, diving toward Jean in a tightly knit blitz.

Jean assumed that since the birds were so packed they would be hitting at the same time and, combined with their size and strength, they would break through even the strongest of shields. Her eyes swiveled around the room, trying to think of a way to defend against them. An idea hit her and she aimed her wand not at the birds, nor at her professor, nor at anything connected to the stage. "Accio!" Several thick, heavy books shot from the shelves behind Kinshield's desk, their river bottom brown and forest floor greens, reds, and oranges rocketing forward in front of Jean. It was more the tomes that hit the crows rather than the other way around and the birds dissolved on impact in a puff of smoke and black feathers. Jean twisted her wand around, her arm shaking from exhaustion and adrenaline. "Vineas!" The books restacked themselves in the air like a battering ram and plowed towards Kinshield's chest, gaining speed as Jean picked herself up off the ground.

Kinshield was unphased. "Fugerunt!" A navy blue light pushed itself out of Kinshield's wand, expanding in width, twisting and tearing itself apart, the spinning frayed fragments looking like a giant, serrated drill. When the light made contact with the pillar of texts it tore through the pages like a giant paper shredder, tossing the ruined remains up and out into the air till Jean, Kinshield and everyone in the room was standing in a snowstorm of black, block print. A sigh of exasperation tore from Jean's lips, the spent muscles in her arm dropping her wand to her side. With the back of her hand, she wiped the streams of sweat dripping into her eyes, briefly wondering if there was any conceivable way to beat him.

Jean hauled her wand arm up, attempting to draw all the pieces of paper to her and hurl them into his face, but Kinshield seemed to have been waiting for Jean to be in this state and before she could even get the spell out he attacked with the speed and veracity of a machine gun. "Brachiam Torpor!" A warm, tingling, numbness akin to a limb falling asleep raced up her arm. "Teneremagne!" Jean's knees crashed to the ground and stuck to the floor as if magnetic plates were embedded in her knees and the stage. "Silencio!" Jean didn't even have to open her mouth to feel her voice being stolen from her. "Stupefy!" Jean crumpled over in a heap.

There was an uncommon quiet that carpeted the room and Kinshield seemed to move almost in
slow motion, lifting one spell off Jean after another. Jean didn't move even after the ability was restored to her staring up at her professor all still and austere in a halo of light expanding off his blond hair, the unspoken secret hanging between their mouths. She felt his anger prickling off of him and piercing her like thorns, his desperation and disappointment stinging her cheeks like a breath of frost, his fear that clenched at his own heart reaching out and wrapping around her throat, demanding more answers but at the same time keeping her silent. "I don't understand," she whispered.

Kinshield knelt down and, even after, Jean would swear that she was the only one that heard him speak. "You're a good fighter," he said, the condensation of his breath collecting in the crevices of her ear, "but there is always someone better than you." Time returned to normal speed. Kinshield stood and Jean pulled herself up off the stage. "Mr. Lupin," he called out, "Miss Evans, you're up."

Magnus Kinshield dueled every one of his students and none lasted as long as Jean before he sent the five, flustered and exhausted, back to their dormitories. Jean wondered if Kinshield shared similar words with her other friends as he had with her but they were just as silent as she as they walked. They dissipated on arrival, Sirius slumping into one of the red wing backed chairs, James and Remus doing similarly on the love seat. Lily waved a silent good-bye to everyone and gave James a lingering kiss nestled in his hair before she drifted off down the corridors to her own bed. James followed soon after, looking like he'd rather fall asleep on the closer, easily accessible sofa. Jean retired to her own room as well, but didn't sleep. She settled down into the folds of her mattress, stacking the pillows to assuage her aching back. Her Defense Against the Dark Arts textbooks and essay assignments were scattered over the crimson coverlet. She ran her hand over her tired eyes, thumbing through the beige pages, not really reading. Her mind mulled over Kinshield's last lesson wondering if he was proving a point or if he was venting his frustration on Jean about the future she had prophesized. Perhaps it was a little bit of both, responding to the inevitability at hand, rapidly approaching like an unseen train, and passing on knowledge to arm themselves against it.

Jean adjusted her wand, which was balanced on the bedside table, the tip jutting through the closed curtains. The soft light emanating from it cast maroon silhouettes of her sleeping roommates. Jean scissored her fingers and glanced through the fabric at her watch, the spindly silver hands forming a scowl on its face. Jean slumped her head back into her pillows, her eyelashes fluttering shut, unconsciously allowing her breath to slow.

Jean jolted awake at the sharp movement of her mattress being pressed down upon, her books and parchment rolling towards the dip in elevation in a flurry of crinkles and crackles. Padfoot pushed away Jean's quill with his wide, padded paws before looking up at Jean. He cocked his head to the side, his ears drooping at the tips, mouth open with his tongue lolling out it side, his tail swishing back and forth so much it thumped the curtains. "Sirius," said Jean, quickly checking her voice, her eyes swiveling to the still shadows of the other girls in the room. "What are you doing here?" she whispered. "It's almost one in the morning. How…How did you even get up here?"

The black dog returned to the form of a man sitting cross-legged amidst Jean's school work, his silken night shirt partially unbuttoned, his tousled hair sloping in a gentle arc over his face. He gave he a wolfish grin. "Padfoot's always been able to get up to the girls dormitory."

Jean spluttered. "You've done this before?"

Sirius tossed his hair out of his eyes, unfolding his lanky legs. "Your boyfriend surprises you in bed and that's what your clinging to?" he said, still grinning as if he was pleased with her flabbergasted reaction.
"You should be asleep," answered Jean, "we both have a N.E.W.T. in the morning and you have a quidditch match and—" Sirius closed her mouth with his own, his tongue running over the edge of her teeth.

"So should you," said Sirius his chin touching the bottom curve of her lip, "and how can I go to sleep if you didn't kiss me goodnight?" His breath smelled like crushed mint blended with the neutral smell of soap coming off his skin.

Jean shook her head, a grin splitting her own face. She reached up drawing a stray strand of hair away from his forehead. Curling her fingers into the shower damp tresses she pulled his face down. "Only for a minute," she conceded sinking back into the cotton and goose feathers, she under the thin crisp sheets and he on top.

They broke apart slightly when Sirius' thigh pushed one of Jean's books onto the floor the resulting sound bouncing around the room like a rubber ball. "You're going to wake everyone up," said Jean, peaking through the gap in her curtains. Dorcas' shadow shifted in her sleep and stilled.

"You'd like that wouldn't you," Sirius' hot breath rushing to Jean's eardrum.

"Sirius Black," said Jean, swatting Sirius when he laughed at her again, "don't even think about it."

"You're right," Sirius conceded, "I can't. You kick up such a fuss whenever I kiss you in front of people I can't even think of what you'd do if someone found us like this." Sirius fell to Jean's side; half of his face enveloped by the pillow and looped his arms around Jean's pelvis, pulling her close. He planted a wet, sloppy kiss on Jean's lips, pulling away with an audible smack.

The couple laughed as they resettled, Sirius' arm, bent at the elbow to brace the side of his head, sinking into the pillow his other arm running lazy strokes up and down Jean's arm. Jean curled herself close to his chest playing with the ivory buttons on Sirius' nightshirt. "Why does it bother you so much on who sees us?" he asked, his fingers slowly weaving their way through the freckles on her skin. "You afraid my legions of ex-girlfriends are going to come for you in the night?" Even though Jean wasn't looking at him, she could hear the cheeky grin in his voice.

"It's not that," she said. Jean folded back a portion of his shirt, her nails running over the tight midnight coils of chest hair. "Back when I was in fourth year," she began, "there was this boy who was interested in me. He was…tall and charming and athletic…"

Sirius pushed Jean's chin up with his thumb. "You're blushing," Sirius said, a dimple forming in his chin.

Jean felt her cheeks heating more than they already were. "He was very much the school heartthrob and he asked me to a dance and it was wonderful and he was wonderful and," she checked her gushing, the flush expanding down her neck, "and I was…flattered that he asked me and I would be lying if I said I didn't enjoy the attention: plain, bookish Jean Granger being swirled around on a dance floor by the dashing chiseled chin quidditch star wanted by every girl in school.

"A little more than flattered I think," said Sirius tracing the crimson coloring down into the dip in her throat, "should I be jealous of this…What did you say? 'Chisel chinned quidditch star'?" His finger lingered in her suprasternal notch.

"No," said Jean looking up at him, eyes going wide, "no it was nothing like that. It," Jean cleared her throat, "the enjoyment faded quickly. There was a lot of nasty talk about," Jean trailed off, not able to say that an illegal animagi reporter created a false love triangle between the Bulgarian seeker that was not even born yet and Sirius' godson from the future in order to discredit her,
"about him dating me because I was helping him pass his classes and I was simply enjoying the attention. It ruined everything and when he graduated we wrote to each to each other every so often, but it was never the same." Jean quieted. "And then there was my friend, the one that…" Jean swallowed, her eyelids beating rapidly, "I always…but I never told him…and then he…"

Sirius hushed her, pulling her so close the tip of his chin rested on the crown of her head. "It's alright," he said quietly, his hands tangling in her curls, "I understand why you'd want to keep relationships close to the chest."

He pulled away slightly and Jean looked up, the whites of her eyes glossed over with a pale shade of pink. "Only when you're ready."

"Thank you," said Jean, readjusting her head so it rested on his shoulder, soothed by the sensation of Sirius' hand running through her hair. Every so often she felt the chill of Sirius' ring skimming over the nape of her neck. "Did Peter ever make it back?"

Sirius nodded. "Just a few minutes ago, but he went straight to bed." Sirius pulled his head back slightly to look down at Jean. "You mad at me about what I said about him? I think James still is."

Jean circled the onyx jewel in Sirius' bulky silver ring with the edge of her nail. "I think you might be more correct than you think." Sirius nodded slowly, not really looking at Jean. He rested his chin on her head. Jean shifted, feeling the mattress creak underneath her. She ran her fingers in the fold of Sirius' silken collar. "I think James is more upset about Peter possibly sacrificing things about himself in order to stay included. It's possible James never noticed it, until today. But," Jean paused as Sirius brushed a curl out of her face. "But, I think you might be right about Peter. He knows he's not good at dueling and spell casting and a lot of other stuff Professor Kinshield has been teaching us and I think he's tired of just playing catch up."

Sirius turned his head and stared up at the crimson canopy, his thumb settled in the slope of Jean's collarbone. Jean had never noticed how long Sirius' eyelashes were, like dark spider webs curling outwards up towards his brow. "I don't want him to."

"Sirius, don't say that."

"No, I mean it," said Sirius once again turning his head towards her. Jean saw that he really was serious for the light had left his eyes, leaving them stony. "I don't want to rely on him to watch my back. I don't want to rely on him to watch yours," he added softly.

"Sirius," said Jean, "you know I'm very capable of taking care of myself."

"I know that," said Sirius, "but you've seen so much and have been hurt so much. I don't want you to ever have to go through something like that again. Not if I can help it."

Jean snuggled closer to Sirius' chest, feeling the rippling of her nightshirt when his hands drew themselves around her back. "Well then I won't have to worry about Peter regardless, cause I know you'll always have my back."

Sirius wrapped his forefinger around one of Jean's curls, stretched it, and let it spring back. "Always," he said, leaning forward into Jean's lips.

It was deeper than the kiss before. With increasing strength, their jaws rolled along with their lips. Jean hummed, the sound vibrating in Sirius' mouth, prompting him to adjust the angle of his head. Jean reached up and pressed her fingers into his scalp, marveling once again how smooth his hair was. Sirius let out a breathy moan through the side of his mouth, his arms tightening into a firm,
comforting cage. Jean's fingers drifted down the nape of his neck, running over the ridges of his spine. Jean's eyes snapped open when her fingers brushed over warm skin and not the cool silken threads of Sirius' nightshirt. There was a pregnant pause, broken up by arrhythmic breathing. Cautiously, Sirius reached backwards, his fingers drifting over the hem of his shirt, bumping against Jean's digits. He waited until Jean's fingers curled and tugged upwards slightly.

Sirius finished the motion, removing his shirt in one fluid stroke, crumpling it in the indentation of the pillow. He bent his elbow to prop his head up, his muscular torso spread out before Jean. Jean felt his eyes follow her hand as it reached out and ran over the swell of his pectorals, dropping down to the dusky nipple. It pebbled under her hand. Sirius' released a sharp exhalation of breath before his head lolled into his palm. "Your fingers are so soft," he whispered, almost not moving his plumped lips at all.

Jean let her hand wander up his chest, up his neck, and ran her nails over his raven stubble. She cupped her hand behind his ear and drew him close again, nipping him on the lower lip when she pressed her mouth to his.

"Jean," Sirius murmured into her flushed skin, his mouth falling from her lips to the curve of her jaw, falling farther to the pale soft expanse of her neck. "My Jean." Sirius settled in the space between Jean's shoulder and chest, lightly kissing and sucking, the bridge of his nose resting on her sternum. Jean linked her arms around Sirius' back. It was like holding onto an electric blanket. Jean yawned lulled by Sirius' hands slowly skimming up and down her back. "I could stay here tonight if you want," whispered Sirius into the crown of Jean's head, which was pillowed in his chest.

Jean idly drummed her fingers on Sirius' skin. "It would look bad," she said, "if anyone saw us."

"We could go back to my dormitory where no one would care," Sirius offered.

Jean lifted her head to look at Sirius, smiling sweetly. "No." Jean resettled herself, listening to Sirius' deep chuckle echo through his ribs, "but you can stay a while longer."

Sirius hands resumed their movements like a dragonfly on a still pond. "As long as you want me." His eyes sparkled like clusters of stars.

Jean wasn't sure when she drifted off, but through the mists of semi-sleep she felt Sirius move out from underneath her and chastely kiss her on the forehead before he slipped from the bed. Jean's arm fell out with him and the tips of her fingers petted Padfoot from between his ears to the tuffs of his tail.

Jean woke up with Sirius' shirt wadded in a messy ball under her head, the only proof of Sirius' nighttime comings and goings, now hazy like a half forgotten dream. Jean stretched, stuffing Sirius' shirt into her pillowcase as she stuck her head out of the crimson bed curtains. "Hey," she said.

"Hey," Marlene chimed back from her vanity mirror, one eye's lashes extended and sculpted in mascara, the other plain and waiting.

Alice stepped out of the bathroom, a red towel wrapped around her head. "Well, hello there, sleepy head," she said. "We were beginning to wonder if we'd have to wake you."

"What time is it?" said Jean, shaking the grogginess off.

"Around nine thirty," answered Mary, who was flopped on her bed, fully dressed, spinning her shoe around on the end of her toe. "We were thinking about grabbing a quick bite to eat before our
Defense Against the Dark Arts N.E.W.T. if you'd like to join us."

Jean nodded, pushing herself out of bed. "Yeah, I'd love to. I signed up near your time slots last night."

"Well that worked out wonderfully," said Dorcas with a laugh. The women got dressed, Jean choosing an outfit that would also be suitable for the quidditch final that afternoon, and exited the Gryffindor Tower in one gaggling unit.

"So," said Dorcas, readjusting her feet to accommodate the staircase that shifted under their feet. "Are you going to the match, Jean?"

"Wouldn't miss it," answered Jean. She paused, noting how Dorcas had pressed her lips together into a thin line. "Is that all you wanted to ask me?"

"Well," continued Dorcas, "the girls and I were wondering…" she drifted off.

Mary picked up Dorcas' dropped sentence. "Are you and Sirius…you know?"

Jean lifted her eyebrow, for one wild moment wondering if her roommates knew that Sirius had secreted him himself upstairs, before she caught their actual meaning in their barely concealed grins. "Yeah," she answered, "Yeah, we're dating."

"Oh, I knew it. I knew it," said Marlene, practically bouncing up and down the now stationary stairway. "Alice, didn't I tell you I knew it?"

Alice had turned to Jean, a dimple settled in each of her rosy cheeks. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"Oh you know," said Jean, shrugging, "I didn't want to make a circus out of it, what with me being the new girl and Sirius being…well Sirius."

Alice rolled her eyes, chuckling as Mary slid up beside Jean. "Sirius is practically out the door. The girls of Hogwarts have either settled with someone or have their eyes turned elsewhere," Mary's voice dropped lower, "like that Barty Crouch boy. I mean, I know he's a Slytherin, but the fifth years lucked up with that one."

Alice scrunched her face up. "He's too skinny," she said, "and he has so many sharp angles in his face."

"Well, some of us don't have a boyfriend that's wrapped around their finger," said Marlene, "some of us are still looking and I for one am not going to let something like age or prominent cheekbones hinder me."

"I'm actually older than Sirius," said Jean, determined to change the subject from Barty Crouch Jr.

"Are you really?" said Dorcas, "that must ruffle his feathers."

Jean pinched her fingers together and pulled them apart a fraction of an inch. "Just a bit."

The girls' laughter died down when they reached the entryway to the Great Hall. "What's this?" asked Alice, effectively voicing the thoughts of her friends. The doors to the Great Hall were shut and there was a small line of students curling out from two ministry officials flanking the closed room.
"I'm sorry, ladies," said one of the ministry officials, holding up his hand to stop them. "The Great Hall is closed for the Defense Against the Dark Arts N.E.W.T."

"Meals are being provided outside in the courtyard," added the second man.

"Thanks," said Alice and the group turned around, heading for the Entrance Hall.

Outside was as beautiful as mid May could be. There was not a cloud in the sky, leaving a vast, unending expanse of azure. The sun was hot and comforting on Jean's skin and the air smelled fresh and pollen laden. In the distance the Whomping Willow was flowering small clusters of almond shaped petals blowing gently on the ends of its branches. The courtyard was set up like an elaborate garden party. A long white table draped in an equally white table cloth was pushed up against the fountain, which tossed droplets of water into the air to catch the sunlight before dropping into the shimmering pool. It was filled with large silver platters piled with finger sandwiches, orderly lines of cubed fruits and deep dishes of thick, creamy potato salad and multicolored punches self stirred by crystal ladles. At the end of the table was a large floating teapot filling the china cups set on dainty little saucers. Dotting the cobbledstoned plaza also covered in crisp white tablecloths were round tables surrounded by five to six off grey iron chairs, their backs twisted into elegant flowery knots. Topping the tables were porcelain vases filled with daisies and trumpet daffodils. The girls settled into their seats, Jean pinching her salami sandwiches between her fingers next to Dorcas who was stirring her potato salad. On either side of Marlene, Alice and Mary prepared their tea, the light, wispy steam winding its way between their fingers. But Marlene herself hadn't touched her meal. She sat back in her chair, hands folded in her lap. She cocked her head sideways and grinned cheekily at Jean.

"What?" asked Jean, between bites into her sandwich.

"I just knew it," said Marlene as if it were her doings personally that resulted in Jean and Sirius being together. "You want to know why?"

"Alright," said Jean, playing along. "Why?"

"Because of the way he looks at you," answered Marlene. "I mean, have you seen the way he looks at you?"

"I've been told," said Jean, recalling Lily's words on the subject several months back.

"Usually, it's the other way around," said Marlene, spooning sugar into her tea, "girls rubbernecking with their doe eyes. With you it's different. Sirius is the one that's been looking and he's not the one to do that. He didn't do it with me or Christina Coolidge or Jaqueline Rollyns and especially not Matilda Maybelle."

"Oh, well, that's a relief," said Jean with a laugh before the sound caught in her throat. "Wait," she said, "you and Sirius…"

"Oh yeah," said Marlene. "Years ago. We were each other's first—boyfriend and girlfriend I mean." Marlene smiled into her cup nostalgically. "I adored him when I was thirteen; absolutely over the moon in love with him. But, don't expect for Sirius Black to say 'I love you' first if you're waiting for it," said Marlene, pointing her tea spoon at Jean, "because he never will, not unless he really means it."

The minutes whittled away until the girls pushed themselves up from the table and reentered the castle. The last person in the short line went inside the Great Hall as they approached and formed and queue behind the closed doors and ministry officials. "I wonder why we have time slots and
yet Professor Kinshield still needs the entire Great Hall commented Mary, "I wonder what he's planning."

"Maybe we have to duel each other for the grade," offered up Dorcas. Alice shook her head slowly. "But then why not just use the classroom then?"

"Maybe we have to duel Professor Kinshield himself or maybe we have to fight some enormous creature or maybe—"

"Marlene McKinnon," said the ministry official, cutting off Dorcas mid-tangent. Marlene let out a long breath and brushed her blonde ringlets back over the shoulder. "Wish me luck," she said, stepping forward.

"Good luck," the girls chirped, watching Marlene slip through the sliver in the door before they closed with an ominous thud.

Alice Prewitt, Dorcas Meadows, and Mary Harper were all summoned into the mystery within the Great Hall, leaving Jean alone outside, idly scuffing her shoe on the floor, humming random spatterings of notes and watching the figures in the portraits lean lazily against their frames. "Jean Granger," the ministry official read from his list. Jean moved forward and, as before, the door was opened to the smallest allowable gap for her to squeeze through, the door being shut soundly behind her.

If Jean had been blindfolded and lead to this location she would not have been able to say that she was in the Great Hall. Towering above her, spearheading through the stormy clouds on the enchanted ceiling was a seemingly impenetrable thicket of trees, wide and imposing, topped with dark green conifer needles. The only way around was through, via a spindly path quickly disappearing into the darkness. Jean heard a crinkling sound by her ear and turned her head. A levitating letter unfolded itself and spoke through shriveled lips made from emerald wax that created the seal. "Student," said Professor Kinshield's voice, "you are tasked with moving from one side of the room to the other as quickly and as efficiently as possible, overcoming the obstacles within. There are trained witches and wizards standing at each impasse should you become endangered and or incapable of completing the task. Good luck." The letter folded itself and floated away.

Jean twisted the handle of her wand and pulled it from her pants pocket. "Well, Professor Lupin," she muttered to herself, "now I know what inspired your final in my third year."

Beyond the tree line the air was close and the scenery was dyed in shadows. Almost immediately, the single path splintered into the many threadlike passages through the woods, creating a labyrinth before her. "Point me," Jean said, holding her wand on her flattened palm. Like a compass, Jean's wand spun slowly over her skin until it settled on the direction she needed to go, down the less obvious track jutting out towards the left. Contrary to reality, the pathway seemed to have been there for a hundred years and unattended for the same amount of time. Thick, gnarled roots forced their way between the flagstones and low hanging branches robed in sickly grey leaves were level with Jean's eyes. Jean treaded carefully, avoiding touch with the foliage whenever possible, always aware of what could be unseen around her.

Just when Jean was thinking she was going through and empty maze or she was so far off course none of the obstacles were anywhere near her, an indigo flame burned though the fog around her. The flicker was so far from Jean it was the size of a dime but it had the brilliance and precision of a laser pointer. It bobbed and jigged like an angler in murky water. Jean stepped forward, thinking it
was one of the unseen observers the letter had mentioned guiding her back. The light bounced away keeping its same distance, but it jerked and weaved more now, like she was doing what the bearer of the light wanted. Jean moved a few more feet towards the disembodied flame and it kept its same distance, insistently drawing her down a divergent on her chosen road. "Wait," said Jean aloud, stopping at he fork. She squinted at the dancing light, twisting and turning in its own acrobat show. "I know this." Jean wrapped her fingers firmly around her wand. "Lumos Maxima!" The blazing cylinder of white light encompassed the dot of color and seared the mists like morning sunlight. The thin clouds evaporated, leaving only the silvery wisp that was the before hidden hinkypunk, now slowing the swings of its lantern. "Stupefy!" The hinkypunk shivered and plummeted to the ground, its lantern accelerating its fall. The hinkypunk disappeared into the soft earth with a puff of steamy smoke, leaving its spindly lantern, lopsided, still pulsing its enchanted light. Jean pushed the lantern into the overgrown flora with her toe and continued inching her way through the magical forest.

Jean ran into two more hinkypunks on her slow traverse through the trees and thought for one wild moment as she smacked the back of her neck to ward off the bites a flying insect that the hinkypunks had been successful in steering her off course. Jean's feet tumbled over themselves in what felt like the downward slope of a hill. The ground grew damp around the soles of her shoes, pooling water up through the muck at every footfall. Jean felt the bite of another insect and she swatted vehemently at her shoulder. She let out an exasperated huff, spinning around in a small circle. "Point me," Jean said to her wand. "But, I've already been that way, I think," said Jean when her wand settled on a direction. Jean fisted her hair, jerking her head to the side when another unseen insect nipped at her ear. "Oh this is hopeless." What would Professor Kinshield think of her, Jean Granger, time traveler, member of the Order of the Phoenix, defender against Lord Voldemort and she couldn't get though a wet patch of woods. What would Sirius think? What would Dumbledore think? What would Harry think? Harry Potter could get through this, Jean thought, plopping herself down on the ground. He'd fought against a basilisk, a swarm of dementors, even the Dark Lord himself. He could get though a walk in the woods, unlike Jean Granger, poor, pathetic, muggle born witch that she was. Jean was almost ready to throw up her wand and have someone come and collect her.

"Bloody bugs," Jean gritted though her teeth, slamming her hand down onto her forearm. Jean felt a satisfying crunch and peeled her hand away. Jean narrowed her eyes and examined the insect, pulling its furry, charcoal grey body from her skin by its broken wings. "A glumbumble," Jean's eyes widened, "of course." Jean tossed the dead insect into the dark leafed foliage and turned her wand on herself. "Alacritas." The magical melancholy caused from the glumbumbles' bites dissipated and Jean breathed new air deep into her lungs. "Much better," said Jean, picking herself up off the moistened ground. "Now," she said, looking down at her wand, "what direction do I go?"

Jean was very careful to cast a Cheering Charm on herself whenever she felt the sharp bite of a glumbumble and had yet another encounter with a hinkypunk as she descended the hill, until at last the dark, misty forest gave way and she spilled out onto a grassy clearing. "Oh, thank Merlin," said Jean, relieved that she was out of the habitat of both the glumbumbles and the hinkypunks. The path had disappeared at the edge of the glade so Jean sloshed though the long grass, water still squirting up from the ground where she stepped. Jean put her foot down and it kept going and going. Jean had just enough time to throw her hands up before she slammed into the ground. Groaning and with grass slicked to her cheek, Jean looked back at the hole her foot had disappeared into. Silently grateful she didn't break her ankle, Jean flipped over onto her back and tried to pull her foot out of the hole, but it wouldn't budge. Jean pulled again, but something was holding her firmly. Jean could feel whatever it was wrapped around her ankle. It readjusted its grip. A wave of adrenaline coursed through her and Jean wrenched her foot up along with its captor in a hail of
pebbles and sod. Dangling off her foot was a gangly, emaciated thing that looked like a larger, stretched out version of a house elf. Its skin was a tarnishing copper color that hung off its arms in floppy, lazy sags. Its clothes looked like they had been bleached in sewer water. The only color on the creature's person was a scarlet swatch of leather fashioned like a 1950's football helmet. The red cap snarled at her, its under bite catching on its thin lips. It dropped to the ground with a plop and took in both hands a cream colored femur, a human femur. Jean yelped and back-pedaled away from her assailant as it, almost drunkenly, loped towards her. She kicked out with her feet to keep it at bay. The red cap swung its makeshift club and grazed the side of Jean's shin, but even that left the first markings of a bruise.

Jean continued to scramble from the red cap until she felt the hand that held her wand go down another hole hidden in the grass. Immediately, she felt a second red cap latch to her wrist, trapping her twisted wand in her palm. Jean had an easier time pulling this red cap from its burrow, but it was harder to shake off, its long digits gripping her wrist and fingers. Finally on her feet, but still unsteadily moving backwards as the long, thick, bone was swung at her, she physically wrenched the second red cap off her captured limb, freeing her wand. Jean threw the red cap once attached to her arm and it tossed up dirt as it rolled towards the first red cap. Jean threw up her wand at the first red cap stumbling out of the way of the second. "Confundo!" The red cap's small dark eyes almost crossed and began rolling about in its head. The four foot creature propped itself up on the leg bone like a crutch, shaking its head and the crimson covering almost slipped off. Its gaze focused on the red cap on the ground equally dazed and confused. Jean heard the standing red cap release a gravelly growl from its chest. It wrapped both hands around the bone's hip joint, arcing it high above its head. The second red cap squealed scuttling away from the weapon brought down so hard it made a dent in the earth. Jean remained motionless as the two red caps swiped and scratched at each other. The second dove into a dark hole and the first pursued, their sour screeching receding into nothingness. "Okay," said Jean, breathing steadily for the fist time in minutes, "red caps now."

It was slow going across the shadowy meadow. Jean found herself falling down three more of the densely packed entrances to the underground labyrinth and narrowly avoided at least twice as many. If it weren't for her dignity and the knowledge that someone was watching her she would have enthusiastically gone down on her hands and knees. Jean sighed in relief, happy to be approaching the second tree line as she had been escaping the first. This forest was different. Instead of dark conifer trees fat, sickly green leaves sprouted from the thin twisted branches draped in long ragged curls of Spanish moss the color of ashes and dust blowing gently in the non-existent wind. Jean paused, tilting her head. There was a path of some sort cutting its way through the trees, but it was in the form of a swampy, shallow stream. Jean walked a few yards up and down the edge of the second forest, but the interlaced branches made entrance impossible. Jean returned to the watery opening and crossed her arms. "Am I missing something?"

Jean sat down on one of the large roots that had forced itself out of the ground, gently rubbing the purpling bruise cause by the first red cap. Jean was sitting for all of a few seconds before she heard a rustling in the grass and something warm and leathery brushed up against her jeans, causing her to nearly rocket into the air, wrenching her wand out of her pocket at the same time. "Oh," said Jean, a wave of relief washing over her, "hey, little guy." The long golden snout of a niffler pushed its way though the foliage, its large, almost human like paws skillfully climbing up the root system to reach for Jean. The cat sized creature crawled onto Jean's lap, sniffing at her buttons. The gold and copper flecks caught in the folds of its olive skin glimmered in the dim lighting. The niffler snorted and turned about on top of Jean's thighs, its dark, round eyes ever on the move. "Yeah," said Jean, running her fingers down the coarse, springy swatch of brown hair that jutted up several inches from the crown of its head to the nape of its neck like a Mohawk, "you're not that dangerous at all." Before Jean could pull her hand back, the niffler's long paws snatched at her wrist, sniffing
furiously at her watch. The niffler pushed its spindly snout between Jean's wrist and the clasp, attempting to remove the watch. "Except when it comes to shiny things," Jean added.

Jean deftly undid her watch and pulled it out of reach of the treasure-seeking creature. The niffler snapped at her retreating fingers, revealing a row of needlepoint teeth. "No," said Jean. Before the niffler could bite at her again, Jean scooped it up under its chest and gently tossed it to the ground. "Lumos Luppiter." The beam from Jean's wand worked like a flashlight creating a circle of light on the earth. Jean jigged her wand and the small ball of light danced its way through the weeds. The niffler immediately forgot the watch it was clamoring for and scrambled off of Jean, chasing the appealing light. Jean sent the orb down into one of the many holes in the field and the niffler pursued it, not emerging again. Jean chuckled lightly and slipped her watch back over her wrist and turned back towards the woods. "Well, I'm not getting anywhere just sitting here." She sighed, examining the sludgy creek bed that was apparently her new path for this part of the course. "I'm going to need a new pair of shoes," Jean murmured to herself. Jean restarted her trek, her shoes sinking into the grainy silt.

Jean's trainers were tan by the time her aching legs forced her to stop. Water was slowly creeping up her pants legs and her hair was slicked to the back of her neck, the humidity causing it to frizz. The farther Jean moved into the second forest the warmer it got until Jean felt like she was inhaling water vapor rather than air. Jean paused at a point when the stream widened into an algae laden pool filled with reeds, cattails and water lililies. The only thing Jean would worth noting were the ten to twelve brown, half-sunken stones that came up to her knees cloaked in leaves from the aquatic plants. Jean let out a huff, pulling her hair back into a ponytail. Jean shuffled over to one of the rocks and threw her foot and soiled shoe out of the thickening muck onto it and gingerly began to retie the laces. Jean had just finished when the rock shifted underneath her. It gurgled, several bubbles ballooning out of the murk and popping. With her foot still braced on the stone, Jean reached through the vegetation and ran her hands over the swirls and divots in the fingernail like texture. Jean's eyes widened realizing it was not a stone, but a shell. The creature shifted and moved away from Jean, her foot plopping back into the pool. Its camouflage dropped off its back, revealing an array of rubies, sapphires and emeralds the size of persimmons embedded in its shell. The turtle like head of the fire crab turned and hissed at Jean before it heaved its bulky body into a standing position. Jean's eyes widened. The congealed goo trapping her shoes allowed her to move out of the way just before the jet of flames erupted from the fire crab's body.

Jean stumbled into a large stone to catch herself and she gasped, jerking her hand away. Jena steadied her heart when she realized that it was in fact a rock. The same could not be said for the one on the opposite time of Jean. The fire burned away the foliage on its back, revealing its glistening shell. The fire crab pushed its head up through the earthen water and groggily looked about, its leather neck ballooning like a bullfrog's when its eyes landed on Jean. Jean didn't give the creature a chance to react. "Reducto!" The powerful spell flipped the fire crab onto its back in a small wave of brown water and pond sludge. It's long wide feet flailed about, its body jostling, but unable to pull itself upright. Though Jean could not see its head, she heard its sour squalling, stopping only to take a breath. The original fire crab would not be deterred, plowing through the mud like a little Sherman tank every so often bursting fire from his backside. Jean felt fire lick at her sweater from another fire crab the first fire crab's rampage had awoken, but she neither had the time or, more importantly, the distance from yet another fire crab she had accidently tripped over to incapacitate it. The fire crab she had aroused was so close to her it barely had to stick out its neck to snap at her thighs. Jean spun around, blindly back-pedaling. "Frigidus!" The water around the fire crab formed a grey glacier, trapping the creature within. It stretched its neck to breaking point and yowled after Jean before pecking at its prison trying to wriggle its way to freedom. Jean turned on a dime when she felt her back slam into something, sighing in relief when it was just another large stone.
The remaining fire crabs were not to be hindered and barreled past its companion, moving more easily in the deepening stream. The water had risen past Jean's knees and she was contemplating giving up her sluggish jog in favor of swimming, without much hope that either action would outrun her pursuer for much longer. However, the decision was made for her. Jean's foot went down and kept going, her body following it off the unseen drop-off into a deep pool. Jean's yelp of surprise was silenced by a mouthful of silt-laden water. Resurfacing much like a porpoise she treaded water, one eye on the fire crab, another looking about. The briny rock that surrounded the pool was sharp and too high to climb. The only way to land was the way she had come. Escape was not onwards but down. She pointed her wand at her face and submerged.

Through the silvery film of the Bubblehead charm that encompassed her head and neck, she looked up at the surface and the two sets of bulging brown eyes that glared down at her. She returned their gaze until they disappeared. Jean let out a breath, the air escaping through the thin barrier and forming its own bubbles, swimming like jellyfish to the surface. "Lumos." The darkness burned away around her, but that was hardly enough to illuminate the underwater world past Jean's extended hand. Jean slowly swam around trying to find the stony circumference of the pool, debating if she should sacrifice her shoes to propel herself better. Slowly, she moved farther and farther, blindly seeking solid wall until, with a jolt, she had gone past it. Jean waved her wand around and found she was hovering at the mouth of an underwater cavern. Jean pushed out her wand to the ends of her fingers but it would not pierce the unending blackness. Figuring the cave wasn't placed there for aesthetic purposes, Jean let out a little breath and moved inward.

Even though Jean could barely see inches around her and never once bumped into the sides or the top of the cavern, traveling through the murk was the most cramped and claustrophobic experience of her life and she had been cornered by a troll in a bathroom. The cave was so dark the water seemed almost chilled. Jean at one point would've sworn that her breath condensed on the bubble encompassing her head. Something thin and slimy curled its way around her ankle and she jerked away from it, feeling it break away from whatever tethered it to the unseen ground. Twisting around, Jean pointed her wand at it, the light revealing a snare of stringy seaweed circling her exposed skin. Pulling a scowl, Jean gingerly plucked off the offending vegetation with the end of her wand and carried onward. Jean's thoughts were her only company as she swam through the shadowy waters, kicking off kelp as she went. Tension and fatigue pulled at her arms. Her soaked clothing dragged her body downward. The water was now so cold her skin had gone numb to it. Jean almost didn't believe it when she saw a pinprick of light glimmering in the distance. With every stroke, the light shining from the so looked for surface grew, almost blinding her with its brilliance after the long, dark swim. Another piece of aquatic foliage seized her foot. Jean hissed, the serrated edges cutting into her skin. She tried to kick it off, eager to reach dry land again, but it held firmly. Frustrated, she turned her wand downward to illuminate the lower half of her body. She almost dropped it. Gripping her ankle was not a tangle of seaweed, but a hand the color of algae and turgid water with thin, webbed fingers tipped with dark, pointed nails digging into the fabric of her clothes.

It was like a trap door had opened beneath her. Jean was pulled down through the water so forcefully and so fast it was like gravity was making her fall and not the human sized aquatic monster. She struggled to kick the grindylow off her foot, but another set of hands seized her other leg around the knee, immobilizing her. Desperately, Jean glanced up. The light of the surface was nothing more than a faint glimmer. A third grindylow grabbed her upper arm and her shoulder, its nails scratching through her shirt and her skin. She heard another amphibious creature cut through the water. With her only remaining limb, she reached out and caught the creature around its gelatinous chest, the hilt of her wand crushing itself into her palm, the tip illuminating both of their faces. Eight thick, suction-cup covered tentacles flailed around Jean's arm, struggling for purchase. The strong fingers of the grindylow dug into her wrists and hands, drawing blood and almost
Jean tilted away from the grindylow, mindful of the one spread across her back. If it were any closer, the grindylow could bite through the Bubble Head Charm producing her air and then she would either drown or bleed to death from the bites on her face and neck. Jean felt her wand slipping through the gap between her thumb and forefinger. Her eyes widened, knowing that losing her wand could be a death sentence. Jean thought fast, gulping in air inside her magic bubble. Her arm was shaking from the effort of holding the grindylow back. She screwed her eyes shut and released the grindylow to grab hold of her wand. "Stupefy!" Jean could see the flash of red through her lids and felt the now limp bodies of the swarm of grindylows floating off her person. But in that second she cast the spell, the grindylow closest to her pushed forward and bit through the think layer of the Bubble Head Charm. Jean barely had time to close her mouth before the icy water rushed in around her.

For Jean, the rush of liquid was like being punched in the face. The light in her wand had gone out and she lacked the energy to wordlessly bring light to the end of her wand or conjure the bubble around her head. Not pausing, in fear of the grindylows recovering or the commotion she made drawing others. Jean wildly began swimming upwards towards the faint flicker of light high above her head like a star in the distant sky. Jean tore through the underwater forest of kelp, flinching away from it so nothing hidden within could catch ahold of her. It felt like weights were tied to her wrists and ankles, insistently holding her back. A steady burning expanded in her lungs and Jean had to fight the instinct to open her mouth for an unavailable breath. A headache formed in the crown of her head and snaked down her back, feathering out to other parts of her body, burning and freezing her at the same time. She couldn't see, she couldn't hear, she couldn't breathe. And then, cool, crisp mountain air.

Jean's head broke the surface in a shower of droplets from her dampened hair. She coughed and spat. Water leaked from her nosed and over her lips. It was as if all the bones had been pulled out of her body. Exhausted, Jean floated on her back, staring at the thick, fluffy clouds roaming across the enchanted ceiling of the Great Hall. It was hard to comprehend that this course was still in Hogwarts in the same room where she ate her meals, secretly holding Sirius' hand under the table. Jean felt something solid brush up against the back of her head. Weary and practically boneless she turned over and mutely stared at the rocky shore. She sighed; rippling dark waters with her breath. She wanted nothing more than to float, enjoying the weightlessness and the sounds off water lapping over small stones, but she would also like nothing more than to be done with her N.E.W.T. She pushed herself up, silt and lake bottom sludge ballooning around her hands and sloshed out of the water.

Jean stood on the shore and stared at what was in front of her. A large rock was jutted upward until it was lost in the clouds of the magical ceiling. It was like she was standing at the base of a mountain. On one side of the wall was a large carpet of thick, green vines with heart-shaped leaves lined with deep purple veins creeping and interlocking into a sheet of organic chainmail all the way up the stone. The other side had an opening to a large cave. In retrospect, Jean thought it looked too simple, too straightforward. She thought the next challenge was inside the cave. It came out to meet her the moment Jean put a toe over the threshold, in the form of a large, lumbering mountain troll.

Jean backpedaled so quickly she was almost in the water again staring wide-eyed and slack jawed at the mottled grey creature. Straps of ruined cloth and leather were slung over its shoulders to form loose garments. Its small, dark eyes looked over its large, purpled nose and grunted slightly, extending its wide, calloused hands towards her. This troll did not carry a club like the troll that cornered Hermione in a bathroom. Jean assumed it was because if it brought the blunt weapon breaking bones. The pale light from Jean's wand flashed against its black marble sized eyes and tiny needlepoint teeth that snapped at her face.
down on her it would probably kill her and none of the proctors wanted seventh years to die in attempting their N.E.W.T.s. All the same, Jean didn't want to rely on aurors to save her fast enough if the troll got its hands on her. Jean fiddled with the hilt of her wand, wondering if she should try a spell strong enough to stun it, or make the idea of it touching her as unappealing as possible.

Jean chose the latter. "Inpulsa!" The troll jerked its hand away, twitching its wrist back and forth as the electric shock passed through its limb. Jean's wand buzzed like an angry hornet, quivering with electric currents, ready to sting the aggressor again. Jean's mind, on the other hand, was flying wildly about while her body stayed rooted by the pool. Her eyes flitted from the troll, to the flora covered rock face, to the cave, and back to the troll again. She knew she only had a limited number of shots before the creature would be angered enough to overcome its fear of injury to hurt her. Jean's gaze landed on the mouth of the cave behind the troll. If she could dance her way around the circumference of her fight she could slip into the cave and get away. Her mind didn't linger on the possibility that there was an end to her presumed escape route. Jean's brain grounded as the troll reached forward again, cautious but still curious.

"Inpulsa!" The troll jerked back, shocked again. As its huge body stumbled Jean moved to the left a few feet, wand at the ready, always watching her distance. Jean repeated her tactic over and over until she was halfway to her goal. By then, the troll's fingers and hand were peppered with blood blisters, swelling and stiffening around the joints. The troll reached for Jean again and when Jean repelled it once more her limited number of chances had run out. The creature roared, spittle flying from its mismatched teeth and lunged, both hands extended in an attempt to squash Jean between the two. Jean shrieked, practically sprinting backwards. Her spine slammed into the rock wall, framed in emerald foliage. "Inpulsa! Inpulsa! Inpulsa!"

Dust kicked up around the small explosions of white light around the troll's feet. The troll jigged drunkenly until finally its top-heavy body tumbled into the deep pond behind it with an audible splash. Jean let out a sigh of relief as she watched the manufactured waves roll up onto the shoreline. In her eye line was the mouth of the cavern. She made to run, but for some reason she could not force her limbs to move, as if something was tethering her to the ground. Jean jerked wildly, knowing that any moment the troll would sputter its way to the surface, but whatever was holding her would not give. If anything, it coiled tighter around her wrists, her ankles; Jean could feel the tendrils creeping across her torso. With one eye on the mercifully placid water, Jean glanced down and pale. It was not benign, aesthetically pleasing ivy she had backed into, but a thicket of devil's snare, which, in the short time she was close to it, had netted Jean so effectively that escape was practically impossible.

The still plane of water in the pool shattered like the breaking of a glass. With a gurgled groan the troll resurfaced, shaking its boxish head to reorient itself. In its grip was a grindylow, sprawled out haphazardly over its knuckles, tentacles limp but still spasming, forked tongue lolling out from its open jaw teeth tipped red from both attacking and attempting to escape the troll. Jean watched the troll fling the grindylow and it slide across the ground leaving and black and flesh colored skid mark. The troll looked over at Jean and its entire body stilled like a predatory animal catching sight of it's prey, bleating and helpless in the grass. Jean unconsciously shrank away from the troll, farther into the devil's snare, causing even more wiry vines to sew themselves into her clothes. Like a snowplow, the troll began carving its way through the water.

'Save me. Save me.' Jean thought repeatedly as more and more of the troll's body appeared from the pond. She tugged uselessly at her wand arm, her wand and forearm already devoured by that point. Desperate and frustrated, Jean twisted her neck back and forth taking in the tangles of devil's snare taking over more and more of her body. Almost angrily, Jean mentally protested the placement of the inconvenient plant wildly thinking if she had devised the obstacle course she would have placed the devil's snare to hinder the runner on their main path, not may or may not stumble into
on the side and possibly get themselves killed with.

Epiphany struck Jean like lightning; so much that it had stilled her movements and made the rampaging troll move in slow motion. Jean was on the main path. The open cavern where the troll hid was the ruse. She had faced this challenge with devil's snare before in the bowels of Hogwarts in pursuit of the Sorcerer's Stone when she had to not fight it but fall through it. In spite of her heart hammering its way through her ribcage, she quieted her body, relaxing against the aggressive plant life. The troll moved closer. Its knees were scraped and embedded with sharp rocks. The devil's snare snaked up her shoulders, dipping beneath the collar of her shirt. The troll's wide feet made imprints on the damp earth. The devil's snare circled her throat and Jean gasped to breathe. Jean could smell a rotting stench from the troll's breath and closed her eyes, wondering what she would look like at the end of a tug-of-war between the two entities. If Jean had wanted to open her eyes afterwards she couldn't have, for the devil's snare had masked her face, pressed her nose into her upper lip and held her lids shut. Then, with a lurch, everything around Jean's body gave way.

Only when Jean's back fell down onto an uneven stone flooring did she breathe in great gulps. Jean's eyes opened and fluttered, struggling to adjust to the sudden darkness that surrounded her. Stiff and sore, Jean gingerly rolled over onto her hands and knees, cautiously looking around. The dark, dusky underground passage was discomfortingly empty. Her breath sounded like a landslide around her. Jean pushed herself off the ground and felt her back crack. She winced, wondering how she would ever stay awake during the quidditch final and not nod off from sheer physical exhaustion. Jean lit her wand with a pallid yellow light flickering on the end of taper, mimicking a candle more than a flashlight. She didn't want to prematurely attract the attention of whatever lurked within.

Jean only made it a few paces before she stopped in her tracks. "Of course," she said in a sigh, running a hand through her hair. The passaged divided; one to the left, one to the right, and one straight ahead, each as indiscernible as the next. Jean held her wand in her palm to ask it directions. She regretted in immediately. The Point Me spell caused the light to be doused and the darkness was so complete Jean couldn't tell which way the wand had landed. Jean pointed the wand at her feet, attempting a different spell. "Leve Vestigium." Jean lifted her foot experimentally and in its place was a pale green print of the ball and heel of her shoe glowing with a bioluminescent light. Now she could track where she walked. Jean felt like Theseus finding his way through the subterranean maze using a spool of string. She could only hope there was no Minotaur hiding in her shadowy labyrinth.

Jean's walk was relatively uneventful; a left, a left again, then right. She found herself at a dead end, backtracked on her luminescent footsteps and took a right again. Never the less, Jean was as tense as a taut wire. It was obvious something was hidden in the darkness, the question was what. Jean uneasily assumed that a second troll was out of the question. A ghoul maybe? Or perhaps a dementor? A poltergeist? The thought made Jean crack a grin. The mischievous Peeves would be a welcome relief in comparison to other creatures found on this exam.

But then, something rumbled through the darkness. A sound to accompany the silence and Jean's quick breaths. It was low and gravelly. The growl that echoed around Jean to the point that it vibrated in her bones came from something feral, something canine. Jean felt cemented to the ground, the air in her mouth too fearful to pass her lips. A mantra repeated itself over and over in her head like the thump of a drum. There's a werewolf in here."

Time sped up and slowed down at the same time. Jean's feet carried her blindly, quicker that her brain could tell where she was going. The light on the pock marked walls blossomed into dancing shadows that swirled and jumped so slowly that were practically still pictures. Jean heard the clip of curved nails on stone and hot air push itself from a wide and sturdy chest. The smell of animal
stained the inside of her nose. Jean shook her head to clear her eyes of the future from her past and the images of a thirteen-year-old girl cornered at the base of the Whomping Willow defended from a werewolf by who once was and at the same time would be her boyfriend. Jean wondered briefly if the wolf was tracking her by smell or the little lights left by her feet as she ran pell mell through the uneven interlay of caverns. Jean barely had time to stop herself before she crashed head long into another dead end. Frantically, Jean turned around. "Lumimurum!" The ball of light at the end of her wand split into three and shot off with shrill shrieks and tails of thick, grey smoke before sticking to the walls and illuminating the small room.

With her back brushing against the wall, the wolf emerged from the blackness as if it had been molded from it. Jean pointed her wand down its long muzzle, tufted with ashen fur broken up by off white swatches around its dark jowls, between its emerald eyes. Jean's wand wavered and wobbled. The wolf had very human eyes. She had seen this before; as early as last night. She had seen Sirius' grey eyes through his Animagus form.

"You're not a werewolf," said Jean, more to herself than to the lupine creature still snarling and snapping its jaws. "You're not even a wolf." The animal lunged at Jean. "You're an Animagus."

Still in midair, the back legs of the large wolf elongated as they dropped. By they time they hit the ground they were wearing shoes and trousers, quickly covered by dark robes. As the person stood, the wolf's chest shortened and grew smaller, the long hairs of fur weaving itself into a sweater vest and robes. The middle-aged silver haired man shook his head and his muzzle shrank back into his face and his pointed ears rounded out under his hairline.

"Well done, Miss Granger. You were quicker than most to find me out."

Jean slumped against the wall ecstatic that identifying the Animagus and not fighting it off was the objective of this phase of the course. "Is it over?" Jean asked

The auror chuckled. "No, but you're close. You're one of the fastest times though. Not many people have gotten this far without being helped."

Jean allowed her body to relax for a moment. She observed her dirtied clothes and shook her wrist a few times to clear the condensation from her watch. Amazingly, she was still under the time normally allotted for a paper exam. "I didn't think it would be this long," said Jean rolling her shoulders. "or this difficult."

"Your taking a N.E.W.T exam designed by a veteran auror," said the Animagi humorously as he walked up to Jean. "Did you think it would be a stroll down Diagon Alley?"

The auror tapped his wand on the wall three times. "I thought you weren't supposed to be helping me," said Jean.

"I'm not," said the auror, "but no one gets out of this cave without my say so."

Jean blinked as blinding sunlight shot through the growing fissure in the wall. She held her hand above her eyes. "Any advice?" she said off handedly, as she stepped though the newly made mouth.

"Mind the gap," called out the auror. There was a tremor and a low, steady rumble. Jean looked over her shoulder and watched the opening restack itself into a solid wall. The auror waved at her encouragingly and in an instant he was gone.

By then Jean's eyes had adjusted to the light. "Mind the gap?" she murmured, "What ga—oh."
Looming before her like a gaping maze was a canyon with steep sides and jagged edges. With her wand drawn, Jean inched towards the precipice and looked down, seeing nothing but the unending pit. Looking up, Jean squinted and, in the distance, concealed by low-lying clouds was the other side. Jean shifted her gaze back to the bottomless chasm. "Please don't tell me I have to climb down there," she said to herself.

Resigning herself to the idea that she did have to climb down, considering the magic that made the canyon prevented her from conjuring her way across or a magical method of descending, Jean walked along the rim of the abyss, searching for anything that would allow her to access the next stage of the course. Short gnarled trees teetered dangerously over the vast emptiness clutching the loose and dusty earth with twisted, intertwining roots. Trees that grew behind the ones out front held onto them as well with their grasping subterranean fingers, creating an elaborate highway, sewing itself through sand colored earth and small boulders.

A thicket came over Jean so subtly she hadn't realized she had walked into one until she glanced up and saw the sun obscured by broad, yellow leaves. Thin, but serrated, patches of grass grew in the shade, turning almost transparent when sunlight hit them. Jean bent down and pulled her pants leg down to keep the grass from cutting into her ankles.

Jean stayed in her crouch when she felt more than heard a heavy rhythmic thumping reverberate through the ground. Whatever was the source of the vibrations was large and close. Careful to stay as invisible as possible, Jean swiveled her head from side to side, her hand gripping her wand until her knuckles were white. Her field of vision passed through a gap in the shrubbery. Jean stiffened, stilled and let out a soft breath.

In the shadowy glade pawing at the dirt with its bronze claws was a palomino colored hippogriff. Shafts of sunlight striped its beige coat, temporarily turning it to muted gold. It's head and upper shoulders were covered in long white feathers like a bald eagle creating a stark contrast, creating a stark contrast with its golden eyes. Its black legs had cream-colored socks rising from its hooves to just above its knees. It's curved talons carved through the soft soil, unearthing wriggling worms which it pierced with its beak. The hippogriff turned its amber eyes to Jean and ruffled its feathers around its throat.

"Oh," said Jean, scrambling upright only to bend her back into a bow, dipping a few extra inches considering she spent the last few seconds gawking up at the easily offended animal. Jean watched through her peripheral vision the wide chest of the hippogriff pushing through the bushes. The hippogriff grunted and snorted. Jean could see its claws cloting through the dirt around her, towards her. She felt its hot breath on the small of her back. And then, without the clumsy awkwardness of one so large, the hippogriff lowered its feathered neck, curving in a gentle arch, one claw fluidly sliding forward, the other curling back, barely an inch off the ground. To Jean, the hippogriff looked like the picture of an English gentleman.

Slowly, Jean erected herself and the hippogriff did the same. The creature was obviously frequently handled because it hardly moved when she approached it. "Hey there," said Jean, attempting to be casual. She petted the place on its back where the feathers merged with horsehair. She felt the hippogriff's wing shift against her thighs. Its long cream-colored flight feathers tapered back to where they almost touched its light brown withers. Upon closer inspection, Jean saw a collection of circular spots the size of the pad of her thumb clustered on its rump. Jean turned to look at the hippogriff's front and beyond that the lip of the canyon, partially obscured by a netting of trees. "I guess you're my ride then, said Jean, patting the hippogriff again as if she could summon courage from the movement.

Jean planted her hands on the hippogriff's shoulder and its rear haunches and heaved, trying to not
pull up any of its wing feathers with her as she unceremoniously shimmied herself onto its back. "I'm not the best flyer," chatted Jean nervously, her fingers already curling into the hippogriff's fluffy down, "but I'll try not to pull any feathers out." Anything else Jean wanted to say was lost in the rush of wind that whipped around her face. The hippogriff charged the precipice, galloping effortlessly over the snarl of low-lying foliage. For one terrifying moment, Jean was astride an eagle headed horse falling over the edge of a cliff. The hippogriff's wings extended, catching the sun soaked air and they soared.

Jean didn't see much of their short flight. Her head was buried in the hippogriff's feathers and her arms were wrapped around it's neck, her fingers clasping the opposite wrists. She did hear the steady pumping of air from the hippogriff's great wings as they flapped back and forth and felt the light dampening of her clothes from the blanket of fog they drilled into. The hippogriff hit the ground roughly and cantered to a halt, allowing Jean to slide wobbly-legged of its back.

"Thank you," said Jean, more than happy to be on solid ground again. She patted the hippogriff lightly on the shoulder as she stepped away. The hippogriff busied itself with preening its feathers no doubt from where Jean had ruffled and clumped them. She hid a small giggle behind her hand and looked up at it apologetically. When the hippogriff finished Jean gave it a small bow, which the hippogriff returned before turning around for its return trip. From her place on the ground, Jean could admire its ascension. The sunlight rippled across its muscles as the hippogriff's trot picked up speed. It's wings unfolded from its back and suddenly it was galloping up into empty space, enveloped in an instant by cloud cover. Jean folded her arms over he chest and tilted her head. "Harry would have loved you," whispered Jean, enjoying the rare moment when her friend's name could pass through her lips. She sighed, unfolding her arms and pulled a small, white feather from the cuff of her sleeve.

The path Jean was supposed to follow was unusually easy to find, as it was inlayed with worn, red bricks, almost like a footpath in someone's front lawn. In fact, it was someone's front lawn. Jean had barely walked a few yards into the tree line from where the hippogriff had launched into the sky before she came across a small one-story house set in an overgrown lawn. The house was a dingy blue color and some of the siding was eaten up by rot. Several long branches hung over the house, scraping at its black shingles. The shudders were barely hanging onto the windows. One had fallen off and was entirely shawled in weeds a few feet below. Jean walked up the last few feet of the path to the front door, ward out and scanning for any unseen adversaries hidden in the tall grass. Jean put her hand on the doorknob and gave it a cautious turn, her eyes still on a swivel, seeking out her next opponent. But, the knob turned with a squeak, the door swung open and nothing else happened.

Jean did a quick circuit around the small living space in the house. It appeared to be a muggle home. There was a boxish television set on the floor and in the adjoining kitchenette the cabinets below the sink were opened and a red, metal toolbox was inside as if someone was working on the plumbing. The only door that was closed to her was an off-white one in the middle of the wall straight ahead of her, presumably leading to a back bedroom. Jean stepped through the sitting room and jiggled the knob, but it did not give as easily as the first. Jean pointed her wand at the brass. "Alohamora." Jean reached for the knob and turned, but the lock stayed in place. Jean lifted her eyebrow and raised her wand again. "Alohamora," she repeated firmly. Jean shook the knob, but the bolt still held firm. Jean huffed "Aperio." Nothing. "Introitu." The wood creaked but the lock did not give. "Dissipate Ostium!" Jean threw her shoulder into the door for added emphasis, but it still would not open for her. Jean slapped her hands on her pants. "Open sesame."

Jean backed away from the door, glaring at it almost murderously. The small room was stifling. Jean idly lifted her hair and fanned her neck, simultaneously licking her drying lips. Jean hadn't realized how thirsty she was until that moment. Jean's eyes drifted over to the sink in the miniscule
kitchen and watched a droplet of water congeal on the end of the faucet before dropping into the metal basin with a plunk. With one more wearied glance at the unopenable door, she crossed over to the kitchen and turned on the sink. Jean cupped her fingers around the flow and drank greedily from her palm. The water tasted metallic and was so cold it bit at her teeth, but she drank it anyway, splashing the liquid on her face and neck. The red, rectangular toolbox was hanging halfway out of the cabinet. Casually, Jean pushed it aside with her toe. Her father had a similar toolbox. Jean recalled one of her earliest memories sitting on the floor of her childhood bedroom watching in utter awe her dad replacing a ceiling fan. As a toddler, after seeing him hold the blades of the fan in his broad hand while screw driving it into the ceiling, she thought her father was the strongest man alive. Jean let the water run over her lip. "Could it really be that simple?" Jean's gaze drifted down to the crimson edge of the toolbox and then up to the bedroom door. If magic failed, why not use a muggle means?

Jean pulled out the toolbox and made the contents clatter inside when it hit the ground. After flipping open the lid and rummaging through a hammer a set of wrenches and a near endless supply of nuts and nails found a Phillip's screwdriver buried at the bottom. Pocketing her wand, Jean squatted down in front of the doorknob. "Let's see if I remember how to do this." One by one, Jean removed the tiny screws, letting them drop to the ground. As she worked, she recalled a similar scenario when Professor Snape had used logic, not magic, to create his obstacle on the way to the Sorcerer's Stone, and how that would have left most wizards stranded. On the fourth screw the knob and the lock came out in Jean's hand. She heard the satisfying thunk of the adjoining knob falling to the floor. "Ten points to muggle-borns," said Jean smugly, pushing the door open effortlessly with the end of her finger.

The smile on her face died almost instantly and for a moment Jean thought she was the wrong place. There was nothing in the room. No bed, no boxes, only colorless wallpaper. But, Jean could still feel something. A sickly mist gathered around her feet and there was such a chill in the air it bit into any exposed skin, sinking down into the bone. Jean exhaled and she could see her breath. Jean drew her wand as the door soundlessly closed itself behind her. "Hello?" she called out to the empty space. "Who's there? There was nothing at first, then a whisper of sound, like steam escaping a metal pipe, but as it grew louder, the shrieking whistle lowered into a long steady hiss coiling around the room. Jean clapped her hands over her ears and collapsed to he knees.

"No," moaned Jean, her back curling, her fingers digging into her skull. "You can't be. You can't." Shaking and unable to move, Jean looked over at the corner where the mist merged with long dark robes barely discernable from the shadows that surrounded it. A hood covered its head, but crimson slits for eyes still unnaturally illuminated its pale snakelike face.

He spoke.

She screamed.

Jean screamed and screamed as she lay there, paralyzed, feeling blood vessels breaking in her throat. She screamed until she couldn't see anymore, hardly feeling the hands as long and thin as spiders grasp at her. She felt something grab at the collar of her shirt and pull so hard she nearly choked, but Jean still kept screaming. Something wrapped itself around Jean's chest and upper arms so warm it felt like she was on fire. Jean thrashed, but could not get free. Her fingers were being pried apart. He wanted her wand. Desperately, she tried to cling onto it until it was wrenched from her hands. Fingers, pawed at her face, but they were warm and gentle. Along with the sounds of blood pumping through her ears and her own screaming, she made out a second voice shouting, calling out her name. She knew that voice and followed it blindly from her oblivion. Jean jolted and opened her eyes as if she as if she had awoken from a nightmare and saw only silver and sapphire blue.
"Professor?" said Jean weakly, her voice sounding like she had a week's worth of laryngitis.

Dumbledore's eyes twinkled comfortingly. "Yes, Miss Granger, now lie still. You've just had quite the panic attack."

"Panic attack?" repeated Jean. When Dumbledore nodded Jean felt all of her adrenaline leave her in a rush. She slumped back onto something soft, yet solid. Kinshield's chest rose and fell beneath her head. "Did my boggart give you a fright?" he asked, loosening his arms around Jean's chest.

"That was a boggart?" she parroted again. Jean passed a quivering hand over her eyes. It was a boggart. Jean kept her fingers over her face. She felt like the room was swaying back and forth.

"All right," said Kinshield scooping Jean up, her limp form contouring to his body, "let's sit you down somewhere." Jean felt herself being deposited in a chair its high back supporting her body. She felt the stem of a goblet being pushed into her hands. "Drink," commanded Kinshield, framing her hands with his own and guiding the chalice to Jean's lips. The solvent was sticky and sweet, coating the inside of her mouth and throat. It tasted like chocolate and cinnamon and bubbled on her tongue like a soda, but it warmed in her belly like whiskey. Jean readjusted the rim in her mouth, pulling the cup from Kinshield's fingers. Jean opened her eyes once she felt like she wasn't on the prow of a ship and realized Kinshield had deposited her at the High Table in the Great Hall. Dumbledore was sitting in his chair next to her, his fingers laced in his lap. Kinshield was kneeling down next to her, his forearm braced on the table. "Feeling better, Miss Granger?" asked Kinshield, his fingers still subtly extending the goblet.

"Yes," said Jean between mouthfuls of the comforting brew, "much better. Thank you."

Kinshield nodded. "Then I'll leave you with Professor Dumbledore. I have to oversee the last of the students running the course." Jean watched over the edge of her cup Professor Kinshield descend the raised dais before he looked back. "You did very well, Miss Granger, I wouldn't be surprised if you had one of the highest scores of the exam." With that kind word, Kinshield waved his wand at the thick cloud cover that formed a top to bottom barrier beginning at the end of the steps parted like a theatre curtain, allowing the undercover auror to pass through before sealing itself.

"Do you think he's still mad at me?" asked Jean, placing her empty goblet on the table.

"Beg your pardon?" said Dumbledore.

"Do you think Professor Kinshield is still mad at me?"

Dumbledore sighed, ponderously, sinking back into his chair. Dumbledore looked at the cloaking of clouds as if he could perceive Kinshield through it. "I do not believe," began Professor Dumbledore, "that Professor Kinshield was ever angry with you, at least, not over what you think." Dumbledore smiled underneath his beard and his eyes flashed with the mischievousness of youth "I believe Professor Kinshield was more angry with you when he thought you were a Death Eater."

Jean thumbed the jeweled stem of the chalice. "But, if he's not angry, what is he?"

"He's afraid, Miss Granger, and therein you'll find his recent frustration." Dumbledore turned to Jean. "Fear makes you blind. Fear makes you think with your heart, rather than your mind. It becomes easy to take easy answers. It becomes so simple to slip into a primal state of protecting your friends and crushing your enemies that you do not examine who your enemy is or why." Dumbledore indicated to the wall of clouds. "Professor Kinshield knows he is afraid and is at war with it, at war with himself. He is torn between tactfully attacking his enemy and saving as many as he can however he can and, in his rashness, slay some of his friends to shelter his enemies. But,
that is why he is a good commander."

"Why is he a good commander," asked Jean, "when he is at risk of hurting people to protect people trying to hurt him?"

"Because he will choose, Miss Granger. Even the wrong choice is better than no choice at all, and stagnation springs from fear. Some choose to hide in the sand and hope to not get crushed. But, if we all do that then our adversaries will walk over us like a well-paved path."

Jean recalled how the Ministry chose to ignore Voldemort's return while members of the Order were picked off one by one. She brushed her hair out of her eyes and with it the images of Sirius' body falling into a veiled archway. "So to be victorious one must be without fear," said Jean.

"Not necessarily, Miss Granger," replied Dumbledore. "When you are afraid, what makes you rise again?"

"Because my friends are in danger," said Jean, "because I want to protect them; because I love them."

"Exactly," said Dumbledore. "Fear and Bravery are two sides of the same coin. You cannot have one without the other; but, whereas stagnation and cowardice come from fear, so bravery must come from…" Dumbledore trailed off, looking at Jean expectantly.

"Love?"

Dumbledore nodded. "Love."

Jean smiled softly, but it faded as her eyes drifted away to the clouds. "Professor," she said, "can I ask you something?"

"Of course, Miss Granger."

"Are you afraid now?" The question hung in the air between the two like a large, silvery bubble that popped the moment the side door to the Great Hall crashed open.

"Jean! Jean!"

Jean jumped and spun around in her seat as a frazzled redhead, flushed and sweating, skidded to a stop in front of her. "Lily," said Jean, surprised, "what are you doing here?"

"I'm here for you," said Lily, seemingly taking her first normal breath in many minutes. "Mary was waiting to walk down to the pitch with you and she said you started screaming horribly and Professor Kinshield ran in to get you. She said something was trying to kill you."

"Nothing like that, Miss Evans, I assure you," interjected Dumbledore, "Miss Granger just had a nasty run in with a boggart."

Lily breathed out a sigh in relief. "And here I was thinking that the troll was beating you into the ground." Lily squatted down so she could look up into Jean's face. "Are you alright?"

"Yes, I'm fine," answered Jean.

"You don't need to see Madame Pomphrey?" Jean saw Lily's eyes drift over to Dumbledore for confirmation.

"I think Miss Granger has spent enough time in the castle on such a beautiful day," said
Dumbledore. "Go. Enjoy your afternoon. I seem to recall a very important quidditch match taking place."

Jean stood up from her chair. "Come on, Lily," she said, attempting to be overly chipper. "The match will be starting soon and I don't want to miss the beginning."


Lily looped her arm around Jean's as they trekked down to the quidditch pitch. For the most part the walk was in silence, broken occasionally with casual comments about the weather or how many points Gryffindor would have to gain against the closely matched Slytherin to win the cup. "Jean," said Lily after a moment, "are...," Lily's thumb jumped across Jean's knuckles, "are you sure everything's all right? I mean...with the boggart? I thought," Lily sucked her lower lip into her mouth. "Did you see..."

"Lily," Jean interrupted. She reached over and stilled Lily's worrying on her hand, "please." Jean looked at Lily and saw Harry hiding inside her face. Her eyes reminded Jean of her eleven-year-old son, fresh off the Hogwarts Express, eyes full of hope and laughter, not yet shadowed by years of war and tragedy. Harry's eyes would never look like this again. But, Jean also saw the love and care within Lily's eyes and the desire to aid and protect everyone she held close. Harry's eyes would never lose that.

Lily looped a piece of Jean's hair and held it between her thumb and forefinger before tucking it behind Jean's back. "You're a mess."

Jean laughed.

Lily waved her wand over Jean and Jean's clothes cleaned and repaired themselves. Her face was scrubbed clean of grime and her frazzled hair was pulled back slightly, falling over her shoulders in manicured curls. Jean pulled on a ringlet, stretching it straight before letting it spring back to its original form. "I've always wanted to do that to your hair," said Lily playfully.

The Gryffindor locker room was hot and congested. Students mingled with players beneath the red and gold banners that draped the wooden ceiling. Their conversations blended together into a cacophony of echoing sounds. Lily weaved effortlessly through the throng, one hand holding onto Jean's wrist. A hand reached out of the tangled masses and grabbed Lily's shoulder. "James," said Lily as the tousled teenager pulled himself from the crowd. "How's everything?"

James didn't say anything. His face was grim and his lips were pressed into a thin line. His hair was wilder than Jean had ever seen it, like he had run his fingers through it repeatedly. James' face broke into a grin when his eyes landed on Jean. "Hey," he said, "you're in one piece." James briefly looked over his shoulder before turning back to Jean. "Mary came running in saying something had happened to you."

"It was just the boggart," said Jean off-handedly, "it caught me off guard." Jean was already looking past James to the person he had undoubtedly signaled of her arrival. Jean stepped forward and felt the odd and unfamiliar feeling of everyone and everything dissolving away until she and Sirius were the only one's left in existence. "Sirius," she murmured, inhaling his scent, feeling the warm security of his arms wrapped around her ribcage. "Sirius."

Jean felt herself being gently but firmly pulled away when the sound came back to the world it was muted and far away. Sirius had pulled Jean into one of the closet like dressing rooms for the players, closing the opening with a curtain of neutral colored cloth. He looked haphazardly dressed,
as if he had done so distracted. The strings of his robes were not properly laced and were barely tied at the top. His pants were not tightly tucked into his boots and shin guards and one of his thick beaters gloves was falling out of his pocket. He was already speaking in a whirlwind. "—So stupid. I'm so stupid. I'm so sorry. When they told me I knew it was the boggart. I should have told you about it the moment I got out. I'm so—"

The tips of Jean's fingers ghosted over his lips. "Sirius, she said softly, "it happened. It's over."

Sirius looked somewhat consoled. He grasped the wrist that hovered above his mouth and pushed down the sleeve, revealing the thin, ugly word, pale and almost glowing against her skin. He kissed the scar. "I wish you didn't have to see that again."

"It can't be helped," said Jean simply, "no matter how hard we try."

Sirius nodded once, his eyes absent of their usual sparkle. He reached out and took a tendril of Jean's hair, twisting and twirling it betwixt his fingers. "I just want to keep you safe," he said.

Jean returned her head to Sirius' chest, lulled by it rhythmic rise and fall. She closed her eyes when she felt his hands link at her hips. "I'm safe now," she murmured into his exposed skin. All the while Jean's hand fistled to the gold trimmed edging of his robes where Sirius couldn't see, as if she could hold them in this moment in time forever, "we're both safe."

Jean opened her eyes to meet Sirius'. His lips relaxed and his smirk returned along with his careless elegance. He took her chin in his hand and turned it upward. "I love what you've done to your hair."

The rings on the curtain rod sang. "Padfoot," said James, peering into the alcove. "Hooch says we have to start."

Sirius looked at James before he sighed in resignation, pulling his hair out of his face. "I guess there's nothing for it," he said. Sirius pecked Jean chastely on the forehead. "I'll see you after the match," he said.

Jean's hands shot out and cupped Sirius' cheeks before he could get away and brought his lips to her mouth. In retrospect, Jean wished she could see her action from James' perspective because she was certain Sirius' eyes had popped from his head in shock. For all she knew, James' eyes could be the same. Jean didn't care. She didn't care who or how many saw she wasn't wasting any more moments. "Good luck," she said and she gave her boyfriend over to his best friend.

The crowd in the locker room and mingled onward and upward to the seating. Lily and Remus were among the last of them, waiting for Jean to rejoin them. "I still can't believe that I had to be rescued from a boggart of all things," said Jean to the two friends that flanked her.

"Well, the glumbumbles got to me if that makes you feel better," said Remus, "and James will never admit this as long as he lives but he couldn't get the door to the boggart open."

Both Jean and Lily laughed at that as they pulled themselves up the steep rickety stairs to the stadium seating. Lily's eyes scanned the multicolored collection of people before shooting her hand up in the air and waving it. "Come on," she said, "Alice and the others are up there."

Alice, Dorcas and Marlene were clustered Mary, all whipping their heads and giving soft smiles of relief at seeing Jean. "It was the boggart," said Jean before anyone spoke. Remus moved past his female companions and shook the hand of the man sitting between Alice and Peter that Jean had
never seen in person, but recognized instantly. "Jean," said Alice after Jean settled amongst her gaggled of roommates, "I'd like to introduce you to my boyfriend, Frank Longbottom. He graduated from Hogwarts last year and is an auror for the Ministry." Alice held Frank's hand. "He surprised me coming up for the match." Although Alice still had most of Neville's facial features, Frank's was still obviously Neville's father. His round, brown eyes were as warm and sweet as dollops of melting chocolate and though it was shorter and cleaner cut than the last time she had seen it, Frank's hair was the same color and texture as his son's. Frank smiled a wide-toothed grin and in an instant Jean was thrown twenty years into the future. "It's wonderful to meet you," said Frank extending his hand.

"Likewise," said Jean, shaking it.

"I'm sorry, Jean," said Mary, looking more than a little embarrassed since Jean had arrived. "I didn't mean to get everyone all worked up. When I heard you screaming I thought the troll was trying to eat you."

"Merlin, yes," agreed Dorcas, "the moment I saw that troll I dived back in the water and started screaming for help"

"I was just glad to get out of the water," said Marlene, "those grindylows nearly drowned me. I had to bypass the troll because when it came out of its cave I was still coughing up water." Marlene turned to Alice. "What about you? Did the troll give you any trouble?"

"I…er," Alice crossed her legs. "I didn't know there was a troll until you brought it up. I recognized the Devil's Snare immediately and thought that was the challenge, so I shot some sunlight at it and walked on to the next phase."

Jean drifted out of the conversation discussing the trials and tribulations of Professor Kinshield's exam and looked out over the empty quidditch pitch. She brought her hand pensively up to her face, a knuckle of her forefinger tucked just beneath her nose. With her nail she nervously picked at her thumb's cuticle.

"What did you see?"

Jean jerked as if she had come out of a trance and twisted to see Peter, who was sitting on the bleachers behind her. "What?" she said, still staring at Peter with a wide-eyed stare.

"The boggart," said Peter, shifting slightly as Remus turned more towards Frank, "what did it change into?"

Jean had almost forgotten that Peter didn't know about the incident that everyone thought she saw or the origins of the scar she kept so hidden. "Professor McGonagall," she answered, blending truth with her lie, "she said I failed everything." Jean saw Remus smirk over Peter's shoulder even as he spoke to Frank and in that gesture Jean's dark mood drifted away.

A magically enhanced voice boomed around the stadium, drowning out the chatter. "Hello Hogwarts students," called out Thomas Finn, sounding more like a wrestling ring announcer than a quidditch commentator, "and welcome to this year's quidditch cup final Gryffindor versus Slytherin." Finn was dressed neutrally in a black and yellow windbreaker while his co-commentator, Diana Wickerbee, had a little more favoritism in her outfit with a wide, red ribbon belted around her simple blue sundress. "We apologize for the short delay, but without further ado the Slytherin House team: Spindler, Greene, Collier, Peet, Rosky, Brunswick and Black." Jean watched the seven emerald jackets fly in a large chevron formation over the screaming Slytherin stands while the Gryffindor side sat sullenly, some clapping obligatorily.
"And he comes the Gryffindor players," said Diana, "Potter, Lowry McKinley, Black, Miller and Kostova."

Jean was the only person not applauding as the ruby red broomstick riders zoomed over their heads. She reached over to Lily and shook her shoulder. "Where's Richard?" she asked.

"Ahh," said Lily, deflating, "the drama of the day. He's been throwing up purple mucus all morning, coincidentally after his evening cram session with his Potions partner; his Slytherin Potions partner."

Jean paled, understanding James and Sirius' exchange from earlier. How the school hadn't broken out into civil war she'd never know. "Do you think…?"

Lily shrugged. "There's no proof, even though James and Sirius were willing to tear out poor Richard's insides to find it. They've been trying to find a substitute all morning. The Ravenclaw captain even offered up his keeper but Madame Hooch wouldn't allow it and quidditch can't be cancelled due to a player's illness."

Jean let out a long breath. "This is going to get ugly," she said, settling into her seat and angling her head to the sky.

"Yep," responded Lily, doing the same.

Diana continued her commentary as the thirteen flyers settled into their starting positions. "The Gryffindors will unfortunately not be playing with a keeper today and we all wish Mr. Harris a speedy recovery." The Gryffindor team looked like they'd rather have a fistfight than a quidditch match.

"And here comes Madam Hooch with the quaffle," continue Finn. Madam Hooch flew out between the players who began to tighten the circle around her even more. She did not call the captains forward to shake hands. "The quaffle is up," said Finn, "and the game is on."

James, McKinley and Lowry all lunged for the quaffle, but Spindler, on the faster broom, tucked the sphere under his arm and dove towards the earth, skirting centimeters above the manicured grass. All the players from both teams excluding the seekers and keeper swarmed him. Collier and Greene flanked Spindler as they flew, effectively creating a human shield since the ground protected them from strikes from below by the pursuing Gryffindor chasers. The Slytherin beaters added an extra level of protection flying above them all, firing bludgers down on Sirius and Miller as the defended their chasers. "The Slytherins have turned themselves into a tank," said Finn.

As the players sped steadily across the pitch, Lowry had flattened herself onto her broom handle and was gaining on the peloton of Slytherin chasers. The only person that separated her from Spindler and the quaffle was Greene and she had just reached his shoulder. Lowry pressed forward, hoping to dart around Greene and snag the quaffle for herself. Greene flickered his eyes towards her before pulling his foot from its stirrup, his sole into Lowry's shoulder, causing her broom to dig into the earth. With a yelp, Lowry was thrown from her broom and she and it rolled over the grass, kicking up damp sod. Spindler ascended sharply, along with his wingmen hugging the white poles of the hoops as closely as he did the ground. He dropped the quaffle through the unmanned goal as effortlessly as throwing away a piece of trash. "Slytherin scores the first goal of the match," said Finn, "and remains in possession of the quaffle."

Like an armored turtle, the Slytherins duplicate their play, this time Collier taking point with Spindler and Greene flanking. Once again, the Gryffindor chasers scrambled to find a chink in their armor without crash landing. "It seems the Gryffindors are trying a new tactic," said Diana. Lowry
and McKinley peeled away from the Slytherin chasers and James, who was still determinedly hunting the quaffle, and sped to the goal posts, each protecting a side hoop and both guarding the middle. James was gaining on the trio as they flew up to the hoops for neither of the bludgers were being pelted at him. But, in a matter of moments he knew why. James watched helplessly from behind as not one but both of the bludgers were hurled at McKinley, one clipping the bristles of his broom and the other missing him entirely because McKinley wildly swerved out of dodge. Greene split off to hold Lowry at bay while, in spite of James almost throwing himself off his broom to catch Collier, the Slytherin pitched the quaffle into the side hoop vacated by McKinley. "And Slytherin scores another ten points," said Diana, having to speak louder than normal to compensate for the thundering roar coming from the Slytherin seating, "being without a keeper is really hurting the Gryffindor team."

A small shrill whistle cut through the air as the teams began to rearrange after the goal. Jean looked up and saw that Greene had not yet released the smaller Lowry even after the points were scored. He held her by the back of her hood, causing the hole to cinch around her neck as she struggled to free herself. Before anyone had realized James was flying over he was already there. With a firm shove to the chest, James pushed Greene off his fellow player and pulled Lowry by her broomstick towards him. Jean heard Lily shift nervously in her seat as they watched her boyfriend glare at his opponent through his quidditch glasses. Like a pack of predatory animals sensing a fight, Rosky turned and began floating up to the opposing pair, his broad beaters bat swinging idly in his hands. Shortly after Sirius followed, shouldering up to James. In a chain reaction all the players began drifting into a ring until Madam Hooch darted into the middle of it all. The circle scattered. Jean saw Hooch's black-gloved hands directing the teams back to the center of the pitch. "It seems tempers and tensions are rising for it," said Finn, adding to Diana's earlier statement.

Jean settled back into her seat. "If Prongs doesn't throw a punch by the end of this match I'll eat my hat," said Peter behind Jean's shoulder.

"If Sirius doesn't throw a punch," answered Remus, "I'll eat it for you." Out of the corner of her eye Jean saw half of Lily's face steepled in her hands.

The teams reset themselves and when the quaffle came into play Greene snared it and rocketed to the ground. James Lowry and McKinley gave chase, the boys on the side since they could not be so easily pushed to the ground while Lowry flew above them all, using her slight frame to try to burrow into the center of the Slytherins and the quaffle. Even from the sizeable distance, Jean could hear the slap of Collier and Spindler's hands on Lowry's shin guards as they attempted to swat her away. "It seems that the Slytherin team seem intent on repeating their very effective play."

"Yes," agreed Diana, "but what are the Gryffindor beaters doing?" Jean sat up a little and saw Sirius and Miller flying closer together. She squinted and saw Sirius looking intently before nodding once and drifting away.

It was like Miller had dropped into next gear. He flattened himself onto his broom and urged it faster and forward, making his way over to Spindler and James, obviously battling for air space. Sirius drifted back and remained at that distance. Jean's eyes flicked toward the steel ball shooting through the air. Peet pursued it and fired it towards the aggressive Gryffindor beater.

"James move!" Sirius shouted.

James turned and braked so violently his body lurched as Miller turned and smoothly swatted the bludger, skimming over James' nose, not away from him but towards where James just was and where the Slytherin chasers were. They were like little green bowling pins tumbling over the ground.
In the pandemonium and picking up of broomsticks, Lowry plucked the quaffle and sped towards the Slytherin goal posts, soon followed by James and McKinley.

Brunswick who had not done a thing since the match began was not prepared for Lowry's quick arrival since she was unheeded by half her team still standing on the ground. With dust flying from the tails of her robes, Lowry triumphantly punched the quaffle through the hoop farthest from Brunswick.

"Gryffindor scores!" shouted Finn through the cheering crimson tide of Gryffindor supporters literally making waves in the stadium as they stood and applauded Lowry as she flew over them in a victory lap.

Once the Slytherins had chased down their brooms and ascended the match continued. "McKinley gains the quaffle," said Diana, "and he's off."

McKinley flew high and fast, enjoying the open air around him for the first time in the match. James flew slightly ahead of McKinley and Lowry slightly ahead of him. Like a relay race, McKinley passed the quaffle to James who passed it to Lowry and then back to McKinley whenever a Slytherin got close, fluidly weaving down the field. The momentum was soon lost when Greene who was flying close to the ground shot straight up towards the underside of McKinley just as the quaffle was passed to him again. The crowds let out a collective grunt when Greene collided with McKinley. The Gryffindor chaser dropped the quaffle and bowed over his broom caging his battered chest while Greene snatched the quaffle from the air and turned around. Lowry and James were too far away to pursue him, allowing Greene to score effortlessly. "Mr. Greene earns another ten points for Slytherin," said Finn, "they now lead thirty to ten."

The Slytherins returned to the center of the pitch but the Gryffindor players took their time. Even Kostova abandoned seeking out the snitch to drift over and inspect the pummeled player. McKinley brushed them all away but leaned heavily on his broomstick handle when he returned to his starting position. The laces of his quidditch robes had been loosened. Jean could see the purpling welts blossoming across his bronzed skin.

"Oh, this is a nightmare," Jean heard Alice say to no one in particular.

"But, why?" added Dorcas. "Slytherin always plays dirty but our team has always been able to handle it."

"They need a keeper," supplied Frank, "they can't focus on what's close to them and close to their hoops at the same time and their hurting for it. They can't play as aggressively as normal because there's no keeper watching their backs if a play falls through—"

"Slytherin scores."

The group groaned and glared daggers at Collier who spiraled away from the triad of white hoops glinting like glass in the afternoon sun. Remus ran his fingers through his sandy hair while Alice leaned her shoulder up against Frank.

"Can't they do anything?" said Peter, his hands bouncing on his jittering knees, "can't they use one of the chasers as a keeper or something?"

Remus shook his head. "Normally I'd say yes, but with the way the Slytherins are playing today the remaining two would be massacred."

"Look out!" someone cried out. Jean, Lily, the others, and everyone else behind or beside them
ducked, shielding their heads with their arms and anything else they could find as a bludger whizzed over them, so close Jean could hear a small screaming as the compact ball cut through the air.

Amidst the shrieking and squawking from the stadium seating the commentary carried on. "It seems Sirius Black is intent of removing the bludgers entirely from the match." Sirius flanked James as the two raced after Greene who had the quaffle pressed into his side. Every time a bludger came near Sirius he swung at it with both hands on his bat, sending it sailing towards the castle, forcing the Slytherin beaters to fly far and away if they wanted to use them. Sirius' face was set. He looked ready to beat the quaffle out of Spindler's hands if he had to, however James was more than prepared to beat him to it. Greene and James rocketed onward leaving the rest of their teams behind. Jean had seen Harry and Draco Malfoy get into some nasty mid-air brawls over a snitch, but never had she seen anything like this. James was practically climbing up Greene to wrestle the quaffle away all the while Greene batted at him with his arms and elbows to throw his off. James' athletic glasses had been knocked askew, one of the lenses twisting up onto his borrow. James' size and sheer determination eventually won out and after several seconds of struggling James wrenched the quaffle away to a triumphant cry from the Gryffindor stands.

Their cheers almost instantly transformed into gasps for James had barely flown away before Green lashed out, yanking his foot out of its stirrup and throwing off of his weight into a blow on James' shoulder. James cried out and dropped the quaffle. Spindler caught it as it descended and scored without much ceremony since the stadium was otherwise occupied. The Gryffindor side was sneering and jeering, some even standing up and shouting as James weaved almost drunkenly clutching his injured shoulder. The Slytherins did the same as Greene pinched his nose to stem the blow flow from where James, using his good arm, swung around and punched him square in the face. The only one silent that Jean could see was Lily. She had long since been watching the match through her fingers.

Madam Hooch corralled the players and drove them back to the center of the pitch. James experimentally rolled his shoulder and corrected his glasses. He nodded at Madam Hooch before she threw the quaffle up into the adolescents.

"The quaffle is once again in play…and once again Greene is in possession," Finn sounded none to pleased with what he was saying. "Greene is racing down the field. It seems he wants to solo the goal. Potter and McKinley are lagging behind as well, undoubtedly nursing their injuries. Greene is going for the hoops. He shoots and—"

Any shout or explicative Finn may have used was drowned out by similar expressions from both Slytherins and Gryffindors. Lowry had managed to fly ahead of Greene, looping around to the back of the goal posts and was behind them when Greene took his shot on goal. In a moment of semi-suicidal recklessness, Lowry leapt from her broom, her tiny frame propelling through the middle ring, and caught the quaffle before it passed through. As she fell with style, Lowry arched the quaffle back over her head with both hands and threw it over the stunned and somewhat impressed Slytherin chasers to McKinley who caught it only out of instinct.

At last Lily spoke, or rather screamed. "Don't just float there, you idiot, fly!"

McKinley's turn was the longest in human history but the race down the pitch was faster than sound. Revitalized by Lowry's acrobatic display, McKinley flew down the pitch. Sirius flanked him from below. The Gryffindors in the front seats leaned over the railing waving their banners and clapping their hands in encouragement.

"McKinley is going for the goal, but cane he make it past Brunswick?" shouted Diana, her voice
going shrill in her own excitement. McKinley screwed his face up in pain as he fired the quaffle from his hand towards the left hoop. Brunswick darted over, arms extended for the catch. But, McKinley's throw was not true and, in fact, was never meant to be so. James loitered just below them all, his injured arm still hugging his chest. When the quaffle came within range James skillfully hopped up from his broom and landed both feet on the stick, his weight caused the bushed end to quickly rise upwards. Like a pinball lever, the quaffle bounced off James' broom and arched over Brunswick's flailing hands into the unprotected right hoop.

"Potter scores! Potter scores for Gryffindor!"

The stadium exploded. One would have thought they'd just won the world cup rather than score only their second set of points in a school championship. James and McKinley hugged each other fiercely, clapping each other on the back and grinning like it was the greatest moment ever. Lowry bounced up and down on the end of Miller's broomstick, smiling and clapping her hands as Miller escorted her down to retrieve her broom.

The Gryffindor team was still cheering when the quaffle was returned to play. James seized it and began pushing forward, carefully moving the quaffle from under his injured arm to the other. Considering the Gryffindor chasers were now the walking wounded their passes were weaker than normal. One fell short and Collier caught it for Slytherin, doubling back before they got too far down the pitch. James, Lowry and McKinley had been punched, kicked and pushed to the ground so many times that day they did not have the collective strength for another barrage through Greene and Spindler to reach Collier, which resulted in Collier reaching the Gryffindor goal posts relatively unchallenged. Collier aimed and took a shot on the center hoop. A foreign, hollow thunk reverberated around the stadium followed by a familiar cry of outrage from the Slytherins. Miller had moved in front of the Gryffindor goal posts and, with his bat, whacked the quaffle away from its intended target to McKinley.

The entire Slytherin team did not care or even acknowledge McKinley moving down the field or the subsequent goal he scored. They all surrounded Madame Hooch, pointing sharply at Miller, who still lingered near the hoops.

"Excuse me," Diana's voice echoed out over the populous. Jean turned and saw that Diana had propped a thin, vibrantly green book up against the commentator's box, hurriedly thumbing through the pages. She held a certain spot with her finger and produced a set of glasses with blue tinted lenses so large and round they covered her eyes, her brow, and her upper cheek. Jean grinned at the very Luna-like behavior. "According to the Laws of Quidditch set by Kenilworthy Whisp," read Diana, "a beater may substitute for the keeper if the keeper is absent from the match, the quaffle is in play inside the scoring area where keeper privileges would normally be enacted, and if the beater only uses his bat to interact with the quaffle."

Madame Hooch nodded in agreement, having bookmarked the same passage in her own little, black rulebook, showing it to the swarm of Slytherins that surrounded her. "Given than all the criteria has been met," concluded Diana, "the play and more importantly Mr. McKinley's points are valid."

Jean laughed into her hand when she saw the looks on the Slytherin team's faces when they realized they had practically giftwrapped McKinley's goal. Rosky, venting his frustration, struck a bludger on his way back to the center of the pitch straight into the ground, leaving a pockmark in earth when the bludger buzzed away.

For a while, the game stagnated. Gryffindor, still being one player short and moving towards exhaustion held their own, and Slytherin not being able to extort the Gryffindor team being
keeperless held theirs, neither making much headway over the other. Jean relaxed into her seat, crossing her legs and lacing her fingers in her lap. Lily uncurled herself from the ball she had twisted herself into and chatted with Remus and Peter. Alice played with the cuff of Frank's shirt and Frank smiled softly, rubbing his thumb over her fingers. Even Diana and Finn had calmed down, waiting for either Regulus or Kostova to bring some inevitable excitement to the game. Rather than remove them entirely, Diana had pushed her glasses to the top of her head. From a distance, Jean thought they looked like teal mouse ears. "Lily," said Jean, "I have a question. Is Diana Wickerbee dating anyone?"

Lily screwed her mouth up, clearly digging through the filing cabinet in her brain. "Yes," she said. "He was a Ravenclaw, but he's much older and graduated a long time ago. He had a very odd name, but for the life of me I can't remember it. I never paid much attention to them. Why?"

Jean casually shrugged her shoulders. "No reason." Jean glanced up at the sky. "Spindler has the quaffle again," she sighed.

"Joseph will get it," interjected Remus. "He's been very good at this impromptu position of his."

The two teams twisted and weaved through each other like a living kaleidoscope, chasing or protecting Spindler who was quickly moving down the field. Miller waited for him, testing his bat it his hands. Spindler smirked at him and Miller returned it. Spindler cocked his arm back and launched the quaffle, but the crimson sphere was not the first to reach Miller. Not one, but both Slytherin beaters had tracked down a bludger and shot it at Miller in time with Spindler releasing the quaffle. Jean clapped her hand over her mouth as she watched Miller repel one of the bludgers, but was unable to bring his bat around in time for the second. In connected to his head with a crunch. Miller crumpled like all the bones in his body had dissolved and he slipped off his broom, the quaffle whooshing through the hoop just above his limp, falling form.

There was a shriek and suddenly everyone was in motion. Sirius dived and caught Miller's body, slowing down their fall. Both landed roughly on the sand beneath the goal posts. Sirius' broom was pinned underneath his back while Miller's broom tumbled down on top of them. James was on the ground in an instant and pulled Miller off Sirius. When James' hand came away Jean saw blood. Madam Hooch and the rest of the Gryffindor team descended in seconds, clustering into a tight crowd. The Slytherins remained in the air, stretching their strained muscles during the stoppage. Teachers soon began to swarm the pitch as well, McGonagall leading the way, one hand holding her large hat on her head, the other holding her rippling dark green robes out of the way of her feet. Professors Kinshield, Flitwick, Sprout and Slughorn came huffing and puffing behind her, but somehow Dumbledore and managed to beat them all and was already gently inspecting his student by the time they arrived. Jean did not see any of this. Her back was bent towards her knees and her face was hidden. She wrapped her arms around her shoulders in attempt to still the steady stream of tremors passing through her body. She did not want this to be the second time she watched a dead body being carted off the quidditch field.

A stretcher was conjured and Miller was eased onto it. Flitwick and Slughorn held it suspended in the air. As they removed themselves from the pitch, McGonagall took out a handkerchief and dabbed it on Miller's ears. Shortly after they disappeared a sound similar to a megaphone being turned on echoed around the arena. "I have just been informed by Headmaster Dumbledore," said Finn, "that Mr. Miller has a fractured skull and a concussion, but is now in the care of Madam Pomphrey and is not in danger of any serious harm."

Jean let out a breath and only then realized she had been holding it.

Finn's next words seem to have had been pulled from his mouth. "Play will resume, minus the
The Gryffindor side moaned, groaned and protested, but nothing could be helped. Quidditch could not be delayed, quidditch could not be cancelled and to forfeit now would be to lose the entire season. James bent down and extended his hand, pulling Sirius to his feet.

The Slytherins smelled blood in the water and relentlessly pursued it. On the now rare occasion that Gryffindor was in possession of the quaffle the Slytherin chasers assaulted them. As much as Sirius tried to help them he was helpless. Wherever he flew, Rosky was there, hovering around him like an incessant gnat. Sirius could barely see what was going on and couldn't get to a bludger before Rosky batted it away, allowing Peet to accost the Gryffindor chasers with bludger after bludger until they lost the quaffle.

Sirius by then had resorted to physically shielding James and the other chasers as they moved up and down the pitch. But, Rosky was still there, dancing around the Gryffindor's densely packed bastion of defense. Suddenly, Rosky yelled and spun away from Sirius, clutching his mouth and nose, blood pouring out through his knuckles. A long, tired whistle rang out and Madam Hooch drifted over, giving Sirius a look. Sirius did not look remotely apologetic, but spoke so sweetly his worlds could have been strung sugar. "I'm sorry Madam Hooch," said Sirius loudly enough for everyone to hear, "I thought Rosky's head was a bludger."

Collier was allowed a free shot on goal. Both sides applauded: Slytherins for the ten points and Gryffindors for the merited action that lead to them.

"Slytherin scores," said Finn, his voice monotone.

"Slytherin leads seventy to thirty," Diana finished. Both commentators settled back into their seats for the remainder of this long and punishing match.

And long and punishing it was. The sun was setting into the lake. The dying light and lengthening shadows dyed the Gryffindor uniforms black and Slytherin's a deep wine purple. Not a Gryffindor player remained unscathed. Even Kostova had a bludger shot at her when she flew too close to Peet, causing Sirius to bloody up his second Slytherin beater for the day. But, by comparison to their seeker the rest of the Gryffindor team looked half dead. The chasers had an uncountable number of scrapes, bruises and bumps. James had cracked his quidditch glasses, making him fly crooked sometimes. Visibly the worst was a long gash on McKinley's hairline when he was forcibly crashed into the seating and knocked his head against a bleacher. He refused to bow out of the match to get it treated. It had now scabbed over and he was rubbing it constantly. Sirius looked on par to when Jean first saw him in the Shrieking Shack during her third year; gaunt and grim with a headful of matted hair. He sported a set of bruised knuckles and had taken a bludger to the back, which scared Jean to death. He now flew stiffly and didn't raise his bat as high as he once did.

Nobody was enjoying the game anymore. Lily had propped her head in her hand and stared at the slats below her. "Just catch the snitch," she repeated over and over, "just let it be over before anything else happens."

Even the commentators were giving a lackluster performance "And after Greene's latest goal," said Finn drolly, drumming his fingers on the side of his head, "Slytherin leads two hundred to Gryffindor's sixty." Finn practically sighed out his words. "The teams have returned to their starting positions. Madame Hooch has the quaffle. The quaffle is up and—"

"The snitch!"

An electric current passed through the crowds as they followed Diana's wildly pointing finger.
Even the remaining quidditch players remained immobile, only capable of staring as Kostova and Regulus Black dove out of the coral colored sky, the little golden ball, holding the last of the day's light, pumping its thin wings frantically in front of them. Jean watched them both throw their hands out and knock each other's away. The snitch turned erratically and the seekers' bodies slammed up against each other, both refusing to give way. "They're neck and neck," said Diana, bouncing on the balls of her feet as she spoke, "and the snitch is still trying to make one last escape."

It was like Diana's words gave it an idea. The snitch veered to the left, its pair of pursuers relentlessly following. The snitch slipped between the beams of the Slytherin side of the stadium, disappearing underneath it. Regulus shoved Kostova sharply in the shoulder, gaining a little bit of a lead as he chased his prize though a larger gap. Kostova scowled and flattened herself on her broom as she followed. "I've never seen anything like this ladies and gentlemen," said Finn, his dynamic voice returned, "this fight for the snitch is taking place underneath the seating."

Jean stood up, desperately trying to see and saw Gryffindors and Slytherins doing the same. She even spied some students bending down, attempting to see the action through the gaps in the boards. An ominous crack of wood on wood tremored through the air. Kostova rolled out from underneath the other side of the seating onto the edge of the pitch, her splintered broom slipping out from between her legs. Her body was curled up on itself, her face hidden. Everyone's gaze followed Regulus as he roared into the air.

"Merlin, I don't believe it." Only Jean turned to look at Finn. Both he and Diana were standing and looking down, not up, their jaws slowly dropping. Jean and gradually everybody else looked disbelievingly at Kostova prostrate in the dirt, the battered little snitch beating against her fingers.

Diana jumped into the air. "Kostova's got the snitch!"

There was a silence and the whole world seemed to take a breath. Then jubilation.

Jean thought she'd go deaf. Everyone around her was in motion. Alice, Marlene, Dorcas and Mary were hugging each other, smiling to the point of tears, as they celebrated where they stood. Remus and Frank whooped and whistled, slapping each other on the back. Jean found herself being swallowed in an embrace by Lily and Peter. She wrapped her arms around them both grinning until she felt her face breaking. Diana and Finn were about to leap out of the commentator's box from excitement. "I don't believe it," Finn repeated. "They did it! Gryffindor won the quidditch cup by ten points!" Diana was beyond words. She was practically dancing and hugging every human she came across.

James and Sirius flew wildly to Kostova, stumbling to the ground, laughing and sobbing at the same time. They about crushed her with love as they hugged her and each other at the same time. Lowry glided in and threw herself around Kostova's neck causing them to stumble. When McKinley slammed into them they fell over into a jumble of arms and legs. They didn't care, for one perfect moment they lay there together staring up at the first winkings of stars.

James and Sirius scooped Kostova up onto their shoulders, who was still holding the snitch, now waving it over her head, and paraded her out of the stadium. The rest of the team members followed as well as the entire Gryffindor house and most Hufflepuffs and Ravenclaws. "Let's go," said Lily, nudging Jean and they spilled out into the exodus.

The column of students marched from the quidditch pitch, hooping and hollering all the way to the Gryffindor Tower. They even picked up Miller and Harris from the hospital wing along the way, bandages, bucket and all. The Fat Lady folded her hands as they approached. "Password?" she asked, smiling daintily, no doubt the news spreading from portrait to portrait.
"Victorious champions," cried James, inciting another calamitous symphony of noise from the students behind him.

Much to their surprise the portrait hole sung open. McGonagall was standing in the threshold looking prim and proper as always. Kostova shimmied off of James and Sirius' shoulders to stand on the ground. "Professor?" she asked.

The Deputy Headmistress gave a rare smile and swept her arm behind her. "Congratulations," she said proudly, "and have fun." McGonagall must have emptied out the entirety of Honeydukes and deposited in her house's common room. Piles of innumerable sweets and snacks spilled over the sofa seats and collected on the floor. Near the stairs were boxes upon boxes of butterbeer neatly stacked almost to the ceiling. In the middle of it all, set magnificently in the center of the coffee table was the large, silver quidditch cup gleaming in the firelight.

Jean and Lily filed into the space halfway through the flood. Already bottles were opened and butterbeer was spilling onto the carpet. There was a constant crackle of wrappers being unraveled and bags being torn open. Music played from seemingly everywhere. Clusters of students were packed in small schools joking, gossiping and exchanging thrills and chills from the bombastic match. Miller and Harris though slightly white-washed were grinning like madmen from their seats by the fireplace surrounded by Jean's roommates, catching them up on every minute thing they missed. Lowry sat on a stool between the pair, stretching her back against the relaxing heat of the flames, wrapping a sheer orange piece of plastic around her fingers. McKinley had his arm tossed over Kostova's shoulder, plopping Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans into his mouth. Across from them Remus leaned against the mantle smiling pleasantly, the crescent moon highlighting the hints of silver in his hair. Peter was sitting cross-legged on the ground in front of him chasing down a chocolate frog. All were looking up at James and Sirius who were standing on the coffee table chugging butterbeer, each holding one handle of the quidditch cup.

"Lily," called out James, passing the cup to Lowry and McKinley. "Lily."

Lily and Jean moved in front of the coffee table. "You called Mr. Potter," said Lily coyly, crossing her arms.

"Lily, I have to tell you something." James extended his hand in an attempt to pull Lily onto the top of the table.

"I'm not getting up there James Potter," said Lily.

"Come on Lily-Flower, please," said James, extending his vowels. "I have to tell you up here."

Lily shook her head, smiling sweetly and gave James her hand. She let out a small yelp of surprise as James swiftly pulled her up on the table. Lily didn't get a word in edgewise before James lowered his mouth on hers. For a moment, Lily's eyes were as wide as saucers before she closed them and deepened the kiss, running her hands through James' jagged forest of hair. Her foot came up in a little pop.

Sirius whistled and clapped along with the rest of the student body as James dipped the love of his life and she smiled against his lips each holding each other as if in their own little world. Jean locked eyes with Sirius and his clapping slowed. His eyes were filled with such warmth and laughter that Jean sometimes still couldn't get used to. Jean thought she'd never see such a thing when she first met him all those years again and here it was as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

She bit the corner of her lip. She wasn't going to waste any more time. Not where he was
concerned. Not when it was about this. "Sirius," she said so that only he could hear. He nodded once. "I believe you promised me that one day you'd kiss me in front of the entire school."

Jean saw Sirius' mouth part slightly, understanding instantly. He cocked his head a little. "You sure?" he said just as quietly.

Jean nodded, a warm flower blossoming on her lips and from the center of her chest. "Yes."

Subtlety, she extended her hand.

Within the same motion Sirius swooped her up to his level and kissed her hard. For the second time in Jean's life she felt fireworks explode around her.

It was only after that Jean and Sirius broke apart that they heard the serenade for them. James reached over and pulled Sirius into a one armed hug and Jean blushed, smiling into Sirius' chest, feeling his arms hold her comfortably close. She glanced around, a dimple indenting her cheek when she saw Marlene grinning like a Cheshire and pulling everyone within arm's reach to tell them she had known it all along. Jean felt Lily shift and press a few fingers into her palm. Jean closed her hand around them and squeezed.

The portrait hole once again swung open and the room quieted. Jean lifted her head slightly from Sirius' chest, wondering if Professor McGonagall had come back to say they were having too much fun. Frank and Alice were standing there, holding hands. Their smiling faces were flushed and shining with tears. Jean heard both Lily and herself gasp when Alice raised her hand, a diamond ring glittering on a very important finger. "We're getting married!" As the celebrations turned towards the newly engaged couple and Jean watched James and Lily leap down from their perch, James shaking Frank's hand vigorously, Lily along with the rest of Jean's roommates, hugging the life out of Alice, and felt Sirius' laughter through his chest as his cheek came to a rest on the top of her head, Jean could not recall a time, either here or as Hermione that she'd ever been happier.

But, the smiles died after everyone drifted off to their own dormitories for bed and after Jean had kissed Sirius soundly of the staircase. Alone in the confines of her crimson bed curtains with only the light breaths of surrounding slumberers for company, Jean felt a cold, creeping dread seize at her spine, drill into her heart and freeze it, bring a stutter to her breath. When she closed her eyes she could see it, when she pressed her hands over her ears she could hear it, and all through Jean's sleepless night the boggart in the empty bedroom taking the slender, shadowy form of Lord Voldemort repeated his message: "I'm here, Hermione Granger. I'm already here."
First Strike

Chapter 16: First Strike

As Jean had worried the gossip about she and Sirius spread like a stomach virus, but as Alice had promised everyone got over it in forty-eight hours. Everyone her age smile contentedly at her for having settled down the school bad boy and everyone younger than her smiled wistfully at her having settled down with the school bad boy. Even Regulus Black regarded her more closely now, tilting his head curiously whenever they crossed paths in the corridor. The only person who continued to be scandalized was Narcissa-soon-to-be-Malfoy.

Sirius tersely folded up his copy of the Daily Prophet into a small square and flicked it with his forefinger to the center of the long Gryffindor table in the Great Hall. "If I have to read one more article about Narcissa's wedding to Lucius Malfoy," he huffed, "I'm never reading The Prophet again."

"It's worse in Witch Weekly," sighed Jean, who had already given up on her Saturday morning read. "When the wedding is, where the wedding is, what she's wearing to the wedding, the flowers, the cake, the people, the pedigree of her pureblood family. On and on and on."

"It'll be over by the end of summer," commented Remus worming his way past Peter's arm to reach the butter and jam, "by then I'm sure they'll have found something else to fuss over."

Just then James and Lily entered the Great Hall and gravitated over to their friends. Jean nudged Sirius over so Lily could sit down beside her, while James plopped himself down beside Remus with a very dramatic, very contented sigh and scooped himself some porridge.

"You're very chipper this morning," said Sirius.

"He's still crowing about his shiny new plaque in the Trophy Room," supplied Lily, pouring herself a large cup of tea.

"Quidditch Captain of the Decade," said James proudly for about the hundredth time since Dumbledore had presented him the award barely a week after Gryffindor had won the quidditch cup, "not too shabby if I do say so myself, no too shabby at all."

"How could they not give it to you, Prongs," said Sirius cheekily, both playing along and egging his best friend on, "since you became captain in our fifth year we haven't lost a match."

"Sirius, dear," said Lily wearily, holding her tea as if it could cure a long and tiresome headache. "I know you're on the team too, and it really is a wonderful achievement, but do you have to puff him up so much? I'm the one who shares a living space with him now."

"Only for a few more weeks," answered Sirius, "and then is back to Godric's Hollow for the both of us."

Their conversation was unceremoniously interrupted by a tawny spotted owl crash landing into a bowl of scrambled eggs in front of them.

"What the—" exclaimed Sirius, while both women beside him pushed themselves away from the table. James, now significantly deflated, brushed eggs off his front while Remus grabbed the bird by the ankles and endeavored to rescue the face planted owl, which was all the while hooting indignantly and flapping its molting wings about.
"Look," said Peter, "its got a letter." Peter reached out and snared the letter tied around the owl's leg as Remus righted it.

The owl hopped around the table, its claws clattering against the wood, before it stopped in front of Sirius, its round, dark eyes blinking expectantly. "Go on," said Sirius, brushing the owl away. "Shoo." The owl puffed its ruffled feathers as if offended before snagging the remnants of Sirius' bacon as payment before it flew away, sprinkling the air with yellow fluffs of egg yolk.

"Padfoot," said Peter after they all watched the owl's inglorious departure, "it's for you." Peter passed Sirius a thick, ivory envelope sealed with a glob of black wax. Sirius' name flowed across the front in elegant calligraphy.

"Maybe it's an invitation to your cousin's wedding," joked Remus as Sirius broke the seal.

Sirius let out a bark like laugh. "If it's anything of the sort," he said, unfolding the contents, "it'll be a howler threatening me not to come within a hundred miles of the location."

Sirius' face suddenly sobered and silently he thumbed through the pages. His eyes widened and he released his breath. "Sirius?" said Jean, touching his shoulder.

"What is it," asked James, becoming serious as well.

"My uncle Alphard died," stated Sirius, monotone, his eyes still going over the lengthy document.

"Oh, I'm sorry Sirius," said Remus, "were you close?"

"Not particularly," replied Sirius, finally looking up, confusion still etched on his face, "which is why I'm so surprised."

"Why?" asked Lily.

"He left me money."

"Well, that was nice of him—"

But Sirius cut James off. "A lot of money, James."

Jean peeked over Sirius' shoulder and felt her jaw drop when she saw the sum at the bottom of the letter. "Oh, Sirius," she breathed.

James tugged at Sirius' letter and his limp fingers relinquished it. Sirius' hands fell into his lap and Jean reached over and rested a hand on top of his. "Sirius," said James looking up at his friend, "this is enough money to buy a house."


"Sirius," continued James, a smile stretching his lips. "This is wonderful. This—this is miraculous. I mean think about it. You don't have to worry about what happens after we graduate. You'll be an independent man. We can start auror training and you won't have to take jobs on the side, which may slow you down. Sirius, this will give you everything you ever wanted."

Sirius' stunned brain seemed to catch up with James' train of thought. Slowly, Sirius met James' eyes. "James," said Sirius softly, as if he could barely say the words, lest they shatter into nothingness between them. "We're going to be aurors together."
Jean smiled and Lily laughed as they watched the two men in their life stand up and hug each other from across the table, the letter containing Sirius' bequeathment fluttering down between them. "Today's the last Hogsmeade trip of the school year," said James pulling away slightly, but still holding onto Sirius' shoulders. "We should go and celebrate."

Sirius nodded, unable at the moment to form a coherent sentence.

"When?" asked Remus, speaking on behalf of Sirius.

"Now," said James, "right now, unless you want to finish breakfast." He casually indicated to their section of the table, lightly feathered and in disarray.

Jean laughed and nodded in agreement and began pushing herself away from the table. However, her action was completed by Sirius, who had regained his faculties and scooped her up so enthusiastically that he spun her around in a small circle. Sirius kissed her soundly before she felt the soles of her feet touch the ground.

Sirius' smile was dazzling, literally dazzling. A divot formed in his cheek Jean had never seen before and the starlight in his eyes gathered together to make a sun. "Do you know what this means?" he asked, cupping Jean's face with his hands.

"What?" asked Jean. The tips of her fingers skirted over his knuckles.

Sirius didn't say anything. He bent down and kissed her again, but he didn't wrap himself around her as he did before. Instead her kissed her solemnly, reverently, hardly moving his lips at all, but for Jean, the action was just as intense as his highest of passions. Sirius pulled away and Jean inhaled the heat of their shared breaths. "Everything," he said, brushing the slope of her hair across her forehead, "everything I ever wanted." Sirius straightened and gave her a slightly wolfish grin that showcased his more casual elegance. "And what I want most right now," he announced, "is to take my charming," Sirius pecked her on the forehead, "beautiful," left cheek, "girlfriend," right cheek, "out to lunch."

"Sirius, you don't need to pay for me," protested Jean lightly.

"Ah," but I can," said Sirius linking her arm with his, "so I will."

By the time Jean's group spilled out of the castle they were the last of the stragglers headed for Hogsmeade. Jean didn't mind though, it made the walk more leisurely in contrast to bumping into bustling students racing for the latest deals at Zonko's or the best seats that The Three Broomsticks.

Spring was courting with summer and the pastel flowers ladened the air with a blend of overripe scents, their thin petals curling outwards before being pushed off their green twigs by the buddings of leaves, creating the illusion of snow in pale blues, white washed purples and faint blushings of pink. Jean inhaled, holding the honeysuckle and sunshine deep within her lungs. She leaned against the warm robes on Sirius' shoulder, curling her fingers against his palm and looked out over the lake, glittering like a freshly cut sapphire. First and second years gathered in little groups along the shore rolling up their pant legs and wading into the crisp, clear water splashing, skipping stones and searching for mermaids. Their laughter was like little bells.

"It'll be strange after we graduate," Jean commented casually. "Hogwarts has always seemed like a second home for me."

Jean felt Sirius shoulder shift under her ear. "Has it?"
Jean stiffened slightly and swiftly amended her statement. "That is, ever since I moved here, of course."

Sirius' hand found its way to the small of her back. "I understand what you mean," he said. "Hogwarts has always been where my family truly is. It'll be strange not living under the same roof anymore."

"Hogwarts has been the only place where I could truly be myself," added Lily, overhearing the couple's dialogue from a few paces back. "At my parent's house, I always have to...hide; pretend that I'm like everyone else around me. I don't know when it happened, but one day going to where I grew up felt like going away and coming back here felt like coming home."

Jean twisted and looked behind her. "What are you thinking about doing once we graduate?"

Lily laced her fingers together, looking pleased with herself. "Alice and I are applying to St. Mungo's to be healers. Alice is excellent at Herbology and I've always been good at Potions, so we thought it was a good fit."

Jean smiled, turning her head even more to look at Peter. He had undone some of the fastenings on his outer robes and was in the process of loosening his tie. "What about you, Peter," she asked pleasantly, "what are your plans?"

Two pinpoints of color reddened his cheeks. He rolled a pebble underneath his shoe. "I have a few positions that I'm looking into. I'm on the lower end of the qualifications, but I think I have a shot."

"That's wonderful, Wormtail," said James, reaching past Lily to clap Peter on the shoulder. "What jobs do you have lined up?"

Peter shrugged his shoulders. "Oh, this and that," he said vaguely, "although, my mum keeps telling me I should take over her business so she can enjoy an early retirement, but I keep telling her I don't have to disposition to be a shop keeper. So, we'll see."

Jean nodded encouragingly at Peter before turning her head to Remus, who was strolling on her other side, hands in his pockets, looking out over the lake. "Remus?" she asked, the unsaid question hanging in the air.

The werewolf made a noncommittal grunt. "I supposed I'll just wander around until I find someone who'll hire me."

Jean chewed on her lower lip, recalling her shabbily dressed professor sleeping in a train car, too afraid to keep a job he enjoyed, too afraid to fall in love, too afraid to be normal when he could be extraordinary. "You could always teach."

Jean watched Remus cater the suggestion, fantasize over it. "It's too risky," he said wistfully.

"More risky than it is right now?" said James.

Remus huffed, his fingers forming fists in his pockets. "I don't want to talk about this right now."

"I think it's high time we should," said Sirius, refusing to drop the subject. "Dumbledore would help you if you asked."

Remus raked a hand through his sandy hair. "I'm not asking Dumbledore for anything else, not after everything he's already done for me." Remus let out a long sigh. "I don't want anyone's charity, just because of what I am."
"It's not charity if you deserve it," said Sirius gently. "You're an accomplished wizard. You deserve to do what you want with your life and there are people that want that for you."

"But a lot less people than the ones who won't want a werewolf in their place of work!"

The only sound that cut through that silence was the bell like laughter from half the lake away. Remus pinched the bridge of his nose and closed his eyes, his nostrils flaring. "Look," he said, the softness of his speech trying to soothe the sharpness in his voice. "I worry about this enough without the lot of you ganging up on me. I'll handle this as I've always handled it."

There wasn't much else to be said, but before the conversation turned Jean said it. "All the same," she stated, "If nothing else mattered, I think you'd be very good at it, Professor Lupin." No one else could see it because they weren't close enough, but underneath his steepled fingers Remus smiled.

Sirius whistled low, garnering everyone's attention. "Everybody's here," aren't they?" From their place at the crest of a hill, the small hamlet was bursting at the seams. Blockades of students milling in the streets and meandering outside shops made the narrow roads nearly impassable. Frazzled locals pushed and shoved through their daily routines, no doubt eagerly awaiting the summer weather heralding the reduction of their weekend populous.

The Marauders, Lily and Jean threaded their way through the throngs of congestion, repeatedly knocked into and jostled by the general hubbub. "This is ridiculous," grumbled Lily, who had nearly lost James so many times she latched herself onto the sleeve of his robes. "I vote we go swimming with the first years."

"Maybe since its such nice weather everyone is outside," responded James, trying to be hopefully optimistic. His attitude was not rewarded. The Three Broomsticks was more crowded than Jean had ever seen. Not a seat inside wasn't taken and a line of students trailed out the door and loitered in the lane. The six students pressed themselves to the sun baked bricks, trying desperately not to get trampled.

"Frank, Alice and the others are in there," commented Peter who had his face pressed to the glass. Jean peered in over Peter's shoulder and spied Alice sitting at a large table near the back wall. Her engagement ring glittered on the hand that rested on Frank's. Both them and Dorcas and Mary were laughing at Marlene who was speaking animatedly, pausing only to sip on a shockingly green drink served in a tall and twisted glass.

"Maybe we can use Sirius' new found fortune to buy their table from them," said Remus teasingly.

"I don't think I have that much of a new found fortune," replied Sirius.

"Well, we can't just stand here," huffed Lily, disentangling herself from the baggage of a passerby. "Let's just go somewhere else. How about the Hog's Head?"

James turned and looked at Lily incredulously. "Who goes to the Hog's Head?"


"Let's try a middle ground then," offered up Remus. "How about Madam Puddifoot's? Even if it's crowded it's got to be better than this." He jerked his thumb over his shoulder at the barely controlled chaos behind him. The group nodded in agreement and began pushing their way through the current of people towards the side street that housed the café.

"Have you ever been to Madam Puddifoot's?" asked Sirius casually, holding onto the hem of Jean's
robes to keep them from being separated.

"I don't think so," said Jean, truly unable to recall if she had visited in the present or exclusively in the future.

"You'll like it," he said. "It's very…couple-ly."

"Couple-ly?" said Jean, chuckling slightly at Sirius' invented word. "Well then," she laced her hand with his, feeling his family ring wedged between the apex of her third and fourth finger, "you should have taken me sooner." Jean reached, almost getting to the tips of her toes and planted a small kiss on the underside of his jaw.

Madam Puddifoot's sequestered restaurant had changed little over twenty years. The naked slats of the walls were covered in pictures of couples in pristine locations, waving at customers and leaning languidly against their ornate golden frames. The chandeliers were layered with ribbons and wreaths of flowers that matched the season. Today, a crisp, clean white. The round tables were covered with spreads of delicate lace topped with centerpieces of small ceramic vases stuffed with pink flowers or small candles nestled in glass dishes, depending on the time of day. A flustered witch weaved and bobbed through the intimate setting, flyaways of slivery blonde hair coming out of the bun on the back of her head, greeted them at the door. "Good afternoon, everyone," said the witch pleasantly despite her tiredness, "how many today?"

"Six," said James, attempting to keep the door from shutting on himself while trying to wriggle his way around it.

The witch tucked a strand of her hair behind her ear and pocketed her wand in her floral apron before settling her hand on her hips as she scanned for available seating. Her eyebrows lifted. "You're in luck," she said, "a group of students just left, so you can have that table by the window there." She pointed the table out and stepped aside to allow her patrons pass before following them. Sirius allowed Jean to slide into the chair closest to the window, James doing the same with Lily on the opposite side. Remus and Peter took the remaining chairs at the end. Once settled, their waitress pulled out a pad of paper and her wand. "What can I get you?"

"Just a pot of tea for now," said Lily, trying to be as easy as possible for the overstretched server.

The witch smiled. "Of course."

Jean watched the witch bustle away. The casual conversation washed over and around her, but she did not dive into it. Drifting in her own thoughts she turned and looked through the thick panes of the window. A group of students were clustered together, licking stacked scoops of swirled ice cream, shopping bags swinging from the ends of their arms as they walked. A young mother pointed out something to her friend through a shop window. Her child twisted and turned in her arms, its short pudgy fingers reaching for a grimy cat that climbed up a drainpipe. An older man shuffled out of a blue door and watered the plants potted in wooden barrels with his wand. "So you never told us."

Jean turned back to her company. "Hmm?"

"You never told us," repeated Remus, "what were you planning on to do after you graduated?"

"Oh," said Jean. She thought she had told them this before, but then she recalled it was only Sirius she'd had this conversation with and she hadn't told him much of anything either, save for attempting to free the entire house elf staff of Hogwarts. "Well, umm." Jean trailed off.
"You told me that you'd like to have a position in magical law," supplied Sirius, "and fight for oppressed magical groups. Right?"

"Ever the fighter, aren't you, Jean?" said Peter jokingly.

Jean nodded once. "Ever the fighter," she agreed.

"Is that something you still want to do, Jean?" asked Lily. "So much has changed for you over this past year, nobody would be surprised if what you wanted to spend your life doing has changed as well."

Jean didn't know how to answer them. It had been so long now since she'd thought of something so normal as what she would do after she graduated. For so long now, her thoughts about the future were to live long enough to see Voldemort defeated, to live to see the next sunrise. Even in the present time Jean lived from moment to moment, hiding who she really was and waiting for that charade to be shattered, as it had already been. But, that wasn't living, that was surviving. For the first time, Jean understood why Harry pushed away from his fame, both from being The Boy Who Lived and all his subsequent spectacular achievements. After a lifetime of fighting, surviving, Harry didn't want to do anything particularly momentous with his life. He just wanted to live it. And now, so did she; she wanted to eat ice cream on a summer afternoon, she wanted to do window shopping with her friends and have a child giggle and coo at strange cats. Her eyes flicked from one friend to the other. Even though they could not replace Ron and Harry and everyone from their future, they had returned to her what and whom she had lost. In this moment, even if it was a very ordinary moment, Jean wanted to hold onto them and all they represented for as long as she could.

"I want to keep potted plants on my stoop," Jean replied.

Lily, along with everyone else gave her strange looks. "Potted plants? I don't understand."

"Our lives are on the edge of endless opportunities. As to what I want to do with them? Well, we'll see what sticks."

"That's a very positive outlook, Jean," said James.

Jean smiled and cupped the hand Sirius rested on her knee. "I prefer the term hopeful."

"Here's your tea, dears," said the witch waitress, levitating six mismatched saucers and cups in the air while holding the teapot by the handle. "Nice and hot for you." The cups floated down in front of each respective student. Remus took the teapot and poured some of the steaming liquid for himself before passing it to Sirius. "Can I get you anything for lunch?" asked the witch.

"I'll have a turkey sandwich," said Remus, holding the small cup in both hands, "and a salad, please."

The witch tapped her pad of paper with her wand and Remus' order wrote itself down in thin bubbly handwriting. "And for you?" she said, looking over at Peter.

"I'll have that pasta special. You know, the one with the tiny mushrooms—" A sharp clatter cut Peter off midsentence and he and the rest of the table looked down at Jean. She let the teapot drop to the table, a stream of tea spilling over her cup into the saucer and onto the table. The lid softly rattled in its socket from her trembling hands.

"Jean?" said Sirius, leaning towards her. "Are you alright? Did it burn you?" But Jean couldn't hear anything beyond her own heartbeat.
They came like a storm cloud, ominous, but unseen, replacing early summer's warmth with a
deadly chill that shuddered Jean's breath and spread, like an ever expanding stain, shadowing the
bright pallet of color before Jean's eyes with their black robes barely moving about them. "No,"
whispered Jean, still and unblinking. "No." One turned to the window and the cozy world she had
built behind it. Underneath the hood, their mask glowed with an unnatural light of pale, sickly,
silver. The Death Eater raised their wand.

"Get down!" Jean felt a hand seize her shoulder and pull her down, forcing her to duck underneath
the table; the arm attached to said hand covered her face and limbs. The window exploded above
her and showered them in particles of broken glass. The blast had completely destroyed the large
window and smashed into the back wall, creating a large burn mark and knocking most of the wall
hangings loose. Dust from the rafters fluttered down from above, blanketing the room with an ashy
grey. Outside other windows were blasted open, the destroyed remnants of what was inside littered
the streets. People tripped over each other trying to protect themselves and the blue painted door
was knocked off its hinges.

Without a moment's pause, Jean clumsily heaved herself through the obliterated window and
stumbled onto the cobble-stoned street. She took aim at the retreating dark figure. "Petrificus
Totalus!" The Death Eater stiffened and fell onto his back with a thump. Jean kept going, stepping
over the Death Eater's frozen form.

One of the fallen Death Eater's compatriots heard the commotion behind him and turned around.
Even though his face was completely covered Jean could see his scowl through his voice. "Now,
just who do you think you are, girl?"

Jean didn't even merit the Death Eater's jab with a response, raising her wand smoothly.
"Incendio!"

More prepared, the Death Eater dodged Jean's spell, his black cloak getting clipped by the beam
that zoomed past him. Circlets of smoke spiraled upward from his singed hem, warm embers still
worming their way through the fabric.

The Death Eater snarled and Jean stepped back, bracing herself for a block. "Rictusempra!
Crepitus!Crucio!"

Jean leaned her weight into the magical shield before her, turning away from the vibrant splashes
of light and color fanning out around her like a series of paint splatters. Jean felt her wrist bend
under the magical blows and wrapped her fingers around the joint to bolster it before she finally
felt the energy of the attack wane. Skillfully, spinning out of the Death Eater's line of fire, she
leveled her wand, a spell just behind her lips.

"Bombarda!" The spell slammed into the masked man's temple and for half a second Jean thought
his neck snapped. The Death Eater's body slammed into a nearby building, brick dust, clouding
around his shoulder, before he crumpled to the street, a small stream of blood dripping through the
nose slits and collecting the in engraved spiral-work adorning the metal face-piece. Jean turned her
head in time to see James lower his wand, stone-faced, storming across the street.

Jean felt a set of hands clasp her shoulders and she was spun around to meet Sirius' face. "Jean, are
you alright?"

Jean nodded. "Yeah," she said airily, her initial adrenaline slowly seeping out of her. "Yeah, I'm
alright." Her eyes drifted back to the Death Eater eagle-spread in the street.

Jean winced and brought her attention back to Sirius when his hands tightened and shook her
slightly. "What were you thinking," said Sirius sharply, his eyes wide and fearful, "charging out like that?"

"I don't know," Jean said, pulling herself out of his grip, "but, come on; we have to go."

"Go where?" asked Sirius.

Jean looked at the tableau they had created, from Sirius over to James and Lily, half obscured by James' athletic shoulder, then back past all of them to Remus and Peter. They all had such young, frightened faces amid such familiar destruction dropped so unexpectedly into their universe. They were heroes to Jean, they just didn't know it yet, but they were also her friends and it took all of Jean's will power not to shuttle them to the nearest house and hide them there forever.

"We have to help," said Jean simply, "are you coming or not?"

It was Lily that stepped forward first, sweeping strands of hair back over her shoulder, before the rest followed suit. "We do this properly," said James, his face more businesslike than Jean had ever seen. "No splitting up, but if we do get separated never end up alone."

Jean nodded silently, already sizing up her next opponent. "Expelliarmus!" The large, linebacker sized Death Eater felt his wand escaping his grip and clamped his fingers around the hilt just in time. The action did very little good, for by the time the Death Eater turned around Lily, Remus and Sirius had already shot off spells. Half a second later, the Death Eater was lying in the street, unconscious and bound with coils of thin rope, his wand half buried in the lose soil of a window box.

They moved like a pack of predatory animals, moving down the alley as one unit, taking out the black clothed assailants as often as they could. The only person who hadn't engaged in an attack was Peter, who all the while was staring wide eyed at the violent world around him.

Another Death Eater fell before them. The Marauders, Lily and Jean stepped around his prostrate body onto High Street. The alley that Madam Puddifoot's was sequestered to was a small slice compared to the pandemonium that erupted on the main vein of Hogsmeade. Student's and civilian's ran pell mell, while other pressed themselves to buildings clutching broken limbs and bloodied faces and others still lay unmoving on the ground. Jean watched the upper windows flash with fiery reds, electric blue, and emerald green.

"Merlin," Sirius muttered under his breath.

"Ah!"

"Lily!"

Jean whipped her head away from the panorama in front of her to see Lily go down on one knee, gripping her side even as James tried to pull her hands away. A second streak on amethyst shot towards the group. Jean twisted out of the way, the beam passing so close it burned the bridge of her nose. Jean's face contorted and, with a grunt, she threw all of her energy into her attack "Facultatem!" The street in front of her exploded, spraying both she and her assailant with small pebbles. A cloud of grey dust ballooned up between them causing Jean to cough, water gathering at the corners of her eyes.

A dark robed hand punched a hole through the translucent wall between them. The Death Eater snared the front of Jean's collar and, with a gag, she and him tumbled into the street.

Jean choked and spat, wildly flailing her limbs to gain purchase but the larger man easily rolled
over onto her, sharply pinning the elbow of her wand arm with his knee. Jean blinked, expanding spots darkening her vision. Long fingernails dug into the muscles of her neck. The Death Eater sneered and pointed his wand inches from Jean's face. "Avada—"

A stranger stumbled over them with a yelp and the Death Eater's wand was knocked from his grip. Both he and Jean watched it skitter away betwixt many moving feet. The Death Eater snarled and shoved Jean across the ground before he scrambled after his weapon. Jean groaned and turned over, coughing up spit onto the street.

"Everyone get inside!" Jean tilted her head up at the familiar voice, shaking her head to keep the world from swaying back and forth. Magnus Kinshield, his blonde hair flying behind him flitted his way through the crowd, grabbing anyone he could and pushed them into the closest door before slamming it shut behind them. "Everyone get inside!" Jean watched him sprint down the street flanked by two stocky red heads.

A pair of hands roughly seized her and hauled her off the street. Jean's feet drunkenly stumbled along with the sturdy body. "Jean. Jean." Jean focused in on the voice, along with the face it came from. "Hey," said Sirius gently. He tried to brush the dirt off Jean's face, creating a beige smear under her eye. "You okay?"

"Yeah," murmured Jean, regaining feeling in her feet. She blinked, the world coming back into being. Sirius was using his arm to shoulder her away from screaming stream of pedestrians. Lily leaned against James, part of her shirt burned away revealing a black scorch mark on her side oozing thick, dark blood from cracks in the skin. "Where's Remus and Peter?" asked Jean, her eyes on a swivel.

"James shook his head. "We don't know. You went down and Sirius followed you. By the time we all got back together they were gone."

"I hope they are together," Lily said through clenched teeth.

James looped his arm and pulled Lily closer to him. "They are. Don't worry." James looked over at Jean and Sirius. "We can't keep fighting on the streets like this."

"But, we can't just go and hide either," countered Jean.

"Lily's hurt," said James, his face tight, "and we have no idea we have no idea where Remus and Peter are."

"Doing nothing is not an option, James," interjected Lily. "Professor Kinshield didn't train us if he didn't think we could help and we wouldn't have asked him if we didn't want to."

"Look," said Sirius, taking up the role of negotiator. "We can fight only if we have to, but Kinshield and the aurors can do their job better if we get people safely off the streets."

Jean glanced over at Lily, who was easing herself off of James. The redhead nodded in silent approval.

"Okay," said Jean taking tentative steps into the road, her arm brushing up against Sirius. "If we get separated, meet up at the Shack."

The group proceeded much more cautiously than before, focusing more on plucking people off their paths and placing them in the middle of their circular phalanx. James stepped out of their unit and snared a Slytherin student by the scruff of his robes, all but hauling him back to where a cluster of other students were packed between Lily and Jean.
"On your left, Prongs," called out Sirius. He fired a spell at the approaching Death Eater. James turned on his heel. "Lorem Torquent!" The Death Eater launched backward and torqued through the air twice before landing flat on his back with a humph.

Jean watched the exchange between her friends and the shadowy figure, her arm twisting behind her, frantically feeling. Her mouth pulled into a grin when she latched onto the bulky doorknob of Zonko's Joke Shop. "Get inside," said Jean guiding the younger students into the unnaturally cheerless space, "quick, get inside."

The teens scuttled inside, fistng each other's sleeves. "Whatever you do stay quiet," said Jean, both gently and firmly at the same time, "and don't open this door." Jean glanced once over at their over-bright eyes shuffling back into a corner before she sealed them inside the shop.

The group reconvened, after James dragged the limp body of his fallen foe up to a street lamp and began quickly trotting down the lane. In spite of everyone's efforts, the streets had gotten no better. People were still sprinting in a frenzy, pushing people over and beating their hands bloody on doors that had been closed to them. All the while, Death Eaters emerged like ghosts from shadows, striking, and slithering away again.

Jean's head jerked as a panicked cry cut through her ear. A woman ran down the uneven road, her robes bloodied and torn with both shoes missing. A stunning spell struck her in the small of her back and with a choked huff she staggered and fell. A Death Eater sniggered and stepped over her. "Conmuro!"

James stepped in front of Lily, blocking the orange streak of light. Jean stepped forward to assit, but was distracted by even more sounds of distress behind her. Twisting her neck, Jean saw to her horror a group of thirteen-year-old students cornered by a broad shouldered Death Eater, the scene perfectly framed by the doors into Honeydukes.

"Go. I'll be fine," shouted James between parrying blows from his opponent. Jean didn't need any more encouragement and charged into the sweets store. "Haesitatio!" The Death Eater's arching wand was caught in her spell, sending it flying back towards the exposed landing of the second floor, magically sticking it to the crossbeams. The Death Eater, in effort to keep hold of his wand, fell back with the blow. He hit the ground, topping into a set of shelves. Sugar quills shattered and box upon golden box opened, releasing a chorus of chocolate frogs. The Death Eater struggled to pick himself out of the ruined shelving, Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans rolling out from beneath his body. "Why you little—" He didn't get to finish his explicative before Jean interrupted him.

"Locomotor Mortis!" The Death Eater's leg was hefted up by the hem of his trousers towards the ceiling, his head firmly smacking the side of the counter. He hung there, swinging slightly, with his limp limbs hanging about like a dead chicken at market. Sirius stepped up beside her while Lily shushed the children. "He's going to feel that when he wakes up," commented Sirius.

A creak cut off their conversation and everyone in the ruined room turned their head upwards. "I think someone's upstairs," whispered Jean.

Sirius nodded once. "Stay here," he said and cautiously journeyed up the stairs. Once he was out of view Jean followed his feet with her ears.

"Jean," said Lily, drawing her attention, "We have to hide them." She gestured to the students satellitling her.

"Right," said Jean, still listening for Sirius' steps. "Get everyone behind the counter."
Lily and Jean crammed the students into the small space and barricaded their huddled forms with packing crates. Lily held her wand out over their heads. "Dissimulo!" she said, tapping each in turn. To Jean, it was like a bucket of pain had spilled on them, dripping and globing until they were camouflaged between the walls and boxes. "Now we need you to stay still and quiet until somebody comes to get you," Lily explained. "The spell will only work if you don't move. "Everyone understand?" Lily seemed to wait for the invisible heads to nod before she nodded herself.

James poked his head through the door, his glasses covered in a thin film of dust. "You lot good in here?"

"Yeah," said Lily stepping out the opening to meet him, "we're good."

"Sirius is looking for anyone upstairs," said Jean jerking her thumb over her shoulder. "We need to wait." But, Jean couldn't get out the door before a large body blocked it, separating her from Lily and James. She swallowed. He was younger and lither than the last time she had seen him, but there was no mistaking that pungent animal musk or the yellowing oddly pointed teeth of Fenrir Greyback. His black eyes flashed with a hunter's adrenaline and Jean felt herself lean back on her heels. Through the shattered remains of the window, Jean watched James and Lily assess the new presence. "James, Lily," said Jean evenly, "get out of here."

"Jean," said Lily softly, her eyes moving between her friend and her enemy.

"Go. Now." Jean said again, her fingers readjusting around the hilt of her wand. A gravelly chuckle vibrated in the werewolf's throat. Jean saw James begin to lift his wand. She beat him to it, desperately pointing her wand through the window at him. "No!" she shouted, arm shaking. "Go!"

"Virtrum Iactum!" Jean whipped her wand hand around and the remnants of the windows shattered. Jean heard the small singing of scalpel like shards rushing past her ears. Jean didn't wait to see if any of her barrage struck home. She turned, her eyes set on the door, thinking running through the streets from a werewolf was better odds than being caught in a building. She felt the outside air waft against her face, slipping into her lungs and even though it smelled of smoke and destruction it was sweet. And then she felt a blow knock all that air out of her, sending her spiraling back onto the floor.

Jean wheezed and through swimming eyes she saw Greyback retract his arm and wipe at the myriad of hairline cuts spread across his face. He growled and it rattled deep in his chest. Jean tried to scoot away but the floor kept moving beneath her. In a flash, Jean was flat on her back choking for what little breath she had while her hands tired to divest Fenrir's fingers from around her throat. "I'm going to paint this floor with your head," he sneered. His breath smelled like old blood. Jean watched Greyback raise his hand, but before it fell her eyes drifted over to the camouflaged students. She hoped they didn't scream.
A sturdy object cut through the air, hitting its mark with a thunk and a crack. Greyback howled, his bent digits spasming. The bannister knob rolled and came to a rest beside splintered shelving and squished sweets. Jean looked past Fenrir at Sirius thundering down the stairs. "Get away from her," Sirius growled.

Fenrir jerked around, his eyes darkening, saliva frothing in his lip. He was done playing with his food. "Sirius," she screamed in warning, but was cut off by the clatter of a wand rolling out from behind the crates. In the same motion, Jean scooped up the wand and looked the unseen face of the student who gave it to her as well as turning towards the two human canines charging each other. "Sirius, cover your ears. "Canere Malum Canes!" Sirius was just in time and managed to dodge Greyback as he collapsed on the stairs, whining bitterly and clawing at his ears. "Run!"

The concealed children didn't need any more encouragement and they scattered like rabbits once they hit the street. Jean followed them out, towing Sirius along and grabbing her own wand as well. "Where are Lily and James?"

Jean didn't even look up from her work of sealing the werewolf in the sweets shop. "I told them to go."

"Why did you do that?"

Jean jerked around. "Because he was looking at me and not at them and I told them to run while they could."

"That still doesn't answer my question," said Sirius, his voice raised slightly. "Why?"

"Why?" said Jean, her voice breaking, "because he's dangerous, Sirius."

"How is he so much more dangerous than anyone else out here that you feel like you had to sacrifice yourself?" Sirius bit down on the word 'sacrifice'.

"Sirius," said Jean, her voice evening. She pointed at one of the dirty window. "That's Fenrir Greyback."

Sirius lifted an eyebrow. "Who?"

Jean felt her heart jump into her head. She had just assumed. This whole time she had just assumed Remus knew who his sire was. "You..." Jean stammered, trying to articulate. "You don't know...."

Jean didn't get to the end of her sentence. An explosion sounded down the street accompanied by the crackle of fire through wood. Above the mismatched little roofs of Hogsmeade rose a column of twisting black smoke. Sirius took a few tentative steps out onto the street and Jean followed him, the connection between the two werewolves forgotten. "Merlin," whispered Sirius, "it's the Three Broomsticks."


Sirius and Jean ran up the remainder of High Street, skidding to a stop at the side of the building. Jean coughed the smoke out of her lungs and Sirius held is hand against the intense heat. "I can see a window," said Sirius, "just there."

Jean could barely make it out through the canopy of the inferno. "How do you suppose we get to it?"
Sirius whipped out his wand. "Augamenti!" A stream of crisp, clear water dove into the blaze, for the most part evaporating into steam on impact. Sirius brought up his other hand to further support his wand. "Come on. Come on." Eventually, the water began to make a space in the flames. Jean could begin to see individual droplets spatter against the pane. "Jean," said Sirius, "get ready to run." Jean braced herself on the uneven ground, eyeing the ever-expanding gap. "Go."

Jean slammed her palms against the glass and shoved upwards, forcing the window open in stilting inches. Water from Sirius' wand showered her back. Wet knotted hair slapped against Jean's cheeks, sticking to her skin. Blinking against the spray, Jean held the window to keep it from sliding down onto her and clumsily clamored inside. Water from Sirius' wand showered her back. Wet knotted hair slapped against Jean's cheeks, sticking to her skin. Jean held the window to keep it from sliding down onto her and clumsily clamored inside. Halfway through Jean heard a long creak and felt a snap sting her thigh. The framing of the window, made brittle by fire and further weighted down by water, collapsed in on itself. Jean pulled her leg through quickly before blackened planks boarded up the opening. Jean peered through the gap at Sirius swiftly stepping forward. "I'm fine," she called out through a small hole in the wood. "Go around. I'll meet you out front." She couldn't stay there long herself. Already the wood was heating up again.

Sirius twisted his wand betwixt his fingers before holstering it at his side. "Just be careful," he called out.

Jean nodded, even though Sirius couldn't see her. "I will," she said and backed away from the boards.

Floating embers irritated her eyes and smoke caught her breath in her mouth. Jean held her damp sleeve over her lips to filter the air as she navigated through the translucent maze of overturned furniture. The haze and chaotic destruction and disorganization made the familiar space alien to her. She held out a cautious hand in front of her but still bumped into tables, walls and even the staircase as she made her way to the main dining area of the pub. Jean walked into yet another chair and pushed it out of her way. It ran into the back of another person. The stranger yelped and Jean winced as a magical light shined into her face. "Jean?"

"Alice?" It wasn't just Alice. Huddled behind her were Mary, Marlene, Dorcas and several others whom Jean didn't know. "What are you doing here? Come one, we have to get out of here."

"But Frank said we had to stay here." Alice's ever-smiling dimples were gone and her cheery summer outfit was covered in soot.

"Well, I don't think Frank anticipated the building to catch fire." Jean edged forward. "Come on," she said softly. "I really need your help."

"With what?" asked Marlene.

"With everyone else behind you," replied Jean. "The aurors need everyone off the streets, but can't stay here with the building burning down around you."

This time Dorcas spoke. "But, where would we go?"

Jean paused, thinking. "The Shrieking Shack," she said at last. "It's not that far away, but it's off the road enough I don't think anyone will pay attention to it. You can hide there until Frank comes to get you."

"Isn't it haunted?" Mary piped up.

"Not in the way you think," said Jean, "and even if it is, it's much better than in here or out there." Jean's eyes settled on Alice, nervously fiddling with her engagement ring. "Come on Alice, Frank
will be in less danger if he thinks you're not in danger."

Alice looked up and Jean saw a strength that wasn't there before. She picked herself off the floor and Jean followed suit. "Everyone, let's go," Jean called out.

In a clumsy, crunched crowd, the group pushed their way through overturned tables littered with spilled mugs and shattered dishes. Jean spoke rapidly to her roommates. "Run and don't stop," she said. "Don't try to engage anyone if you can help it. Above all, don't be noticed, but if you see anyone alone grab them and take them with you." Jean threw open the door, the sun blinding her from being in semi-darkness, and all but shoved Alice and the others through. "Run," she screamed, "I'm right behind you." After making sure that everyone had exited with them she brought up the rear, here eyes on a swivel for Sirius. "Keep going."

A sound exploded through the sky like a thunderclap, the force darkening the otherwise blue sky. Instinctively, Jean covered her ears and craned her neck skyward. The darkened portion of the sky dyed itself a sickly, indescribable shade and then changed more, darkening and lightening simultaneously, until it settled on an electric emerald color. It took shape and formed a skull, which opened its toothless jaw with a vapid moan that sounded like it was inhaling all the air in the world. The serpent that slithered forth coiled through the skull's eye sockets and about the crown of its head. She had seen it many times before, but, for the first time in her life, Jean was truly afraid of the Dark Mark. Jean weakly backpedaled and tripped, falling on top of an object. It was a person, a body. She picked herself up and the world seemed to fall away. She looked for a long moment at the slightly surprised face of Magnus Kinshield, his brilliant blue eyes dulled and his mane of blond hair fanning about his head like a tarnished halo.

"Jean!" She was vaguely aware of a voice called out to her. She turned and something struck her head. She rubbed her temple and felt the water on her hairline. When she pulled them away, her fingers ran red. The voice called out her name again, but it was foreign to her. Her vision tilted and darkened. The blood on her fingers turned dark purple then black. Jean slumped over onto Kinshield's still chest and saw nothing but darkness.
Induction

Chapter 17: Induction

Jean peeled her eyes open and immediately shut them again. Her head had a heartbeat that ached all the way down her neck. As the world struggled to reorient itself she clamped her mouth shut to keep from being sick. Gingerly, Jean reached up and felt a stiff layer of bandages wrapped tightly around her head. They felt crusty, as if she had bled through them and then it dried. Once the world had settled itself into a semi-stable state, Jean relaxed and her head fell back into something soft, clean and comfortable. But, above all, the blessed silence was glorious. She opened her eyes.

Jean's gaze fell onto the broad expanse of neutral colored sheets tightly tucking her into a bed. The Hospital Wing was sleeping, night shrouding the long room in a soothing calm. Stars glistened in the vast, clear sky beyond the large windows, casting glints of pale silver on the stone floor accompanying the dark orange balls of lamplight burning on each bedside table. The Death Eaters' attack had ended.

Jean stretched and her muscles screamed at her, but never the less she pulled herself out of the over-starched bed sheets, grabbing her wand from amongst rolls of bandages and a collection of tiny medicinal potions. She shuffled down the empty room, silently assessing. There wasn't an empty bed to be found in the Hospital Wing. Even the extras had to be pulled out and pooled close together in neat little rows lining the walls. For the most part, they were villagers from Hogsmeade, but every once in a while she passed someone young enough to be a student curled up on the mattress. Everyone had bandages or burns covered in a sheet of clear, overly sweet ointment. There was even one man in traction, his leg suspended off the bed and wrapped in a cast.

At the end of the aisles of patients a separate room had been constructed out of white curtains hanging limply on dull metal rings. Jean fiddled with the fabric, catching shafts of moonlight in the ripples. She wanted to delay the inevitable moment, but didn't flinch when she pulled the barrier back. To her, Magnus Kinshield always had a very animated face. There was always some form of emotion playing across his features. Seeing his face so still, one step beyond sleep, was unnerving to her. Someone had washed his body and brushed his hair so that it fell over his shoulders. Jean tilted her head and examined his profile. He was a very handsome man. Jean pondered over her time with her most recent Defense Against the Dark Arts professor: their midnight meeting where Sirius, both injured and recently revealed Animagus, had practically blackmailed Kinshield to train them; the many hours of secretly sparring with the undercover auror; the way the flames licked around Kinshield's robes in Dumbledore's fireplace after he had discovered she was from the future. Jean straightened the collar of Kinshield's borrowed robes and swept a stray strand of hair off his forehead. Their secrets, all of their secrets, had died with him.

"Miss Granger." Jean spun away from Kinshield and looked at Dumbledore, half concealed by nighttime shadows. For one morbid moment, Jean thought she was surrounded by so many dead people. "Please, come." Dumbledore turned, the muted colors of his robes shifting with the undercover auror; the way the flames licked around Kinshield's robes in Dumbledore's fireplace after he had discovered she was from the future. Jean straightened the collar of Kinshield's borrowed robes and swept a stray strand of hair off his forehead. Their secrets, all of their secrets, had died with him.

Despite the warm weather, the corridors of Hogwarts felt cold as Jean and Professor Dumbledore walked through them, their footsteps echoing around them like doldrums. It almost felt abandoned. Not even Mrs. Norris lurked in the corridors this night. For Jean, the most eerie of all were the paintings. None of them were napping against their frames, their slight snores creating a soothing white noise. They were all awake, but silent and staring from their canvases. Jean tugged her hair to avoid looking at the many unsettled eyes.
"Mercifully," said Dumbledore quietly, but in the silence it made Jean almost jump, "there were no student fatalities and I've been told by St. Mungo's everyone that was sent to them is doing very well."

"Were any Death Eaters caught," asked Jean simply, preferring to stare at the floor than anything else around her.

Dumbledore paused before speaking. "No. It was a well-organized assault and the auror's were not very effective after..." Dumbledore trailed off and for a long moment both were quiet.

"What do we do now?" said Jean.

Dumbledore looked over at Jean, the twinkle in his eyes carrying a different tone. "I believe you know, Miss Granger." The headmaster pulled out his wand and Jean looked up to see the golden gargoyle guarding his office. "Marzipan."

The statue groaned and turned in its alcove, revealing the tightly spiraled staircase. Dumbledore ascended with Jean on his heels. She heard the professor exchange several greetings before she followed him into the circular chamber.

The space was unexpectedly crowded. Behind Dumbledore's stood several older wizards and one witch who was speaking softly to Professor McGonagall, including the two broad shouldered red heads she saw in passing with Kinshield. Sitting or standing in front of the desk were the Marauders, Lily, Jean's roommates and Frank Longbottom. The young auror had his hand on his fiancé's jittering shoulder. Alice was flanked by Marlene and Dorcas, huddling themselves into a tightly knit unit. Mary was standing off by herself, tugging at the ends of her hair. Jean's roommates had little to no injuries when compared to the rest of her friends. Peter and Remus had a collection of cuts and abrasions decorating their faces and arms. Lily had her shirt rolled up and knotted to the side to let air onto the wound on her abdomen now covered up with a swatch of taped cloth. James and Sirius were the worst off. James had a black eye with several nicks surrounding the colored skin from where his glasses lens had shattered against his face. Sirius' hands were bandaged up and he had a long, thick gash going along his jawline. Jean let out a sigh at the sight. There were all still here.

Lily turned and, with a gasp, she struggled out of her chair, practically falling into Jean's embrace. "Jean," said Lily, her arms tightening around her shoulders. "You're okay." Jean closed her eyes and smiled, tears pricking at the corners of her eyes, and leaned against the side of Lily's head. "Yeah," she said into her shoulder, "we're all okay."

"Ladies," said Dumbledore. Jean looked over Lily to see their headmaster settle himself into his great gilded chair. "If I could invite you to take a seat."

With reluctance, Lily drew away from Jean and eased herself back into her chair. A second chair appeared behind Jean with a whoosh. Jean turned and saw Sirius stiffly shove his wand back into his robes. As she sat, Jean held his hand in both of hers, feeling Sirius' fingers clench about hers. She kissed his bandages.

"Now," said Dumbledore, attempting to be pleasant as well as businesslike, "I'm sure all of my students are wondering why I invited them here this evening, but first, introductions." Dumbledore gestured to a middle aged man leaning against the mantle, his small dark eyes reflecting the firelight. "This is the, now official, Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement, Alastor Moody."

Jean about fell over. She had walked right past him and didn't even recognize him because all of
his recognizable features were absent. He didn't have a chunk missing from his nose, he still had both his legs, and the ever spinning electric blue eye wasn't set in an empty socket. However, he still had enough scars to gnarl his skin and had a wild, unkempt look about his boxish features framed in grizzled dark hair.

Jean didn't have long to ogle at Moody for long. Dumbledore steered away from his skulking guest and moved onto a finely dressed man sitting closest to him. "This is Edgar Bones, Deputy Head of the Department of Magical Law Enforcement and a senior member of the Wizengamot." Initially, Jean dismissed the stranger for being a black haired Lucius Malfoy. He had the look for it. Finely tailored robes draped elegantly over his slender shoulders, a close cut goatee stylishly trimmed his chin, and his hair was pulled back by a silken ribbon that reminded Jean of all old, pureblooded families. But, on further inspection, his eyes were like a clear July sky, warm, refreshing and astonishingly blue. He also had a soft, genteel smile that revealed a neat row of white teeth. He nodded slightly at Jean and she nodded back.

"Gideon and Fabian Prewett," said Dumbledore, continuing on.

"What? No fancy titles for us, Albus?" said one of the brothers, thumbing the swatch of beard that divided his chin down the middle, perfectly centered beneath a Spanish mustache, looking playfully offended. "One would think we're not important."

"Gideon and Fabian Prewett," carried on Dumbledore in a tone of amusement, "who are all top ranking aurors and, if I recall, cousins of yours, Miss Prewett?"

Alice nodded slightly in spite of her unsettled state. "Fourth or fifth, but I can't quite remember." She turned to the other brother, who had shaggy curls hanging almost over his eyebrows. "How's your sister, Fabian?"

"Molly's flourishing in her ever growing brood, though I think it'll keep growing until she has a daughter. But, you know what they say about Weasleys and girls."

The similarities synced up in seconds. Jean looked at the brothers in muted awe. They were Ron's uncles. She was amazed she didn't recognize them immediately. They were Fred and George incarnate if the mischievous twins from her old time were taller and gained twenty pounds of muscle.

"And last but not least," concluded Dumbledore, "Emmeline Vance, a very old friend of mine."

The older woman wearing high-necked robes of mauve tilted her head gracefully. "Pleasure," she said. Jean somewhat remembered Emmeline Vance from the future. She was the most recent death in this roomful of ghosts.

"Yes, yes," said Moody waving his hand, "niceties and all that. Can we get to the point?"

Dumbledore let out a long sigh and nodded, the firelight casting a silvery sheen on his half-moon glasses. He shifted in his seat and steepled his fingers over his mouth. "Lily," said Dumbledore, his voice almost hypnotically calm. "I need you to tell everyone what you told me earlier about what you saw in Hogsmeade."
ball she had tightened herself into, but she still stared at the floor when she spoke. "James and I got separated from the group. We were going to the Shrieking Shack to meet up with everyone, but before we got there we saw The Three Broomsticks catch fire. We doubled back to see if we could help and we saw Alice, Mary, Marlene and Dorcas leading a group of students up the path." Lily swallowed. "Those…people started chasing after them. James and I tried to hold them off so the other students could escape. Frank too." Lily and Alice exchanged a look. "Frank tried to make Alice leave with the others, but she wouldn't go." Lily paused again and Jean could tell she was struggling with her words. "The four of us were together and this other wizard came. He was more powerful than any of the others. Everything we did barely fazed him. He did…" she touched her face, "….to James' eye. I thought he was going to kill us all." Lily's voice picked up in both speed and pitch. "I kept fighting and fighting, but I was so scared and he was so strong. He had these eyes." Jean felt her skin goose pimple. Lily held her hand over half her face, shaking her head. "He had these horrible red eyes."

"That man," said Dumbledore, "calls himself Lord Voldemort and he is the leader of the group that attacked Hogsmeade today: the Death Eaters." Jean felt numb and nauseous.

"You were all so brave today and saved many lives." Emmeline's voice was like a warm, wool blanket. "You should be proud of your students, Minerva."

Professor McGonagall looked like she wanted to take all of her Gryffindor's back to their tower and keep them there forever. "Too proud for words," she said quietly, "but why pull them from their beds at this hour, Albus?"

"That," said Dumbledore, "as Alastor says, is the point of us all being here. Voldemort and his followers have made their move. He has announced his intentions to the world today and, in doing so, he has assassinated one of the highest ranking officials in magical law."

"Professor Kinshield?" asked Dorcas, stunned.

"Yes, Miss Meadows," replied Dumbledore. As some of you know and some of you don't, Professor Kinshield was never just a professor. He was an auror, working alongside me, spearheading a small team placed inside Hogwarts for its protection."

"A lot of good it did us," grumbled Gideon, crossing his arms.

"You can't blame yourselves," said Edgar Bones, twisting in his chair to look at the younger man. "As bad as today was it would've been much worse if no one was there."

"Agreed," supplied Dumbledore. "Today cannot be worried over any longer. In fact, today is now yesterday." Jean couldn't help but glance over at Lily's watch as the second hand ticked its way past midnight. "We must look to the future," continued Dumbledore, "and I believe Magnus left us a gift to help us with that."

"What gift?" asked Moody, turning his back to the fire.

"Them," Dumbledore gestured towards the group of students in front of him, the familiar twinkle returning to his eye. "A few weeks ago, Magnus and I were having a discussion. He told me that he had been secretly training Mr. Potter, Mr. Black, Mr. Lupin, Mr. Pettigrew, Miss Evans and Miss Granger skills in magical combat."

"Why on earth would Magnus do that," said Fabian, a thick eyebrow rising into his bangs, "especially without consulting you, Headmaster."
"I asked him that myself," replied Dumbledore. "He said he liked them." Behind her, Jean heard Sirius suppress a smirk. "In light of his death, I would like to represent Magnus' wishes and intentions. I believe he would be telling you the same things as I am if he could, and I think if he could have seen the actions of Mr. Longbottom, Miss Prewett and these other ladies he would have invited them here himself."

"Why were we invited here, Professor?" asked Lily.

Dumbledore laced his fingers together and looked down at his students from over his large, imposing desk. "Magnus and I worked on something far more secret. Something even the undercover aurors did not know about. When we decided the threat of Lord Voldemort was real, he and I founded a secret organization consisting of the witches and wizards gathered here, among others. We work in the shadows, outside of Ministry law, as a force against these Death Eaters." Jean tried to listen through her heart pounding in her ears, knowing, but not quite believing what Dumbledore was about to say. "It's an organization I would like each of you to be a part of, should you chose to accept the invitation. The Order of the—"

"I don't want it."

Jean blinked back to reality and turned in her chair, attempting to find the speaker.

"Mary?" said Lily. Jean's eyes accompanied Lily's to the back wall of the room. Mary's head was tilted towards her toes, nervously trying to dig their way through the floor.

She twisted her hands together. "I don't want it," she repeated, "the invitation." Mary shook her dark haired head, eyes over-bright. "It's not that I'm ungrateful and I'm honored but…" Mary stumbled over her words before they burst from her lips, rapid fire. "But, undercover aurors and secret orders and I saw my professor dead in the street this afternoon. I'm not the person you think I am, headmaster. I'm just…not—"

"Mary," said Dumbledore, holding up a gentle hand, "it's alright." Mary let out a watery breath, blinking rapidly. "Minerva," continued Dumbledore, "could you please take Miss Harper back to Gryffindor Tower, please? And make sure she can fire call her family before she goes to bed."

"Yes, professor." The Deputy Headmistress stepped through her sea of students towards Mary. "Come along, my dear," she said, hovering her hand over the small of Mary's back to guide her towards the exit.

"Professor," said Mary, turning around at the threshold. "You won't…wipe my memory, will you? I promise I won't say anything."

Dumbledore shook his head. "No, Miss Harper. This offer will always be open to you if you want it."

Mary nodded. "Goodnight then, professor, and I'm sorry." Mary and Professor McGonagall descended the spiral staircase, the door magically swinging shut behind them.

"She illustrates a good point, Albus," said Emmeline. "They are just students. How can we expect teenagers to go against killers?"

"They won't be students for much longer," replied Dumbledore, "and Voldemort is recruiting inside Hogwarts' walls as well."

"We need numbers and that's the plain and simple of it," said Moody, "and numbers that know how to fight. Besides, I'd hate to think Kinshield wasted his time, especially with those two." He pointed
"I wasn't aware you had received Mr. Potter and Mr. Black's N.E.W.T. scores yet," said Dumbledore pleasantly.

"Being the Head of the Department has its advantages, Albus." Moody glanced over at James and Sirius. "I expect your applications promptly."

James had to reel his mouth from the floor before he could speak. "Yes, sir," he stammered out. Sirius, uncharacteristically graceless, was still gaping at Moody.

"I agree with Alastor," said Gideon, fiddling with his beard. "The more aurors we have with us, the less the ministry can move against us and the aurors Magnus recruited for the mission here were too deep in the Ministry's pocket for his liking, even Kingsley Shacklebolt, Albus. I believe Magnus would have agreed to bringing potential aurors into the fold before the Ministry got ahold of them, even if they are still students."

"That's unfortunate to hear," replied Dumbledore, "especially about Kingsley. Both Magnus and I believed he had such potential."

"There are also just as many suspected Death Eaters in prominent Ministry positions as there are Order members," added Fabian. "No doubt Voldemort will be pooling his resources to further increase his influence."

Emmeline sighed. "I suppose you're right." She looked wistfully over at Jean and the others. Jean couldn't help but sympathize with her.

"Edgar," said Dumbledore, "you've been quiet."

Edgar Bones sighed and eased himself back into his chair. "I agree with what everyone has said and I do think we should take them, but I have certain doubts about him."

"Me?" said Sirius incredulously.

"Yes," said Edgar coolly. "I do not like your family, Mr. Black. They are cruel and they are elitists, not to mention I have a growing list of members from your family who are all but declared Death Eaters. Close family members, Mr. Black." Jean froze, wondering briefly if the other Black brother was meeting this midnight in another shadowy room, only in the company of Death Eaters.

"I haven't spoken with most of my family since I was sixteen years old," said Sirius through clenched teeth, trying to reign in his temper.

"Yet you have just received an inheritance from your uncle; a substantial inheritance. One would think you are not as distant from your relations as you declare."

"How do you know about that?"

"Mr. Black, I'm the Deputy Head of Magical Law and a long-time member of the Wizengamot. No pureblood money passes hands that I don't know of first." Edgar paused and the room was so silent you could hear a pin drop. "It would be advantageous for a person of your pedigree to be a Death Eater in Voldemort's new world. I believe with the money, power and influence you would receive from your family subsequently you could easily convince others to…follow."

Sirius was about to rocket out of his seat but both James and Jean beat him to it. "That is as preposterous as it is insulting," James all but shouted. "If you don't want Sirius because you're
afraid of his pureblood heritage, you can bloody well take your Order and leave us both out of it!"

"Are we to be exactly like Death Eaters then," added Jean venomously, her cheeks tinged pink, "blindly discriminating against purebloods based on bloodlines and family relations instead? If so, this is not the Order I will be a part of."

Edgar's lip curled upward, as if he were hoping to have incited this reaction. He held his hands up pacifyingly. "It seems I have been outvoted by a far more convincing argument."

"Well," said Dumbledore, as if there wasn't a burgeoning argument that just bounced across his office, "now that we're all agreed. My students, I have watched you grow up in these halls and classrooms. I wish I could keep this from you and I do not make this decision lightly, but we are in grave need of you." Dumbledore paused and Jean felt like the whole world had paused to listen. "No oath or vow will bind you to us, but I ask you, will you, for as long as you are able, uphold the mission of this organization and do your best to protect the members within as well as the countless others who will never know the full extent of your deeds done to defend them?"

"Yes," said Jean, firmly nodding her head, feeling the weight of its motion.

"Yes," said Sirius beside her. A chorus of affirmations sounded off behind them.

For a moment, Jean thought Dumbledore looked sad, as if he were hoping that more than Mary would refuse his request. But, the moment passed and Dumbledore smiled genuinely. "Then I welcome all of you to the Order of the Phoenix."

Behind them all, the bird for whom the Order was named rustled in his sleep.
When Jean thought on it, she had never been to a Hogwarts graduation because she was either in the hospital or someone had died, so the approaching experience was a novel one. The soft pink fingers of dawn prodded at her face and Jean woke, stretching underneath her tousled sheets. This afternoon she would graduate and tonight would be her last feast at Hogwarts. Today would be her last full day as a student. Jean parted her crimson bed curtains and looked outside. Brilliant shafts of sunlight shined through the ripples in the glass. There wasn't a cloud in the sky and the weather was unshakably summer. Not even the tragedies of recent weeks could dampen the mood of this day.

Jean pulled her eyes away from the dazzling vista and scoped the room. Every bed was made and the occupants had vacated. She shrugged, assuming they had gone to sprawl out on the lawn with their breakfasts in their laps, searching for smoke from the train bringing their families from London. Jean threw on a dressing gown and slipped on her slippers and padded down the stairs towards the Common Room. The only occupant of the entire downstairs chamber was Sirius. He was equally underdressed, barefoot, with checkered pajama pants flowing around his ankles. He looked up at her descent and smiled, a swatch of unkempt hair falling across his face. He stood up from where he was sitting on the steps. "Good morning," he said warmly, looping his arms around Jean's body.

Jean felt the rough stubble on Sirius' chin when he kissed her forehead. "Morning," she answered, "where is everyone?"

"Upstairs in our room," said Sirius, jerking a thumb over his shoulder. "I'm here to invite you to a private breakfast. Marauders only and," Sirius drew her closer and began escorting her upstairs, "special guests."

The continental breakfast was tightly packed on the heater in the middle of the room. Cream-colored plates were stacked with blueberry and banana nut muffins, their tops covered in a layer of granulated sugar. The plates formed a ring around a glass pitcher filled with orange juice. James, Lily, Remus and Peter had pulled their comforters off their square posted beds and made a nest in front of the window facing the Forbidden Forest. Lily glanced up from where she had been lounging against James' body. "Hi, Jean," she said waiving, while at the same time balancing a glass of orange juice precariously on a pillow.

Jean grabbed two muffins and settled herself down between Lily and Sirius. Sitting across from her, Peter sucked on the moist bread that stuck to his fingers and Remus had his back propped against his bed, pensively staring out the window. Jean bit into her muffin and felt the berries pop over her tongue.

"So, Jean," said Lily. "Are your parents coming?"

Jean shook her head. "They couldn't make the trip, but they send their love."

Lily tilted her head. "That's such a shame. I would've really liked to meet them."

Jean smiled against the edge of her glass. "I'm sure they would've loved you."

Sirius threw his arm around Jean's shoulder. "It's alright. We'll be parent-less together."
Jean rolled her eyes and playfully shoved her body against his shoulder. "But, you're parents are coming aren't they, Lily," said Jean, attempting to turn the conversation away from her elusive mother and father.

Lily nodded enthusiastically. "Yes," she said, "I'm so excited. They've never been anywhere magical before."

Jean smiled sweetly and the conversation lapsed into silence. While everyone nibbled off their plates, Jean's sight continued its circuit around the room. Jean's eyes drifted over to Lily, who had been the first of her friends to meet her in this time and had welcomed her so warmly it didn't seem like they hadn't known each other till a few months ago. She passed over to James, who was so alike his future son in both looks and spirit that it helped Jean to overcome her grief for what she had lost. Finally, her eyes fell on Sirius, the man who meant more to her than anything she could articulate. "So," she almost whispered, "this is it."

James nodded, silent, swirling around the liquidly pulp in the bottom of his glass. Remus turned his head towards the group, his eyes glistening and distant. "We'll look back on these as our happiest years," he said. "Thank you, my friends."

"Remus," said Lily, watery. James leaned over and pulled the slender man into a one-armed hug, shaking him slightly. Remus gave a soft grin, brushing at his eyes.

"Do…you think it'll be the same," asked Peter, staring down at his shoes. "I mean…will we still be friends after we've all gone?"

Sirius clapped Peter on the knee. "Of course we will. We're the Marauders. That's got to count for something." Jean didn't say anything. She couldn't. Already her mind was drifting away from their Elision in the Scottish hills, preparing for the fight that would harden some and destroy others.

James nodded, swallowing the last vestiges of his orange juice before sinking back into Lily's embrace. "Mischief managed."

Jean, Lily and the Marauders ate and chatted till the sun left a glare on the center on the room. Lily pulled herself off the ground and waved the remnants of their meal away with a whoosh. "We'd all better get ready. The train will be arriving soon. Everyone nodded and Jean, James and Lily pulled themselves off the floor so they could drift off to their respective quarters.

Sirius followed suit and walked Jean downstairs, waving Lily and James out of the portrait hole. "You got quiet up there," he commented casually. Jean didn't respond, absent-mindedly worrying on her cuticle. Unphased, Sirius continued. "I'm sorry that your family couldn't make it," he said, loitering on the landing. "I get the feeling none of us will ever meet them."

Jean shifted, her heart twisting on itself, before shaking her head. "No, I don't think so," she said. "I have my life and they have theirs and, for now, they're not meant to interact."

Sirius rested his hand on the stone balustrade, nodding. "We've had a difficult time these past few weeks and it feels strange to be leaving Hogwarts because," he ran his thumb up and down the grain of the stone, settling it in and indention, "for some more than others this has been more of a home than anywhere else has ever been." Sirius patted the ancient railings once, then twice, and straightened to face Jean. He hung his wrists over her shoulders and further frazzled her messy morning curls. "But, this is a happy day. Let's not anxiously look towards our futures outside these walls and instead enjoy the moment with whomever we have here."

Jean looked up at Sirius and once again marveled at the differences between the man she knew and
the man she remembered. The Sirius of the future would never worry about tomorrow on another
day. His dark, disquieted thoughts were never that settled as he restlessly haunted the shadowy
halls of Grimmauld Place. Jean wanted to give this day of rest to him, even if only one of them
could enjoy it since she had taken on the tropes of the infamous prisoner of Azkaban.

Sirius turned his wrists to cup the underside of Jean's jaw. "Now," he said, "let's see a smile."

Jean smiled in spite of herself and reached up to run her fingers over the edges of Sirius' hands.
"Sirius," she said, trailing off.

Sirius tilted his head. "What is it?"

Jean sighed and leaned her cheek into his palm, soothed by the warmth and the worn down
callouses. "Nothing," she said. She kissed him on the corner of his mouth. "I'll see you later."
Sirius winked and held onto Jean's fingers until she was too far up the stairs.

During the time Jean had been breakfasting with Lily and the Marauders, Alice, Marlene, Dorcas
and Mary had returned to their room and were in various stages of dressing. Jean waved to them in
greeting before pulling on her black graduation robes trimmed with a wide red stole, which fell
over her neck all the way down to her hemline. Jean sat down on her bed, staring at herself from
her bedside mirror. The wet summer weather seeped through even the walls of Hogwarts. Jean
huffed and pulled on a crinkled curl and watched it bounce back into the snarl of frizzled fuzziness.

Jean felt two hands knead through her tangled tresses all the way to her scalp. She craned back her
neck and found Marlene almost resting on the top of her head. "You're not the only one who suffers
from humidity hair," she said shaking her well-manicured locks. Marlene wiggled her knuckles in
Jean's hair. "May I?"

Jean chuckled and nodded. She barely blinked before she was shuttled over to Marlene's large
vanity. Marlene pumped a light pink foam into her hands and proceeded to massage it into Jean's
hair. Jean watched her reflection as her curls solidified in shape and fell gracefully just past her
shoulders. For having such a large mirror, Marlene didn't have a lot of space to see. The perimeter
of the glass was layered with a collage of photographs held up by spell-o-tape. The images near the
bottom, partially obscured by beauty products, were of Marlene when she was very young,
probably in the first few weeks of her tenure at Hogwarts. Marlene aged up as the photos ascended
and everyone she knew was featured in many of them. She and Alice posed in the conservatory,
surrounded by large orange flowers. She and Dorcas stood, arms linked, in front of one of the
carriages pulled by invisible thestrals. Marlene, Mary and Lily were sitting in the quidditch
stadium wrapped in a super long Gryffindor scarf, laughing and trying not to pull each other over.
Jean even saw a single photo of Sirius with his arm slung around Marlene's shoulder leaning in his
casual elegance the castle walls. Towards the top on the outermost layer, Jean saw herself, ankle
deep in a February snow. Every once in a while the image of Marlene tossed a hastily made
snowball and Jean rubbed her frosty gloves in the blonde's hair.

"You know, back at my other school, I didn't have many girlfriends," said Jean, thinking back to
her original roommates: Lavender Brown, Parvarti and Padma Patil, Fay Dunbar and a ginger girl
named Amelia Rivers, and how they coupled up and chatted animatedly well into the night while
Jean, as Hermione, secluded herself with her school books or was absent entirely off on an
adventure with Harry and Ron.

Marlene twisted one stubborn lock back to keep its hold. "No of the girls at your old school knew
what they were missing, then," she said. "I don't know why anyone wouldn't want to be friends
with you. You're so smart and you're one of the nicest people I've ever met."
Jean shrugged slightly. "I was a different person back then and I...wasn't around much."

Marlene fluffed the hair around Jean's part. "Well, I'm glad you're here." She spun Jean around in her chair. "Alice, can I steal those earrings over there? The studs. Mary, lip gloss; the blush colored one."

"I didn't think I was getting a full makeover," said Jean, sticking out her lip so Marlene could paint it.

"We're not officially friends until I do your wardrobe at least once," Marlene responded.

"She does this with everyone," said Alice as she passed Jean a pair of small ruby studs set into gold backings.

"Oh really," said Jean humorously as she put on the earrings.

"Yes," said Mary, craning for a view in the mirror to apply Marlene's aggressive shade of lipstick.

"It was my last chance," said Marlene, "and done."

Jean turned around, blinking. "Wow," she said simply. Jean's hair was soft and smooth with a light spring to her otherwise unmanageable curls. It fell in a soft slope across her forehead, accentuating the dark gold highlights hiding in her light brown hair. The subtle pink to her lips flattered her natural colors and lit up portions of her face and the glint of ruby in her ears complemented with the wide band of silken cloth draped over her front.

Alice came up behind Jean and Marlene and the three of them were framed in the mirror. "Lovely," she said tugging lightly on a coil.

Marlene grinned and suddenly began scrambling underneath her bed. "What are you doing?" asked Dorcas, sitting up. Jean twisted around and, along with Alice and Mary, watched Marlene haul out a black, bulky camera.

"Come on," said Marlene said, huffing from the weight, "last picture." Marlene balanced the camera on the edge of the vanity and yanked everyone down onto the bed. Marlene threw her arms over Jean and Mary's shoulders, squeezing everyone together. "Smile." The flashbulb shined like a newly born star.

After Jean blinked the white light from her eyes, she and her group came down from their tower and spilled into the Common Room. Sirius, Remus and Peter were all waiting there; two sitting on the overstuffed crimson loveseat and another leaned against the mantelpiece, digging his toe into the rug. Jean watched Sirius push himself off the wall when he saw her and Jean blushed a little at the look on his face. "You look," he stuttered out when Jean reached him, "wow."

Jean smiled. "Thank you." She idly straightened a fold on Sirius' robes. "You don't look too bad yourself."

Sirius let out a bark like laugh and rustled a hand through his hair. "I try." Sirius' laughter trailed off and Jean along with everyone else's gaze drifted over to the portrait hole. Sirius let out a breath. "Shall we?" Jean nodded, looping her arm around Sirius' elbow.

The Great Hall was vastly different from how it was normally, mostly because the four long dining tables had been removed and replaced with row after row of brown, spindly chairs. Massive banners sporting house colors and sigils hung from the rafters, shafts of sunlight from the clear sky ceiling shooting through them. Students and their family members squeezed together in the large
room, talking amiably. Jean and the others threaded through the throngs, searching for any recognizable faces.

"Jean!" Jean turned her head towards Lily, who was practically towing two people behind her. Lily skidded to a stop. "Jean," said Lily, swinging her companions arms back and forth. "I'd like you to meet my parents Rose and Johnathan Evans. Mum, Dad this is the new Gryffindor I wrote you about, Jean Granger." Mr. Evans had thinning red hair and wore silver square glasses and a maroon argyle sweater vest. He stuck out his hand and Jean shook it. "It's wonderful to meet you, Jean. Lily has told us a lot about you."

Jean smiled, now understanding even more why Harry was hopelessly blind without his glasses. Jean glanced over the tall man's shoulder at Lily's mother. She was slender, modest and demur wearing a teal sundress with blonde hair falling in a slight swoop, curling inward at her jawline. She smiled and fine lines folded at the corners of her eyes. Jean surreptitiously scanned the area searching for, and not finding, Lily's sister, Petunia. She wasn't surprised and wasn't about to ask Lily, assuming Harry's aunt had vehemently refused to attend any magical gathering.

"You'll have to come visit us over the summer," said Mrs. Evans. "Lily doesn't have many friends with—what was the word, dear—mooble parents?"

"Muggle, mum," supplied Lily. Her face suddenly lit up. "Oh, look here comes James and his dad."

Jean knew that James' parents were older when he was born, but she was still surprised as James led the elderly gentleman up to the gathering leaning heavily on his cane. He looked old enough to be James' grandfather with a head full of white hair, thick dark glasses and shriveled, liver-spotted hands, but despite his advanced age, he still looked sharp and dignified in his neatly pressed black robes. "Dad," said James when they approached. "You remember Lily, right."

"Yes, yes, yes," said Mr. Potter taking a few quick steps forward to take Lily's hand in both of his. "Hello again, my dear. You're a vision."

"Thank you, sir," said Lily.

"And Dad," said James, "these are Lily's parents."

"Her what?"

"Her parents," repeated James more loudly.

"Yes," said Mr. Potter, stepping forward. "Charlus Potter, charmed to meet you."

"The pleasure is mine, sir," said Mr. Evans, shaking the other man's hand.

At that moment, Mr. Potter's periphery found Sirius and he grinned to the point of his face cracking. "Sirius, my boy, look at you. All cleaned up and not crashing bludgers into my roof." The older man shuffled forward and clapped the younger on the shoulders, shaking them affectionately. "Could'n be more proud."

"Thank you, sir," replied Sirius. Jean heard the thickness in his voice as well as the gratitude and respect he had for his surrogate father. Sirius recovered and shifted so that Jean came into view. "I'd like you to meet my girlfriend, Jean Granger."

Jean shook Mr. Potter's hand, wincing slightly as his deceptively strong grip. "It's wonderful to make your acquaintance," said Jean.
"Likewise, Janet," answered Mr. Potter pleasantly.

"It's Jean, Dad," James corrected gently. "Jean Granger."

"Yes, yes, yes," replied Mr. Potter, brushing his mispronunciation aside.

"Hey, Dad," said James, "why don't we get you a good seat before everything starts. You'll be able to see better."

"Capital idea," chattered Mr. Potter. He turned as if he were the one controlling the comings and goings of the get together and grinned genially. "We'll all meet up afterwards, I insist. Lovely to meet you, Mr. and Mrs. Evans. Good-bye, Joyce."

Jean gave Mr. Potter a half wave as James escorted him off. Sirius hid a chuckle behind his hand.

"We best be off too," said Lily before immediately switching back to her parents and yanking them off again. "Oh, Mum, Dad, if you look at this window here you'll be able to see the quidditch pitch. You know Gryffindor won the quidditch cup this year and did I tell you that James was named the quidditch captain of the decade..."

By then everyone else had drifted off to find their own relatives, leaving just Sirius and Jean. "Well they all seem nice," said Jean offhandedly. "It's a good thing for future in-laws to like each other." Jean drifted off into silence when she saw Sirius, silent and pensive beside her. Her eyes followed his line of vision to the two distant forms, one working his way down into a chair as the other supported his back. Jean felt a pang in her heart, knowing that James' mother and the closest person Sirius could ever call a mother wasn't there to share this day with them. Her sadness turned inward as well and Jean blinked away the thought of her parents, wherever they were in this present time, and wondered what run-of-the-mill activities would fill this afternoon that held so much meaning to all three of them once upon a time. Without speaking, Jean reached out and squeezed Sirius' hand. Sirius leaned his cheek onto the crown of her head, running his lips against her hairline each lost in their own thoughts, mourning for those that weren't in attendance for the myriad of unspoken reasons.

Sirius and Jean came back to reality when Dumbledore strode onto a raised stage placed where the staff table would've been normally. "If I could invite everyone to take their seats," he said, "we shall begin."

Sirius and Jean drifted up to the front of the Great Hall where the students arranged themselves alphabetically, their guests settling themselves in the remaining chairs behind them. Jean saw Alice kiss Frank and nod politely to a stern faced Augusta Longbottom, looking as passively intimidating as Neville had ever described her. Marlene hastily passed her camera to her parents before dashing off and Peter quickly hugged his mother before shooing her fingers away from straightening his hair. "At the risk of being rude, is there a reason why Peter's father isn't here?"

Sirius' shoulders gave a small shrug. "I think Peter's been asking that question his whole life."

Sirius and Jean took their respective places in the student section. Jean turned around and sneaked a glance at Ms. Pettigrew. She had a round, pudgy face with tinges of pink coloring her cheeks. She had large over bright eyes that made her look constantly surprised and she was wearing a dress so pink it almost hurt Jean's eyes matched with an equally pink cloche rimmed with little white flowers, which almost completely obscured her light brown hair coiled into tight rings beneath. To Jean's knowledge, Ms. Pettigrew was the only parent still alive twenty years from now. She kept Peter's Order of Merlin on her mantelpiece. Jean wondered in anyone ever bothered to tell her the truth about her son. She hoped no one did. She seemed like a sweet, simple lady.
Jean whipped her head back to the front as the professors joined Dumbledore on the dais, taking their seats behind the Headmaster. Only one chair remained empty, marking Magnus Kinshield's absence with a bouquet of dark red roses.

"Ladies and gentlemen," began Professor Dumbledore. "The Minister of Magic asked me a few days ago if, in light of recent events, it would be wise for Hogwarts to postpone the graduation ceremony. He expressed a worry that no one would feel safe and that it might be in poor taste to celebrate so soon after such a loss to not just the school, but to the magical community in general. I thought about the Minister's words, but I also thought about what Professor Kinshield would've said to me." Dumbledore paused and readjusted his glasses. "I don't think I could've convinced Magnus to come here to teach if he didn't believe the students were important. I think he would've told me that if we cancelled the events today, then we would have lost so much more than people and these witches and wizards who seek to the disturb the peace of our streets and the halls of our school would have gained what only we could give over to them. So today, we gather no just to honor the memory of a great man, but to celebrate the hopes he had for each and every one of you. Today we celebrate and we will not be too afraid of the dangers that lurk in darkness or too sad to be joyful in the shadow of such sorrows. We celebrate in spite of everything and we will carry on, for in that way alone will we be truly victorious." Dumbledore moved over to the empty chair. "But first," he laid a hand on the back. "Magnus Kinshield, a man whose sacrifice will not be forgotten."

The congregation applauded and there were more than a few people that wiped at their eyes with their sleeves.

Dumbledore returned to standing in front of the podium, his eyes drifting over the graduates. "You are my favorite class," he said, "and yes I do say that every year." Dumbledore paused for the chortles and chuckles. "The reason why I say that is because each class is my favorite, but all for different individualistic reasons. There will never be this unique of a collection of blossoming talent in one place and there will never be a class exactly like yours at Hogwarts ever again. Without one of you this group would be entirely different. Never forget that. Never forget how one is so integral to all and never devalue the power of your single actions." Dumbledore paused and indicated to the professors behind him. "I invite everyone to stand and we will proceed with the commencement. Margaret Aldridge."

Jean stood and snaked her way through the chairs as student after student crossed the stage. She watched Sirius stride across the stage with an elegant swagger and, though unseen by him, Professor McGonagall hide a soft smile behind the tips of her fingers, as well as Lily, Head Girl badge emblazoned on her robes. Jean looked down at her shoes, barely visible beneath her graduation robes and gave them a silent pep talk not to trip over themselves.

"Jean Granger," called out Dumbledore.

Jean jolted and then roused herself to ascend the creaky stairs onto the stage. She first passed the empty chair belonging to Magnus Kinshield, then past the other professors capped off with the Heads of Houses and Professor McGonagall as Deputy Headmistress. She nodded as Jean passed, the velvet of her emerald robes holding onto the sunlight. Dumbledore met her in the middle of the stage and he shook her hand. "Congratulations, Miss Granger." He lifted up his arm and in that motion a rippling black cape materialized in his hand. Dumbledore cloaked Jean and fasted the Hogwarts sigil set with an emerald, sapphire, ruby and yellow diamond.

Jean looked down at the clasp and then back at the Headmaster. "Thank you, sir," she said.

Dumbledore winked, a smile hidden beneath his silver beard and ushered her onward. "Mary
Jean returned to her seat and turned the broach in her fingers so the light could catch in the little gems. Jean took Dumbledore's advice and smiled in spite of everything. Magnus Kinshield was still dead, Voldemort was still out there and the magical world stood at the beginning of a great and terrible journey that only she knew the full extent of, but today she was graduating. The act was so blissfully normal it almost brought tears to her eyes. She blinked rapidly, looking up when the last of the students had crossed the dais. Dumbledore stepped forward again amidst a small applause.

"Yes," he said. "Well done. Well done all." He paused and the room grew quiet again. "After today's festivities and merry making you will all leave here down different paths. Some will be paved and well lit while others will have to be blazed from the underbrush of the unknown. But, remember, no matter how long or how treacherous, the journey will always lead you home and to the people that love you." Dumbledore's eyes were sparkling like little suns behind his half moon glasses. He extended his hands, his voice booming. "Now go enjoy those people; and congratulations."

The polite applause soon crescendoed into cheers as the assembly broke. Students and their guests began dispersing, holding onto each other in many-armed hugs. Jean was soon swept up into the stream, searching for familiar faces. She saw several Slytherins who didn't acknowledge her clustered around austere family members. She saw a Hufflepuff quidditch player swing a younger member of his entourage onto his shoulders. She even saw Matilda Maybelle with her ever-perfect tresses of black, curly hair smile at an elderly woman. They made eye contact for half a moment. She nodded and Jean nodded back. Jean spied the sandy haired head of Remus Lupin. "Remus," she called out.

Remus' amber eyes fell on her. "Hey," he called out weaving the short distance between them. Remus and Jean hugged briefly. "Congratulations." Jean smiled and looked past Remus at the older man and woman framing his shoulders. "Mum, Dad," said Remus, turning slightly to address them, "this is my friend Jean Granger, the one who moved here this semester. Jean, these are my parents Lyall and Hope Lupin."

If Jean didn't know any better, she would've completely believed that Remus slipped away from Hogwarts every month to visit his ailing mother because she looked the part. She had Remus' sandy hair, but it looked more thin and wispy than Remus' ever was on his worst days. Her hair looked almost translucent at certain angles as if she was balding and covering it up with her sculpted victory curls. Hope Lupin had a thin, hollow looking face as well with sunken cheeks and thin lips barely tinged with a natural pink. However, her face was saved by the warmth in her round brown eyes and how they lit up her countenance with a hidden youth. Lyall Lupin had light colored hair as well and let it fall to his shoulders similarly to his son's. He looked just as old as James' father in spite of being significantly younger. He had deep canyons for age lines carved into his face, gathering at the corners of his lips and eyes and fanning outwards. His eyes possessed no shine and looked almost listless and he looked like he was constantly trying to keep his body from caving in on itself. This was a man who had been beaten up by life and left bloodied on a street corner. Mr. Lupin roused himself enough to reach out and shake Jean's hand. "It's wonderful to meet you, Miss Granger," he said, the consistency of his voice sounding like worn out sandpaper. "It's always wonderful to be able to meet Remus' friends from school."

Jean caught the tone in his voice and how he looked at her when she released his hand. No doubt Remus kept his parents well informed on who did and who did not know his secret. "It's nice to meet you too, Mr. Lupin."

Jean felt a pair of hands seize her around her waist. Sirius popped a kiss on her cheek before he
inserted himself into the conversation. "Hey, Mr. and Mrs. Lupin," said Sirius, saddling up to Remus, "glad you could make it."

Mrs. Lupin's eyes smiled more than her mouth. "Hello, Sirius, dear," she said. She coughed briefly into her handkerchief. "I hear congratulations are in order. Remus told us that you and James were accepted to the Auror Academy."

Sirius puffed up his chest, clearly pleased with himself. "Yes," he said. "We received our official acceptance letters a couple days ago."

"I'm sure you'll do very well there," replied Mrs. Lupin. "Jean, what are you thinking about doing now that you've graduated?"

Jean jolted to attention, not sure how to answer her question, considering she had no answer for herself. Kinshield was right. She had no records magical or muggle. No matter where she went it was only a matter of time before somebody got suspicious. "I…er…” Jean stuttered out.

"Andromeda!"

Jean was more surprised than relieved at being interrupted and followed Sirius with her eyes as he cut through the crowd and embraced a young woman who was a few years older than him dressed in mottled hazel robes. She was accompanied by a man dressed in a tweed jacket and slacks, whom Jean assumed to be her husband. Jean had only seen Andromeda Tonks sparingly in her previous life and never when she was this young. She had auburn hair falling elegantly around her heart shaped face, which was colored by sunshine. She had the grey starry eyes of her pureblooded ancestry and delicate willowy limbs. Jean was certain that Andromeda was the prettiest of the Black sisters.

"What are you doing here?" asked Sirius when they broke apart.

"To see you graduate, of course," replied Andromeda. "Miracles like this don't happen everyday. But also…she is still my sister. Jean followed Andromeda's wistful gaze. If she squinted she could see through the throngs of people to the blonde head of Narcissa, the center of attention, leaning serenely against the shoulder of Lucius Malfoy.

Sirius escorted his cousin into the circle of people. "Everyone, this is my cousin Andromeda and her husband Ted. Dromeda this is Remus Lupin, one of my closest friends, and his parents, and this his Jean Granger, my girlfriend."

"Girlfriend?" said Andromeda. "Oh, and I'm the last to know, Sirius Black?" She playfully cuffed him on the shoulder. "Honestly, I get married and I have a baby and you decided not to tell me anything anymore? Write me a letter every once in a while."

Sirius smiled and scratched at the back of his head abashedly. "I guess now would be a good time to tell you that Uncle Alphard left me some money when he died."


Jean felt her jaw drop to the floor then reel itself up into the biggest grin she had ever made for someone she was meeting for the first time again. Tonks couldn't be more than four years old, the top of her head barely even with her mother's waist. She wore capris pants and a floral blouse that looked like she was twisting at it during the entire ceremony. She had short hair the color of her mother's currently and eyes as big and blue as a July sky.
Andromeda attempted to scoot Tonks from around her leg. "Nymphadora, say hello to your cousin, Sirius." Tonks pushed her face deeper into Andromeda's robes bashfully, the tips of her hair becoming tinged with pink. Andromeda spied the bright color and wrapped one of Tonk's locks around her finger. "Honestly, Nymphadora," sighed Andromeda. "I asked for a natural color today. Didn't I tell you this morning that this isn't appropriate for a graduation?"

"It's alright, Andromeda," said Sirius. "I think it's pretty. Don't you, Moony?"

"Yes," Remus agreed his smile dropping down to Tonks. "It's very pretty."

"Really?" Tonks had moved around Andromeda's leg, but still close enough that the two were physically touching.

Remus knelt down so he was eye level with Tonks. "Yeah," he said. "It reminds me of bubblegum."

"Do you like bubblegum?"

"I love bubblegum."

That was all the encouragement Tonks needed and in an instant her entire hair was a shocking shade of pink. Jean watched Tonks take a tiny step forward and stick out her hand in a very rehearsed manner. "My name is Nymphadora Tonks. It's a pleasure to make your acquaintance." Jean hid a smile behind her hand at how practiced the little girl's introductions were.

Remus took her thin fingers in his palm, smiling gently. "I'm Remus Lupin. It's nice to meet you too."

Jean was so distracted by the scene going on that when she looked up again she about jumped before becoming very still. She moved her hand away from her mouth. "Sirius," she said quietly.

Hovering like a satellite at the edge of the group, silent and observing was Regulus Black. He wore a grey pinstripe suit beneath his well-tailored black robes. His hair was pulled back and away from his face and his hands were laced together. Jean saw Sirius almost physically straighten and fill out his form as much as possible. "Regulus," he said evenly.

The younger man took a step forward, his thumbs rapidly tapping against each other. "Sirius, I…" Regulus paused and wrestled with his phrasing before finally giving up. "Congratulations."

Sirius seemed to be equally struggling with what to say. "Thank you," he said at last.

"Ted," said Andromeda, "you haven't seen the rest of the castle yet. Why don't we…" but that was the last Jean could hear for Andromeda was already some distance away, her daughter swung over her hip. Remus and his parents had also slipped away during the tenuous exchange.

Taking her cue, Jean drifted away and left the two brothers to their hushed and stilted conversation. She subtly helicoptered around them, her head on a swivel, smiling sweetly at her fellow graduates and chatting conversationally with their family members all the while keeping one eye on Sirius. Jean accidentally bumped into someone, their hands shooting out to steady her. "Oh, James," said Jean, stumbling as she turned around. "I'm sorry I didn't see you there—"

"Hermione."

Jean felt the bottom drop out of her stomach and at the same time felt like she was going to throw up. Cautiously and overly slow, Jean turned around, a wild grin stretched on her face attempting
pleasant confusion. "James, what—" Jean's voice died in her throat as it constricted itself. Behind the lenses of James' glasses the eyes Jean saw were not James' but Lily's. Above that, partially concealed beneath unkempt dark hair was a thin scar in the shape of a lightning bolt.

"Harry?" she said, barely speaking.

"Hermione." He looked like he could barely believe what he was seeing too.

"Harry!" Jean's identity shed off her like a cloak and Hermione leapt forward, seizing Harry by his robes, his shoulders and anything she could get a hand on. "Harry," she repeated. "Harry. I can't believe you're here."

"Hermione." Harry's voice was thick with emotion. "You're alive." Harry's arms had caged her and held on as if he was afraid to let go. They stood there for a long moment, processing their unexpected reunion, swaying slightly in each other's arms.

Hermione broke them apart with a gasp, suddenly remembering where and when they were. Harry's headmaster was here, his godfather, his parents. She looked around quickly and saw no one that she knew. "Harry, come on," she said, towing him through the crowds. "You can't be seen."

Harry's name was like a sweet that she hadn't expected to taste so soon and it spread through her mouth like liquid warmth as she and her closest friend dashed through the gathering of people, an action as familiar as a slightly forgotten muscle memory. Her shock had evaporated into joy and lifted a grin onto her face. When they were out in the semi-secluded corridor Hermione couldn't help but leap back into his arms, laughing as she did. Harry laughed as well and hugged her so hard that he lifted her into the air, her toes barely touching the stone floor. Hermione finally got a good look at him. He looked older than when she had last seen him. He was also less gangly as if he had been building up his muscle mass. A light copper tan colored his skin. There was a simple gold wedding band on his finger. "Harry," she managed at last, "how are you here? How did you find me?"

Harry reached into his robes and pulled out a device that was about as big as his palm hanging on the end of a thin silver chain, which was draped around his neck. "This is a special kind of time turner," Harry supplied, "instead of going into the past and having to live through all the time you went back through you go to a specific time, stay there for an allotted amount of time and then go back to the present, only forward in time for the same amount of time you were in the past."

Hermione leaned forward and examined it, turning it about on the tips of her fingers. It was silver instead of gold and contained no hourglass. Instead a series of thin silver discs in varying diameters circled around each other to make a sphere. On each of the discs were roman numbers, some bands having markings going up into the millions, each numeral written as thin as spider's silk and almost emanating a pale moon-like light. It looked like an ancient calendar blended with a sundial. "So," said Hermione, "if you went back in time at noon and you stayed there for a specific time, stay there for an allotted amount of time and then go back to the present, only forward in time for the same amount of time you were in the past?"

"Exactly," said Harry.

Hermione continued to turn the device over in her hands before giving it back to Harry. "Who else knows about this? Did you get it from the Ministry?"

Harry tucked the time turner back into his robes. "No one else knows about it and I don't plan on telling Kingsley about it anytime soon."

"Kingsley Shaklebolt?" asked Hermione. "Is he still the leader of the Order?"
"Hermione," said Harry, "he's the Minister."

Hermione's breath caught in her throat and she looked up at Harry like she couldn't comprehend what he had just said. "Did we..." Hermione trailed off.

Harry nodded once. "We won."

Harry and Hermione spent the next hour wandering though the halls of Hogwarts out of sight of everyone there like two ghosts displaced from time talking about things that happened to them far off in the future. The pair made it to the castle grounds and paused underneath their favorite tree where she and him had spent so many lazy afternoons no matter what time they were in. Harry leaned up against he broad trunk and put his hands in his pockets as he finished dictating the Battle of Hogwarts and Voldemort's final defeat. "And that's basically it," said Harry, reaching up and fingerling the pale green leaves of the tree, "we began rebuilding Hogwarts, Kingsley was installed as Minister of Magic, and I promised the Malfoys that I would vouch for their aid in the final battle if they could tell me what had happened to you. Harry reached out again and looped his arm over her shoulder as if to reassure himself that she was really there. "They told me that you didn't...die, but you had just vanished. They looked everywhere for you and you were nowhere to be found. After that I've been looking for you ever since. For two years now."

"And here I am," said Hermione.

Harry smiled softly. "And here you are."

Harry drew Hermione close to his chest, the tip of his chin nestling into her hair, his arm casually hanging over her front. Hermione held onto that hand, idly running her fingers up and down his own, loitering on his wedding ring. "I can't believe you're married," she said.

"And older than you," Harry added with a wry grin.

Hermione winced slightly and rolled her eyes. "Harry, stop it's too weird to think about."

"Come to think about it, Ginny's older than you now."

Hermione covered her ears and playfully glared at Harry. "Harry James Potter," she said half scolding.

Harry didn't continue to heckle her because he was too busy laughing. Hermione soon joined him. She leaned into the crook of his neck. "I wish I was there for your wedding," she said quietly, not looking up at him.

"You were," said Harry. Hermione felt Harry shift underneath him. "Oh, here." He fished a folded up photo out of his pocket and handed it to her. "It's a recent picture of Teddy."

Hermione stared at the toddler, cooing over the squiggling image of Harry's godson. Every once in a while the pair of legs that he was sitting on bounced him up and down. Teddy laughed and reached up to an unseen face. Hermione felt her heart swell. She blinked rapidly. "He's precious," she said, wiping at her eyes, her thoughts wandering through the corridors of the castle to Tonks, who was no more than a kid herself, and to Remus, who didn't think he was worthy of his wife and son. "I'm so happy for Remus," she said. "I'm so happy he got the life he deserved—Oh, look at him. He has Tonks' hair."

"Yeah," said Harry. "He likes teal the most, but he went through a phase where he mimicked Ginny's red hair."
Hermione chuckled, pensively running the tip of her nail over the photograph. "I just… I can hardly believe that it's over… And Snape… Harry, that whole time…"

Harry nodded slightly again. "I know. It was hard for me to wrap my head around, too."

"Not as hard as I originally would've thought," murmured Hermione, more to herself than to Harry. She passed the photo back to Harry and he tucked it into his pocket.

"I had him buried in Godric's Hollow next to my mother. I figured she wouldn't have minded all that much."

"That was a very sweet thing to do, Harry," said Hermione, "and I think she'd appreciate the gesture too." Even though Hermione's next question hid behind her lips it hung noticeably between the two. "Where…"

"We buried him at the Burrow. You'd like the spot; it's beautiful in autumn. He was given an Order of Merlin, First Class and…" Harry chuckled slightly, "and they put him on a Chocolate Frog card."

Hermione also gave a watery laugh. "I think he'd be more pleased with that than the Order of Merlin." Harry nodded in agreement. Hermione's laughter dissolved into bittersweet tears. "He was protecting me in the end. He shielded me from Bellatrix's curse." Hermione continued to sob, all the guilt and sorrow clawing it's way back to the surface fresh and tender as an open sore. "He… It's my fault. If only I hadn't tripped."

"Hermione," said Harry, cupping her face in his hands. "It wasn't your fault. None of this was your fault."

"But…"

"It wasn't your fault." Hermione felt Harry's thumbs clearing away strands of hair stuck to her tear stained face. "I would never blame you; and I won't have you blame yourself."

"Harry, you," Hermione looked up at Harry, the wind whipping through his hair and a shaft of sunlight shining off his glasses, "you look so much like your father, except your eyes."

Harry smiled humorously at the most recent person to compare his physical traits to his parents. "So I've been told." His eyes flicked up over her head and she didn't need to turn around to know he was trying to catch a glimpse of them, any of them. "Are they happy now?" he asked.

"Yes," Hermione replied.

Harry nodded once, stiffly this time. "Good."

Harry reached into his robes and pulled out his time turner, examining it before concealing it again. "We have a few more minutes before the time turner will take us back."

"Us?" asked Hermione.

"I'm taking you with me," Harry paused, seeing her face. "Right?"

Jean recalled vividly when she felt her entire world become upended when Dumbledore had told her she was staying the past permanently. That was the only feeling she could compare to the one she was experiencing presently and that both confused and surprised her.
"Right?" Harry prompted again.

"I…hadn't thought about it," she pushed out. "I…Harry, you have to understand. Dumbledore said I could never go back. I tried to make a life for myself here and I succeeded, much to my surprise." Hermione broke off her babbling and looked helplessly at Harry who was staring at her sightlessly, assimilating what he was hearing, processing his grief again. His glistening over bright eyes launched her back into speech. "Harry I want to go with you so much…but I have…friends here, which at one point I thought I'd never have again…and they're counting on me in the Order and I've…met someone and he's…he's…"

"Hermione," said Harry. He looked at her closely, as if he were memorizing her face. "I get it," he whispered. A small grin formed on his face, but it looked like it was barely holding on. "I get why you," his sentence was broken in half with a sigh, "have to stay."

Hermione desperately wanted to take everything back, but her mouth couldn't articulate the phrase. "Harry," she said, but Harry cut her off before she could begin again.

"Hermione," said Harry, taking both of her hands in his, "my best friend. The thing that kept me going during these past two years was the hope that you were safe, somewhere in the world and I'm…ecstatic…to find you safe and happy, even if it's not with me anymore."

"Harry," said Hermione, tears leaking through her lashes, but Harry continued.

"Ron's dead," he said. "The man you wanted to spend the rest of your life with is dead. How could I take you back to a life that's no longer the one you wanted when you have a chance at happiness in this one?"

"Harry," Hermione attempted again, but found no words. "I'm sorry." She cried miserably where she stood, her shoulders shaking with the internal war within, desperately clinging to the lives of both Hermione and Jean. "I'm so sorry."

Harry gathered her in his arms and held her as she cried, Hermione feeling his own tears on her hairline. "Don't be," he murmured into her scalp. "Please, don't be." Harry shifted and sighed. "I have to go." Hermione's fingers sewed themselves into his clothes in a panic. "Hermione," he said gently. "You need to let me go." Harry took his hands and gently massaged Hermione's fingers until she released him. He held them both in his hands as if he were having trouble letting go of her as well. Harry's eyes flickered over Hermione's shoulder again, gazing up at Hogwarts. His lips thinned and he swallowed audibly. "Tell them I love them," he said, his voice wavering.

Hermione nodded her head jerkily. "I will. Harry…I'll try."

"I know you will," Harry replied. Harry readjusted his fingers, almost as if he were prepping himself. He leaned forward and chastely kissed her on the forehead. "Goodbye," he whispered against her skin, and then he let go.

Hermione instinctively reached out to him, but he slowly moved backwards as if to keep himself from running back into her embrace. He raised his hand in farewell. By the time his arm reached its full extension it was translucent as Harry began being pulled back through time. "I'll miss you, Hermione Granger," he called out and then, in the longest moment of Hermione's life, yet at the same time no time at all, he was gone.

"I'll miss you too, Harry." Hermione's voice morphed itself into a keen and she held one hand around her chest to keep it from tearing itself to pieces and the other over her mouth to keep her silent cries from vocalizing.
All the while lurking in a high window of Hogwarts, Sirius observed the impassioned exchange between his girlfriend and James Potter. He watched James Potter disappear after pulling himself out of an embrace he initiated and his girlfriend stumble away in tears back into the castle. His fingers tightened into a fist and he hit the grilles before shoving himself away from the window.

Hermione shuffled through the corridors, blindly moving from one to the next, wiping her eyes. She had him. She finally had Harry again and she lost him and the worst part was she had let him go willingly. Hermione continue to wrestle with herself, wondering why she didn't enthusiastically go back with Harry to the future. But, then she countered herself saying that there was no future for her. Harry was right. Ron was dead and the world had grown up and moved on without her. She would be just some displaced time traveller living partly in two worlds. She contradicted herself again saying she could find a way to be happy there just like she found a way here and the future here meant starting the war all over again instead of sitting with Harry at the end of it. Back and forth she went, on and on and on. She twisted and turned herself until her head ached. She brought her hand up to her temple. "I'm so lost," Hermione murmured to herself.

Hermione jumped as she heard the wall rumble beside her. A fissure split the stone and the Room of Requirement opened up before her. Hermione slipped inside and discovered the familiar cavernous room she had found on her first visit in this time. She winced slightly when the Mirror of Erised appeared at the end of the antechamber, but she had run out of tears for anything more than that. The murky surface set in the gilded frame cleared and Harry and Ron appeared, smiling and standing on either side of her. She stared at the wistfully at the pair, as she had for many nights previously, and put her hand on the mirror, almost feeling the softness of Ron's hair under her fingers. "Hermione Granger will always love you," she said. Ron smiled widely and Harry did the same.

Suddenly their bright and shining smiles, along with the rest of them, faded into the depths of the mirror. Hermione blinked in confusion as the image disappeared, then changed. It first was only her, standing solitary in the center of the glass. Then a pair of arms emerged from the darkness and wrapped around her body. She felt the warmth and strength of the limbs, holding her heart together. Sirius' head appeared over her shoulder. He leaned his head up against the side of her face and stared at her with his starry sparkling eyes in a way that only he could. He kissed her hairline and Hermione, almost without thought, attempted to lean back into him. Her eyes dropped down from his to hers and she regarded herself in a way that she had never seen before. Everyone had told her and she had seen for herself how Sirius looked when he looked at her, but she had never before seen how she looked in return. She had a glow to her skin that she hadn't noticed and the simple way she carried her head brought about such a difference that she couldn't even describe.

The woman in the mirror rested her hands over Sirius' and tilted her neck to nuzzle the underside of his jaw. She looked safe, confident, strong. "This is Jean Granger," said Hermione. "I am Jean Granger." Jean left the Room of Requirement, not looking back as the door folded itself into the wall.

Jean felt weightless as she sprinted through the corridor, rejuvenated and content. She almost skidded past Frank, Alice, and a very flustered Augusta Longbottom before she turned on her heel and went back to them. "Hey," she said, speaking rapidly, "have you seen Sirius?"

"Yeah," said Alice, eyeing her, "he was outside on the grounds. Why—"

"Thanks," and Jean was off again.

Jean erupted through the door, the warm wind whipping back through her hair. Within moments she spied Sirius standing at the edge of the castle grounds near the road leading down to Hogsmeade. She ran down to him, waiving her hand in greeting. "Sirius!" she called out. Sirius
looked over at her and her pace faltered. "Sirius?" The stars had fallen from his eyes, leaving them cold and ominous. He looked like how Jean had first met him in the Shrieking Shack, forlorn and haunted and very angry. "Sirius!" Jean called out again, but no matter how fast she ran to him, Sirius only had to take one step more before he was outside the magical boundary. He Apparated with a sharp pop, the only evidence of his recent presence being a rustled clumping of leaves falling slowly back to earth.
Chapter 19: Oh, Those Summer Nights

Nobody saw Sirius again until the end-of-term feast that evening and even then he wasn't particularly lively. He applauded only because it was socially required of him when Dumbledore announced that Gryffindor had won the House Cup and was the only one of the Marauders who didn't stand up when the gleaming gold award was paraded over to them. For the most part, he just sat on his side of the table, with only Peter for company, pointedly stabbing at his steak and speaking only to grunt and Peter to pass the potatoes.

"Sirius," ventured Remus, "Can I have some potatoes too, please?" Sirius pushed the brimming bowl over to Remus and resumed eating. "You alright?" he asked.

"I'm perfectly fine," said Sirius. He proceeded to saw off the gristle of his meat and chew on it.

"You've seemed off since the ceremony. Wha—"

"I said I'm fine." Sirius' knife clinked sharply against his plate.

James snapped his mouth shut and stared sharply at Sirius before he scooped a spoonful of mixed vegetables into his mouth. Jean had long since stopped attempting to initiate conversation and idly shifted her food around on her plate, trying to make sense of Sirius' strange, yet familiar, pattern of behavior. The Sirius she knew had never acted in such a way, however the Sirius she remembered had the tendency of being snappish and broody, particularly when he was irritated, such as when he was forced to be confined and isolated in Grimmauld Place for months on end with only Kreacher and sparse visits from Order members for company. She drew a blank, however, not coming up with anything that could've happened between when she left Sirius with his brother and when he Disapparated away from her at the edge of the Hogwarts grounds.

"We should probably be heading to bed soon," said Lily, attempting to quell the turmoil at the table. "We've had a long day today and we'll have a long day of traveling tomorrow."

"Best idea of the entire day," said Sirius suddenly. He shoved himself away from the table. "Come on, Wormtail. I seem to recall both you and I have some packing to do."

Peter, more than stunned at being selected over Remus and James, nodded his head vigorously and skittered behind Sirius' rapidly retreating form.

James dropped his silverware with an audible chink. "Well, I'm finished with feasting for the day." Remus, Lily and Jean felt similarly and quietly withdrew from the end of term festivities in the Great Hall.

Jean was quiet as the quartet wandered through the corridors to the Head Boy and Girl dormitories. James and Remus were huddled in a tight unit discussing Sirius in hushed rapid voices. Lily remained on the periphery, her eyes every once in a while drifting over to Jean. Jean shoved her hands into her pockets and fiddled with the seams, running through the possibilities of what could have set Sirius off. His family was an obvious candidate with so many of them in one place. Jean wondered how long it had been since he'd even seen his mother and father and was fairly certain that that was the first time she had seen Sirius speak to his brother.

"Hey."
Jean jerked herself out of her musings and looked over at Lily who had walked up beside her. "Hey," Jean replied.

"So," said Lily, trailing off, an obvious question hanging on her lips.

Jean shrugged her shoulders. "I don't know. I left him talking with Regulus and the next time I was him he was…” she vaguely gestured with her hand, "like that." Jean returned her hand to the confines of her pocket. "Do you think they got into an argument or something? It wouldn't surprise me if his family could put Sirius in that type of mood."

Lily shook her head. "I don't think so," she said. "I saw Sirius and Regulus at the end of their conversation. They seemed really friendly with each other. He came up to me and asked where you were and off he went. I didn't see him for the rest of the afternoon. I took my parents down to Hogsmeade and we met up with James and his father." Lily ran a nervous had through her auburn curls. "I'm sorry, Jean."

Jean looked over at her. "For what?" she said, surprised.

"Well," began Lily. "You obviously weren't with Sirius, and Remus and Peter were with their own families while I was off with James and our parents and we all just left you along with no friends or family to be with.

Jean, for a moment, was once again in awe of a person capable of such care, generosity and compassion. "I," stammered out Jean, "I did have someone, actually. A friend from my old school came over and surprised me."

Lily's mouth formed an O before it widened into a grin. "Jean," she said, "that's so wonderful. Are they still here?"

"He couldn't stay long," said Jean, a touch of sadness coloring her voice, "but we got to talk for a long time."

"What did you talk about?" asked Lily.

Jean smiled softly. "A friend of mine had a baby boy."

"That's wonderful," responded Lily, her eyes sparkling. "You must be so happy for them."

"I am." Her eyes, almost of their own accord drifted to the back of Remus' head. "I really am."

James and Lily split company to return to their dormitories. Lily reached out and hugged Jean before they shut themselves in for the night. "I'm sure whatever is bothering Sirius will blow over by morning," she whispered into her ear.

Jean only nodded, images of the terse and irritable Sirius of the future flooding her memory.

A few minutes later Remus held open the portrait hole for Jean as she stepped into the Common Room. She visibly deflated as her eyes scanned the room, finding nothing and no one but a roaring fire casting a warm light on the red wing backed chairs. Jean padded across the rug-covered floor and up the short flight of stairs to the landing where the stairs divided and headed towards either the boys or girls dormitories. She rested her hand on the balustrade quite similarly to Sirius earlier that morning when all he wanted was her happiness and looked as far as she could up the stairs spiraling into the tower to where Sirius was no doubt brooding within his four poster bed.

"You going to bed, then?"
Jean turned around, completely forgetting that Remus was still there. "I guess so," she said, shooting the boys dormitory another glance while Remus ascended to her.

Remus mimicked her gaze before he looked back at Jean. "I'll talk to him."

Jean almost visibly relaxed. "Thank you."

Remus nodded once and made for the adjoining stairs, but before he got up the first step Jean grabbed him by the robes and pulled him into a hug. "Jean?" he asked, his arms, not sure where they should fall, extending awkwardly out from his sides. "What's all this?"

Jean thought of the bubbly blue-haired baby in Harry's photograph and tightened her grip. "I'm just so happy for you Remus, and happy for all the things that you've done. I just wish you considered yourself deserving of them in spite of being...you know."

Remus' wrists fell on Jean's shoulders and Jean looked up at him. "Having you say so makes me almost believe it," he said. He stepped out of her arms.

"Remus," said Jean.

Remus looked back at her. "Yes?"

Jean opened her mouth, closed it, then opened it again. "I know you don't see it now and I know you want to make your own way, but there's a good life for you in the making. Don't be afraid to reach for it."

Remus crossed his arms and leaned against the staircase, drumming his fingers on his sleeves. "When I was ten years old my parents sat me down and told me I'd never go to school. They told me I'd never be like normal boys because I wasn't a normal boy. But, today my parents saw me graduate from a school they never thought I'd attend alongside the best friends I could ever hope for, whose friendships were made stronger because of what I am, not in spite of it." Remus paused and Jean watched him turn his hand back and forth as if he were noting the nicks and scratches that stretched over his skin. "I believe you're very optimistic about my future, but stranger things have happened."

Jean nodded knowingly at the professor of her past and his future. "Stranger things indeed."

Remus gave her a half grin. "Goodnight, Jean."

"Goodnight," Jean responded and both departed to their separate rooms.

Sleep did not come easily to Jean, however, after she crawled into her bed and drew her curtains shut to block out the well-lit room, waiting to welcome the rest of her roommates back to their last night at Hogwarts. She tossed and turned, perpetually jittery, shoving her face into her pillow to suffocate her thoughts. She tightened herself into a cocoon until she was stifling from her body heat and threw her sheets and comforter off with a disgruntled huff.

Jean parted her curtains and peered out into the darkened room, her roommates having returned and long since asleep. Too restless to stay confined to the quiet room, Jean padded across the chilled flooring and down the spiral staircase towards the Common Room. Near the end of her descent, Jean saw the orangey glow of the fire crackling in the great hearth and stumbled when a human shaped shadow cut across that light. Jean crouched and surreptitiously peered over the balustrade, keeping close enough to duck back into the stairwell.

Sirius was standing there, one hand leaning against the mantelpiece and staring pensively into the
flames. In the odd light, his dark hair was streaked with hues of navy and his eyes had the look of liquid silver. The onyx in his ring winked like far away lamplight whenever he drummed his fingers against the grain. His other hand held the iron poker, resting idly in the embers. His ringed hand ran over his face as he sighed, pushing himself away from the wall and gracefully collapsing on the sofa his dressing gown pooling around his bare feet. Jean felt her back begin to ache as she watched the firelight flicker across his frame and almost spoke before he moved violently, vehemently turning about the logs and throwing a cascade of embers and hot ashes into the air before, just as suddenly, going still again.

Jean bit on the inside of her lip and her fingers curled around the stone before, defeated, she withdrew back to her bedroom.

Jean eased open the door and quietly clambered over trunks and parcels, blindly reaching for her bed curtains. She thought she was nearly there but found she was far from her mark when she began blinking at the pale blue light emanating near her. Dorcas Meadowes sat on the edge of her bed, arms crossed, wand pinched between her fingers like a quellazaire. "I thought you had gone," she commented.

Jean blinked again to regain her sight. "Where would I have gone?"

Dorcas shrugged her shoulders. "Off to another adventure. You seem to have so many of them with Lily and the boys."

Jean tilted her head slightly, wondering where Dorcas was going with this. Dorcas shifted and Jean sat down in the space made for her on the bed. "So," said Dorcas, lacing her fingers together in her lap. "Professor Kinshield was secretly training you to fight these Death Eaters."

"He was training us in case Death Eaters attacked," Jean clarified. "He didn't want us to fight and wasn't trying to make an army out of us."

"But we're in an army now," commented Dorcas, "you, me, and everyone else."

"I guess we are," conceded Jean. She hadn't really thought about it before, being a child soldier in a shadowy conflict, or perhaps the concept was so normal, so accepted, that it's significance had long been lost to her.

"Are we at war?" asked Dorcas quietly.

Jean remained silent for a beat, her fingers pleating her pajama pants. "Yes."

Dorcas sharply exhaled through her nose and nodded her head, as if she were attempting to assimilate the word now lying between them. "I keep turning over in my head," said Dorcas, blankly staring out the window, "why Dumbledore vouched for Alice, Marlene, Mary and I. Why did he invite us to join the Order? What did he see in us? I'm not brave or strong like you."

Dorcas drifted off into silence and Jean realized that they had drawn closer together, Dorcas lightly nestling her cheek into Jean's shoulder. Jean rested her temple on the crown of Dorcas' head, holding onto the quiet moment with her friend. Jean recalled what Moody had said about Dorcas Meadowes in the basement kitchen of Grimmauld Place. Voldemort had killed her personally. Jean tightened her grip, running her thumb over the edge of Dorcas' knuckles. "You will be," said Jean. "But, I'm not that brave. Somebody just has to be."

"Well, I think you are," said Dorcas, "especially since you're," Dorcas paused, turning the unfamiliar word in her mouth, "fighting them again after what you've already been through."
Jean stiffened immediately. "What do you mean?"

"Your scar," replied Dorcas simply. She reached forward and rolled up Jean's sleeve, revealing the ugly word carved into her skin.

"How did you know about that?"

Dorcas ran a finger lightly over the raised markings. "Did you really not think we'd notice it? Or that we'd puzzle out who gave it to you?"

Jean looked down, saying nothing.

"When Marlene first saw it she thought you were a secret agent."

"A secret agent?" Jean repeated.

"Yeah," said Dorcas, laughing slightly. "You know like in those muggle movies where they dress up in suits and drink martinis and say they're some news correspondence when in fact they're an ex-war hero who works for the government, speaks seven languages and can kill a guy with a paperclip."

Jean cut Dorcas off with a laugh. "I didn't think I was that exciting."

Dorcas cocked her head comically. "You know Marlene and her dramatic flair."

Jean nodded in agreement. "Yeah, I do."

"Still," said Dorcas, her voice dropping back into seriousness. "I'm sorry they hurt you."

Jean flexed her tendons and watched the wording tense and stretch. "They've done worse," she murmured.

"Why?" asked Dorcas.

Jean thought about Voldemort and his plans to subjugate anyone who wasn't a pureblood wizard. She thought about the muggle registration where their stance was muggle-born witches and wizards stole magic. She thought about how Voldemort had spent a lifetime creating Horcruxes, acquiring the Deathly Hallows and seeking out the true meaning of the prophecy to live forever. And then there was Bellatrix who just thought it was fun. "I honestly don't know anymore."

Jean didn't know how long she and Dorcas sat in silence, casually leaning against each other, but she stirred when Dorcas yawned as if she had fallen asleep on Jean's shoulder and just now had woken. "I think I'm going to bed," said Jean.

Dorcas nodded sleepily, readjusting so she could lie down. "Jean?"

Jean turned and resettled into her pillow, pulling her sheets to her neck. "Yeah?"

"When you go on your next adventure, don't slip away from us forever." Dorcas' voice floated over to Jean through the darkness. "I'd miss you."

Jean nodded, even though Dorcas couldn't see her. "I'd miss you too."

Morning came too quickly for Jean. She sat sleepily and somewhat dazed on her school trunk as if she were having an out of body experience. Shafts of sunlight warmed the leather and Jean rested her hands on its heat.
"Jean," called out Alice from the door. "Are you ready?"

Jean wasn’t ready. She wasn't ready to not be a Hogwarts student and leave the comfort of the castle, constant through time, and brave this new world that until today she had been secluded from. Jean rocked back on her heels and swung into a standing position. "Yeah," she said.

Dorcas, Mary and Marlene were sprawled across the sofas when Alice and Jean descended into the Common Room. Jean glanced over at the fireplace. A thick layer of soot spilled out onto the floor probably because Sirius stirred the fire until he couldn't keep himself awake. "Have Sirius and the others come down yet?"

"I think they've already gone on," said Mary idly looking at her watch.

Jean nodded, somewhat jerkily, wishing that Sirius was here so she could ascertain if whatever that had occurred yesterday was still bothering him.

"Jean?" asked Mary, tilting her head slightly. "You alright?"

"Mm-hm," she said, cloaking her mood with a layer of cheeriness. "I was just thinking…I'll miss this place."

Jean watched everyone nod, drifting back into their own memories along with Jean. "Tough old thing," said Dorcas, her fingers catching on the almost invisible fibers of the antique crimson sofa.

"Had to be to survive us," commented Jean, not sure if she was referring to the Marauders or the Golden Trio.

"But what a place to grow up," said Alice. Jean and the other girls sat in silence until, almost with some unseen mental synchronization, they stood and silently passed through the portrait hole.

As the portrait hole swung shut, revealing the Fat Lady leaning against her gilded frame, Marlene turned over her shoulder. "Bye," she called out to the painting. "Have a nice summer."

"Good-bye, dearies," answered the Fat Lady, "hurry now or you'll miss the boats."

"Boats?" asked Jean, as they proceeded through the corridors at a brisk pace.

"Oh, yeah," said Marlene, the tight coils of her curls bouncing in it's ponytail. "On the first night a person comes here as a student they don't take the carriages, they take boats across the lake. So, when a student graduates they leave for the last time in the boats as well."

Jean put forth a considerable effort not to tear up. She had completely forgotten the ceremonial ritual regarding the boats. For so long she had assumed she would never go back to Hogwarts after her sixth year or that there wouldn't be a Hogwarts to go back to. "Neat," she managed to say at last. "Looks like nice day for it."

Jean had rarely found herself at the docks kept in the caverns beneath Hogwarts, which she thought a feat considering where else she had found herself within the castle. So, she stared in genuine awe at the paddle-less boats bobbing in the dark water, bumping into each other and the almost grid like array of moldering rocks that contained them.

Jean gingerly picked her way across the damp floor pockmarked with stalagmites. Jean was bumped by a wave of shuffling students and lost her grip on Marlene's hand. Jean huffed, slightly claustrophobic, and gently pushed her way through the people, attempting to keep an eye line on the blonde curls.
"Jean!" Jean's head turned towards the sound of Lily's voice and spied her waiving from the bow of a boat. Jean smiled and waved back as James made to move over and give her a space. But, her hand stiffened and stilted as another person stepped into the space James had just vacated for her. Sirius glanced up at her with eyes so dark they were almost black. With his foot, he launched the boat in the same motion he stepped into it. He did not look at her again as he settled into his seat, but Jean felt the lingering frost bite into her cheeks.

Lily made a valiant effort to grab for the docking, but missed. She looked wistfully at Jean as she receded from shore. Jean gave her a half-wave and Lily returned it before sharply turning to Sirius. Jean turned away, not waning to see the argument between her best friend and her boyfriend.

"Jean?" Jean looked up. "Jean, there you are. Come on, get in." Jean almost robotically clamored into the boat, holding Alice and her other roommates, settling in with a thump as the boat pushed itself from shore.

"For a second there, I thought you were getting into Sirius' boat," commented Alice idly.

Jean shrugged her shoulders. "They must've not seen me."

Jean felt a hand touch hers. She looked up and found Marlene's manicured nails resting on her wrist. Marlene leaned in subtly. 'You alright?' she mouthed.

Jean pulled a non-committal nod before she folded her hands into her midsection.

The sun broke brilliantly over the water, momentarily blinding Jean as the armada of little boats emerged from the mouth of the cave. Almost compelled, Jean turned to look over her shoulder and, along with the rest of her roommates, regarded the place that, in one time or another, had been their home for seven years. From their place on the water Hogwarts looked majestic and imposing, set against and unending stretch of blue summer sky. For a moment, Jean let her worries about her life beyond the safety of this stronghold and her concerns over Sirius' behavior slough off her and pool in the bottom of the tiny vessel. For all the troubles in getting to this moment, she was grateful for the ancient stones that built this timeless structure and the warm lights that lit her way home that night she sailed across this lake for the first time. Her fellow travellers seemed to be lost in similar memories. Mary had her arms wrapped about herself, a serene far away look to her face. Alice blinked and ran a finger under her eye and Marlene and Dorcas' hands crept together and held each other firmly. Jean leaned against the side of the boat and dragged her fingers through the small ripples in the water.

All too quickly, that beautiful quiet ended with the uneven grinding of many hulls over rocky, rooted shores. Jean jolted back to reality and, with a huff, collected her worries and concerns from the bottom of the boat and hefted them across her shoulders. Jean followed the beacon that was Marlene's bobbing blonde curls through the throngs of 'farewells,' 'well wishes' and 'write to me soons.' Before entering the train, Jean spied the hulking mass that was Hagrid on the far side of the platform, sheparding luggage and soon-to-be second years to the appropriate places. She resisted calling out, but wished she could run over and hug him hard before her last train from Hogwarts.

Jean pulled her eyes away from her childhood and realized she had lost her eye line with Marlene and her other roommates. Following the flow of other passengers, Jean quickly swung herself onto the train, searching for someone to share the ride back with.

Jean weaved her way through the vestibule of the train car, dodging the energetic younger students and smiling sympathetically at fifth years already hunkered down in their seats, furtively reviewing their O.W.L. scores. She passed the passenger car that contained the Marauders and Lily. The red head was smashed between Remus and James, the latter waiving his hands animatedly in telling a story to Peter, who was listening with rapt attention. Sirius stared blankly out the window,
determinedly ignoring everyone, his hand bracing his chin. Jean only lingered for a moment and kept walking before anyone noticed her.

Jean walked onwards past car after car filling up with students heaving their luggage to the upper compartments and settling in for the long ride back to London. Every once in a while, a younger student would race by, shooting off zips of sparkling magic with their friends before they had to return to a muggle dominated life. They dwindled down to fewer and fewer in number till Jean was practically the only one in the corridor. The floor lurched beneath her and Jean caught herself on a passenger car door as the Hogwarts Express rumbled its way out of the station. She felt the glass beneath her braced palm being tapped. Framed in the window was Dorcas Meadowes, who gave a small wave.

Jean smiled softly and let herself into the passenger car and fell into the seat closest to the door. Dorcas and Alice sat across from her while Mary, who was in the farthest corner from her, had slipped off her shoes and sat cross-legged thumbing through a copy of Witch Weekly.

"Sirius and the others were a few cars back if you were looking for them," said Alice.

Jean felt Alice's words prying, at everyone's behest, at a subject Jean didn't have an answer to. She shrugged noncommittally. "Really?" she said pleasantly. "I didn't see them. I'm here now though, so I'll meet up with them at the station." Her rouse didn't work and Jean watched their eyes flicker to one another. Jean braced herself for the inquisition.

The passenger car door slid open and an elderly woman poked her head in, startling Jean into holding onto her seat. "Anything from the trolley, dears?"

Jean jumped at the opportunity. "I'll have a Pumpkin Pastry please."

The young women ate their confections in silence. Alice and Dorcas passed a box of Bertie Bott's Every Flavor Beans between them. Mary used her newly acquired Chocolate Frog card as a bookmark and Marlene sucked on a Sugar Quill. Jean picked her pastry apart and ate it slowly, trying to buy some time to think of answers to the questions waiting behind her friends' lips. From Sirius' behavior, it was easy to assume his mood was targeted at her. But, for what reason? She searched through the day of their commencement and couldn't think of a single thing that could've changed him from his charming self to a person who barely even looked at her. Jean even ran through the memories of the future, trying to find a clue to Sirius' behavior in his older, far more jaded counterpart.

Jean had barely finished her last bite before Marlene took up where Alice left off. "Jean," Marlene said matter-of-factly, "What's wrong?"

Jean sighed and folded her slightly sticky hands together. "I don't know," she said at last. "Everything seemed fine the morning of graduation, but by the end of the day...He's barely looked at me let alone spoken to me."

"Do you think he's mad at you?"

"I don't know what else it could be," Jean responded dully, "but I don't know why he would be."

"Typical Sirius though," commented Marlene, "the more he needs people to help him carry his burdens the more he isolates himself from the people who would."

Jean couldn't help but nod in agreement, thinking more of the future Sirius Black than the present. "I just thought," Jean began, "that I of all people would be the one he would want to share with."
"It's his wall," said Marlene. "You've taken down more of it than anybody I've ever known. Perhaps this is just a portion he's not ready to let you into. But, I wouldn't worry about it being you. Sirius has his moods. He'll come round and if he doesn't well, there's a life beyond Sirius Black. Believe me." Marlene bit into the end of her sugar quill with a crunch.

Jean pulled a smile that didn't expose her teeth. "Why did you and Sirius break up?"

Marlene gave a non-committal wave. "It was so long ago I can hardly remember now; probably over something very adolescent."

Jean teethed on the inside of her lip, hating to bring it up, but she felt like she had to. "And Matilda Maybelle?"

"Now, that was a strange situation," said Marlene. "It's at the end of fifth year. Everything's going well. They're the two most love struck people you've ever seen. Then, about halfway through the summer he stops writing her. Matilda writes and writes and she can't get to him. She writes to all of his friends and everyone responds saying they haven't seen him. Finally, Matilda gets a letter from James saying Sirius had moved into his place and that he would talk to her at the start of term. First day back he broke up with her."

Jean didn't think a day would come when she felt sorry for the beautiful and charming Matilda Maybelle. "Did he ever give a reason?" asked Jean, even though she already knew the intimate details of that tumultuous summer that not even James knew the full extent of.

"No," said Mary, taking up where Marlene had left off. "But no one really thought much of it. They had broken up before and barely a year went by before they started making eyes at each other again."

"It was his family then and I bet you a hundred galleons it's his family now."

Jean was genuinely surprised at the dark timbre that accompanied Alice's voice. "Why do you think that?" she asked.

Alice shifted in her seat, looking uncomfortable. "Jean," she said, measuring the weight of her words. "You have to understand. Frank and I are purebloods. We were raised around Sirius' family, hearing about his family." Jean flicked her eyes down to watch Alice readjust her fingers. "Jean, they're not good people. They hate muggle-borns. I mean Sirius' parents completely disowned his cousin, Andromeda, for marrying a muggle-born wizard."

"How did you know about that?" asked Jean, thinking that the Blacks were too proud to admit they ostracized one of their own.

"Everyone knows about that," said Alice, her fellow travelers nodding silently in agreement, "but no one will talk about it. The Blacks are a powerful and wealthy family. They have eyes and influences everywhere and it wouldn't completely surprise me if they tried to...do something, even if it pertained to family they don't think of as family."

"To me, you mean," supplied Jean, "because I'm dating Sirius."

"I'm not saying they're going to kidnap you for ransom or anything," said Alice half laughing in amusement and half to relieve the tension, "but, being on the bad side of Sirius' family could make life...complicated."

"So, Sirius might be avoiding me to spare me from his family."
"It makes sense to me," said Alice, "and the timing is right. His family may have harassed him and threatened you during graduation because Narcissa or Regulus may have told them."

"Regulus didn't say anything," said Jean.

"What makes you think that?" asked Dorcas.

Jean heard Kreacher's frantic narrative as his young master's body being dragged into a dark a frigid lake by decaying hands played out before her. "I just don't think he would."

Jean felt resistance when she pulled her palms apart and looked down at the half dried clumps of pumpkin pastry icing. She pulled a scowl and gingerly rubber her fingers. "I'm going to go wash up," she said, shifting into a standing position, "be right back."

Jean slid the passenger car door shut, but walked past the washroom and kept walking until she reached the end of the train and walked through the door of the caboose. Jean leaned against the railing that surrounded the small standing platform and jetted a stream of water over her hands to clean off the stickiness watching the droplets sparkle as they fell onto the tracks. Jean sighed and tucked her hands into her side allowing the wind to whip her hair across her forehead. She stared at the receding horizon, convincing herself that if she squinted she could make out the hazy silhouette of Hogwarts even though it was miles away. Jean sighed again, thumbing the seam line of her robes. There was no way she could survive outside of Hogwarts, at least on her own. She couldn't get a place to live since she had no income. She had no income because she didn't have a job. She didn't have a job cause she didn't even bother to apply for one. Her records and resume were so skimpy in this time she couldn't help but attract attention and a graduation from Hogwarts could only shield her so much. She should have never left Hogwarts since she had nowhere to go. Maybe if she stayed on the back of the train no one would notice her and the express would circle her back to Hogwarts. Maybe she should just Apparate to the castle gates now. Jean fisted her robes, preparing.

"Hey."

Jean jerkily spun around towards the unexpected company.

Lily's hair caught the afternoon sunlight and passed through her crimson curls before she daintily tucked it back behind her ear. "I've been looking for you. Why are you out here all by yourself?"

Jean sighed and let her hands fall in front of her before she turned and rested the small of her back on the railing. "I don't know," she said at last. "I think I just wanted some time to myself."

Lily nodded once and took a step forward, making a visual sweep of the panorama as well. "I tried to talk to him about what was going on," she began. "It didn't end well. I left so he'd stop skulking."

Jean couldn't help but smirk slightly at that. "Have you ever seen him like this before?"

"Only once or twice I think, but not as...enduring."

Jean folded her hands back underneath her arms. "Do you think he's going to break it off with me?"

Jean saw through Lily's eyes that the answer she wanted to give was not the answer that was going to come out of her mouth. "I don't know. I believe he's trying to figure that out for himself."

Jean at last allowed her frustration and distress to manifest outwardly. "I just don't know what happened. What changed?"
"I wish I could tell you, but I suppose that is the mystery that is Sirius Black. I believe he would be both an easy and a hard man to love."

Jean nodded once. "Yeah, I suppose so."

By this time, Lily had walked up to Jean completely, and the latter shimmied over to give the red head room on the rail. Lily pressed she and Jean together, shoulder-to-shoulder, and Jean tilted her head in so that their temples were almost touching. Their wild tendrils tangled together in the breeze.

"Oh, I almost forgot." Lily produced a piece of paper from her pocket and pushed it in Jean's direction. "I need your address so that I can write to you."

Jean fiddled with the piece of paper, creating a crease down the middle. "Well," she said, almost laughing. "I would love to give you an address if I had one to give."

"You what?" asked Lily.

Jean wordlessly spread her hands.

"You don't have a place to live?!"

Jean was genuinely surprised at the vocal force that came out of Lily's body. "I can just go back to Hogwarts until Dumbledore and I figure something out," she said, attempting to backpedal. "No big deal."

"Jean Granger I will not allow you to stay by yourself all summer in that drafty castle," said Lily. "You'll stay with me."

"I'll—What? No, Lily I'm not just going to invite myself over to live at your house. What would your parents say?"

"You didn't invite yourself over to my house, I did; and Mum and Dad won't mind. They'll love the company."

Jean ran her fingers through her hair. "I don't know, Lily. I feel like I'd be such a bother. I can easily live at Hogwarts until I find my own place."

"And you can just as easily stay at my place until you do and be no less of a bother there than you would be at Hogwarts."

Jean opened her mouth, but closed it again. Lily smiled with her eyebrows. "You've lost this one, Jean. Accept it."

Jean had no other choice. "Lily," said Jean. "Why do you care so much?"

Lily crossed her arms looking pleased with herself. "Because you are my friend and you can't stop me."

The Hogwarts Express rolled into King's Cross station with a cacophonous rumble. Jean watched from the window the younger students throw themselves into their parents arms while rapidly introducing their new friends. Jean felt a slight sting. This was the first time she would walk back through the entrance to Platform 9 ¾ to meet parents that were not her own. Jean followed the much more sedate procession of students exchanging long good-byes before slugging off to find her luggage. Jean hung onto the tips of Lily's fingers as she darted through the people, smiling and
waving as she went. James bloomed from the crowds and appeared suddenly beside the pair, slinging his arm across Lily's shoulders.

"Come on," said James, jostling their way over the platform. "Let's go get your luggage."

"Where's Sirius?" asked Lily. James swiveled his head around. "I don't know," he said. "I lost him a few minutes ago."

James lifted himself into the luggage car and dug around around the trunks and suitcases before finally dragging one out. "Here, Lily" he said, swinging her trunk to her feet before diving back in. "Jean, what does your trunk look like?"

"It's over here." Jean walked over to where her trunk was resting, out of the line of traffic but still within eyesight. She pulled it up onto a trolley cart, no longer wondering what Sirius was doing in his unaccounted minutes.

Lily and James parted quietly, with Lily kissing him subtly on the cheek and Jean pretending not to notice before the women passed through the brick wall back into the muggle world. Mr. and Mrs. Evans were there, experts at surreptitiously waiting by the barrier between platforms 9 and 10. Mr. Evans folded up his newspaper and Mrs. Evans picked herself up off the bench. "Hey Mum, Dad," said Lily giving them each a one armed hug. "You remember Jean Granger from graduation?"

"Of course," said Mrs. Evans. "Hello, dear. Did you have a nice ride back?"

"I did, thank you," Jean responded.

"Jean's not going back to America," Lily continued, "and I was wondering if she could stay with us until she found a place of her own."

Jean felt compelled to say that it was really no problem for her to go back to Hogwarts and she didn't want to be leeching off their hospitality, but she never got a word in edgewise.

"Of course," said Mrs. Evan enthusiastically. "Stay as long as you like. It's been so quiet since Petunia got married. We'll finally have a full house again."

Jean could only nod. "Thank you for having me."

Mr. Evans looked down at his watch. "Well, we'd best be off. We don't want to hit traffic." Mr. Evans grabbed Lily and Jean's trunks and proceeded to heft them out of the station.

The Evans family plus Jean crammed themselves into a silver Ford Cortina and puttered out of the station. While Lily leaned forward to talk to her parents in the front seat, Jean folded herself up against the door and leaned her forehead onto the glass. It was oddly comforting to watch cars zoom along beside her, billboards and advertisements remaining stationary and muggles paying for purchases with pounds before taking the tube home. Over time the city of London gave way to it's suburbs and finally to the outlying country. A young girl rode a bicycle alongside a broken down fence, wispy yellow hair flying wildly out behind her. A shaggy old dog trotted along beside her sniffing at he grass and snapping at bugs that whizzed through the warm air. Vaguely, Jean was aware of her mother asking what she wanted for dinner.

"Jean? Jean?"

Jean jolted awake, disoriented from her dream of the past. Her eyes locked onto Lily's hand that was resting on her shoulder and followed her arm to her face. "We're home," she said.
Jean uncurled herself from the seat and tumbled out onto the driveway, blinking against the low hanging sun. The sidewalk to the door was framed in boxwood and large yellow and orange flowers overflowed from the window dressings. A family of garden gnomes was huddled next to the stairs, smiling with their stony grins. Jean glanced over at Lily who shrugged. "Welcome to Cokeworth."

The inside of the Evans' home was snug and warm and charming. From the front door, Jean could see all the way through the living room to the kitchen and out the little window above the sink trimmed with pale yellow valances. The furniture was a worn down mahogany and the upholstery on the sofa and chairs was definitely well used. The slightly varnished floor was covered in rugs of muted colors. Jean imagined that ten years ago the floor coverings could have made a rainbow. A pudgy cat with pale white stripes set in it's dark gold coat roused itself from one of the threadbare rugs and sauntered over to where Lily scooped it up enthusiastically. "Hello, Jenny baby," she said murmuring nonsensical cooing into its fur. "I missed you." Lily extended the cat out to Jean. "Jean, this is Jennyanydots."

"Jennyanydots?" asked Jean, scratching the cat behind its velvety ear.

"You know the book?"

Jean nodded. She knew the book. She also knew the blockbuster musical that would come out more than a decade from now.

Mr. and Mrs. Evans shifted around the two girls and their trunks. "All right," said Mrs. Evans, "dinner will be along shortly. Lily, help Jean get settled."

"Yes, Mum," and the two began heaving their trunks up the stairs.

Lily pushed open the first door they came to in the narrow hallway. It creaked from lack of use. "Sorry it's so Spartan," apologized Lily, "Petunia took practically everything when she got married."

Jean had only seen Petunia Dursley's infamously clean house after she, her husband and son went into hiding, but what she saw then was exactly what she was seeing now, bare and immaculate. The floor was covered with a clean cream colored carpet. The walls were a blush like pink and frilly lace curtains dressed the window. Pushed against the wall was a small twin bed with a matching pink duvet peppered with forget-me-nots. There were no photos or knickknacks on the nightstand, vanity or dresser and they were so scrubbed clean and shiny they looked brand new compared to the downstairs furniture.

"It's perfectly fine," said Jean tiptoeing into what felt more like a hotel suite than a childhood bedroom.

"Okay," Lily responded. "My room's the last one down at the end the bathroom is the first door you get to. I'm going to put my things up. Be back in a bit."

Jean nodded, but Lily lingered in the doorway before she left. "Jean," she said, "try not to worry about Sirius. I'm sure it'll work itself out in the next few days." Lily left the door open and Jean heard her trunk being dragged down the short hallway.

Jean pushed her trunk underneath her bed, careful not to disturb the unnatural immaculateness of the space, before flopping down on the covers. Jean couldn't help but wonder if Sirius was settling into his borrowed bedroom as well. She couldn't help but wonder if things would work themselves out as Lily had said and, more importantly, how. Jean sighed and folded her hands on her chest,
Two weeks had passed and things had not worked themselves out. Jean sent Sirius a note saying that she was staying with Lily, but she hadn't received a word before or since. Lily tired to secret the letters from James she received every other day, but owls flying in and out around afternoon tea were hard to miss in the sedate muggle neighborhood. Never the less, she did enjoy herself and didn't ruminate on her predicament with Sirius. Mr. and Mrs. Evans were wonderful and opened their home to Jean like she was their own child. She and Lily spent lazy afternoon going into the village and shopping in muggle boutiques and record stores or splitting a soda during matinee movies. Jean came out of one particular screening with a fiendish delight that she was one of maybe five people in the world that knew the true identity of Darth Vader. Being a misplaced time traveller had to have some benefits she supposed. But, by far, Jean's favorite thing to do with Lily was walk the uneven sidewalks of the suburb watching children chase around the ice cream truck and jump through yard sprinklers, their stroll cumulating in a ramshackle playground on top of a hill overlooking a sluggish, rather grimy looking river. They'd sit on the swing set talking about everything and noting until the fireflies chased them home.

Jean sat on that same swing, digging her toes into the soft, sandy earth, and enjoying the noontime sun. Jean idly watched two boys race up and down a rickety metal side while their toddler of a sibling was perfectly content with pulling up weeds and blowing tufts of dandelions. Their mother dog-eared her book and reached down to wipe the spittle off her youngest's face.

The chains of the swing beside her rattled and Jean looked over to see Lily settling into the seat. "Hey," said Jean.

"Hey," Lily said back.

"You got a letter from James?" Jean asked.

Lily pressed the folded up letter to her lap. "Yeah," she said. "He invited us to dinner at his house."

"Us?" Jean raised an incredulous eyebrow. "As in 'you and I' us?"

"No, me and Emily Clarke from next door," huffed Lily. "Of course us."

Jean remained hesitant. "What does Sirius have to say about this?"

"James invited us over for dinner. Why does what Sirius has to say matter?"

Jean remained silent, rocking back and forth in the swing with the edge of her heels.

"What do you think will happen?" Lily pressed. "That he'll throw you out of the house?"

"He can try," Jean murmured.

"Out of James' own home," said Lily. "Really?"

"Still," said Jean. "I don't know, Lily. Perhaps it would be better if you went by yourself."

"Jean," said Lily, "in my opinion, Sirius as been incredibly silly and rude about...whatever it is that's bothering him because neither James or I can figure it out. However, you have the right to be with and enjoy your friends, most of which are Sirius' friends as well, without worrying about him being there."

Jean looked at Lily, who was smiling encouragingly, before she ran a hand over her eyes. "Fine, I'll
go," she relented. "What time's dinner?"

"6 o'clock."

The bells in the church tower of Godric's Hollow rang out the hour. Before the last toll faded into silence a loud pop sounded through the lane as Jean and Lily Apparated outside the Potter household. The first and last time Jean had seen it, half the second story had been blown away and the rest was obscured by ivy, tall grass and a thick layer of snow. The house before her was a charming cottage in the Tudor style. It was not as lavish and stately as the Malfoy mansion, but never the less it felt like a well to do family lived within. Warm light was thrown out from the large windows onto a manicured lawn of dark green grass. A thin footpath meandered from the front door up to a wrought iron gate set in a low hedge wall. Jean lingered behind Lily a step or two as they made their way up to the door and rang the bell.

James opened the door as if he were waiting there expectantly the whole time and swung Lily though the threshold. "Hello, Lily my love," he said kissing her soundly.

Jean eased her way around the couple into the entryway. While the Evans' household was cramped and cozy, the Potter's was bright and airy. The high ceiling of the entry hall gave the illusion of more space than there actually was. To her left, Jean saw a large living room with brown overstuffed armchairs and a sofa all centered around a hearth that dominated the farthest wall. To her right was a dining room elegantly set for dinner with a linen tablecloth and crystal goblets.

Jean felt herself being pulled into a one armed hug. "And how are you Jean?" asked James.

"I'm fine," said Jean, casually looping her arm around James' shoulder. "Thank you for inviting me."

Jean heard a displeasured grunt and peered around James. Sirius was standing halfway up the staircase looking as causally elegant as ever in his dark wash jeans and simple black t-shirt. "Hello, Sirius," said Jean coolly.

"Jean," said Sirius. He paused and dipped his thumbs into his pockets. "You look nice."

Before anyone could say anything else, James' father shuffled in from the living room. "Lily," he said, "wonderful to see you. Radiant as always. And Jillian, you came, too. Lovely, lovely."

"Dad, her name's Jean."

Jean brushed James' attempt at correcting his father aside. "Thank you for having us, Mr. Potter. You have a wonderful home."

"Yes, yes, yes," said Mr. Potter, now moving into the dining room. "Let's eat everyone. James has been cooking for hours and I'm curious to see what meal required every pot and pan in his mother's kitchen."

"You cooked?" Lily asked of James, following Mr. Potter to their chairs. En route, she spied a view of the kitchen that was hidden from the dining room by a pair of half opened pocket doors. "Without magic?"

James shrugged his shoulders as if his kitchen sink wasn't overflowing with used crockery. "Yeah, why not? You always say it's so relaxing," Jean hid a smirk. James looked far from relaxed.

James quickly served everyone plates of chicken masala with glazed carrots and steamed asparagus topped with minced garlic and a light drizzling of olive oil before he quickly settled into his seat
beside Sirius and across from Lily.

"So," said James, barely touching his food before beginning conversation. "How has your summer been so far?"

"It's been good," responded Lily. "Jean and I have just been hanging out around town. She and I went to see a movie the other day called Star Wars."

"Star Wars," said James, laughing a little. "Muggles and their fascination with space."

"It's more like science fiction meets fantasy," said Lily, explaining further. "They travel around to all these planets and use these energy swords. What were they called again, Jean?"

"Light sabers," Jean supplied.

"Right," said Lily. "Typical young hero defeats the all powerful evil."

"I'm amazed you didn't like it," Jean interjected humorously.

"I didn't say I didn't like it. I'm just saying it clearly borrowed from other story telling formulas that have been around forever."

"Maybe you'll like the sequel better."

"You think it's good enough to have a sequel?" asked Lily.

"I think it's got a shot," said Jean popping a mushroom into her mouth.

"Yes Jean, because you always know best."

Jean snapped her mouth shut and watched Sirius smoothly take a sip out of his goblet.

The almost agonizingly long dinner proceeded in that manner. As soon as Jean began immersing herself in conversation, Sirius injected some passive aggressive comment, which caused Jean to quiet down, withdraw and shave off a little bit more of her patience. Never the less, she put on a brave face for James and Lily's sake, who were growing more flustered and frustrated every time Sirius opened his mouth.

"I couldn't eat another bite," said Lily, following up after Sirius' latest jab. "That was delicious James."

"Thank you, sweetheart," said James, visibly relaxing. "So Jean, Lily tells me your looking for a flat."

"Yes," said Jean, repeating her half-truth. "But, I think it would be more pertinent to find a job first."

"Still no luck with that?" asked Lily.

Jean silently shook her head and took a drink from her goblet.

"Strange," said James. "I would've thought with your N.E.W.T.s people would be lined up to employ you."

"But, you're always welcome to stay with me, Jean," said Lily.
"And we have a spare room in the Potter Family Boarding House if she wants it, right Sirius?"

Jean giggled over the rim of her goblet, but was cut off by Sirius' laughter so sour it was a sneer. "James you're so funny. I had no idea you were so funny, did you Jean? Must be why you have so much luck with the ladies."

Jean brought her goblet down with a thud that almost echoed around the silent room. In the same motion she half stood, staring at Sirius from across the table. "If you have something to say to me, Sirius Black, I suggest you say it." Sirius said nothing and glared back at her, his fingers curling around the stem of his goblet. "James," said Jean, not moving her gaze from the flecks of steel that were Sirius' eyes. "I've suddenly remembered I've double booked myself and have another engagement. I'm afraid I'll have to call our evening early."

"You sure Jean?" asked James.

"Yes, but thank you again for dinner. That was lovely." Jean walked around the table practically shoving Sirius aside to get through the pocket doors. "I'll see you at home, Lily," she called out over her shoulder.

"Goodnight, Jean," said Lily, staring at her napkin in her lap.

"You leaving, Julia?" called out Mr. Potter, but Jean didn't hear him to answer. She stormed through the messy kitchen and out the back door, slamming it behind her.

Sirius roughly pushed himself away from the table and stomped his way upstairs to his bedroom, swinging his door shut with as much force as Jean had mustered in her exit. He raked a hand through his hair before bracing it on his desk. He attempted, without much success, to calm his hammering heart, oscillating between feelings of hurt, fury, guilt and not wanting to feel anything at all.

His bedroom door blew open and shut soon after. "What the hell do you think you're doing?" James shouted.

Settling on fury, Sirius tightened his face and spun around sharply. "What do you think you're doing?" he shouted back.

"I'm trying to have a nice dinner with our girlfriends. You, I don't know."

"I know more than you think," said Sirius venomously. "I watched you two all night...laughing at each other's stories...flirting."

"Flirting with Jean?" said James. "You're out of your mind."

"I saw you together!" Sirius roared. "At graduation. You were hugging each other. And you kissed her and she was crying. What did you do James? Wanted to see what another muggle born girl was like now that you've had the chance to try out Lily?"

BAM.

Sirius stumbled back against his bed clutching the side of his face. Through bleary eyes he watched James uncurl his fist. "You say that again and I'll break your jaw," said James evenly. With his other hand, James fished through his pocket before extending it to Sirius. "Why would I do anything to betray the woman I want to marry?"

Sirius' eyes widened at the blossoming bud of diamonds set in the silver circlet. "James...that's..."
"And you're ruining it." James eyes were wide and over bright behind his glasses as if he were about ready to cry.

"But," said Sirius, his fury draining out of him like a punctured water balloon. "I saw Jean…"

"With a close friend from America that she hadn't seen in months," James supplied.

Sirius looked up at James weakly. "How could you know that?"

"Because I, unlike you, have written to my girlfriend. Lily told me that one of Jean's friends surprised her at graduation."

"But I saw…"

"Nothing that meant anything," said James. "If it did she would be there with him and not here with you taking your abuse."

"I…" Sirius began, "…need to apologize."

"I couldn't agree more." James pointed and Sirius followed his finger. Framed in a pane of his window, Sirius spied Jean sitting on the bench in the back yard.

Sirius swallowed. "I'm such an idiot, Prongs."

James clapped Sirius on the back. "Only some of the time, Padfoot," he said. "Now go beg your girlfriend for forgiveness while I go propose to mine."

Jean was momentarily bathed in light from the house before she heard feet coming down the steps towards her. She folded her arms. "I'm not in the mood, Lily," she said.

"Hey," came a voice gently.

Jean turned her head and saw Sirius standing a few feet from her. He had donned his motorcycle jacket and his hands were clasped close to his stomach. "What, Sirius?" she said, turning her head back away from him.

Sirius took that as permission and took a tentative step forward. "I thought you would've left by now," he said.

Jean huffed and threw her hands up in the air. "Well, I would have," she said, "but Apparating in front of muggles is frowned upon." She jerked her thumb in the direction of next door where a quartet of children was clamoring through the bushes armed with torches and jam jars. Jean folded back her arms. "Besides, I didn't want to give you the satisfaction of me having to walk back through the house."

Sirius' natural response was to laugh, but he held it in. "Jean, about that," he eased himself onto the bench, careful to keep a respectful distance between him and his appropriately peeved girlfriend. "I am so, so sorry about how I've been treating you; not just over dinner but for the past few weeks as well. It was unfair to you and terribly awful of me."

Jean sighed and rested her hands on her knees. "I just want to know why," she said quietly. "What happened?"

"I was jealous," said Sirius, "and hurt and angry and I handled it in the poorest way possible."
Jean looked up at Sirius. "Why?"

"Well," Sirius stumbled over his words as if he were embarrassed to say them. "You know, your friend, the one who came to see you at graduation. He looks a lot like James from a distance."

Jean desperately hoped that her shock tinged with horror was concealed by looking down at her hands again as all the pieces of this puzzle fell into place. "Yeah, I suppose he does, now that you mention it."

A third hand came into her view and rested atop of hers. "But that's not the point," said Sirius. "I punished you for something I didn't understand and I made a jerk out of myself in the process. And I'm really, really sorry for that."

Jean looked for a long minute at Sirius and their hands and how they were stacked atop each other. "Well," she said at last, "I suppose I'm a teeny tiny bit flattered that you were that jealous over me."

Sirius let out a whisper of a laugh. Jean felt his thumb start to rub small circles into the flesh between her thumb and forefinger. "So, what was your other engagement tonight?"

Jean shrugged. "I figured watching late night television with Mrs. Evans would be a pleasant alternative to the present situation."

"May I offer you an alternative to your alternative?" Sirius stood and extended his hand to Jean. "Please?" Jean stared at Sirius' hand before giving him her own.

Sirius walked Jean over to the garden shed where, parked up against it, was a glistening black motorbike. She had only seen this motorbike briefly in Harry's final ride from his aunt and uncle's house and after almost two decades in Hagrid's care it had earned a few sizable dents, rust was beginning to peel up the paint and the main headlight was falling out of it's socket. The bike in front of her looked like Sirius bought it yesterday and meticulously took care of its upkeep. "Is that your motorbike?"

"Yep," said Sirius pulling the keys out of his jacket.

"Your flying motorbike?" Jean clarified, feeling a bristle of unease run through her neck.

Sirius smirked. "Yep." He bent down and began disconnecting the sidecar from the main vehicle.

"And your alternative plan is…without the side car?"

Sirius looked up at Jean and then back at the sidecar. "I only use this thing for luggage and groceries."

"Sirius, I can barely ride a broom."

"But, you're at least comfortable on a broom," said Sirius. "Now, we can graduate you to being comfortable on a flying motorbike." Sirius saw Jean shift uncomfortably one from foot to another. "Come on," he said encouragingly, walking over to her. "There's a spell on it that'll keep it from tipping while it's in the air. So, in theory, it's safer than a broom."

Jean continued to eye the motorbike skeptically. "As long as you don't make me try to drive it," she said at last.

Sirius chuckled. "Jean, darling," he said swinging himself onto the bike, "I've see you fly a broom, so don't be offended if I don't ask that you anytime soon."
"Consider me not offended," said Jean, gingerly placing herself on the seat.

The motorbike roared to life and rumbled out onto the street, making Jean wonder how it's ascent into the air didn't attract the attention of the entire county. Sirius drove them through the quiet streets of the hamlet until they reached the road heading out into the sparsely inhabited country. "You ready?" he called out over the noise of the engine.

"Not particularly," said Jean, gripping onto anything she deemed sturdy.

Sirius pulled on a lever that looked like a second throttle and just like that the motorbike quickly launched them into the sky, leveling out at an altitude that, to a pedestrian below, the lights and sounds would seem like a low flying personal plane. Jean had to admit that Sirius was right. Though the ride was bumpier, she didn't feel like the motorbike had a mind of it's own and would spontaneously buck her off. After a moment she got comfortable enough to release her death grip on the seat and take in her surroundings. The beginnings of rainclouds lumbered by them like lumps of fog. Tentatively, Jean reached out and let the clouds mist over her fingers.

Suddenly the bike tilted backwards, causing Jean to shriek. "I thought you said it wouldn't tip," she screamed into Sirius' back, her arms locked in a vice around him, clutching at jacket, shirt and skin.

Sirius laughed in full now. "It's not tipping," he said. "I just popped it back on one wheel."

"Well, put it back on its designated number of wheels please and thank you." Jean heard Sirius chuckle and felt that motorbike return to its original position.

Sirius circled the village on his descent back to the Potter's house. From her perch in the air, Jean thought Godric's Hollow looked like a cluster of fireflies winking in the night. They passed around the church at the end of the lane and Jean caught a glimpse of their morphed refection in the tarnished brass: Sirius somewhat bent over the motorbike, his hair flying out behind him, Jean's arms wrapped around his midsection. Jean didn't know quite when it happened but she became aware of the scent of leather close to her cheek and a faint heartbeat through Sirius' shoulder blades.

Instead of parking in the back yard, Sirius landed on the roof coming to a halt by the chimney and leaving the bike perfectly balanced by magic on the gable. "That was a fun alternative," said Jean, laughing as she attempted to smooth down her hair.

"I'm glad you liked it," said Sirius following close behind her.

"Shouldn't we head down?" asked Jean.

Sirius sat down on the shingles, stretching out his legs. "I think, given my performance tonight, James would prefer to propose to Lily in peace."

"He's…" Jean smiled an open mouthed grin and looked down as of she could see through the walls down into the living room. Jean settled down beside Sirius.

"You cold?" he asked.

"Not really," Jean replied.

Sirius surrendered his jacket anyways, the arm that draped it over her lingering across her shoulders. His familial ring glistened with silver ripples of moonlight. Jean tilted her head into his chest.
"Jean," said Sirius after a beat of silence, his index finder coiling through her curls. "I can't tell you enough how sorry I am for all of this. I know I have a temper and I tend to act before I think and, most of the time, my actions hurt the people I care about most. I'm not perfect and I'm certainly not the man you deserve." Jean looked up at Sirius' profile. Sirius felt her gaze and turned to look at her. "But, I love you Jean Granger, and I promise to try."

It was like a cloud passed from the night sky. The stars in Sirius' eyes gathered and glimmered like they had never been gone at all. Jean smiled softly. "I love you, too." As if drawn together by gravity, an unseen force, or a red ribbon tethered between their heats Jean and Sirius kissed on the rooftop, Jean running her fingers through his hair and Sirius gently cupping her jaw, the warm air tossing up to them the laughter and indistinguishable chatter of children.
Sirius more than made up for his bout of silence to Jean almost to the point where Jean thought he did nothing else but write letters to her. It was quite common for Jean to receive several notes a day, the ones in the morning telling what he planned for the day and the ones in the evening detailing what he did. The latest in this slew of letters invited her to see him off at the Ministry before his first day of auror training before their date that evening, date being code for first official Order meeting.

Jean tucked the letter into her purse and donned a light blue tea dress with white flats for the bright summer day. She was contemplating on whether to pull her hair back or leave it down when Lily appeared in her doorway, Jennyanydots looping about her ankles. “Hey,” Jean said, turning around from the mirror. “You look nice.”

“They’re hideous.” Lily pinched the lime green healer’s robes with a crossed bone and wand stamped across her heart with the absolute ends of her fingers.

“They’re not that hideous,” said Jean, reaching out to adjust Lily’s overly starched collar.

“I look like I escaped from a fruit basket.” Jean smirked and Lily scrunched her nose before running a hand over her face. “I shouldn’t be complaining to you, not when it’s been so hard for you to find a job yourself.”

Jean shrugged her shoulders casually; burying her worry for a job she had little credentials to acquire behind a layer of nonchalance. “It’ll come eventually,” she said, following Lily down the stairs.

“Breakfast for the working girls?” called out Mrs. Evans from the tiny kitchen. Lily and Jean sat themselves down at the circular kitchen table as Mrs. Evans dolled them out hearty portions of omelets and sausages.

“I still can’t believe that no one has hired you yet,” said Lily over the edge of her glass of orange juice. “Are you sure you applied to all the departments at the Ministry?”

Jean nodded. “Yes,” she said, “and at the hospital and I have mailed every shop and stand down Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade my resume.” Jean watched Lily worriedly chew on her omelet. “Don’t worry about it, Lily, especially on your first day. Something will turn up.”

“Speaking of first days,” Lily looked down at her watch, “we’d better be heading out or I’ll be late.” Jean gulped down the last of her tea and Lily ate the last of the sausage before they headed out the door, apparating with a pop before they even made it over the threshold.

Lily and Jean appeared in a secluded side alley in downtown London a few yards away from the hustle and bustle of the muggle world. Lily and Jean melded into the crowds, chatting idly for a few blocks until they arrived at the bricked façade of Purge and Dowse Ltd. The windows of the four-story department store were boarded up with crisscrossed planks, some of the windowpanes
broken out behind them. Lily let her hand rest on the tarnished handle of the entrance, yellow tape reading ‘Condemned’ practically wallpapering the glass. “You sure I look okay?” asked Lily nervously, no longer caring about the color of her robes. “You think I should’ve put my hair up?”

Jean reached out and tucked a stray strand behind Lily’s ear. “I think you look perfect,” she said.

Lily nodded slightly and took a breath, her shoulders rising and falling with her intake of air, before she put on a smile. “Here we go,” she said, tugging on the door.

To a muggle, the interior of Purge and Dowse would be nothing more than a dilapidated department store with only semi-dismantled manikins for patrons. To Jean and Lily, it was the sleek and pristine St. Mungo’s Hospital for Magical Maladies and Injuries. The outside wall was completely comprised of windows refracting light onto the hunter green seats surrounding coffee tables that made up the waiting area. The welcome witch sat behind a long white counter kitty-cornered to five elevators. As Jean and Lily approached, the welcome witch pulled on her horn-rimmed glasses from where they hung on a string of plastic beads around her neck. “Name?” she said.

“Lily Evans, I’m a new Healer Trainee.”

“And Alice Prewett, Healer Trainee as well.” Jean whipped her head around and saw Alice practically skipping across the atrium, her low heels clattering against the tile flooring. Frank followed his fiancée a step or two behind her, dressed for work in his auror robes.

The welcome witch ran her thumb over her clipboard. “Evans and Prewett,” she said. “You two will have a rotation on the fourth floor today. Spell Damage unit. Your supervising healer today will be Healer Chapwick.”

Lily and Alice nodded their thanks and the quartet drifted over to the elevator, the silver doors sliding open as they approached. “Good luck today,” said Frank, kissing Alice lightly on the lips, “I’m sure you’ll do brilliantly.”

Lily pulled Jean into a hug. “Tell the boys I said good luck and that I’ll be thinking of them.”

“I will,” said Jean, watching Lily step back, waiving her fingers slightly, as the doors closed on she and Alice.

“You’re heading to the Ministry, then?” asked Frank.

“Yes,” said Jean as both she and he turned away from the elevators.

“I’ll take you then.” Frank and Jean barely stepped outside the entrance of St. Mungo’s before Frank lightly pressed his hand on the small of Jean’s back and sidelong apparated her to the bustling Whitehall. Governing officials both muggle and magical alike shuffled side by side along the street settled in the heart of London, oblivious to each other in their morning commute.

Frank and Jean inserted themselves into the throng. “That’s the workers entrance over there,” said Frank, subtly pointing out the bold, block lettering of the public restrooms set next to the entrance of a subway station, “but the guest entrance is down that way.”

Jean saw it before Frank indicated to it. On a rather despondent corner of the pristine Whitehall, near a dark alley containing an overflowing dumpster was a lonely telephone box, it’s muted red coloring obscured by a hearty layer of dust and graffiti. Frank jimmied open the door and both he and Jean squeezed inside the cramped compartment. “Here you go, Jean,” said Frank, scooting out the way so that Jean could reach the telephone. “Just dial 6-2-4-4-2 and follow the instructions.”
Jean did as she was told and as he saw Harry do once before and held the phone to her ear.

“Welcome to the Ministry of Magic,” said a cool female voice, “please state your name and business.”

“Jean Granger,” said Jean into the mouthpiece. “I’m here to visit Sirius Black and James Potter, who are Auror Trainees.” Jean waited a beat, but did not get a response. She sidelong looked at Frank who was idly rolling up his sleeve to check his watch. Another beat. “Hello?” Jean prompted.

“I’m sorry,” said the cool female voice, “your request cannot be completed as dialed. Please hang up and try again or call our service line for further assistance.” Jean heard the line click off.

Jean lowered the phone from her ear and looked up at Frank. “It says my request could not be completed as dialed.”

Frank looked at Jean, his face morphing into one of confusion. “What?” He maneuvered his way to be nearer to the phone. “Did you put in the number right?” Jean nodded and passed Frank the headset. Frank keyed in the number himself and after a moment he extended the mouthpiece over to Jean. “Say what you said again.”

“Jean Granger,” Jean repeated, “visiting the Auror Department.”

Frank took the phone back, his fingers drumming on the wall. Jean watched them stop and knew that the voice had repeated its atypical message. Frank sighed and tilted his head back, closing his eyes as if searching for a memory. “Service number,” he murmured to himself. “What is it? Seven…another seven…three, five…five again…two…six…eight? Yes, eight…six, three.” After a moment, Frank began speaking again and it didn’t take long for Jean to realize he was speaking with an actual person. “Hello Higbee, this is Frank Longbottom. I’m…Yes, good morning to you too. I’m with a guest, Miss Jean Granger, and she’s having trouble getting downstairs. Yes…yes.” Frank covered the mouthpiece with his hand. “You haven’t changed your name recently, have you?”

Jean shook her head, knowing now why the phone box was acting strangely, but she could never risk giving her real name to anything Ministry related.

Frank put the phone back to his ear. “No, she hasn’t. Yes…Alright. See you in a tic.” The headpiece had barely settled into its cradle before the phone box began to slip into the cement like an elevator. “We’re going to have to stop by security to get you properly checked in, but it shouldn’t take too long.”

Jean nodded wordlessly, staring intently through the murky glass. When the underground labyrinth of the Ministry of Magic came into view, Jean let out a little breath. The last time she had been in this atrium, the Ministry was firmly under the thrall of Voldemort. Muggle-born witches and wizards were brought in daily to answer for their crimes of stealing magic, while everyone else trudged through their daily routine under the grim monolith reading Magic is Might. Now, the space had been returned to how it was, or presently, how it has always been. The golden figured fountain lit up the room like a beacon and, as she descended, Jean watched collections of people emerge from emerald flamed fireplaces lining the walls. However, it was a hollow victory and the grin that spread across Jean’s face at seeing the space restored was soon twinged with a wistful sorrow. It was Camelot. For all it’s energy, and splendidness it was little more than an elaborate farce to hide and ugly truth that would not stay hidden for much longer.

“It’s a sight to see, isn’t it?” Jean looked up at Frank and saw his chest puffed out in pride.
“It has its charm,” Jean responded.

Frank and Jean exited the elevator and walked along the hardwood hallway past the gilded fountain to the security desk tucked discreetly in the corner of the cavernous room. A thin faced old man Jean assumed was Mr. Higbee was sitting in a sturdy wooden chair, pushing paper around with his pointer finger. He pushed his navy cap, which made him look more like a bellhop than a security officer, off his brow when the pair approached. “Mr. Longbottom, sir.”

“Higbee,” said Frank pleasantly, stepping up to the desk. “I’m here to check in Miss Granger.”

“Lift giving you grief, ma’am?”

“Just a bit,” said Jean, laughing a little.

“Crotchety old thing,” said Higbee looking out over their heads as the phone booth ascended back to the surface. Higbee rummaged under his desk and produced a small cloth satchel and a slender off white slip of paper that looked like a punch card. “Now then,” Higbee said, producing an abused old quill. “Your name, please ma’am.”

“Jean Granger,” supplied Jean as the old man scratched it out on the punch card.

“And your wand’s description?”

“Umm, 10 ¾ inches. Dragon heartstring,” Jean recited, hesitant about relinquishing even this to Ministry records.

“I’ve put her down for twenty punches,” said Higbee, his nose inches from the paper.

“That should be sufficient,” said Frank.

Higbee straightened and pushed the paper and bag towards Jean. “Now I would suggest trying to enter the normal way every once in a while, just in case it decides to take you, but if not,” Higbee opened the bag and produced a ten-sided brass coin with only three stars for markings, “put this in the coin slot and it’ll take you straight down. Bring this punch card over here so we’ll know you’re visiting.

“Okay,” said Jean, taking the bag and slipping it into her purse.

“Good, then if I could have you sign this please, ma’am.” Jean signed the punch card before Higbee slid it over to Frank. “And if I could have you cosign, Mr. Longbottom.” Frank scribbled out his signature and Higbee slammed it with a stamp. “Here you go,” said Higbee. “Have a lovely visit, ma’am. Mr. Longbottom.”

Frank nodded his thanks and took the punch card before walking back into the atrium. “Now,” he said to Jean, “my signature on this makes me responsible for you.”

“I promise I won’t be mischievous,” said Jean teasingly.

“But, you are dating Sirius. So, perhaps it would be better for me to not give you this at all,” he said, extending the card on the ends of his fingers as he said so.

“All the more reason for me to take it,” she said, daintily snatching it out of his grasp, “for me to keep Sirius out of mischief.”

Frank tilted his eyebrows, bemused. “Point taken.” He turned his head slightly. “And speak of
Jean followed Frank’s gaze and spied Sirius and James loitering around the gilded fountain. Both wore charcoal grey double vested blazers with starched mandarin collars that were darker shade of grey, the color of soot, which sharpened Sirius’ eyes even more than usual. A gold Ministry M was stamped across their front pockets and elaborate filigree wound its way up their sleeves, stopping just shy of their elbows. “Well, don’t you look official,” said Jean, walking into Sirius’ outstretched arms.

“And you look lovely,” he said kissing her on the hairline. “I was beginning to think you wouldn’t make it in time.”

“The guest entrance gave her grief,” supplied Frank. “We had to take a few extra minutes to get her properly cleared.”

“Hmm, odd,” said James.

“Yes, very odd.” Jean looked over her shoulder, seeking the new voice, and saw Alastor Moody purposefully striding towards them. “Odd that I had to come down to find you lot rather than finding you ready and waiting in my office.”

Unfazed by the chastisement, Sirius turned to Mood and swung his arm across Jean’s shoulder. “Good morning to you too, Alastor. May I introduce you to my girlfriend, Jean?”

Jean stuck out her hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you,” she said, knowing that, despite the circumstances, this was the first time she and Moody were officially meeting.

Moody’s hand entirely encompassed her own and he gave it one short shake. “Mr. Black, I didn’t come down here to socialize with your significant others. I came down here to make you a dark wizard hunter. And you, Mr. Longbottom.” Moody rounded on Frank as if he just realized he was standing there. “By Merlin, punctuality is lost on the young. Without punctuality there is no efficiency and with no efficiency there is error.”

Jean had no doubt Moody was continuing his tangent, but fell out of earshot as he stalked his way back to the grated lifts. Frank humorously rolled his eyes and fell in line behind him.

“Best be off then,” said James.

“Lily says good luck,” Jean called out, “and good luck to you too,” she added quietly to Sirius. Jean ran her fingers over the filigree. “Don’t do anything to get kicked out on your first day.”

Sirius smirked. “I’ll try,” he said. Even beneath the earth the stars still reached his eyes. “I love you.” Jean’s heart fluttered at the enjoyment Sirius seemingly had in saying that phrase.

“I love you too.” She kissed him and Sirius’ lips lingered over hers. She felt fingers ghosting through her hair and her hands rested against his elbows before they parted and Sirius trotted away to catch up with James.

Jean sat down on the edge of the fountain, watching people as they bustled by. She glanced down at her watch. It was early in the day and she didn’t feel like leaving the Ministry so soon after she spent so much effort in trying to get in, so she filled her time wandering about to see if there was anyone she could pop in on. If anything, being seen in the Ministry would lead to a more credible excuse to Jean knowing its layout than breaking an entry in the cover of darkness to fight Death Eaters and then two years later impersonating a Ministry employee to steal a Horcrux.
Jean squeezed herself into the over-crowded elevator and roamed from floor to floor until she found herself outside the Floor Networking Offices. The interior of the long office looked like a busy, borderline chaotic, call center. Employees buzzed around on low swivel stools drawing golden lines of light across what a muggle would call a telephone switchboard. Jean loitered at the entrance until she caught the attention of the familiar curly haired blonde.

Marlene slipped her wand behind her ear and straightened her navy dress emblazoned with a glittery golden Ministry M as she stood. “I’m taking ten, Nancy.”

Marlene clattered across the beige bespeckled tiling and pulled Jean into a small auxiliary off the main room that served as a receiving area. Marlene hugged Jean enthusiastically. “How have you been?”

“Good,” said Jean. “And you?”

Marlene sighed through her smile and brushed an errant curl back into her ponytail. “Merlin, it’s Bedlam in there sometimes, but I really like it.” Marlene’s eyes morphed into a look of concern. “Lily told me that you’ve been having a rather hard time of it.”

Jean casually shrugged her shoulders in what was becoming a well-practiced move. “I’ll find a job eventually. Don’t worry about it.”

“And Sirius?” asked Marlene, dropping her voice lower. “Are you two...?”

“Yeah,” said Jean, “we’re fine.”

Marlene’s face split into a grin. “Oh, that’s wonderful. I was hoping it would work out. Did he ever say why?”

“It was some kind of misunderstanding,” Jean said. “I don’t think Sirius even knows how to completely explain it.”

“Oh, Sirius,” said Marlene, “half the trouble he gets himself into is his own making.” Jean couldn’t help but silently agree, her mind ticking forward through time.

“Um, excuse me, Miss McKinnon?”

Jean looked up and saw a tall and slender man standing just outside the door as if he were waiting for permission to enter.

“Hi, Benjy,” said Marlene, motioning with her hand. “Come in. Jean, this is Benjy Fenwick from the Auror Department. Benjy, this is my friend from school, Jean Granger.”

Benjy Fenwick was a well-dressed young man with corn silk hair that wasn’t quite long but wasn’t quite short. He had a broad swatch of freckles that ran over his nose and across his cheeks that gave him a Tom Sawyerish look to his face. He exposed a wide toothy grin as he shook Jean’s hand. “A pleasure, Miss Granger.”

“It’s nice to meet you, too,” said Jean. “Are you an Auror?”

“Oh, no,” said Benjy, almost laughing at the idea. “I’m just Mr. Moody’s secretary, but I do what I can. Speaking of which,” Benjy turned to Marlene, producing a pamphlet from his jacket pocket. “Here are the papers you wanted, Miss McKinnon.”

“Thank you, Benjy,” said Marlene, smiling as she took the pamphlet.
“Well,” said Benjy, swinging his hands to his sides. “I must be heading back. Work for Moody is never done. Lovely to meet you, Miss Granger.”

Jean nodded at Benjy as he swept out the door. Jean turned her attention back to Marlene who was folding the pamphlet back and forth in her hands. “What’s that?” she asked.

“The Auror Department is offering self-defense classes for Ministry employees. Can’t be too careful with all these disappearances going on.”

“Who is going?” asked Jean casually.

“Dorcas and I are going together. Frank Longbottom is bringing Alice.”

“Ah,” said Jean, understanding the subtext. What better place for Order members to innocuously practice than a defensive training class. “Maybe Lily and I should tag along with James and Sirius.”

“From what I hear, you’d school us all,” teased Marlene.

Jean looked over Marlene’s shoulder at a strawberry blonde haired woman jutting her head into the room.

“Can I borrow you Marlene?” the woman said urgently. “There’s a backup in South Hampton. Apparently, people are getting stuck in their chimneys.”

Marlene looked back at Jean. “Gotta go,” she said, before giving Jean a hasty one-armed hug. “See you around, Jean.” Marlene added as she darted back into the pandemonium.

Jean smiled out of the corner of her mouth and stepped out into the hallway. Seeing as there was no one left on this floor for her to visit, Jean drifted back over to the gilded elevator and pressed the call button. Jean didn’t know if she accidentally walked into the individual or if that person’s arms gave out in concordance with the elevator’s doors. Either way, newspaper clippings and the royal purple folders that contained them pilled out onto her. Amidst the flurry of papers, Jean caught a glimpse of the flustered features of Edgar Bones.

“Mr. Bones,” she said, clumsily shuffling together the papers that fell into her arms.

Edgar Bones had stopped and was scooping the folders off the floor, but came to his full height when he heard his name. He looked the same as the night Jean first met him. Black, fine robes trimmed his shoulders and his equally dark hair was pulled back away from his face. “Miss Granger,” he said after a beat. “Hello.” Edgar reached for his papers, but Jean held onto them.

“No, I’ve got them.” Jean said, stepping into the elevator. “I’ll follow you.”

Edgar hit the button with his elbow and they swiftly zipped to the desired floor. “What brings you to the Ministry today, Miss Granger?” asked Edgar, stepping out into a hallway more cluttered and confining than the one that contained the Floo Network.

“James and Sirius’ first day of Auror training was today,” said Jean. “I thought I’d visit.”

Edgar nodded, clearly concentrating on not dropping any more of his bundle. He less opened and more shoved his way into his office with his shoulder. “Here we are,” he said.

Edgar Bones’ office looked very similar to Magnus Kinshield’s back at Hogwarts, save while Magnus had attempted to put his old office in a space half the size, Edgar’s was more neatly laid
out. Posers, newspaper clippings, and various other papers weren’t layered in a papier-mâché trickling onto the ceiling, but in a closely formed grid. There were far more books that anything else in the office, neatly lined in black shelves that took up the entirety of the far wall. The shelving was so high the tops had to be reached with a curved ladder that looked like it was made out of tempered glass. The only thing that competed with the shelves’ size and scope was a black and white marbled fireplace set in the wall to the left of his desk. As the pair walked in Jean tilted her head to read some of the spines and realized Edgar’s massive collection of tomes was alphabetized. Edgar’s desk was equally organized with a tall, spiraling silver paper organizer. His pens and letter openers were lined up parallel to each other and several large photo frames were perfectly angled towards the overstuffed office chair.

Jean shifted her armload of Edgar’s work and touched the largest frame, taking up a majority of the desk corner. “Are these your daughters?” she asked, looking at the black and white image of two dark haired girls with Shirley Temple ringlets.

Edgar paused in his attempt to make order from his mess. “Yes,” he said pleasantly. “My oldest is Margery and my youngest is Cordelia.”

“How old are they?”

“Five and three,” he said. Jean passed him the papers she had been holding. “Thank you,” he said, adding them to his pile.

During the exchange, a few sentences stood out on the pages. “Are you doing a case on werewolves?” Jean asked.

Edgar tapped the documents on his desk to straighten them. “Well,” Edgar began, “since Remus Lupin’s tenure at Hogwarts was successful, Dumbledore would like me like me to compile a formal argument for allowing werewolf students to go to school officially.”

Jean glanced back and forth between Edgar and the pages she slowly thumbed through. “Remus would have to testify,” she said more to herself than to Edgar. “He would have to admit that he went to school as a werewolf. How does Remus feel about this?”

Edgar drummed his fingers on the pile of papers. “He hasn’t given me an answer yet.”

Jean thinned her lips, thinking. “Remus has been keeping this a secret for most of his life. I can imagine being so public about it would make him uncomfortable. And if all this went poorly…if your argument fell through and they rejected it…rejected him…” Jean trailed off, not wanting or needing to imagine those results.

“It’s a risk,” said Edgar, and I sympathize with his hesitancy, but this won’t go away just because we’re afraid to chance it.”

Jean nodded slightly, having to agree. “What are you citing in your argument?” she asked.

Edgar seemed slightly taken back, as if he weren’t expecting that question. “Um,” he said, rifling though his folders. “I’m citing the case of Alfred Turney of 1842, George Fields of 1910 and Eugenia Silver of 1612.”

“Eugenia Silver, good choice,” said Jean, “a werewolf mother safely raising 4 children from infancy.”

“Yes,” said Edgar, growing all the more surprised, “I thought it was a good fit, too. Have you studied magical law?”
“I’ve dabbled,” said Jean, casually dismissing the weeks she spent during her third year pouring through the Hogwarts library preparing a defense for Buckbeak’s hearing.

“You should use the case of the hamlet of Ulvurgrein, as well. That’s a good read.”

Edgar tilted his head slightly. “I don’t believe I’ve heard of that one,” he said, interest peaked.

Building off his curiosity, Jean continued. “It’s a tiny wizarding village on the Faroe Islands. It dissipated over a hundred and twenty years ago, but at its peak there was an incident where a very young boy was bitten by a werewolf.”

Edgar nodded and motioned for her to continue. “Rather than kill or exile him,” said Jean, “the town accepted him as one of their own. His family raised him openly as a werewolf. He had friends, a job, married and had children; living a long and fulfilling life.”

“So, this village normalized his condition,” said Edgar.

“More than normalized. According to testimonials, this man managed to live more safely because he didn’t have to constantly worry about being exposed. The people that lived around him also respected what he was instead of fearing it. I think this mindset is what led this individual to have the lowest amount of human endangerment instances from that century.” Jean couldn’t keep the grin off her face. Without even realizing it, Jean leaned her hands onto the desk as she spoke to Edgar. “Do you want to know the best part?”

“What?” asked Edgar, rising to her enthusiasm.

“The population of Ulvurgrien at this time is the same as the amount of professors and students at Hogwarts during a term.”

Edgar rested his arms on the back of his desk chair. “Well done, Miss Granger,” he said simply.

An ugly looking wall clock above Edgar’s office door made a sour sounding chime, causing him to glance up at it. “I have to be at court,” he said, abandoning his mountain of paperwork on his desk. “We’ll speak more on this, Miss Granger,” he said, passing around her and out of his office.

Once again alone, Jean lingered in Edgar’s office. She admired his books and his armchair and, for a moment, allowed herself to imagine that she had an office like this. Her mind drifted through thoughts of working alongside people like Edgar Bones and building a better Ministry as well as a better world. But, it wasn’t possible. For Hermione perhaps, but not for Jean.

Jean’s stomach drew her out of her wistful ruminations. She hadn’t eaten much at breakfast and there wasn’t anyone she could think of at the Ministry she could steal long enough for a meal. She didn’t really want to go back to the Evan’s household either and have Jennyanydots stare down her sandwich. Jean cast her mind about for where she would want to go for lunch and came up with a single, resounding conclusion, which caused her jaw to drop and then transform into a smile. Slowly, Jean walked over to Edgar’s imposing fireplace and stepped into it, taking a pinch of Floo Powder out of a twisted, black urn. “Diagon Alley,” she called out, her voice trembling. With a whoosh, Jean was enveloped in emerald flames.

Jean was almost overwhelmed by the color and the noise. The many shops and street vendors were almost bleeding their bright hues in the afternoon sun. Witches and wizards mulled about, carrying parcels and children with sweets smeared across their faces. It was in such contrast to the drab greyness and uncomfortable silence of the Diagon Alley Hermione left in in 1998. Now, it was untouched, vibrant, perfect. Almost in a haze, Jean wondered down the wide cobbled streets,
moisture pricking at her eyes, every step and every shop bringing on both new and old memories. She passed Ollivander’s and casually peered through the murky windows and stared at the stacks of slender, shoebox like containers for wands. She drifted by Madam Malkin’s and ran her hands through the summer silks and brocades set in a wooden cart just beyond the door. Across the street, Jean saw Potage’s supply of cauldrons precariously stacked on each other, forming a twisting, tilted column to the shingles of the second floor. Jean smiled slightly as she walked by Eelyope’s Owl Emporium, Brown, Barn and Tawny owls clattering in their brass cages outside. Finally the ancient, white façade of Gringotts loomed before her. Jean observed it almost somberly for a moment and then kept going.

By the time Jean came back from her nostalgic high, she found herself past the more popular shopping locales and in a smaller, simpler, evidently older part of Diagon Alley. Packed closer than sardines, on this section of the street was a second hand broom store selling sad, tattered broomsticks hanging off rusty hooks, a junk store that’s inside looked like an entire neighborhood’s yards sale that never made it out to the yard, Twilfitt and Talling’s and Obscurus Books, the less successful competitors of Madam Malkin’s and Flourish and Blotts, capping off with the Rosa Lee Teabag, and even more cramped version of Madam Puddifoot’s if that were at all possible.

Jean’s stomach grumblingly reminded her that it was lunchtime, but Jean staved it off and entered the bookshop instead, hoping to while away her afternoon with one of her favorite pastimes.

The shop was more muted in color than Flourish and Blotts and its smaller size made it seem fuller than it really was. But, the shelves were stocked to bursting with books and that’s all that mattered. “Welcome to Obscurus Books,” she heard a woman call from the long, wooden counter, “can I help you find—Jean.”

Jean’s eyes focused on the speaker and realized it was Mary. The dark haired woman darted around the counter towards her. “I didn’t know you worked here,” said Jean, pulling Mary into a hug.

“Yeah, it’s a relatively new thing,” said Mary. “Can I help you find something?”

“Actually, yes. I’m looking for a book, but I don’t really know what book I want,” said Jean, not sure what in wizarding literature was or was yet to be published.

“Academic or amusement?” queried Mary.

“Amusement,” said Jean.

“Well,” said Mary, walking them over to a table that displayed books through the front window. “The newest books we have are A Summary of Me: The Autobiographical Adventures of Augustus Switchley; and the we have Immortal Beloved.”

“Is that that tragic vampire romance that was in Witch Weekly’s best reads list?” asked Jean.

“It is indeed,” said Mary with a smirk.

Jean cringed. “How about something less…schmaltzy.”

Mary laughed, placing the black book on its silver stand. “Let’s see…oh.” Mary bent down pulling a book from a shelf so neglected a trail of dust followed the pages of the tome. “We also have every single book ever written by Tolkien.”

Jean raised her eyebrow. “How Obscurus Books sells muggle authors?”
“They do now,” said Mary, tucking the battered paperback under her arm. “This is a personal victory for me,” she said affectionately. “My dad has muggle parents and he read Tolkien over and over when he was growing up. When I was little he read it to me.”

“I’d bet wizards and magic were lively dinner conversations,” said Jean.

Mary chuckled. “I’m not sure if I recall those memories because of fondness or trauma.”

Jean glanced down at the book. The pages were yellowed and dog-eared, clearly well loved by the previous owner. “My mom read The Hobbit me when I was little, but it’s been so long I can barely remember what happened in them.”

“Well, all the more reason for you to read them. Also,” Mary added, “if you bought one you’d really be helping me out. My boss said I was crazy for ordering them and they’d never sell.”

Jean laughed rolling her eyes. “Alright, I’ll buy. But, only for the discount, not because your boss thinks your crazy.”

Jean slid some sickles over to Mary and heard them drop very deliberately into the register. “Hey,” said Mary slowly. “How is everything with…that…you know?”

Jean glanced up at her. “Fine,” she said, very conscious that she was in a public place. “You know Dumbledore said you were welcome.”

“I know,” said Mary. “And no, thank you. I’m fine with where I am. Just, please be careful, Jean. All of you.”

Jean nodded once; unable to verbally promise something she didn’t know she could keep. “See you around Mary. Thanks for the book.”

“Bye,” said Mary, waving Jean out the door.

The afternoon heated the cobblestones beneath Jean’s feet. Her purchased bounced against her purse and she looked down into the paper sack. The Hobbit with it’s stilted calligraphy beamed up through the folds in its half broken spine and Jean let out a small laugh. Ten minutes later, Jean settled into one of Rosa Lee’s outdoor tables munching on a plate of tea sandwiches with a glass of strawberry lemonade. The brightly colored umbrella cast a pink sheen on the pages of her book and Jean found herself torn between the words on the pages and the people on the streets, dashing around on their daily routines.

“May I join you?”

Jean looked up quickly and found Remus standing over her, a soft grin on his face.

“Remus,” said Jean, scrambling up out of her seat to hug him. “It’s so good to see you. How have you been?”

“Better than I anticipated,” said Remus, sitting down in the chair opposite of Jean. Remus was wearing new robes, or rather, newer than the patched and shabby robes she was used to seeing him in. However, he was thinner and he had a paleness to his complexion. He had a new scar that ran beside his ear. Remus popped a paper bag onto the table and produced a thermos of tomato soup and several pieces of toast. “I got a job,” he said.

Remus sipped from his thermos. “I’m a metal enchanter. I make snitches.”

Jean knew it was a good job with a modest income for one person to live on, but nonetheless deflated. “You deserved better,” she said, adding more water to her tea. “I still can’t believe the Ministry didn’t give you that position in Werewolf Services.”

“But it’s what I have,” said Remus, “and for that I am content.” Remus bit down of his toast with a crunch.

“Well, you’re better off than I am,” said Jean, defusing her frustration with the Ministry.

Jean had a very Sirius-like sense of satisfaction at watching Remus almost choke on his toast. “What,” he managed to get out. “You don’t have a job?”

“Not yet,” said Jean, taking a long sip from her cup.

“You’ve applied everywhere right?”

Jean was already tired of that question for the day. “No Remus,” she said, “I haven’t. I plan on living with Mr. and Mrs. Evans for the rest of my life.”

“But how,” continued Remus. “Your N.E.W.T. scores were amazing. You should be some departmental undersecretary by now. How do I have a job and you don’t?”

Jean spread her hands, mentally adding that she was a time traveler and he was just a werewolf. Jean attempted to change the subject from her strange employment predicament. “How’s Peter?” said Jean evenly, looking down at her tea. “James and Sirius haven’t heard from him.”

Remus sighed and ran a hand over his face. “He’s okay. His N.E.W.T.s weren’t bad, but they weren’t good either. He’s working at his mother’s shop.”

Jean groaned internally. “That’s exactly where he didn’t want to be.”

Remus nodded. “I think he’s still looking around, but he’s been turned down a lot. I don’t think his mother his helping either. She’s really looking forward to that early retirement apparently.”

Jean worried on the inside of her lip. “That’s a shame,” she said, adding another tea bag to her cup.

Jean and Remus ate in silence for a moment, Jean staring over the rim of her teacup. “I ran into Edgar Bones today,” she said at last.

Remus paused in lifting his thermos and brought it back down to the table. “Did you?” he said looking down at the table, his tone betraying nothing.

“He mentioned his proposal,” Jean prompted gently.

Remus was unusually fixated with his hand and how his thumb ran across the pads of his fingers. “And what do you think of it,” he said at last, his amber eyes lifting up to Jean.

Jean paused, choosing her words sensitively. “I respect your wishes and I don’t want you to be forced into doing something you don’t want to do.”

“But, you think it’s a good idea,” said Remus. “You think I should give a testimony.”

“I think it has the potential of working,” said Jean, “and I think you’re in a unique situation in being able to show that this idea can work. Your story could be invaluable.”
“My story,” murmured Remus, his face dark. “You make me sound like I’m some penny press drama.”

“I didn’t mean it like that—”

Remus held up his hand to stop her. “I know you didn’t,” he said, resting the bridge of his nose between thumb and the knuckle of his forefinger, “I’m sorry.” Remus ran a hand over his face. “I’ve already told you I don’t want to be someone’s charity case. I don’t want people to do something for me, deserved or not, just because they feel sorry for me.”

“I know, Remus, I understand, but,” Jean’s teacup landed in its saucer with a clatter. “Remus it’s just wrong. It’s wrong that people think they can just walk all over you and pass it off as fear of something seemingly dangerous.”

Remus touched Jean’s saucer to still the trembling of the teacup. “Jean,” said Remus, gently. “I’m moved. I really am; and touched to have such a champion and such a friend.”

“They’ll keep walking all over you if someone doesn’t push back.”

Remus smirked. “I can think of more than one werewolf who pushed back who now has a cell in Azkaban.” Remus let out a long breath. “Look, if you want me to take this seriously, there’re some things that you and Edgar Bones haven’t considered.”

“So you’ll do it?” asked Jean, a little over excited.

“I said ‘if,’” said Remus. “If you and Edgar try and fail you can try again. But, if I try and fail I will never get a second chance, simply because of what I am. The Ministry will not take kindly to the idea of a werewolf secretly living at Hogwarts. If anything, it could strengthen the Ministry’s campaign for a werewolf registration act. I will never get out from underneath them and what little I have I could lose. When we do this, Edgar needs to be confident he can win this.”

“You didn’t say ‘if,’” said Jean slyly.

Remus paused and rolled his eyes, the corner of his mouth turning upward. “I will think about it.”

Jean nodded once. “Okay.”

Remus slapped his hand on his thighs and heaved himself out of his chair. He crumpled the paper bag and threw it in the waste bin. “This is all moot anyways,” he said casually, “we have another battle that requires are foremost attention, don’t we?” Remus rolled up his sleeve exposing his watch. “Speaking of which, we’d better be heading over.”

“Is it time already,” said Jean, looking down at her own watch.

“Dumbledore suggested we come in phases to avoid suspicion.” Remus held out his hand. “Shall we?”

Jean shoved her book into her purse, took Remus’ hand and nodded, all business now.

Jean’s arm linked with Remus’ so as not to lose each other and walked a few feet down the alley, as if they were a pair going home at the end of their day. Jean looked around Diagon Alley again, at the street vendors and shopkeepers and all that color and noise. The late afternoon sun caught the face of Gringotts revealing tiny capillaries of gold running through the white stone. With a pop it was all gone and Jean found herself looking at the rich, summer soaked greens of the tree line that surrounded Godric’s Hollow, hearing nothing but the murmurings of a quiet neighborhood.
Remus and Jean walked past the Potter household, which Jean still found strange to see in daylight and not destroyed. Jean felt another shiver down her spine as the pair passed what she recalled to be Bathilda Bagshot’s house. Again, it was strange to see the quaint cottage painted a baby blue with white shutters and geraniums planted down the front walk when she so clearly recalled the place in ruins with only Nagini as a resident. Jean and Remus kept walking past the historian’s house to one that Jean had no direct memory of, but felt familiar with all the same. The dwelling was not as well kept as its neighbor. Grass had pushed its way through the paving stones that wound their way up to the front door. If flowers had been planted around the stoop all that was left were the twisted twigs unevenly trimmed to form some dead knot coming from the earth. All and all, the home, with its neutral paint chipped and bleached out by weather and time, seemed perpetually somber. Remus pulled the bell and Jean heard the sound almost moan through the rooms. A few moments later, the tarnished knob twisted with a shriek.

“Mr. Lupin, Miss Granger,” said Albus Dumbledore, his twinkling eyes the brightest thing in his entire house. “Welcome.”

“Headmaster,” said Remus stepping over the threshold.

“Hello, Professor,” said Jean.

Dumbledore smiled beneath his silver beard. “I believe the pair of you have graduated from such formalities. Dumbledore slid the door shut and the room was veiled in a state of semi-darkness. “Make yourselves comfortable. The others will be along eventually.”

The living room was miniscule and covered with inches of dust. The cameo-backed sofa and the chaise lounge Jean thought were an olive green once, but it was hard to tell. Along the wall were the ghostings of a floral wallpaper pattern. As Jean took in the room she couldn’t help but think that Grimmauld Place looked chipper by comparison.

The one thing that could positively identify this place as the Dumbledore family home was a circular portrait in a worn out wooden frame set above a humble fireplace. Jean had seen this portrait before in one of the first few chapters in Rita Skeeter’s biography on Dumbledore: Percival Dumbledore, who died in Azkaban after attacking three muggles; Kendra Dumbledore, who was accidentally murdered by her daughter; Ariana Dumbledore, who was accidentally murdered by her brothers, and Albus and Aberforth Dumbledore, who disowned each other at their sister’s funeral. The canvas, like everything else, was covered in dust and cobwebs. Even Ariana’s blonde hair was muted. Only Albus’ eyes stood out, again, the brightest thing in the scene. Jean leaned forward and examined her youthful professor further. He had dark, reddish hair and a dimple on his shaven chin. The portrait winked at her and waived cheerfully.

“You’re going to burn a hole through it if you keep staring like that.”

Jean jumped at the unexpected voice, turned, and jumped again at who her eyes found. Jean had never seen more of a Highlander in her whole life and she went to school in Scotland. The man leaning up against the wall was broad, his shirt and dark leather jacket barely containing him. He was completely bald but his elaborate beard and mustache made up for it. They competed for supremacy over his face with his sharp green eyes staring out of his weatherworn face. The man wore a tartan kilt and the ends of white socks could be seen jutting out over wide, black boots belted together with brass buckles. He was one step short of terrifying.

Jean was saved from gawking and stumbling over a response by Dumbledore, who drifted back into the room. “Caradoc, have you met one of our newest members, Miss Granger? Jean this is Caradoc Dearborn.”
“You’re awfully young to be in the Order,” said Caradoc bluntly.

“And you’re awfully rude.” Jean looked past Dumbledore at who had followed him in from the kitchen. Compared to Caradoc Dearborn, this older woman looked Lilliputian. She wore a large dress that looked like the fabric had been taken from the wallpaper around them and her limp brown hair was pulled back so tightly it looked painful. The woman swiftly shuffled across the floor and took both of Jean’s hands in both of hers, shaking them as she did so. “It’s wonderful to finally meet you Miss Granger. Emmeline and Minerva have talked so much about you. My name is Arabella Figg.”

A familiar grin bloomed across her face as she recognized what would become Harry’s elderly neighbor at Privet Drive. “It’s nice to meet you too, Mrs. Figg.”

“She’s still very young,” interjected Caradoc, still skulking in the shadows.

“Alastor liked her, didn’t he, Albus?” said Mrs. Figg making her way back into the kitchen.

“He did,” said Albus, bemusedly watching the guests.

“Albus,” called out Mrs. Figg from the kitchen.

“Yes, Arabella?” said Dumbledore.

“You’re a terrible host,” said Mrs. Figg, “if we had these meetings at my house, if nothing else, we’d all be fed.”

“Let’s hope no one’s allergic to cats then,” grumbled Caradoc before crossing his arms and settling back against the wall.

Mrs. Figg emerged again carrying a rickety tea tray with mismatched cups and saucers. Mrs. Figg practically pulled Jean down onto the sofa, dust blooming out from their impact, and passed her a cup. “Now,” said Mrs. Figg, stirring her tea with a soup spoon as if they were at Sunday brunch. “Minerva tells me that you were a transfer student from…somewhere. What was the name of that school again, dearie? Are your parents still dentists?”

Jean was halfway convinced that Dumbledore invited Mrs. Figg solely to teach Jean how to survive an interrogation. Mrs. Figg had Jean rattle off every single, solitary aspect of her fictitious life to the point that Jean thought she’d have to make stuff up on the fly. Every once in a while Jean would get a break to breathe when Arabella stood up to greet one Order member or another that crawled out of the fireplace. All of these individuals Jean recognized from the future: Elphias Doge, who immediately gravitated over to Dumbledore and shook his hand vigorously, square jawed Sturgis Podmore who, like Caradoc, preferred his own company, and Deladus Diggle, who hadn’t aged a day and still wore the same shabby trench coat, fingerless gloves, and the shapeless over worn hat Jean fondly recalled twenty years from then. Professor McGonagall and Emmeline Vance emerged from the fireplace together, Emmeline in lilac today, McGonagall ever in emerald. Mrs. Figg excitedly excused herself, much to Jean’s relief, and toddled over to the pair. She looked very out of place amidst the tall, Victorian women, however Jean was sure she had never seen McGonagall smile more than when she was talking to Arabella Figg.

Jean wasn’t left alone for long as the quiet abode suddenly exploded in sound brought about by the boisterous Weasley brothers.

“Jean,” said Gideon, sweeping Jean up into a hug as if they’d been friends for years. “Good to see
“You again.”

“Nice to see you too, Gideon,” Jean huffed as all the air was squeezed out of her body.

Fabian, the slightly calmer of the brothers, nodded his getting to Jean and kept walking through the room. Gideon followed, bringing Jean along whether she wanted to come or not.

“Albus,” said Fabian walking up to Dumbledore. “Fletcher found me today. He said he had an ‘appointment,’” Fabian used air quotations around the word, “and he won’t be able to make it tonight.”

“Fletcher?” said Jean, her lip turning back in slight disgust. “As in Mundungus Fletcher?” Jean hadn’t realized his involvement with the Order went back so far.

“Oh you know the old dung beetle, do you?” said Gideon.

“I know of him,” said Jean, not eager to condemn a fellow Order member, but also not eager to align herself with a person who robbed the home of a dead man.

“Yeah,” said Gideon, nodding, “he’s not pleasant dinner company, but he rubs with greasier shoulders than any Auror could.” Jean couldn’t help but agree with that.

The remainder of the Order arrived around the same time and Jean could barely keep track of the comings and goings. She found Moody brooding alongside his fellow Scotsman. She watched Peter plop down on the sofa next to Remus, who was eyeing Edgar Bones from across the room. She waved at Marlene and Dorcas as they came in the front door and were subsequently snatched by the acting hostess, Arabella Figg. The fireplace suddenly flared up and Jean quickly stepped out of the way as Benjy Fenwick came tumbling out of the ashes.

“Good evening, Mr. Fenwick,” said Jean, giving him her hand to help him stand.

“Good evening,” he said distractedly, dusting off his coat. He stopped mid-brush and his head snapped up. “Miss Granger,” he spluttered, clearly surprised at her being there. “I didn’t realize…” He stuck out his hand, not knowing what else to do with it. “Welcome.” Jean shook it and the moment they broke apart Benjy began rifling through his pockets. “I know I have one…” he murmured almost frantically to himself. At last he produced a battered and folded up version of the pamphlet he gave to Marlene earlier that day. “I’m sure Miss McKinnon already told you, but the Auror Department is offering defensive training classes. Obviously it’s a ruse to help train Order members, but we meet on Tuesdays if you want to come.”

Jean took the pamphlet. “Thank you,” she said. “But, I was one of the students that Kinshield trained. I’m afraid my being there would only make others disappointed in themselves.” This was both true and not. If Magnus Kinshield was able to puzzle out her origins by simply watching her fight she definitely didn’t want Moody watching.

Benjy nodded, his face faltering. “Magnus was a good man,” he said.

“He was,” Jean replied.

“So,” said Benjy, attempting casual conversation. “You’re Mr. Black’s girlfriend.”

“I am,” said Jean. “Did you meet him today?”

“Only in passing,” said Benjy. “Moody likes to have a second set of eyes on his new recruits if he’s working with them directly.”
“Moody trained them today?” asked Jean. “How’d they do?”

A small smirk passed across Benjy’s face. “They’ll live.”

Jean turned when she heard the door swing open and saw Sirius, James, Lily, Alice and Frank standing in the doorway. Frank had a smirk identical to Benjy’s while Alice and Lily were wearing faces somewhere between laughter and concern. James and Sirius looked like they could barely stand let alone walk into the house. James’ hair was spiked with sweat and his cheeks were flushed. Sirius had his outer jacket haphazardly thrown over his shoulder and his hair was pulled back into a messy knot. Out of the corner of her eye, Jean saw Dumbledore, Edgar and Moody glance up at them and then resume their conversations.

Jean walked over to the group and Sirius stiffly fell into her arms. “How was your day,” Jean asked, her voice twinged with both sympathy and humor.

Jean heard Sirius mumble something akin to ‘insufferable task master’ against the side of her face. His arms fell to the small of her back and he pulled her close as if her presence was rejuvenating him.

“Ladies, gentlemen,” said Dumbledore. “If we could all find a seat we’ll begin.

There was a great amount of shuffling as people attempted to find a place for themselves. Marlene, Dorcas and Alice squeezed themselves onto the sofa while Remus, Frank, Benjy and Peter crammed up behind it. McGonagall, Emmeline and Mrs. Figg occupied the chase-lounge and Caradoc and Moody kept their space standing against the wall. Lily and James dragged in chairs from the kitchen and James eased himself into his as though he might never stand again. Jean found a chair that was paired with a desk pushed to the back corner of the room. Sirius stood behind her, his hands gripping the top rail to remain upright. He quietly exchanged pleasantries with Sturgis Podmore. Every once in a while, Jean felt Sirius’ index finger extend and draw slow, small circles across her shoulder blade.

Jean shifted so that more people could fit around her and felt something blunt and hard jabbing into her side. Jean flinched and looked down to find it was a small dark knob of an askew desk drawer. Jean jimmied it, but it did not budge. Trying hard to not look like she was rummaging through Dumbledore’s things, she pushed and pulled on the drawer before finally slipping her hand through the small opening in an attempt to find the item causing the resistance. She produced a book, sloughing off a layer of dust as she did so. The corners were curved and beaten down and the spine was bent to the point of breaking. Jean turned the book over and read the jaggedly written title with a jolt. It was a copy of The Tales of Beedle the Bard. More specifically, it was her copy of The Tales of Beedle the Bard, the one Dumbledore left to her in his will. Her fingers lightly ran over the small brown book, dust falling off its pages into her lap. Without thought, as if to confirm the book’s identity, Jean opened the pages and found the beginning of the Tale of Three Brothers. At the bottom corner of the yellowed page was the symbol of the Deathly Hallows. Jean had a faint memory tickling the back of her mind of Xenophilius Lovegood explaining to she, Harry and Ron the legend of the Peverell brothers and their gifts from Death. It seemed like a lifetime ago and yet a lifetime ahead of her.

Jean opened the book a little wider and felt something slide out from betwixt the pages. She reached out and snatched it before it fluttered to the ground. It was a black and white photograph, bookmarking the page, of two men, their arms slung around each other’s shoulders. The one on the left had light hair, almond eyes and was smiling without showing any teeth. The man on the left had dark curls, a full-blown grin and the same smiling eyes Jean saw in the mantelpiece portrait. She already knew who these men were, but all the same, she read Dumbledore’s thin,
distinctive script on the back of the photograph. *Gellert and I. Munich, 1899.* Jean gave a lingering look at the men for a moment longer before she quietly slipped the photo back into the pages, gently placed the book back into the drawer and shut it smoothly.

Jean turned her attention to Dumbledore, who was standing in front of his fireplace, shoulder to shoulder with his younger image.

“Thank you all for making it here this evening,” began Dumbledore, “I’m sure m—”

Dumbledore was broken off by a hearty pounding at the door that shook dust from the rafters. Jean felt her heart leap into her throat and Sirius’ hand snap for his wand. Everyone else seemed to be in a similar state of tension as Deladus Diggle inched over to the door and swung it open.

“’m sorry, Professor Dumbledore, sir. I didn’ mean ter be late.”

The outside was completely obscured by the half-giant’s form as Rubeus Hagrid squeezed himself into the living room.

“Not at all,” said Dumbledore as if he were completely accustomed to this situation, “please make yourself at home.”


From her position, Jean saw everyone’s head, in synchrony, turn to follow Hagrid as he picked his way through the crowd muttering ‘excuse me’ and ‘pardon me’ in what he would call a whisper. Some of the Order members gaped slightly and leaned back as Hagrid thudded by them. Other’s averted their gaze, knowing it was impolite to stare but not quite able to stop themselves. Eventually Hagrid came to a halt and stooped up against one of the walls next to Jean. As one, the collection of heads snapped back to facing forwards.

Jean saw Hagrid nervously twist the handle of his pink umbrella. Straining slightly, Jean reached out to touch his blotched, meaty hand. Hagrid looked down and Jean saw the warm, brown eyes she missed more than she realized. “Hello,” she said, unable to contain her affection. “I’m Jean Granger. It’s nice to meet you.”

Hagrid gave her a quick nod, a sliver of a smile forming on his lips. “Rubeus Hagrid. It’s nice to meet you, too.

Jean glanced back up at Dumbledore. “Well,” said Dumbledore. “Let’s get to business, then. Alastor, if you would please.”

Moody hefted himself off the wall and traded places with Dumbledore, the small fire casting an orange aura behind him. “Now, listen up,” he said gruffly. “The Death Eaters have played their hand. They have the distinct advantage of the Order and the Ministry not being able to retaliate in a similar manner.”

Jean hid a smirk. Of course Moody was disappointed they couldn’t go brawling Death Eaters in the streets.

“They are a deceptive shadow organization,” continued Moody, “and to win this we must sabotage them with equal subterfuge. There are two tasks requiring our immediate attention: knowing their plans and knowing their numbers. Dearborn, I’ll leave the former to you.”

Jean lifted her eyebrows in surprise as Caradoc grunted his affirmation and shifted his stance. Caradoc wasn’t just an Order member; he was the Order’s infiltrator.
“The rest of you lot will be attempting to identify Death Eaters; who they are, what kind of influences they have and, more importantly, who they could be connected to. Remember this is a takeover disguised and a social change. If we find one strand of the web, perhaps we can damage it or unravel it all together. Bones, you mentioned you, Dumbledore and Kinshield have been compiling a list?”

As Moody and Edgar danced around each other to trade places, Jean saw Dumbledore glance up at her quickly. Jean settled back in her chair and folded her arms across her chest, knowing she couldn’t spout out the entire membership of the Death Eaters without drawing suspicion to herself. Nevertheless, she kept her ears pricked, hoping she could steer the Order towards their correct suspects.

“Magnus and I,” said Edgar, “began earmarking individuals within the Ministry. The Mulcibers, and the Notts we have identified as potential Death Eaters. Through these families we have also come to suspect the Crabbes and the Goyles.”

“You think entire families are affiliated?” asked Emmeline. “Including boys just out of Hogwarts.”

“We have boys just out of Hogwarts, too,” said Edgar. “The Death Eaters’ entire philosophy stands for purebloods rooting out…impurities. It’s a community effort for them. I think it’s very possible for fathers to be attempting to recruit their sons.” Jean stared down at the toe of her shoe, mentally adding that if the fathers failed to recruit the sons, Voldemort was likely to kill the fathers, or the sons, or both.

“There’s also Lucius Malfoy,” continued Edgar.

“Abraxas’ son?” asked Podmore.

“Yes,” said Edgar. “He comes from an old prominent family and is rising quickly through Ministry positions. As of yet, I have found no legal way to check is his progress. Lucius personally could begin hampering my efforts in the Ministry and his family’s wealth could charm or threaten other individuals to the Death Eater’s side.

“If wealth and status are such key components, then where does the Black family stand?”

Jean didn’t see who asked the question, but she definitely saw Sirius’ arms stiffen out of her periphery. Jean watched Edgar’s eyes quickly flick over to Sirius. “I have not found any Black family members I’m concerned with yet,” he said. “However, I’ve been going over the reports from the attack on Hogsmeade. Witnesses report seeing a woman; a tall, slender woman with dark hair, dark eyes and a pale, narrow face. Based on her physical description and her reported mannerisms, I suspect this woman to be Bellatrix Lestrange.”

Jean closed her eyes briefly and then opened them again.

“If we can positively identify her,” said Deladus, “perhaps we can get her to a trial. We can remove her from Voldemort’s ranks. Maybe we can get her to reveal more names to us.”

“And risk the Death Eaters becoming aware of us so early—”

“You can’t take her.” Jean twisted her head around to look at Sirius, clearly surprised that he was speaking. “Bellatrix is a Black by blood. If you move against her the Blacks will no longer be neutral. The Blacks and the Lestranges will join together and form a powerhouse we can’t win against without open hostilities. They can and will pay or intimidate anyone to get what they want. They’re really good at getting what they want.”
“But, you do believe this woman is your cousin, Mr. Black,” said Caradoc from his dark corner.

Sirius looked over at the older man, refusing to outwardly be shamed by his family affiliations. “I have no doubt she is my cousin,” he replied smoothly.

Jean drifted in and out of the conversation as the Order debated members of the Death Eaters, only perking up completely when she was assigned her people and places she was to observe and report back on. The meeting broke quickly after that and dyads and trios of people began drifting towards the exits.

Jean weaved around Dorcas and Dumbledore, who were speaking quietly with each other and stepped out onto the weedy front lawn. She breathed deeply the balmy summer air that hadn’t been circulated through several lungs. A breeze brushed through her hair that tasted like conifers and a family’s dinner from down the street.

“You look beautiful.”

Jean turned and saw Sirius slumped against the side of the house, his hands deep in his pockets. Jean walked over to him and he continued to kick the twiggy, mowed over remains of a rosebush. “You’re suspiciously somber,” Jean commented.

“I was wondering how many times I’m going to have to see everyone’s side glances while they talk about my family.” Sirius sighed and pulled his hands out of his pockets. Methodically he began twisting his ring about his digit, as if he were tempted to hurl it in the dirt. “They don’t think I should be here.”

Jean snatched his hands. “Sirius, the only person who has the right to decide where you should or shouldn’t be is you.”

“What should I do?” asked Sirius.

“Prove them wrong,” said Jean. “Prove them wrong like Remus does to people who hate werewolves every day, like Lily does to people who hate muggle-borns every day. Through your actions and your words prove that not only should you be here, but you have a right to be here.”

“How?” said Sirius.

Jean grasped the end of his chin and directed his eyes to hers. “Be you, unapologetically,” she said. “Be the man I love.”

Sirius dropped his forehead against hers and nuzzled her slightly. His fingers ran up and down her arms in a slow soothing rhythm that lulled Jean’s eyes shut. That rhythm stilted when Sirius’ fingers breezed over the raised scarring spelling out mudblood on the underside of Jean’s forearm. Sirius sighed and gently circled her wrist, turning her arm to see the word. “I know Bellatrix,” he said quietly, “and you know what I’ve told you. The thought of any of my family doing something like this to you I…” he tapered off.

Jean winced internally, but their moment was interrupted before she could respond.

James and Lily walked into the yard. “You ready to go?” asked Lily.

“Yeah,” said Jean. She turned and pecked Sirius chastely on the lips. “See you later,” she said, preparing to disapparate.

“Before you go, may I borrow you, Miss Granger?” Jean turned and found Dumbledore framed in
the doorway, his hands folded in front of him.

“Of course, Professor,” said Jean, thinking their was only one thing that Dumbledore would want to talk to her about in private after an Order meeting. “You guys can head on,” said Jean dashing up the short stone stairs. “I’ll catch up with you later, Lily.”

Jean reentered the house and once again felt the closeness of the space even though there were only two people present. She found Dumbledore in the kitchen standing by a yellowing farmhouse sink and a bare table that looked like it had been scrubbed so hard the varnish was coming off. “Tea, Miss Granger?” asked Dumbledore, “I find myself sufficiently chastised by our dear Mrs. Figg.”

“No, thank you, Professor,” said Jean, preferring to get down to business. “Professor, would you like to discuss what I should and should not be telling the Order about the Death Eaters I know of?”

“I will leave how you wish to guide the Order down correct paths up to you, Miss Granger,” said Dumbledore, “but I would urge you not to blaze your own trials. Your personal safety as well as the Order’s hinges on discretion.”

Jean nodded. “So what did you want to talk to me about?”

“I wanted to offer you a job.”

If Jean had accepted the tea, she was sure she would have dropped it. Jean clumsily skidded a kitchen chair across the floor and plopped down in it, blinking owlishly at Dumbledore. “I beg your pardon,” she said at last.

Dumbledore, much more smoothly, sat down in a chair across from her, looking amused. “I was having an interesting conversation with Dorcas Meadowes just now. Did you know that she chairs the Muggle Worthy Excuse Committee in the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes?”

“I was aware,” said Jean, still not sure where this conversation was going.

“Miss Meadowes also has connections to the Muggle Liaison Office, which one of their responsibilities is introducing muggle-born students to the magical world. I’m sure you recall that experience, Miss Granger?”

Jean nodded, remembering when she first saw Professor McGonagall stepping out of her parent’s fireplace in the middle of her eleventh birthday party, Hogwarts letter in hand.

Dumbledore ease himself back into the spindly chair and steepled his hands in front of him. “Now typically, I enjoy this taking on this responsibly myself, however,” he lifted his hand and vaguely indicated to the room, “I have since inherited other responsibilities. Fortunately, Miss Meadowes assures me that, as Headmaster, I have the liberty to choose my replacement as representative of Hogwarts School to these new students.”

“You’d like me to work for you?” said Jean.

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkled with, what Jean would call, mischievousness. “Technically speaking, you will be working for the Muggle Liaison Office and the Muggle Worthy Excuse Committee in the Department of Magical Accidents and Catastrophes under the indirect supervision of Miss Dorcas Meadowes, but under the direct supervision of myself at Hogwarts. I must warn you though that because your work, should you chose to accept it, is so mobile and, though your home office will be in the Ministry you will in fact be stationed at Hogwarts, you may miss the monthly
Jean sat back in her chair, nothing short of impressed. “You’ve buried me quite efficiently.”

“Yes, I believe so, too,” said Dumbledore, sounding pleased with himself. He wiggled his long fingers and, as if it unfolded from nothing, he produced a thick, official looking enveloped sealed with the Ministry sigil, Muggle Liaison Office blocked out in bronze ink across the front. He sat the envelope on the table between them. “Shall I inform Miss Meadowes that you have accepted the position?”

Jean stared at the envelope for a moment before extending a single finger and slid the envelope towards her. “Thank you sir,” said Jean, her voice thick with emotion. In the course of a single evening, Dumbledore has secured her livelihood in this time. She slid the envelope into the pages of *The Hobbit*, using it as an impromptu bookmark.

“Wonderful,” said Dumbledore, standing. “Meet me in my office at Hogwarts tomorrow and I’ll give you this month’s letters you will be delivering.

When Jean apparated back to the Evans house, she found Lily sprawled out on the sofa, Jennyanydots kneading herself a place in Lily’s lap. Late night television cast a bluesish light on her features. Lily tilted her head up upon hearing Jean enter.

“Hey,” she said, moving her legs to give Jean a place to sit. “What did Dumbledore want?”

Jean wordlessly pulled out the envelope and balanced it on the ends of her fingers, the ability to make her own future, a new future, finally in her hands. “He gave me a job.”

Jean felt the sofa cushions move as Lily shifted and sat up, practically slinging Jennyanydots off of her. Jean glanced sideways and saw Lily mimicking her own owlishly agape face. “I beg your pardon?”

“Exactly,” said Jean. She sank back into the sofa and scratched the golden ears of Jennyanydots, who had crawled over and settled onto her thighs with a yawn and a purr.

Chapter End Notes

There are some new edits in this chapter. I just changed some book titles around but they come up in later chapters and I didn’t want anyone to be confused. Thanks for the support!
Chapter 21: Many Happy Returns

As it is prone to do, summer flew by in a haze of lazy afternoons. Before Jean realized it, whips of cold air wafted across her face and the leaves had become tinged with the colors of autumn. Such is how Jean found the world when she peeled her eyes open and blinked at the shafts of sunlight shining through the window in Petunia’s childhood bedroom. Jean groaned out of her slumber and slipped out from beneath the sheets. She flinched from the cold that seeped through the walls and quickly shoved her feet into her slippers, curling her toes into the cottony warmth. Still half asleep, Jean wandered down the narrow upstairs hallway of the Evans house, her hand lightly skimming over the chair rail. Jean’s footfalls made slow lethargic, sounds as she followed the smells of breakfast. The sounds of faster feet ascended up to her and Jean let out a small grunt as Lily collided with Jean’s chest and wrapped her arms all the way around her back.

“Happy Birthday,” said Lily, cheerfully towing Jean down the stairs, Jean’s slippers sliding over her feet as she struggled to keep up with her. “I made crepes.”

The smell made it to Jean before the sight and it roused her completely. On the Evans family kitchen table were two plates piled with the thinly folded pastries. Glistening strawberries leaked out from between the creases, dusted with a fine layer of powdered sugar. A glass vase containing coral colored tulips sat between them. “Oh, Lily,” breathed Jean. “You didn’t have to.”

“Of course I didn’t have to,” comment Lily practically bouncing her way to her seat, “but it’s your first birthday with us and I wanted every moment of it to be special. Lily sat down with a plop and Jean joined her, partitioning out her pastry with a clink of her fork. “So no new Hogwarts students share your birthday?” asked Lily popping a berry into her mouth.

“I’m glad this job has been going so well for you,” said Lily.

“Me too,” said Jean. She wiped off a streak of sugar that caught on the edge of her lip. “Last week there was a boy who had three younger brothers. They all wanted to come with me.”

“That’s precious,” said Lily with a smile, but it wilted quickly. “Petunia was the same way. She used to tease me about my magic when we were younger, but when Dumbledore came with my letter, she felt left out.” Lily folded her hands over her cup of tea and kept talking even though her eyes were far away. “I wrote to her about the wedding, but she hasn’t answered me yet.”

Jean shifted in her seat, shuffling around for a different subject. “How did Dumbledore bring your letter to you? I’m still having trouble convincing parents that I’m not trying to kidnap their children.”

Lily still had a faraway look to her eyes and a soft smiled played with the corners of her lips. “Severus was there. I had almost forgotten. He was with me and my parents when Dumbledore came. Now that I think about it, he was probably there for that reason.” Lily drifted off and Jean watched her stare out the window for one wistful moment. She came back to earth, pulled her
teacup to her mouth and sipped. “I’m sure Dumbledore has some good advice on that subject.”

The pair finished their late breakfast and Jean swept it into the sink before Lily could say anything about it. “I suppose Sirius will be kicking in the door any moment,” said Jean, recalling the three notes from him wishing her Happy Birthday she had received from him in the past twelve hours via a thoroughly winded owlet. “Part of me expected him to be sitting on the sofa by the time I woke up.”

“Perhaps,” called Lily coyly from the living room. “But then, perhaps I’m stalling for him while he and James put the finishing touches on your surprise party.”

Lily’s statement was so casually given it took Jean a moment for it to register. When it did, Jean ducked her head into the living room, her hands still sudsy with pink kitchen soap. “What?”

Lily was sitting on the sofa with Jennanydotes splayed across her lap, purring contentedly. Lily glanced up at Jean, giving her a look she could have only learned from Sirius. “Surprise.”

Jean dressed for the afternoon in a pair of light wash capris and a teal blouse. She casually eyed herself in the mirror and ran a hand over her curls, which hung loose and natural over her shoulders. When she came back downstairs she found Lily dressed in similar sunny attire. In her hand was a pastel wrapped present. “Lily,” said Jean, “you didn’t have to get me anything.”

Lily ignored her and tucked the small box under her arm. “Come on,” she said grabbing hold of Jean’s hand. “Everyone will be waiting.”

“Everyone?” asked Jean. The word had barely left her mouth before a sharp crack sounded and, like a jump cut, the view before her transformed from the homely Evans family house to the bright exterior of Godric’s Hollow.

Jean made for the front door, but Lily stopped her. “They’ll be in the back,” she said. Jean and Lily drifted over to the left side of the house where Jean found a hedgerow that grew up to the middle of her chest, a white garden gate set into it. Lily lifted the latch and, with a creak, swung open the gate and guided Jean into the back yard.

Jean couldn’t help but let out a little breath. The back yard was done up enchantingly. A large round table was set in the back corner of the yard, the bright pink bows tied to the backs of the chairs matching the tablecloth. It was already laden with sandwiches and side items and a large crystal decanter of pumpkin juice. A smaller square table was set near the larger one. Small clusters of presents framed the cake that sat in the center. It was not like the cake Jean had seen at James’ birthday. It was smaller, circular and had three tiers. Pearl colored icing gave it an almost luminescent appearance and green fondant swooped upward around the layers. Intermittently dotting along the vines were sugary pink peony buds. ‘Happy Birthday Jean’ was written in tea lights strung off the side of the house. James and Frank were exiting the house upon her arrival in the yard, arms filled with china plates and silverware while Dorcas, Alice and Marlene chatted idly amongst themselves. Marlene was the first to turn to her, hefting her bulky camera on her hip. “Happy Birthday, Jean,” Marlene said, her voice alerting the others to her presence. Marlene dashed over and ensnared Jean in an embrace and the others followed suit. Jean soon lost Lily amidst the happy birthdays and well wishes.

Jean was shuffled through the yard, passed from one affectionate hug to the next until she was released in front of Mr. Potter who was sitting contently in a garden chair, a plaid blanket draped across his legs. “Ah, Judith,” he said as if he suddenly realized that Jean was in front of him. “The happiest of birthdays, my dear.”
“Thank you, Mr. Potter,” said Jean with a smile. “Everything looks beautiful.

Mr. Potter smiled, the sunlight catching in his smile lines. “You’ll have to thank the boys for that,” he answered with a chuckle. “They’ve been out and about for days now making sure everything was perfect.” Jean blushed, slightly surprised she merited such attentions, but before she could respond, Mr. Potter’s eyes widened while he glanced over her shoulder. “Lily, darling,” he called out, “come say hello to your future father-in-law.”

Jean subtly shifted out of the conversation as Lily traded places with her and drifted over to the smaller table. The cake was even more beautiful close up. Jean reached out, almost touching the flower buds halfway convinced they were real petals. She gasped and pulled back slightly when not just the one, but all, of the buds unfolded their papery thin petals revealing small flickering lights nestled in their centers like candles.

As Jean pulled back a pair of arms wrapped around her midsection and Jean melted into the warm, familiar body. “Happy Birthday, sweetheart,” whispered Sirius, his breath brushing across the shell of her ear.

Jean rested her hands upon his linked ones, the dark jewel ever glistening on his ring finger, and turned about to face him. “Sirius,” she breathed out, her chin touching his chest. “Thank you.” She reached up and cupped the sides of his face, enjoying the feeling of his hair threading between her fingers, and pulled his mouth gently onto hers. Sirius tightened his arms against the small of her back, almost instinctively wanting to deepen the kiss, but relaxed and let his arms hang limp about Jean’s hips. Sirius’ aftershave smelled like cedar and smoke.

“Smile you two.” Jean and Sirius broke apart, temporarily blinded by the flashbulb. Jean’s slightly pursed lips fell into a casual grin as Marlene snapped more pictures. Satisfied, Marlene brought the camera down and began striding across the lawn. “Now, Remus, Peter and Mary won’t be along for a while, but that doesn’t mean we can’t have some fun till they get here.” Marlene picked up a slender wooden racket and a white feathered birdie. “Now, how do you play this game?”

Jean realized the game she was referring to and was surprised she hadn’t noticed it until then. “Who brought badminton?” she asked the assemblage.

“I did,” supplied Lily, “and croquet. You play croquet, right?”

“The last time I played I was ten, but yeah,” answered Jean.

“Perfect,” said Lily, as if that was all the positive assurance she needed. “James and Sirius wanted me to pick out muggle games you might like.”

“And because these two don’t know any back yard activities except quidditch,” added Frank slyly.

“So how do you play this Lily,” asked Alice, picking up a racket for herself.

“It’s quite simple,” said Lily. She took the birdie and racket from Marlene and gently arced it over the net. “Hit it from one side to the other, if it falls to the ground the other team gets a point.”

“That’s it?” James picked up the birdie from the grass and turned it about in his hands. “Does it fly?”

Lily looked at James questioningly. “No.”

“But surely it moves around it bit. You know, to keep you from just hitting it.”
“It’s not a snitch, James,” said Lily.

“But, that’s so simple,” said Sirius, snatching the birdie out of James’ hands and staring at it skeptically. “I mean snitches and bludgers try to at least get away from you.”

“Just because you’re good at one game doesn’t automatically mean you’re going to be good at the other,” quipped Alice.

“I don’t know Alice, they have a point,” said Frank folding his arms and passively staring down at the birdie. “I mean I play quidditch casually and I feel like I’d be really good at this and, well you three don’t play at all. It might be an unfair advantage with who’s team we’re on.”

“Oh,” said Lily, partly amused, partly challenging. Smoothly, she strolled over to the netting, folding her fingers through it, and stared through the spaces at James. “You think you can beat us.”

James wisely remained silent, but slowly shrugged his shoulders and sheepishly spread his hands. A dimple formed in Lily’s cheek as she spun on her heel. “Your serve, Potter,” she said coyly.

“You two not playing?” Jean asked Marlene and Dorcas, who flopped themselves down on the sideline.

“I am the self-appointed event photographer,” said Marlene, flicking a piece of grass off her camera lens.

Dorcas held her hands up. “I’m happy to spectate,” she said. “I know a couples battle when I see one.”

“You sure you don’t want me on your team, Jean,” called out Sirius. “I’d hate to beat the birthday girl at her own party.”

Jean’s face settled as Sirius winked at her as spun the racket around in her hands. “Your serve,” she said.

It went about as well as they anticipated; as in Jean, Lily and Alice were completely clobbered. The only time the ladies scored was when James and Sirius were showboating. Jean and Alice had resorted to playing barefoot and used their shoes to mark the out of bounds area, considering the boys were attempting to lob the battered birdie to outer space. James, Sirius and Frank had no such boundaries, as they were perfectly happy to chase the plaything to the fence line if the opposing team ever managed to get it that far. All the while, Dorcas and Marlene were spread out in the grass, the former bemusedly munching on a sandwich and the latter clicking out photographs.

Lily bent down and dislodged the birdie from the pocket of earth. “So we’re playing to ten right Lils?” said James from across the net.

“Fifteen,” said Lily, swiping her tousled hair back from her face.

“Fifteen. Yeah, forgot.” James looked a little too pleased with himself as he traded his racket between his hands. “Ready when you are.”

Jean pulled her hair off her neck briefly, not sure if she had another five sets in her. She and Alice had long since realized they were supporting players in the grudge match between Lily and her fiancé. Both subtly shifted out of the way as Lily tossed her tiny missile into the air and snapped it over the net.

James easily returned it and Jean darted forward, hitting it back to the boys side with a thwack. Frank backed up a few paces, his eyes following his target before hitting it with the rim of his
racket. For one brief moment Jean though the birdie was going to fall short until Sirius, with his beater’s arm, caught the birdie with his own racket and spiked it down into the dirt before anyone could react.

“For Merlin’s sake, Sirius,” said Lily somewhat sharply. “It’s a casual backyard game not an international championship.”

Sirius just grinned at Lily, trying and failing to look appropriately apologetic. His sparkling grey eyes fell on Jean and his grin spread to her mouth.

“The concept of a gentle swing is lost on you isn’t it Sirius?” said Jean humorously.

Sirius swung a couple of practice strokes across his body. “This arm hasn’t done a gentle swing since I was thirteen.”

Lily resumed her position to serve and swatted at James with particular determination, as if she were hoping to peg him in the forehead with the abused plastic ball. James hopped lightly into the air and fired it back, causing Jean to crane her neck as the birdie went flying over her head. Lily juked and jived, her racket extended out before her, as she lined herself up with her target. “I got it,” she said, more to herself than anyone else. “I got it. I-oomf!”

Remus had hardly taken ten steps into the yard before lily bowled him over, his arms instinctively snatching Lily about the shoulders. Lily wildly lunged with her racket despite Remus’ efforts to keep both her and himself upright. She missed her mark and the birdie landed lightly in the grass, just shy of it being out of play. Mary and Peter watched the entire exchange, Peter’s hand still on the garden gate.

“That was not a point,” said Lily, pointing both with her finger and her racket. “That was an interference of play.”

James didn’t hear her though his own laughter, doubled over, clenching at his belly. “You alright there Remus?”

Remus looked both flustered and confused as he swiped his sandy hair out of his eyes with one hand and settled Lily back on both her feet with the other. “What happened?”

Lily looked dejectedly at the birdie resting at a tilt a few feet away from her before surrendering her racket to Mary. “Mary, avenge me,” said Lily breathlessly before padding barefoot across the yard and plopping down in a chair next to Mr. Potter.

Mary tentatively wrapped her fingers around the taped handle, not sure what she was avenging Lily for.

Jean watched James follow Lily across the yard, looking both smug and bashful at the same time. He squatted down in the grass next to Lily’s chair and, with his elbows propped on either side of her knees, he slowly leaned into Lily’s space. Lily swatted him while at the same time pulling him into her embrace, tucking his head into the crook of her shoulder and running the tips of her nails though his hair.

Jean felt an arm loop around her waist and a pair of lips press against her temple. “Do you forgive me for beating you on your birthday?” asked Sirius with a half smile.

Jean elbowed Sirius in the ribs as Mary came forward, experimentally turning the racket in her hands.
“So, I’m supposed to be avenging Lily is some way?”

“It’s a muggle game,” said Frank coming over to join the group, “which Lily thinks she and Jean should be better at than James and Sirius because they grew up with it.”

Mary hid a good-natured chuckle behind her hand. “How do you play?”

“You just try to pass this feathered ball over the net,” said Sirius his thumb making small circles over Jean’s collarbone.

Remus took the birdie and turned it about in his hand. “That’s it? It doesn’t do anything else?”

Jean rolled her eyes, not needing to hear a repeat conversation that started the first game. She eased her way out of Sirius’ embrace and plodded over to Lily who was folded up in her chair. Jean collapsed down onto the grass next to her and both watched Remus, Mary and Peter square off against Sirius, James and Frank. “They don’t stand a chance,” commented Lily so idly it was as if she were discussing the weather.

“Nope,” answered Jean, equally nonchalant. “Well, what do you want to do in the meantime, aside from watching our friends get creamed by our significant others?

“Something that doesn’t involve flying objects,” said Lily taking a sip of her drink. Over the edge of her glass, Jean saw Lily suddenly perk up, that still surprising competitive streak glinting behind her green eyes. “How good are you at croquet?”

“Better than badminton I hope,” said Jean with a laugh. Jean and Lily wandered over to the croquet equipment piled in a heap at the edge of the yard.

By the time they had set up all of the stakes and wickets in the double-diamond pattern Alice, Marlene and Dorcas had joined them, “So how do you play this game?” asked Marlene, setting aside her camera to pick up a slender croquet mallet.

“We each take a ball,” said Lily, “and we bat them around this diamond formation. The first one to get through all nine hoops and hits the stake at the other end of the yard wins."

“Sounds simple enough,” said Alice selecting a yellow ball for herself.

“Why are all muggle games so simple to wizards?” asked Lily, planting her red ball firmly at the base of the first stake.

“Well, with many wizard games, if you hit something it runs away, or bites you, or tries to hit you back.” A look passed across Alice’s face. “That sounds terrible now that I’ve said it.”

“Oh come on!” The four women looked over their shoulders and watched Remus attempt to divest the birdie from the bushes.

Dorcas laughed and turned her attention back to the game. “I’ll take blue."

Even though the fist sized wooden balls didn’t bite or hit back, the game itself was less simple than even Lily or Jean anticipated. They were reaching the fifteen minute mark on their game and Marlene, Dorcas and Alice’s balls were in a clustered mess in the middle of the formation, hitting each other more than passing through the desired wicket no matter how much the players tried to free themselves from the snare. Lily and Jean were doing marginally better, but only by dumb luck. As often as they hit their ball they dug up chunks of grass with their mallets or sent their balls flying away from the formation and had to take several stiff and nervous strokes to get it back on
track. At the present moment, Lily was trailing behind Jean and was trying to maneuver her red ball around Jean’s green one in order to secure her last wicket. Lily swung her mallet down and groaned as the wooden hammer kicked up more turf and sent her ball veering in the opposite direction she wanted. “I remember this being so much easier when I was younger,” said Lily, following her ball across the yard.

“I’m pretty sure your younger self could beat us all,” said Alice, biting on the edge of her lip as she struck her ball. Alice groaned almost identically to Lily when her ball flew past the wicket, which would force her to sacrifice three turns to get it realigned.

Dorcas was handling her ball as delicately as one would handle a land mine. She timidly tapped it and the blue orb barely rolled forward before getting snagged on a patch of crabgrass. Marlene was less gentle and firmly smacked her ball, sending it flying away from the wickets but was at last free of the cluster. “Yes,” Marlene whooped, “freedom.”

Jean chuckled and turned her attention back to her ball, her lips falling into a neutral line. It was at an odd angle. If she hit it in the direction of the stake, then she ran the risk of knocking over the wicket, but if she shot through the hoop she could end up past the stake and be racing Lily to the finish. She rested her mallet against the side of the ball before pulling back and readjusting.

“What are you doing?”

Jean jerked out of her concentration and looked up to see Sirius standing a few inches away from her. Beyond him, Jean could see James clap the back of the clearly defeated Remus, followed by Mary and Peter, stumbling away from the badminton net. “I’m trying to get this ball over to that stake over there, but I have to get it though that hoop first. I’m trying find a way to hit it so it goes through the hoop but doesn’t go too far away from the stake.”

Sirius laughed to the point he had to hold his side. “You know I am a Beater right? Spent the last five years smacking balls with a stick? I could get that ball through the hoop and hit that stake in one shot.”

Lily perked up at this. “Oh no,” she said, “no. You’re not going to come in here and think you’re naturally a master at this game and act like you could do it with one hand tied behind your back.”

Sirius smirked good-naturedly at Lily. “Well, if you want me to,” he said, winking at her. Sirius saddled up behind Jean and gently took hold of her arms. “Besides, I already beat the birthday girl at one game today. I should make sure she wins the next one.”

Jean tilted her head up, the top of her head touching his chin. “You know Lily’s going to kill you if you win this for me,” she said, not relinquishing her mallet, but at the same time not resisting as Sirius moved her around to line up his shot, “and I might have to kill you if you win for me in one shot.”

“I’ll take my punishment then,” murmured Sirius, the heat from his breath warming her hair. With a smooth crack, the ball evenly rolled forward in a determined line, passing though the wicket in a way that if anyone else had attempted the shot they would have tipped the wire hoop over. Jean’s green ball came to a halt, nestled at the base of the stake.

“Unbelievable,” said Lily, leaning lightly against her mallet.

Jean turned around and Sirius’ arms fell onto the small of her back. “I’ll take my punishment now.”

Jean kissed him chastely despite Sirius’ subtle encouragements. “Thank you,” she said, “but you’ve
“We can’t help it. Sirius and I are just naturally gifted.” James swung his arm across Lily’s shoulders.

“Careful, James,” Jean called out. “Your head’s liable to burst with all that hot air filling it.”

“I’m sure Lily will deflate it in time. But, I do love it when your competitive streak comes out.” Lily’s eyes softened at the same time she lightly slugged him in the shoulder.

“Come on, let’s eat. I’m starving,” said Remus, the flush from his exertion finally leaving his body.

“I agree with that,” chimed Peter, whose pink tinge hadn’t faded from his cheeks.

“One moment,” said Lily, a look passing across her face. “I have one more game for us to play and I don’t think we’ll want to play it after we’ve eaten.”

“Oh, really?” said James, intrigued. “What is it?”

Lily moved towards a clear space in the yard, spinning her wand around on the ends of her fingers. She bent down pointing the tip of her wand at the group. “Rubeo.” As if her wand was an airbrush, a bright red color stained the grass, expanding outwards until it was the size of a dinner plate. Lily moved over a few inches. “Flavo.” Like the red circle, a yellow one appeared, then blue, then green.”

Jean’s eyes widened and her mouth dropped. “Oh, Lily, no. Let’s keep what dignity we have left.” Lily righted herself and walked back over to create the second row.

“What is this game?” Sirius asked Jean, but Jean’s answer was drowned out by James’ conversation with Lily.

“You know I love you even if you lose,” called out James, a wry grin on his face.

Lily returned a matching smirk. “But, you all said it yourselves. James and Sirius have inflated their egos and it’s Jean and I’s responsibility to deflate them. And Sirius,” she added turning towards him, “the name of the game is Twister.”

“I didn’t think I would end up with a back injury at your birthday,” commented Alice from her side of the grid. It was a tight fit around the perimeter of the square, with James, Sirius, Remus, Frank, Jean, Lily, Alice and Dorcas squeezed around the sides. Marlene had resumed her role as the event photographer and Mary was content with losing to James and Sirius once for the day. Peter was plopped in a chair next to Mr. Potter, the spinner on one knee and a plate stacked with tea sandwiches on the other.

“Peter, call it,” said Lily.

“Yes, ma’am.” Peter bit down into his sandwich and flicked the spinner. “Okay, Lily, you’re right hand red.” He turned the spinner again. “James, you’re left foot blue.”

Round and round it went until everyone was in a huffing laughing jumble in the middle of the grid. Jean’s hands were splayed between a red dot and a yellow dot and she had lost track of where her feet were, but she was pretty sure they were tangled up amongst Remus and Frank’s.
“Dorcas,” called out Peter. “Left hand yellow.”

“Oh, Merlin,” said Dorcas, trying to shift the hand that was holding most of her body weight.

“You can do it,” called out Marlene from behind her camera.

“Yeah, reach for it,” added Mary.

That less encouraged Dorcas and more caused her to break out into giggles. “This is impossible,” she managed to get out between her chuckles.

“Dorcas, don’t make me laugh,” said Alice. “You’re making me laugh. I can barely hold myself up.”

“Alice,” Peter called out, laughing as well. “Right hand blue.”

“My foot’s already on blue,” she said laughing all the while, which only caused Dorcas to laugh harder. Alice attempted to shift her hand, but was barely halfway to her destination before she fell onto Dorcas. It didn’t take much for Dorcas to topple over as well and both landed in a giggling heap on the ground. “That was fun,” said Alice, taking a seat on the ground next to Dorcas. “Hang in there Lily and Jean,” she called out.

“What, no words of encouragement for your fiancé?” said Frank, noticeably sweating as he tried to steady himself around Remus’ shoulder.

“Don’t fall,” Alice half-heartedly added.

“Frank,” said Peter through the commotion of shuffling bodies. “Left hand—”

“Oof!” Jean looked underneath her arm and saw Remus flat on his back. “I couldn’t hold myself up any longer,” said Remus panting slightly.

James laughed, from where Jean could not tell. “We need to work on your upper body strength, Moony.”

“Peter, left hand what?” Frank called out, the muscles twitching in his forearms as well.

“Right,” said Peter, looking back down at the spinner. “Left hand red.”

Frank grunted, sliding his hand across the grid to the red circle that was very, very far away. His hand made it to the circle and everyone cheered for him, but they were cut short as his hand picked up speed and traveled past the circle, followed by his arm and the rest of his body.

“Good effort mate,” said Sirius, somewhere near Jean’s ear. “I thought you had that one.”

“Guess I’m going to need to work on my upper body strength, too,” said Frank, wiping off the grass from his knees and sat down with Alice holding a glass of pumpkin juice.

“Down to four,” commented Mary, nibbling on her own sandwich. “What’s next Peter?”

Peter turned the spinner. “James, left foot green.”

James plopped his foot down on the designated circle as if it were the easiest thing in the world. “Give me a hard on next time Peter,” James called out.

“Lily,” Peter said, looking up from the spinner, “left hand blue.”
Lily shifted around to get to the appropriate color, which caused her face to be inches from James’.
“Really, Lily,” said James playfully, “in front of everyone?”

“Shut it, Potter,” said Lily, trying to readjust, but only ending up edging closer together.

“You ready Sirius?” Peter asked.

“Ready, Wormtail. What do you have for me?”

“Right hand green.” Peter responded.

Just as easily as James had, Sirius slid his hand into place.

“Jean,” Peter called out. Jean couldn’t see Peter through Sirius’ body. “Right hand blue.”

Jean stretched, letting out a grunt as she did so. “If I stretch any farther I’m going to tear myself apart,” she muttered to herself. “Okay, got it.”

“James,” said Peter, “left hand red.”

“Easy enough,” said James, lifting his arm. “I thought I told you to give me a hard one—ah!”

Jean struggled to turn her head to see what was going on and saw Lily reach out and tickle James’ exposed ribs. Laughter exploded from James and his limbs sporadically jerked around. He tipped over a moment later, the tilt of his body bringing Lily down with him. They tumbled around in the grass for a moment before both landed on their sides facing each other.

“Cheater,” said James, smiling even as he said so.

Lily tilted her head back into the grass. “Worth it.”

James stood up and turned around to help Lily stand. “Hang in there, Jean,” Lily called out.

Once everyone was settled in their respective seats, Peter flicked the spinner again. “Sirius, right hand yellow.”

“Already there, Peter,” answered Sirius with a bark like laugh.

“Of course it is,” said Jean. “Hurry up Peter my arms are giving out.”

Peter turned the spinner again. “Right hand green.”

Jean moaned internally, the infernal green circle just a short distance away but at the same time impossibly far. Jean felt her tongue twisting up inside her mouth as she stretched, her fingers straining as the crawled through the grass.

“Come on Jean. You almost have it,” called out Marlene, echoing the cheers and encouragements from everyone behind her.

“You’ve got this,” Jean hear Sirius murmur into her ear so quietly that Jean was half sure she was the only one that heard it. “Reach.”

Jean let out the little breath she was holding as the tips of her middle and ring finger slid their way onto the green circle. But, then her back foot slipped out from beneath her and her bent knee caught her fall. Jean let out the rest of the air she was holding and flopped the rest of the way to the ground.
“Aww, rotten luck, Jean,” said Lily.

“Better luck next time,” said Jean airily, blinking up at the rapidly setting sun.

It was blotted out by a mane of black hair and piercing grey eyes. Sirius stared silently down at her but communicated to her in a language she didn’t even know she understood until then. Sirius threaded his fingers through her hair and the tall grass betwixt it. Jean gently touched the tendons of his wrist. “Sorry to make you lose to me again on your birthday.”

“Just don’t make a habit of it,” Jean replied.

“I won’t,” said Sirius. He bent down and kissed her, his woodsy scent mingling with the scent of the earth around him. Jean’s hand drifted up and interwined with his fingers, still tangled in her hair.

Jean’s stomach snarled at them, breaking the moment, and Sirius pulled back laughing. “Sounds like someone is ready to eat.”

“Defeat makes me hungry,” quipped Jean, taking Sirius’ hand and pulling herself up with it.

The snack like meal was sedate in comparison to the excitement of the afternoon. Everyone had slunk down into a chair or was sprawled out on the grass. Many had paired off and were chatting with each other, pausing briefly to chew. Sirius’ hand snuck under the tabled and coiled his fingers around Jean’s. Jean felt the hard circlet of metal and squeezed it.

“All of these games you brought were great, Lily.” Jean perked up and tuned into Alice’s conversation with Lily. “Jean, were there any other muggle games you used to play as a kid?”

Jean thought on it for a moment. “I used to play in the sprinkler during the summer and my friends in primary school liked to play jump rope. My parents and I really liked playing lawn darts. Did you ever play with lawn darts, Lily?”

“Oh, no,” said Lily. “My mum and dad thought Petunia and I would try to spear each other. But, one of my favorite things to do as a kid was hula-hooping.”

“Hula-what-ing?” asked Sirius.

“Hula-hooping,” Lily supplied. “It’s where…” Lily was suddenly at a loss for words. “Here I’ll just show you.” Lily picked a plate off the table and flicked her wrist, like one would do with a yo-yo. As the plate moved downwards it turned into a pale pink hula-hoop hanging off the end of her thumb. Lily tossed it up into the air once before settling it around her hips. “This is hula-hooping.”

James scrambled up to take it, eager for the new muggle game. However, he only managed to make the plastic ring do stuttered rotations around his midsection before it crashed to the ground. James tried again and got similar results. “How are you keeping it up?” he asked.

“Oh, my hips?” said Lily, caught off guard that this was the one thing that would stump him.

“Here, James,” said Jean, taking the hoop from him. “You just get it started like this and you move your body like this and your hips keep it up.” Jean demonstrated, not knowing how to further explain something she had mastered at four. She glanced briefly at Lily who was also at a loss, but growing more and more amused.

“Seriously, how are you keeping it up?” said James, watching her movements intently, as if he could catch her secret.
“There’s got to be more than that,” Sirius added.

“No, it really is just that simple,” said Jean, enjoying giving his words back to him.

Sirius took the hoop next and, if possible, was even worse than James. “I don’t think my body’s designed to move like that,” said Sirius as the hula-hoop spun around his ankles for the fourth time.

“Frank, do you want a try?” offered James.

Frank just shook his head. “I don’t need that question answered for myself, thank you.”

“Look, I got it.” Everyone turned to Peter who was spinning the hoop around his arm.

“Come on Remus,” said Sirius. “You try.”

Remus slid out of his seat, in which he looked very comfortable, and reluctantly took the hoop. “Like this, Lily?” he asked.

“Just like that,” said Lily, taking a sip of her drink.

Remus spun the ring around and it settled on his hips, gaining a steady rhythm. “Huh,” said Remus after a moment. “This is oddly soothing.”

“Okay, seriously,” said James watching Remus intently. “What are you doing to do that?”

Jean laughed and put her plate down. “Not that I’m not enjoying this immensely, but I’ve been wanting to try that cake all day.”

“No, it’s not dark enough to do cake yet.” Jean looked over at Lily, lifting an eyebrow. “Trust me,” said Lily.

“We can do presents first,” said Marlene.

Jean nodded and allowed herself to be guided over to the table of gifts. Sirius gently touched her on the shoulder as they walked. “I’m going to step in the house. I’ll be right back.”

Jean could barely turn to watch Sirius dash through the back door before a pastel colored parcel was dropped into her hands. “Happy birthday, Jean,” said Lily, bouncing on the balls of her feet.

Jean tore at the wrapping paper and found a leather messenger bag with a thick shoulder strap and beaded tassels trimming the edges. “It’s a bottomless knapsack,” supplied Lily. “You can put anything you want into it and it’ll never get full. Do you like it?”

Considering Jean knew first had how useful a bottomless bag could be, she loved it. “I do,” said Jean, pulling Lily into a one armed hug as she continued to examine the bag. “And it’s so stylish. I love the detail on it.”

“I’d hope it was stylish because it took her three hours to pick it out,” said James, stepping forward with a navy colored bag. “Here you go Jean, happy birthday.”

Jean pulled out a pair of dark green dragon skin gloves, which almost shimmered in the low light. “They’re beautiful James,” said Jean running her finger lightly over the material. “Thank you.”

Dorcas, Mary and Alice seemed to have coordinated with James’ gift. Dorcas gave Jean two pairs of pants, one dark-wash denim, and the other olive green. Marlene had a huge bag filled with matching blouses and shirts and Alice gave Jean a pair of brown, sturdy looking shoes. Jean was
less certain that Frank had gotten with his fiancée to coordinate, but never the less his gift matched theirs. Jean pulled out a long mottled looking cloak from a simply wrapped coat box. “It’s an auror’s cloak,” said Frank. “It adapts to all weather and has a small concealment charm on it for camouflage.

“Very useful.” Jean had a suspicion that many of these gifts were not just for her causal use, but were tailored for her missions with the Order.

Mary’s packaged contained a black book with the title stamped out in silver lettering amid angular looking feathers. “Magic In North America,” Jean read aloud.

“I thought you’d like to have a little something of home,” said Mary.

Jean was more grateful than she originally would’ve thought for this. Now, she could actually know something about the place she claimed to be from. “Thank you,” said Jean, quickly thumbing through the table of contents. “I’ll read it cover to cover.”

Remus was next and presented Jean with a plain, slender cedar box. Set inside it, nestled in clumps of lose cotton, was a coin. Curious, Jean turned about. It was a gold liberty coin from the United States. In the dimming light, Jean could just make out the raised edges of the long haired woman pressed in profile to the metal, her crowned head surrounded with a blaze of stars.

“I designed this tip during my spare time at work,” said Remus.

“What is it?” asked Jean.

“It’s called an Ildstein,” Remus supplied.

Jean had a vague memory of an Ancient Runes class where she decoded a passage about Ildsteins created by the Viking wizard Sudri the Seafarer and an offhanded comment from Professor Babbling that only very advanced alchemists and metallurgists could create them.

“What does it do?” asked Sirius looking over Jean’s shoulder.

“Apparating over long distances is very dangerous,” Remus supplied, looking down at the coin, “and portkeys are heavily regulated by the Ministry. But, I wanted you to have a way to get back to the States if you ever wanted to.” Jean nodded her head but otherwise didn’t say anything. It was no secret that Jean had never once visited or communicated with her non-existent family and probably every one of her friends had a different idea of why that was so. Jean focused back on Remus as he pointed to the face of the coin. “If you rub your thumb on this side it will take you to Boston and if you flip it over it will take you back home to London.”

Jean’s grief regarding the future that was far off in her past caught up with her in ways that continued to surprise her. Jean could be fine for weeks and then the smell of flowers that grew in her mother’s window boxes, or looking down at an eleven year old soon to be Hogwarts student, eyes wide with wonder as she tapped her way into Diagon Alley, even the color red would make her double over from the weight of her sorrow. Jean felt her lips tighten and her eyes mist over as Remus passed the coin back into her clumsy fingers. “Remus,” she said, convinced that he was more talented than anyone would ever give him credit for, not just magically, but his almost intuitive ability to understand his friends, “this is…thank you.” She pulled Remus into a hug. “Thank you so much.”

“You helped give me a home when I needed one,” said Remus. “It was the least I could do to return the favor.”
Jean was so emotionally stripped by Remus’ gift that she momentarily forgot that other people were around her as she lost herself in the longing of returning to a home she logically knew was far beyond the reach of even the Illdstein.

“Jean?” Jean pulled away from Remus, honing in on Peter, who was fumbling with his pocket. Jean had almost forgotten Peter hadn’t given her a gift, but then on second thought she hadn’t really expected one from him. “Well…I know I can’t top that,” Peter began, “but…anyways…here you go. Happy birthday, Jean.” Peter at last pulled his hand out of his pocket and extended it to Jean. In his palm rested a small pewter star with four tapered points, a clear gem settled in its center. Jean picked it up by its thin chain and turned it over in her hands. “The shopkeeper said it was the North Star,” said Peter, his hands fidgeting now that he didn’t have the necklace. “I thought you’d like it since…you know…Sirius is name for a star…”

Jean had never expected such a thoughtful gift from Peter and she even less expected her following actions. Jean broke Peter off by pulling him into a hug and held him there. Even with his weight, he was smaller than she realized. “It’s beautiful, Peter,” said Jean genuinely. “Thank so much.”

“Here, I’ll put it on you.” Jean passed the thin chain back to Sirius, who suddenly appeared behind her, and felt him clip it one handed against the back of her neck. “Now, turn around and let me see it on you.”

Jean turned and ran her thumb over the metal. “It’s wonderful,” Jean commented. “I think it goes with everything—Sirius?” Her words tripped coming out of her mouth as she looked at Sirius, particularly the ball of purring fluff that was trying to scramble out of his arms.

Sirius smirked at her speechlessness, trying to get a better grip on the animal even as he passed it to Jean. “I told you. I made a note that you were a cat person.” The cat was somewhere between a kitten and a full sized cat with medium length fur. It’s coloring was also somewhere between black and grey giving it a sooty appearance, like a chimney brush. It had big yellow eyes, wide feet and big ears with thin white whiskers coming out of them. “His name is Hephaestus.”

“Hephaestus,” said Jean. He pulled the cat closer to her chest and firmly rubbed her finger behind his ear. “Hello, there,” she said gently. Almost at once Hephaestus stopped struggling and went boneless in her arms. He rolled his head towards Jean’s touch and purred like a motorboat. Jean felt her heart bursting, both with new love for Hephaestus and old love for Crookshanks.

“Sirius,” she said, happy tears pricking her eyes. She flung her free arm around Sirius’ shoulders, causing Hephaestus to yowl between them. “Thank you so much. Thank you every one. This has been the best birthday.” And she meant it.

“Speaking of which,” said Lily looking up at the sky. “I think it’s finally dark enough for the birthday girl to blow out her candles.” Lily looked like this was the part of the day she had been waiting for the most.

The sky was purple and navy with the stars just beginning to glint as Jean’s friends serenaded her and she blew out her candles. But, the flames did not go out. It was like Jean had released a jar of fireflies and the little flickers floated into the air. Speechless and entranced, Jean folded her legs and sat down to watch the little wisps of light jump and dance above her head, making patterns across the lilac sky. Dimly, she was aware of her friends settling down beside her, of Hephaestus’ paw chasing her new necklace across her collarbone, of Sirius’ fingers slipping into her hand.

Once the cake was thoroughly eaten, the party broke. James’ shuffled his father through the back door as Jean hugged everyone good-bye in turn as Lily helped her gather up her things. “Bye Remus. Bye Mary. Have a nice night,” Jean and Lily called out from the front porch as the pair
“Hey, Jean.” Jean turned towards the call and saw Sirius walking his motorbike towards the street. “Hop on. I want to show you something before you go.”

“Sirius, it’s getting late. I’m sure Lily wants to head home.”

“No it’s fine. I was actually going to spend some time with James for a while. Here,” Lily pulled Jean’s presents out of her arms. “I’ll watch these for you until you get back.”

“Come on,” Sirius, encouraged. “We can even take Hephaestus in the side car. Lily if you do want to head out. I’ll just take her home.”

“Okay,” said Lily, stifling a yawn. “Take your time though. Have fun. Jean I’ll leave the door unlocked for you.” She pulled Jean into a quick hug.

“Do you know where he’s taking me?” Jean whispered into her ear.

“Not telling,” Lily whispered back, not sounding remotely tired.

Sirius took Hephaestus and, with effort, placed him in a wire crate and strapped him down inside the sidecar. “Sirius,” said Jean, swinging her leg over the motorbike and folding her arms around Sirius’ midsection. “You’re spoiling me if this is another gift.”

If Sirius said anything it was quickly drowned out when he kicked on the engine and began climbing into the sky. Jean couldn’t tell where Sirius was taking her through the darkness and the cloud cover. Jean only realized they were in London after Sirius had touched back down. For half a second, as the weaved their way through the cars and buses lit by yellowing street lights, Jean thought they were headed towards the Ministry. However, they weren’t headed towards Whitehall. They weren’t headed towards any place Jean knew of. Sirius merged onto the narrow and uneven pavement of an older residential district. The congested roadways gave way to quiet streets with an occasional bicyclist or a sedate pedestrian. Lines of clothing hung out to dry were suspended above them and upstairs windows were thrown open, allowing Jean to hear smatterings of nighttime small talk. Sirius parked in front of a drab brick building that looked like it had survived the Blitz. It even had a little lean to it and was using the black fire escape ladders as a crutch. The first floor seemed to be a shop and Jean could barely make out the signage through the chipped paint and the dimming lights: The Stitch Witch.

“Sirius,” asked Jean, picking up Hephaestus’ crate, “what are we doing here?”

Sirius grinned and didn’t answer, but he walked into the building like he owned the place with Jean following closely behind. Jean was almost overwhelmed by the amount of cottons, fleeces and flannels that were shelved inside the shop. Jean almost couldn’t help but wander around, running her hands across the bolts of fabric, bobbins and sewing needles. Sirius approached the front desk. Behind it was a reedy, elderly looking woman sticking straight pins into satin that she was methodically wrestling around a dress model. Her coke bottle glasses gave her squinted brown eyes a bulbous look to them and her long fingernails were painted a robin’s egg blue.

“Evening, Mrs. Townsend,” said Sirius, leaning against the counter. “You about ready to close up?”

“Mr. Black,” said the lady, adjusting her spectacles, causing the pearl chain they hung from to rattle. “You started me. I—And who is this?” Her over magnified eyes shifted from Sirius and settled on Jean.
“This is my girlfriend, Jean Granger. Jean this is Mrs. Joanna Townsend. My—”

“Oh please, Mr. Black, just Joanna. Mrs. Townsend is my mother-in-law and I hated that woman.” Joanna sat back on a swivel stool, which allowed her to see completely over the counter. “So nice to meet you, Miss Granger,” she said, her voice coated in saccharine. “Mr. Black she is indeed the prettiest thing. You know how men are, Miss Granger. But you; well Mr. Black wasn’t exaggerating. He just goes on and on about you Miss Granger.”

“Oh does he?” said Jean with a grin. Out of the corner of her eye, Jean caught the faint flush of Sirius’ blush. He coughed into his hand.

“Miss—Joanna. I’m going to take Jean on up. I was just going to use the door behind the desk rather than have her climb up the fire escape.”

“Of course, Mr. Black. You have the key.”

Sirius pecked his way carefully through Joanna’s chaotic organization and opened the door that was slightly behind the heavy metal cash register. Jean followed Sirius through the trail he had blazed. “Have a nice evening,” Sirius called from the door.

“You too, Mr. Black. We’ll chat later, Miss Granger, when I’m not up to my elbows in pink polyester.”

“I’m sure we have a lot to talk about,” said Jean. “Have a good night.”

Sirius whipped Jean through the door and once it was safely shut Jean could hardly restrain herself. Every time she glanced up at Sirius a new wave came that she managed to keep contained her chest. Sirius rolled his eyes and raked a hand along his hairline. “We’re going to the top floor,” he said through the musty semi-darkness.

Two creaky flights of stairs later, Jean and Sirius arrived at a plain and unimportant door. The brass knocker in the shape of a lion with a ring though it’s mouth was ajar and almost rocked loose completely. Even the knob looked like it was barely holding on and jiggled loosely in the door. “Sirius, what is this place?” asked Jean again.

Sirius again was silent and merely waved his hand over the knob and Jean heard the locks click on the other side. “Go in a find out,” he said, his voice suddenly tempered with excitement and another emotion she couldn’t place.

Jean pushed open the door and it skidded across the warped floorboards. She blinked at the brightly lit room that cast warm rays of light onto the damp landing. The living room contained a beaten up leather sofa and overstuffed arm chair covered in knitted afghans that looked like they were made by Molly Weasley. A low rectangle coffee table and tattered rug were centered in front of an elaborate fireplace with expensive looking crown molding. A fire was already contentedly crackling in the logs. To the left of the fireplace was, much to Jean’s surprise, a television sitting on the floor, the firelight reflecting off it’s faux wood paneling. As Jean stepped farther into the room she noted that beside the door was a books shelf and a coat rack with claw feet.

Hidden behind a half wall that was layered with peeling wallpaper was a small kitchen with green and grey linoleum covering the floor. A spindly kitchen table was squeezed in the space with the stove, refrigerator and sink off to the right. On the left hand wall, tucked away in the back corner was another room. Through the opening, Jean could make out the frame of a bed and a dark stained dresser.
Jean turned around and looked at Sirius who had let Hephaestus out of his cage and was shooing him away from his shoelaces. “Do you like it?” he asked, sinking his hands into his pockets.

“I love it,” said Jean, walking back towards him. “Sirius, did you buy your own flat with your uncle’s inheritance?”

“Yes,” said Sirius, pulling his hands out of his pockets, fiddling with a bulky looking house key. Suddenly Jean could name the emotion she had been previously unable to recognize: nervousness. “But I was hoping you’d less think of it as my flat and more think of it as…our flat.” Sirius turned his head and Jean followed his gaze through a door she hadn’t noticed before. Her eyes settled on the white metal framing of a bed, the headboard and footrest containing a simple floral pattern of gentle twists and spirals, draped with a pale blue comforter. There was a white vanity as well, with a large oval shaped mirror topping it. It was bare save for a milk glass vase containing daisies and baby’s breath. Jean turned her very divided attention back to Sirius, whom she just now realized was still speaking. “I know you love living with Lily…but I was wondering if…well, just think about it…if you’d like to…”

Jean broke off his stumbling tangent by sealing his lips shut with hers. “Yes,” she said, her fingers winding around her new house key.

All of that nervousness sloughed off Sirius with a sigh and his mouth spread into a grin against her lips. Spontaneously, Sirius picked Jean up, her legs dangling just above his ankles, and spun her around in a little circle. His thigh caught the side of the sofa and they fell onto it, Sirius’ body sinking into the cushions beneath the weight of Jean’s body.

Jean giggled and tried to readjust herself but Sirius held her still. “Are you happy here?” he asked, one had snaking onto her back, the other settling on her shoulder.

“Yes,” said Jean.

“Are you happy with me?”

Jean rested her chin on the bridge of her knuckles. “Yes.”

“Good,” said Sirius, gently pulling her down onto his lips again.

The kisses were soft and gentle at first, familiar and companionate, but then Sirius looped his arm around her lower back, his fingers ghosting her hipbone. Jean felt his other hand drift up her neck and hold the base of her scalp. Jean extended her hands and ran her fingers through his hair, relishing the silken warmth. The pad of her thumb ran along the ridge of his jawline, which was steadily rolling against her mouth. His eyelashes brushed against the apples of her cheeks. His mouth tasted like sugar and spearmint. “You’re so soft,” she heard him mumble around her teeth. Impulsively, Jean bit down on Sirius’ lower lip. A breathy sound came from the back of Sirius’ throat. His arms sprung like a trap. He seemed to be trying not to just pull her to him, but into him. Jean felt the hammering of a heartbeat through her breastbone, not sure if it was his or hers. Jean felt Sirius’ hips shift beneath her and his head canted back into a pillow, exposing his flushed throat. The stars in his eyes were over bright in the heated darkness that tinted the grey of his eyes. “I love you,” said Sirius. His index finger wrapped around a stray curl and his thumb pressed against her plumped lips. “More than anything.”

Jean could only blink. She was only capable of blinking, as any word at all would cheapen the moment.

And then the spell was broken. In a blink, Sirius’ eyes returned to their normal coloring and he
looked past her. Jean felt his foot jerk away from something. “You and I are going to have a problem if you keep nibbling on my toes, little guy.”

Jean laughed though her nose and turned her head sideways into Sirius’ chest, lulled by the steady cadence of his breath. She felt his hand come to rest in her hair and watched Hephaestus pad away, no doubt to stake a claim on her new bedroom.

Chapter End Notes

Hello all, so as of 11/4/19 there was a edit to this chapter which right now isn't a big deal but it will be pretty integral to the plot later on. Remus' gift was changed from the magical memory keeping quill to the magical coin that takes her to the United States without having to Apparate or use a portkey. I leave it to you to speculate on why she would need such an item. :)

Chapter 22: The Miss and the Mistress

Every morning that Jean had been living in she and Sirius’ new flat Jean had been awoken by an animal. Some mornings, Jean was jostled awake when the mattress suddenly sank in on one side, her sleepy vision coming into focus in time to see Padfoot leap from the bed with Hephaestus in hot pursuit. Other times she was stirred into wakefulness by a hot, rough tongue licking at her fingers before morphing into the soft, gentle lips of her boyfriend the moment she reached for his face. Today it was Hephaestus, his rag-a-muffin body balled up in the space between her neck and shoulder. Jean stretched, pushing Hephaestus away from her in the same motion. With great reluctance, Jean pulled herself out of her downy mattress and padded across the distressed floorboards, absent-mindedly running a hand through her disheveled hair.

The pocket door to the Jack-and-Jill bathroom she and Sirius shared still stuck slightly as it shuddered its way back into its slot. Jean didn’t bother to close it, knowing Hephaestus wanted to come in and out as he pleased. The bathroom was cramped with a footed tub and shower combination on the back wall with the sink and toilet on opposite walls. A linen shelf was sequestered into the corner next to the door leading to the living room. The black and white diamond pattern that covered the floor was concealed by a grey, shaggy bathmat.

Jean pulled a fluffed towel from the linen shelf and Hephaestus jumped up to take its place. Jean rolled her eyes at the cat before scratching him behind his large ears. Hephaestus had grown into a cat that was so ugly he was cute. His hair still didn’t know if it wanted to be grey or black, or long or short, giving him a ratty appearance. As big as Hephaestus got his ears and feet grew bigger and his large, yellow eyes gleamed like lamplight through fog from his square, yet pointed face. Hephaestus stretched out over Jean’s clean towels, his wide, bottlebrush tail flicking lazily over the edge of the shelving. He blinked lazily at Jean who stepped into the shower and shut the curtain with a shink.

The tub was deep and narrow with a sloped back for one to rest their back against while soaking. It was set against the wall, but not into it and a spindly curtain rod circled the entire tub, giving Jean the feeling of being in a cocoon. Jean bent down and fiddled with the knobs, hearing the metal piping to the showerhead rattle against the tile walls. Hot water poured out onto her head and Jean both woke up and fell back asleep at the same time. The hot water heater was glorious in this flat and Jean always set it a degree shy of scalding. Steam billowed around her, creating a heated fog. Wisps of hair around her forehead tightened and coiled in the humidity. A hopper window overhead angled a stream of sunlight over her, causing her sudsy skin to glisten.

Suddenly an armed looped itself around her midsection and pulled her against the shower curtain. Warm lips and morning stubble pressed against the underside of her neck. “Good morning,” said Sirius, his voice still gruff with sleep.

“Morning,” Jean answered, touching his hand it slid out of the shower. Jean filled her palm with her scented shampoo and lathered it though her hair, listening to Sirius’ bare feet pad across the floor. Jean had grown to love hearing the small sounds of Sirius’ morning oblations: the squeak of the faucets, the slight scraping sound of metal over skin as he shaved. Jean tilted her head and smelled
the woody scent of his cologne as it wafted over to her.

“Get off,” he heard Sirius say through the shower curtain and heard Hephaestus thump to the ground with a yowling protest. Jean sniggered as she dipped her head back into the water, white foam falling from her scalp and collecting about her ankles. The two didn’t know what to do with each other. Hephaestus and Sirius were, on best days, annoyed with each other. It seemed, to Jean, that the cat was looking for ways to be bothersome to her boyfriend and Sirius was equally seeking out reasons to swat Hephaestus with a newspaper. Padfoot was out of the question. The first time Hephaestus had seen the shaggy, black dog sprawled across the living room rug he back flipped off the sofa before doing a spastic jig across the room and fortifying himself under Jean’s bed for the remainder of the day.

After Sirius vacated the bathroom, Jean dried off and dressed for the day, the heat of her body further magnified by the warm, woolen fibers of her sweater. She shimmied her legs into some dark wash jeans, slipped on some shoes and pinkened her lips with a light gloss. She caught a glimpse of herself in the mirror and thought she looked pretty.

Jean’s hair was leaving wet tracks on the shoulders of her sweater when she emerged from the bathroom. Almost immediately her senses were overwhelmed with the smell of pepper and tomatoes. Sirius was standing by the stove, his bare feet half buried in the kitchen rug. His hair fell about his face in the carless grace she had come to love and he casually tucked a portion of it behind his ear. A frying pan was popping and crackling under his ministrations. Jean walked up behind him and rested her hand across his hips, tilting her temple into his bicep. “What are you cooking?”

“Omelets,” Sirius supplied, “want one?”

Jean nodded. Sirius’ domestic side was an unexpected, albeit pleasant, perk of mornings with him; one that Jean took full advantage of. “Here, help me with this first.” Jean passed Sirius the thin chain of her North Star necklace Peter had given her for her birthday.

Sirius pinched the chain and began clipping it against the nape of her neck. His shirt was unbuttoned and Jean felt the swell of his pectorals against her shoulders. “You look very pretty today.”

Jean felt his voice rumble through her back and the hairs on her arms tingled. “Thank you for noticing,” she quipped back.

Sirius deftly pulled her dampened hair away from the clasp. “You’ve changed your shampoo,” he commented casually. “Peach?”

“Mango.” The pendent rested on Jean’s collarbone. Without thinking she ran her thumb over the jewel in its center. “Thank you,” she said, turning to him.

Her lips met his and Jean let herself fall away, enjoying the familiarity she had with his mouth. The motions had a gentle firmness to them, empowering yet dominating. In his arms she felt like she both molded him and was unmade by him. Jean’s hand slipped down his opened shirt and she followed the sharp lines of his pelvic bone until they merged in the small of his back. Her fingers grazed over his skin and she felt Sirius release a breath against her teeth. Sirius’ tongue cautiously followed, testing with its warm, wet probing. Slowly, Jean relaxed her jaw, allowing him purchase. Sirius’ hands reached up, cupping her head just below the ears, his tongue touching hers. Feeling daring, Jean tightened her lips and sucked.

Sirius made a sound, but it wasn’t the one she expected. “Bloody cat,” said Sirius glaring daggers
down at the dust mop that was splayed across the rug, nipping at Sirius’ tendon. “I will eat you,” said Sirius pointedly, Padfoot’s growl rumbling around the back of his throat.

Jean chuckled. “He just likes you.” Jean heard Sirius make a grunt of reluctance as she divested herself from his grip, ducking under his arm to scoop an omelet out of the pan.

Jean sat down at their small round kitchen table and Sirius soon joined her, dragging his rickety wooden chair across the linoleum floor. Jean chewed and felt the diced tomatoes burst in her mouth. “This is good,” she said in between bites.

Sirius smiled, pleased with himself. “So what’s on the agenda today?”

“I don’t have any letters to deliver, but for the next few weeks I’m going to have full days taking everyone to get school supplies and robes. So I thought today would be a good day to knock out some Christmas shopping with Lily and the girls.”

“Right. Christmas will be here in a month. Better get on that. Sirius sipped on his tea, turning his fork about in one hand. “You know that also means that you’ve been living here for a year.”

Jean was surprised that she was surprised. That January morning when she woke up in the Gryffindor Tower seemed like a lifetime ago rather than just a year, back when she was love with another man, back when she was still Hermione Granger.

“Yeah,” said Jean pensively. “It’s weird to think about.” Jean meticulously chewed her eggs.

“Which is more weird,” asked Sirius, “the fact that you have been living here a year or the fact that for six months of it you have been dating me?”

“I think dating you takes the win.” Jean chuckled internally, in spite of herself. If she sat down with Hermione she would definitely have believed time travelling twenty years into the past over dating her best friend’s godfather.

“Am I your longest relationship?”

Jean glanced around the centerpiece of sunflowers and saw the mischievous glint in Sirius’ eyes and the playful smirk growing on his face. Jean rolled her eyes. “Yes you are. Do you want a prize?”

“I’m dating you,” said Sirius, “that’s more than enough.”

Jean looked down and took another bite of omelet. “Who’s the person that you dated the longest?”

“All at once or over the course of several attempts?” said Sirius cheekily.

“All at once,” answered Jean. “And for the record, if we break up we’re broken up. I’m not going through all that only to date you again.”

Sirius nodded with a mock seriousness. “Duly noted.”

“So, who is it?” asked Jean, after a beat. “Matilda Maybelle?”

“Actually its Marlene,” said Sirius.

“Really?” said Jean, somewhat surprised. “But, you two were so young.”

Sirius smiled softly. “I think we were more in love with the idea of being in love than we ever
were with each other. I think that’s how we’ve been able to stay friends. There was no breakup. We just, sort of, fell out of love with each other. Well, Marlene fell out of love with me and I fell out of love with love.”

Jean settled back into her chair and allowed Sirius his moment of introspection, which, according to everyone else, was such a rare thing. “What do you mean?” Jean asked.

Sirius shifted in his seat, folding his hands together. “I think things with my family were getting difficult; more difficult than they already were. I mean, Marlene was a champ though it all. Imagine being thirteen and the mother of your first boyfriend hating you. After her…I don’t know. I just never really got back into it. I never…invested myself enough in a relationship to ever be in love again. I had James and Remus and Peter. I was content.”

“But you dated…a lot of other people. Why, if you didn’t care either way?”

Sirius let out a bark like laugh. “Oh, I miss those first few weeks when you didn’t think I was some smoldering eyed troubadour.”

“Try first few days,” said Jean coyly.

Sirius smirked and then the kitchen fell quiet, the only sounds coming from Hephaestus as he pawed at the tablecloth. Sirius reached out his hand and Jean stood to it. Sirius gently pulled her into his lap and cradled her against his body. Jean tilted her head into his neck, her cheek lifting as his chest heaved a sigh. “I was lonely,” Sirius said at last. “I wasn’t in love, but I didn’t want to be alone either.”

Jean was silent, staring at nothing. She played with a button on his shirt and felt Sirius kiss her hair. “What about you?”

“Hmm?” Jean glanced up.

“I’m sure Marlene, Lily, and everyone else you could have asked, would have told you the history of my romantic pursuits. What made you choose me?”

Because he made her feel safe in an unsafe world. Because he broke down as many of her walls as she did his. Because, at the end of the day, she was lonely too. “Because you made me smile when I had forgotten how to,” said Jean.

Sirius looked down at Jean and she looked back at him. They didn’t say or do anything; they just looked at each other. But, for Jean, the act was more intimate than when he had kissed her. She felt his thumb trace the outline of her chin. Her hand looped around his shoulders and with her forefinger curled the hair at the nape of his neck.

The clock on the wall struck the hour and time returned to normal speed. “We need to be heading out,” said Jean.

“Moody will wait,” said Sirius, once again attempting to hold her close to him.

Jean laughed. “No, I don’t think he will.” Jean buttoned up Sirius’ shirt before extracting herself from his lap. “Come on.”

Nine times out of ten, Sirius and Jean exited their flat by going out the fire escape attached to Sirius’ bedroom window, rather than going through Joanna Townsend’s shop downstairs and nine times out of ten Jean thought they were going to plummet to their deaths. To say it was a collection of scrap held together by some rusted out screws and good intentions was a compliment. The fact
that Sirius jogged down them causing the stairs to shake and rattle beneath her made the downward journey all the more difficult. When she reached terra firma, Sirius was already waiting in the alley, his arm slung over the handlebars of his motorbike.

Mrs. Townsend had her back door flung open and was vigorously sweeping the two concrete steps. “Good morning, dearies,” she said, the morning sun giving her beehive hair a silvery blue look.

“Good morning, Ms. Joanna,” said Jean, unable to not give the matronly landlady some form of honorific.

“Where are you two off to?”

“Work,” supplied Sirius, “and Jean’s off to go shopping with her girlfriends.”

“Well, don’t let me keep you,” said Joanna. “Oh, wait, Jean.” Joanna reached back through the door and produced a bulky black umbrella. “Here, Jean, dear. The weatherman said it was supposed to rain today.”

Jean tucked the umbrella under her arm. “Thanks,” she said. “I’ll bring it back tonight.”

Joanna waved her hand dismissively, already dragging her broom back inside. “Don’t fret over it, dearie. Now off you go, best not be late. And wear a helmet on that loud thing of yours, Mr. Black.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Sirius.

Sirius dragged Mrs. Townsend’s bins to the edge of the street before swinging himself onto the motorbike and kicking it off with a roar. “We really should get her a Christmas gift,” Jean called out above the cacophony.

“I already took care of that,” Sirius answered. “According to Mrs. Evans, Bernina sewing machines are the best.” Sirius shifted the clutch and merged into the lane.

Jean, at the very least, had gotten accustomed to flying on the backseat of Sirius’ motorbike, so it was a surreal experience watching Sirius navigate traffic. Jean tightened her grip on Sirius’ motorcycle jacket as Sirius zipped around a truck. Jean wondered if playing quidditch for all those years has somehow contributed to his skill, albeit edgy, driving skills. The austere façade of the buildings in the White Hall district were soon rushing by them. Sirius parked in a public lot a little ways away from the guest entrance into the Ministry of Magic.

As Jean and Sirius walked, Jean pulled out her tokens given to her by the Ministry security. “Let’s see if it works this time,” Sirius suggested.

Jean dug through the bag, even as she spoke to Sirius. “If it hasn’t worked before, I doubt it going to work this time.”

“Twelfth time’s the charm?” said Sirius, jimmying open the door, allowing Jean entrance before closing themselves in the phone booth.

“Fine,” said Jean, picking up the receiver and waiting for the cool voice to prompt her.

“Jean Granger, visiting with Auror Trainee Sirius Black.” After a moment Jean held the receiver away from her ear so that Sirius too could hear the voice politely reject Jean’s request. “Told you,” said Jean, dropping the phone into the cradle, slipping her tokens into the coin slot and dialing the longer number chain Frank had taught her.
The secret elevator jarred to life and sank into the cement. Sirius folded his arms and leaned against the glass of the box. “This lift just doesn’t like you, does it,” said Sirius as they descended.

“I’m becoming quite the joke over at the security desk,” said Jean.

“Do you need me to sign off on more of those?” asked Sirius as Jean tucked the bag back into her purse.

“Not yet,” Jean replied, “but I’ll need them sooner rather than later.”

The lift grated to a stop and Jean stepped out into the bustling atrium, Sirius following behind her. Jean’s arm fell into the crook of Sirius’ elbow as they strode through the vestibule. Every once in a while Sirius would wave or nod a greeting to someone as they walked past. Jean looked up at Sirius out of the corner of her eye. Jean still had the brief moments of pause watching Sirius interact with the world, being a normal part of it, when for so long she had know him hiding from it, a hunted man. An unseen hand gripped at her heart and Jean tightened her grip around Sirius’ arm.

Sirius looked down at Jean and she blinked back to the present moment. “You alright?” he asked.

Jean nodded. “Yeah.”

Jean and Sirius squeezed themselves into the gold grated elevator that whisked them up to the Auror Department. Jean couldn’t recall if she had ever been to the auror’s Ministry headquarters before, but it looked like what she expected a muggle police office to look like. Boxish desks paired with royal purple chairs emblazoned with a great golden Ministry M created a grid in the large columned room capped with vaulted ceiling. One wall was completely comprised of exposed brick, though one could hardly tell because it was layered over with Daily Prophet articles and Ministry documents. The other was a series of windows surrounded by silver frames. At first, Jean thought they were just illusions to bring a bit of daylight to the subterranean complex until Jean recognized Diagon Alley, High Street in Hogsmeade and even the muted alcove that was Knockturn Alley. They weren’t just windows, they were almost security cameras.

Sirius unlooped his arm from Jean’s and drifted over to the grouping of men and women that also wore auror robes that indicated they were trainees, leaving Jean free to wander. She drifted over to the third wall in the room, which wasn’t really a room at all. It was a half wall with a metal raining that overlooked a larger sunken room that served as a training gym. Jean watched as dyads squared off against each other, colorful lights awash in the gloss of the shellacked wood. She thought she saw James and Frank dueling each other at the far end of the gym, but she couldn’t be sure.

“Miss Granger.”

Jean suppressed a jump, and turned to look at Alastor Moody, sullenly staring at her with his black eyes. “Mr. Moody.”

Moody rested his arm on the railing and stared out over the gym. “They get younger every year,” he said more to himself than to her. “Braxley!”

This time Jean couldn’t contain her jump, and apparently neither could a curly haired young man who turned mid-duel to look up at Moody, his wand flying out of his hand as his opponent disarmed him. “Is that all the enemy needs to do to disarm you, Braxley? Shout at you? Be more vigilant of your surroundings and more present in a fight.”

“Yes, sir,” Jean heard Braxley call back, retrieving his wand from his partner.
Jean looked at Moody as he fell back into observing. His cheek twitched and Jean thought that was closest thing to a smile that Moody could make. “Mr. Potter and Mr. Black,” continued Moody, “say that I have missed out on a great auror in the making by not offering you a position in the department.”

Jean felt a little heat in her cheeks, not sure if she wanted James and Sirius to draw Alastor Moody’s attention to her. “I’m content with the work that I do,” said Jean.

“Yes. Dumbledore told me that, too,” said Moody. “Still…being an ambidextrous duelist is nothing to be sniggered at.”

Jean looked at Moody, full on the in face. “It was only one time. I wasn’t thinking about it. I was in a pinch.”

“I’ve found that being in a pinch is when being able to do something or not ever really counts.”

Jean looked back down into the gym. She only looked up again when she heard Sirius’ approach. “Morning, Moody,” said Sirius, touching Jean on the small of her back.

“Mr. Black,” said Moody, “you have stealth training in two minutes. I suggest you get down there.” Moody jerked his head toward the gym before shoving himself away from the railing.

“Moody, may I use your floo?” Jean called out to his back.

“I don’t keep a floo; too many eyes watching it. Never trust transportation you don’t make yourself.” Moody looked over his shoulder as he kept walking. “Mr. Fenwick can direct you to a portkey in my office to wherever you wish to go.” Without another word, Moody retreated into the controlled calamity of the office space.

“Paranoid blighter, isn’t he?” said Sirius.

Jean lightly elbowed him in the ribs. “Gruff as he is, he knows what he’s doing.” Jean turned to look at Sirius. “I’m going to head off before he comes back though,” she added with a wry laugh. “Anything you want for Christmas?”

“For Fester to stop biting my ankles and for England to make the Quidditch World Cup playoffs.”

Jean rolled her eyes. “I’ll see what I can do.” Jean balanced on the tips of her toes to peck Sirius on the lips. “I love you.”

“Love you, too,” said Sirius as Jean turned and walked away.

Jean weaved her way through the tight aisles between the desks, juking around other aurors and periodically ducking as an interoffice missive zipped over her head in the form of a paper airplane. Benjy had a larger than average desk, sitting caddy-cornered to the door into Moody’s office. His name was carved into the brass placard and he had several dockets of papers piled precariously on what looked like multi-tiered Lazy Susan, one solid gold the other obsidian black. Benjy was hunched over a roll of parchment, his Sawyerish features crunched into a serious line. “Good morning, Mr. Fenwick,” said Jean, leaning a hand against his desk.

“Good morning,” said Benjy, his voice overly pleasant in spite of the stern look on his face. “How may I help yo—oh, Miss Granger.” The pleasant tone of his voice spread to his face and he stood so quickly that the parchment he was working on almost came up with him. “Good morning. What are you doing here?”
“I dropped Sirius off at work,” she said, jerking her thumb over her shoulder. “Moody said I could use his portkey.”

“Ah, yes, of course.” Benjy edged around the corner of his desk and waved his wand at Moody’s office door, it coming open with a series of sharp clicks. “After you,” said Benjy.

Moody’s office looked very similar to how he, or rather Barty Crouch Jr., had set up his office during his one-year tenure at Hogwarts. The fireplace had been bricked over, with only stark white crown molding as any indicator of where it had been. Hanging hap-hazardly over the mantelpiece was the foe glass, the only content swirling languidly around as grey smoke. The trunk that had contained Moody during Jean’s fourth year was stowed innocuously in the corner, several items spilling onto it from the adjacent bookshelf. Four portraits of previous Heads of the Auror Department hung on either side of the foe glass, glaring grimly down at her. Above that, suspended by chains from the rafters, hung the skeleton of a chimera. Jean’s visual senses were almost overwhelmed at the layer upon layer of pages, papers and documents that were tacked to walls, shoved between books and littering the floor in a chaotic organization that only Moody could interpret. The only places that were clean were Moody’s desk, which seemed overly clean considering it’s surroundings and the space surrounding a pewter perch where an enormous brindle patterned eagle owl blinked deliberately at her.

“Don’t let Brisby scare you,” said Benjy shutting the office door behind him, “she’s a good old girl. Moody’s just never been into dainty owls.”

Jean nodded wordlessly, still watching the bird warily as it fluffed it’s feathers and sank into it’s own neck.

“Where did you say you were going, Miss Granger?” asked Benjy still shuffling around, somehow managing not to disturb any of Moody’s paperwork.

“Diagon Alley,” said Jean, gingerly toeing her way through Moody’s clutter with much less grace than Benjy managed.

“Are you taking a new student shopping for supplies?”

“No, not today,” said Jean. “Lily Evans, Marlene McKinnon, Dorcas Meadowes, Mary Harper, Alice Prewett and I are all going Christmas shopping.”

“Oh,” said Benjy, stilling for a moment in his search, “that sounds nice. Wait…no that’s Hogsmeade.”

Jean lifted an eyebrow as Benjy put the pair of half broken eyeglasses back where he found them. “How many portkeys does Moody even have in here?”

“Many,” supplied Benjy. “So many that I think even he has forgotten. I took the wrong book off the shelf and sent myself all the way to Surrey. Ah, here we are.” With another wave of his wand a wadded up copy of the Daily Prophet landed on Moody’s overly neat desk. “Don’t worry about sending it back. Moody’s put a spell on it that will bring it back on it’s own. Do tell Miss McKinnon and the others that I hope you all have a pleasant afternoon.”

“Thanks,” said Jean, stepping up to the desk. “I’ll see you around then.”

“Sooner rather than later, I hope,” said Benjy knowingly.

Jean gathered the crumpled up leaflet into her palm and felt the familiar pull lifting her out of the office and roughly depositing her in a secluded side street of Diagon Alley. Jean brushed off the
dirt from her impact and followed the sounds of civilization to the main drag of the wizarding district. She was at the far end of the Alley, the farthest away from the Leaky Cauldron that one could get. Several colorful shops, including the bookstore that Mary worked at, were packed like sardines along the crooked cobbled street. Vendors, shaded under vibrant umbrellas, pushed carts and hawked hot cocoa with peppermint spoons. Lily, Alice, Mary, Marlene and Dorcas were all huddled under a street lamp across the lane. Mary’s hair was tucked up into a hat and Dorcas’ face was half buried in a scarf. Marlene was wearing a cream colored coat that made her hair look almost silver white. Alice’s rosy face was framed by a pair of earmuffs. Lily was readjusting her satchel that was slung across her shoulder when she caught sight of Jean and waved at her with a gloved hand.

“How are you?” said Lily, followed by a chorus of greetings behind her. “How are you?”

Jean pulled Lily into a familiar, one-armed hug. “Fine,” she answered casually. “I just left Sirius at work. Benjy Fenwick said he hoped we had a nice shopping trip.”

“What’s the umbrella for?” asked Marlene, jumping into the conversation.

Jean looked down at the umbrella it’s battered wooden handle wrapped around her wrist. “My land lady thought it might rain today.”

Dorcas lifted her eyes to the mottled sky and shrugged her shoulders. “It could go either way I think.”

“Well,” said Alice, “let’s get a move on. Christmas isn’t going to shop for itself.”

The gaggle of young women crowded into the narrow entryway of Ollivander’s, the bell above the decrepit door jangling as they entered. The elderly wand maker looked up from his desk as they spilled into the shop.

“Ah, Miss Granger,” said the reedy man, shuffling around the narrow boxes of wands, stacked like shoeboxes in leaning towers to the ceiling. “Good morning, do you have a student with you today?”

“No, Mr. Ollivander,” said Jean with a smile, “nothing like that today. We’re just here to do some Christmas shopping.”

Mr. Ollivander switched his conversation over to Lily and the others while Jean drifted over to the cramped shelves. Jean had already purchased a few things for Sirius; a motorcycle care kit and a bottle of aftershave that had this woodsy scent she liked, both wrapped and shoved so far under the bed that only Hephaestus could find them. However, Jean did want to get one more thing for him before he was checked off the list entirely. Jean ran her fingers over wand polishers and a couple of ratty pamphlets about wand making before kneeling to look at the next shelf down.

“These look nice,” said Lily, drawing Jean’s attention to a brace of dark leather wand holsters that looked like they attached to a person’s belt.

Alice craned her neck over Lily’s shoulder. “I got one of those models last year for Frank. They’re made from Grindylow skin; very durable and waterproof. Frank says it’s really handy out in the field.”

Lily leaned over to Jean. “Sounds like a good present for James and Sirius.”

Jean nodded. “How much, Mr. Ollivander?” said Jean, already pulling a holster off the shelf.
“Two galleons and seven sickles,” said the older man. Jean shuffled through her friends to reach the till. “I’m brining in a set of twins tomorrow or the day after just to forewarn you,” she said.

The wandmaker betrayed no emotion save for the steady lift of his bushy eyebrows almost disappearing into his hairline. “I’ll be sure to bolt down my valuables.” Jean chuckled, grabbed her packages and one by one she and her companions spilled out on to the street.

Jean and the other’s next top was the second hand robe shop next door to Ollivander’s. None of them thought Remus would even accept their gifts if they purchased robes from a nicer place. The boutique was less flashy than Madame Malkins down the way, but it got the job done and after about twenty minutes of rummaging through the racks Jean, Alice, Mary, Marlene and Dorcas reconvened in the middle of the shop.

“Okay,” said Marlene, taking charge of coordinating Remus’ new wardrobe. “I’ve found three shirts that fit him; a couple of browns and a navy. What else do we have?”

“I’ve found a couple more shirts and some robes,” said Lily.

“I found a couple of vests,” added Dorcas. “I figured it would be good if he had things he could layer.”

“Oh, I like the green one,” said Alice “I wish we found a red in his size though. I found a couple of trousers that go with everything. Do you think this is his leg length?”

Lily held the trousers up against her leg to speculate Remus’ height against hers. “I think so,” she said.

“It’s a shame he’s so rough with his clothes,” said Mary, holding two mottled brown robes over her arm. “These will probably have elbow patches on them the next time we see them.”

Jean and Lily traded and quick glance, Remus’ furry little problem was still on a need to know basis, even within the Order. Jean couldn’t blame him; his monthly absences from his work were already causing a strain on his employment and the Order was founded to hamper Death Eaters not promote the rights of werewolves. “What did you find Jean?”

Jean held up a pair of shoes with some socks shoved down into each sole. “Is that everything?”

“Yeah, I think so,” said Marlene, folding her shirts into a neat little stack.

As a group, they made their way to check out. Jean was the last of the pack, her eyes idly running over the slanted shelves behind the register. Jean tilted her head as something caught her attention. “Excuse me,” she said to the salesperson. “Could you pull that down for me, please?” One bowlegged stepladder later, and the middle aged clerk swung a trunk down onto the counter, dust coming off of it in puffs. It was a little scuffed, but it was in far better shape than when she first saw it shoved onto the baggage shelf on the Hogwarts express, rattling around above her sleeping professor’s head.

“Do you think Remus could use a trunk?” said Jean running a hand over the familiar luggage.

“Probably,” said Lily, “have you seen the one he has? I was amazed his stuff didn’t fall out of the bottom when he got off the train.”

“How much?” asked Marlene.

“Ten galleons,” rattled off the clerk.
Jean heard someone whistle low behind her. “That’s a bit pricy if we have other things to get.”

“I’d like to get him something nice though, instead of just the necessities,” said Jean, not willing to give it up.

“It would be nice to get him something more than just clothes,” Mary agreed. “Perhaps if we all split it then it wouldn’t be too much.”

Everyone thought it over for a minute, Jean’s thumb worried over the slightly dented corner of the case. “Alright,” Dorcas declared, “let’s get it.”

As the women walked down to road towards their next shopping destination they all became very happy with their spontaneous purchase of Remus’ trunk because it had become their personal porter. One by one everyone dropped their parcels and packages into the trunk until everyone’s arms were swinging free to point at store windows and shuffle through the wares of street vendors. Jean loitered at the back of the group, Remus’ trunk levitating a few feet off the ground next to her. Lily and Marlene had detoured and were trying on knitted hats sold by an older man huddled outside the great doors of Gringotts. They took turns with the mirror, swapping one piece of headwear for another.

“You know, Lily always says that James and Sirius feed off each other’s energy.” Jean turned her head towards Dorcas standing on the other side of the floating suitcase, but I think the same could be said for Lily and Marlene.”

Jean laughed as the group marched forward again, Lily and Marlene taking the lead and pulling each other in different directions. “Don’t let Lily hear you say that,” joked Jean, changing the subject. “How is everyone in defense class?”

Dorcas shrugged her shoulder and Jean noticed how Dorcas’ fingers slipped deeper into her coat pockets. “It’s okay, I guess.”

“Everybody doing okay?” asked Jean.

Dorcas sunk deeper into herself. “Lily’s doing great, but I know she did training with Professor Kinshield. I think Frank also works with Alice when they’re at home. Marlene’s taken to it really well, but then how couldn’t she? Benjy Fenwick’s a good teacher. He’s given Marlene a few books of advanced spells for her to try out.”

“And you?” Jean prompted gently.

Dorcas tucked her hair behind her ear, her sigh coming out in a huff of cold condensed air. “I feel so clumsy,” she said at last. “I keep second guessing myself and my spells keep misfiring.”

Dorcas paused, rotating between staring at the ground and at Jean out of the corner of her eye. “How did you do it Jean? You learned all of this all on your own.”

“Not all on my own,” said Jean, somewhat somberly. “I had a pretty good teacher, too.” Even though Jean had friends, a boyfriend and a life she learned to love, sometimes she would miss everyone she had left so much it would ache. Jean blinked back to the present, brushing her brief melancholy to the back of her mind. “How’s your footwork?” she asked.

Dorcas tilted her head. “My footwork?”

“Until you started learning how to duel did you every have to fire off spells while running around at the same time?”
“Actually, no,” said Dorcas with a little laugh. “I’d never thought about that before.”

“The box square is a duelist’s best friend,” said Jean. “Start out slow. Deliberately place your feet from heel to toe, and then train your feet where to fall and get faster. Soon you’ll move instinctively.”

Dorcas relaxed, but her shoulders still slumped a little as she looked back at the ground. “And second guessing myself?” asked Dorcas, casting Jean a shy sideways glance.

Jean smiled at Dorcas sympathetically. “That will come with time and confidence.”

Dorcas straightened herself entirely. “Thanks Jean,” said Dorcas. “Maybe I could talk with you again about this. You can explain things better to me.”

Jean nodded. “Of course.”

“Oh, Alice!” Jean jumped at the pitch of Marlene’s volume, and turned to see Marlene grab at Alice’s hand and drag both she and Lily towards the front door of Madam Malkins. “You absolutely have to show everyone your wedding dress while we’re here.” Marlene looked over her shoulder at Jean and Dorcas. “Hurry up, you two, you’re going to love what Alice has picked out,” she called out before disappearing through the double doors that opened out to the street.

“Apparently we are being summoned,” said Jean. Dorcas and Jean stepped through the threshold, the floating trunk following them inside.

To Jean, Madame Malkin’s always smelled like the inside of a perfume store. Scents of roses, lavender and freshly laundered clothing were layered so thickly in the air that they were almost visible. All the robes were hung on polished silver racks each vying to be the center of attention. In their rainbow promenade their colors and styles were oversaturated and bled together. There was no such thing as too ostentatious. Even the chairs were squat and over stuffed, forming half circles around ornate mirrors propped against the walls. Sometimes, Jean found it luxurious, other times it was overwhelming. The afternoon rush made Jean tuck her elbows into her ribs and with an awkward flip of her wrist she miniaturized Remus’ trunk and slipped it into her pocket. Jean followed her friends threading their way to the back of the store.

“Here it is,” gushed Marlene as if it was her wedding the gown was for. “Alice, it’s prettier than I remembered it.”

Marlene held up against Alice’s body a tea length ivory color with flora eyelets and a ruffle that went around a Queen Anne neckline. Alice looked bashfully pleased with herself, running a finger affectionately over the fabric. “I’ve decided to go with a blusher veil instead of a birdcage.”

“Lily, when are you going to get your dress?” asked Mary, her finger thumbing the gown’s empire waistline.

“Sometime next year, after to holidays are over,” Lily supplied. “I’m still trying to get ahold of Petunia to see if she can come down.”

“Ah, Miss Prewett,” Jean turned and saw Madame Malkin herself shuffling towards her, a fox fur stoll looking like it was choking her. “Are you here for an alteration?”

“No,” Alice answered, “just showing it off.”

Jean silently excused herself as the seamstress continued to banter about the gown. She wasn’t looking for anything in particular, but she didn’t mind looking, admiring the general splendor of
the shop done up to the nines in holiday cheer. Every window had a wreath with a large, starched bow hanging from it. The chandelier overhead was buckling under the weight of garlands. Even the wooden manikins looked like presents with holly berries, bells and mistletoe hanging from every thin finger. Jean touched a robe with a velveteen strip lining the cuffs, wondering if the Order of the Phoenix hosted Christmas parties.

With nothing she needed to buy, Jean stepped out of the store, returned Remus’ trunk to its standard size and promptly plopped down on it. Dorcas and Mary escaped the congestion minutes later and squished themselves onto the trunk with Jean, their backs pressed against either shoulder. “Remus might not be getting his trunk,” commented Mary, “it’s too convenient. First it carries our bags and now it’s a bench.”

“Mary, what would you like for Christmas,” said Jean. “Something from Flourish and Blotts or do you want me to be loyal to where you work?”

“Oh you don’t need to buy me anything,” said Mary. “I bought my Christmas gifts in advance.”

“Wait, what?” Jean twisted to look at Mary, catching Dorcas rolling her eyes.

“Just go numb Jean, your brain will hurt less,” said Dorcas.

Mary playfully elbowed Dorcas in the side. “I’m a spontaneous shopper, so it’s hard for me to give lists of things I’d like to people. I can’t think that far ahead. So, I buy my Christmas gifts with money I got at my birthday and vice versa. Between now and then I forget what I bought and voilà instant Christmas morning magic.”

“So I’m giving you money for Christmas for gifts on your birthday that you’re going to buy sometime in the next 6 months,” Jean surmised.

“Correct,” said Mary.

“That’s…complicated,” said Jean.

“The word you’re looking for is strange,” Dorcas added.

Mary crossed her knees looking playfully prim. “I’m choosing to ignore that Dorcas because you’re going to give me a gift I really want this year.”

“Oh, really what?” said Dorcas, sarcastically.

Mary paused, tilted her head and pursed her lips, trying to recall her own claim. “The Wizard of Earthsea or The Last Unicorn. One of those two. I have it written in the cover.” Jean once again was charmed by the irony of a witch who read muggle fantasy.

Lily came out next, carrying what looked like a hatbox that holiday cheer vomited all over. Lily darted over to Jean wrestling open the stiff, glittery lid. “Jean,” Lily said, “Do you think Sirius will like these?”

Nestled in the box amidst brown paper packaging was a pair of motorcycle goggles and a pair of bulky black gloves. “They’re wonderful Lily, he’ll love them.”

Lily looked pleased with herself as she rammed the lid back on. “Perhaps I should buy you a set as well.”

Jean rolled her eyes and scooted over to let Lily sit on the edge of the trunk. “It’s less nerve
“wracking than riding on a broom.”

“Probably because you’ve got a nice set of shoulders to hold onto,” said Lily with a smirk.

Jean opened her mouth, playfully scandalized, but before she could say anything else, Alice emerged from the shop, holding a smaller, simpler box than Lily. “I was getting worried that it was going to come at the last minute.”

“What is it?” asked Dorcas, intrigued.

With a flair, Alice flipped the lid and revealed a stately gold wristwatch with a crystal face set in a pillow of cream satin.

“Oh, Alice,” said Mary, a finger reaching out to the watch without quite touching it. “It’s beautiful.”

“Thank you,” said Alice, gently placing the box within the trunk, “it’s goblin made. I’m hoping he’ll wear it to the wedding; anything to distract everyone from his hideous dress shoes.”

“Are they that ugly?” asked Jean.

“They’re that old,” said Alice. “Merlin, the soles are falling off, but Frank swears by them. He says they’re broken in.” Jean made mental note that she should add an extra line of advice to his Christmas card. Alice straightened and looked about. “Are we all here?”

“We’re waiting on Marlene,” said Lily snagging the first spot on the now empty impromptu bench.

Everyone waited for Marlene for another ten minutes. Dorcas braced her elbows on her knees, twiddling her thumbs. Mary was squinting through the ruddy windows of Flourish and Blott’s next door. Alice tilted her head back to rest on Lily’s shoulders. Jean tapped the tip of Mrs. Townsend’s umbrella between the furrows in the street. “Is she buying the whole store?” Alice wondered aloud.

Marlene pranced out of the store moments later, carrying nothing. “Everyone set,” she said. “Alright, onwards then.”

“Find anything you like,” said Lily, picking herself up off the trunk.

“Nothing I couldn’t live without,” said Marlene resuming her place at the front of the group. “Where to next?”

“The quidditch shop,” said Lily. “I need to pick up James’ tickets.”

Jean remembered the morning when Lily sent her a letter excitedly detailing her that she had managed to get tickets for James and herself to a Falmouth Falcons game while they played the British National Championship. Jean promptly swore Sirius to secrecy so he wouldn’t spoil the surprise. “I still need to get something for James,” Jean added.

“Well, you’ve come to the right place,” said Lily, pulling open the shop door.

The Quality Quidditch Supplies store was basically identical to Spintwitches in Hogsmeade, except on a much larger scale. It was less flashy than the other stores in Diagon Alley, with bare walls of unfinished wood studded with pegs to display the latest broom models. However, the shopping season made the store just as crowded. Jean hung back by the door, not wanting to dive into the pandemonium before she had to. She picked up a copy of Quidditch Throughout the Ages off the window display, turning the emerald cover over in her hands. To her, it was a staple of the
Hogwarts library she had watched Harry turn through more times than she could count. To James, it was freshly printed and no doubt a must have for his Christmas list. Jean pulled out her wand to pocket Remus’ trunk so she could easily make her way to the till.

“Wait, Jean, before you do that.” Marlene appeared by Jean out of nowhere, fumbling with her coat pocket. Marlene opened the case just a sliver, stowing inside a shimmering navy tie with a silver tiepin tucked into the silken material.

“Who’s that for?” asked Jean, as Marlene just as quickly closed the trunk.

“No one important, yet,” said Marlene, but Jean saw the way her mouth was turned up at the corners. Marlene shrunk down the trunk herself, slipping it into her own pocket. “Is this for James? Come on, Lily is already in line.”

Once back on the street again, Lily tucked the sealed envelope containing the quidditch tickets into her pocket. “Well, I think I’ve take care of my shopping list,” said Lily, “is there anywhere else we need to go?”

“I don’t think so,” said Alice. “Shall we head onto the Leaky Cauldron or double back?”

“Before we do,” said Mary, “I just realized I’ve forgotten about Peter.”

“Merlin, me too,” said Dorcas.

“Likewise,” added Marlene.

“I can’t even think of what to get him,” said Lily, guilt evident in her voice that she had forgotten one of her fiancé’s best friends. “He’s always been so hard to find things for.” Jean didn’t say anything, having already taken a leaf out of Molly Weasley’s book where Peter was concerned, because who didn’t like Christmas sweaters.

“Personally, he’s been hard to find in general,” said Alice, “I mean, he’s missed two meetings—”

“Don’t talk about that here,” said Jean. There was a beat of silence where all the Order members looked surreptitiously over their shoulders. Mary looked down at her feet.

“Jean,” said Lily, her voice both light and cautious at the same time. “Has Sirius heard anything from Peter?”

Jean shook her head. “What about James?”

“James wrote to him inviting him over for dinner, but he was busy.”

“Well, he has a lot on his plate doesn’t he?” said Dorcas. “I mean, it’s an open secret that he hates working at his mother’s shop. I’m sure it’s been hard watching James, Sirius and Remus go off and be successful and he’s stuck doing a job he never wanted. Perhaps this is just how he’s dealing with it.”

“Perhaps your right,” said Mary. “Still, it makes me sad to think he’s so unhappy. We really need to find him a nice gift so he knows we’re thinking of him.”

“We still have a whole month,” said Marlene. “I’m sure if we put our heads together we can think of something.”

“I suppose it’s a puzzle we can solve on another day,” said Lily, “and it’s something we’re
definitely not going to solve standing of the side of the street. Do we want to keep heading forward or go back?”

“I vote back,” said Dorcas. “I’ve been craving Florean Fortescue’s hot cocoa ice cream all week.”

With that decided the troop trekked back to the ice cream parlor. It was less crowded than the height of the summer months, but Jean and the others still had to wait a good ten minutes before they could collapse into the café chairs surrounding a round gazebo table painted cotton candy pink. Jean was squeezed between Dorcas, who was rapidly spooning hot cocoa ice cream into her mouth, and Alice, who was dipping berries from her fruit sorbet into a pastel purple whipped cream before popping them into her mouth. Jean honored her fictionalized American heritage with a s’mores sundae; campfire cooked marshmallows, curls of chocolate and powered graham crackers sprinkled onto two scoops of vanilla ice cream.

“I think we had a good haul today,” said Mary sipping on her pineapple and mango milkshake as she put her feet on Remus’ trunk wedged under the table.

“I agree,” said Marlene, putting her spoon back into her Neapolitan ice cream, “now I just need to go home and wrap everything.” An expression that Jean could not place flashed across Marlene’s face, her glittering eyes darting over to Jean’s, making Jean lift an eyebrow. “Speaking of which,” said Marlene, trailing off.

“Yes,” said Jean.

“How’s life with Sirius?” Marlene prompted.

Alice laughed, clinking her spoon on the side of her bowl. “Couldn’t hold out any more could you, Marlene?” said Alice.

“I’m nosy, it’s part of my charm,” said Marlene, undeterred. Jean scanned the faces around her. Even Lily’s interest was piqued over the lip of her teacup.

“Well,” said Jean, the flat is really nice. It’s above a muggle seamstresses’ shop in downtown London. But, I think all of you knew that. Bye the way, thanks for setting up a Floo line, Marlene.”

“Sure, no problem,” said Marlene; clearly anxious for Jean to continue her narrative, though to what end Jean had no idea.

“I really like that there are separate spaces for a sitting room and a kitchen,” Jean continued, “so there’s enough room for a kitchen table. There’s also a Jack and Jill bathroom between Sirius and I’s room. Oh, and Sirius’ room has a fire escape attached to it.”

“Wait, what?” Marlene’s curious expression gave way to one of confusion.

“What?” asked Jean, equally confused.

Now it was Marlene’s turn to raise her eyebrow. “You and Sirius have separate bedrooms,” her comment was more of a statement than a question.

“Yes,” said Jean, her voice lilting with uncertainty.

“Oh, oh,” said Marlene, her mouth forming words that didn’t quite escape her lips. “So…you and Sirius…have never…”

“Marlene,” Lily cut in, “that’s really none of your business.” Yet, Jean noticed a similar shade of
emotion on Lily’s face as well.

“I don’t’ understand,” said Jean.

“Marlene is rather rudely asking if you and Sirius are sleeping together,” said Mary.

Jean felt her blush spread over her face and down her neck. “No,” said Jean, stumbling over her words. “We haven’t…we’ve never. We’ve never even talked about that.” Jean bit on the inside of her cheek. “Should I be?”

“No, no, of course not,” said Marlene. “I didn’t mean to imply that you should be. Its just…wow, he’s so different with you.”

“Different how?”

Jean watched a series of side-glances bounce between her friends. “This is just new for Sirius,” said Dorcas at last.

“Not a bad new,” added Mary, “it’s just we all thought when Sirius got that flat for the two of you that you were…”

“Sleeping together.” Jean finished. “You all thought that?”

“It just…seemed like something Sirius would do.”

“But we haven’t even talked about things like that,” Jean stated again. “Do you think he wants to?”

Marlene let out a short laugh. “Jean, Sirius has changed with you in many ways, but I don’t think he’s changed that much.”

“Marlene, stop talking about that,” said Lily sharply.

“What?” asked Marlene, “I’m just curious.”

“Marlene, shut it,” said Alice, just as stern. But Alice wasn’t looking at the now baffled blonde. Her head was turned over her shoulder, following Lily’s anxious gaze. Jean looked as well and her entire body stilled like a rabbit caught in a hedge.

They came like a dark cloud, rumbling across a clear sky. Her robes were a rich, black velvet that rippled in the winter sun, long sleeved and high collared with an opal jewel at her throat. However, sunlight didn’t suit her. It gave her the appearance of one recently dead, which made her lips and the apples of her thin cheeks all the more unnervingly red. Regulus walked behind her, a slender shadow to a great black bird.

“Maybe she’ll just ignore us,” said Alice, settling back into her chair with a steadying breath. Lily stirred her tea. Jean looked down at her folded hands, willing the approaching clatter of expensive shoes to recede.

“Miss Prewett.”

Alice looked up, a cordial grin falling onto her face. “Mrs. Black,” she said. “Christmas shopping?”

“No,” said Mrs. Black, not bothering to give any additional information. Jean watched her gaze flit around the group, assessing. Her eyes were the color of chilled concrete. “I hear congratulations are in order. The Longbottoms are a respectable match. You should be proud.” Walburga sounded
Alice’s lips thinned, but her smile stayed stapled in place. “Frank and I are very happy. Thank you.”

“I’m grateful,” continued Mrs. Black, as if Alice hadn’t said anything at all, “that there are still some young men, like my son Regulus, that have retained their sensibilities and don’t debase themselves by mingling with lesser blood.”

Jean could physically feel the spines of everyone at the table stiffen. Lily refused to look down, but she didn’t look up either, choosing to stare straight ahead at nothing. Walburga flicked a piece of lint off her gloves. “Don’t you agree, Miss Prewett?”

Alice didn’t say anything, her grin straining and her eyes panicking. She couldn’t say anything. She was damned either way.

“Regulus.” Jean’s voice cut through the awkward silence almost before even Jean realized it. “I haven’t seen you since before summer. How are you?”

Regulus’ eyes widened, visibly thrown off, his lips rounded around words he struggled to say. “Hello, Jean,” was all he managed.

The aloof nonchalance evaporated in an instant and was replaced with venomous politeness on a suddenly sharp-faced woman. “Who is this, Regulus?” Jean noted how tightly Walburga gripped Regulus’ elbow.

“I’m Jean,” she answered, before Regulus could speak for her. “Sirius’ girlfriend.”

Walburga’s eyes didn’t deviate from Jean’s, her hand still clenched around Regulus’ arm. Jean developed a sort of tunnel vision herself, honing in on the woman whose portrait haunted the silent halls of Grimmauld Place. “How typical of that rude boy, allowing us to meet like this instead of being properly introduced.”

“A shame indeed,” Jean volleyed back, “but I think it would have been difficult to meet. Sirius and I are so busy, with him being in the Auror Academy and my job helping muggle born students learn about the magical world.”

“Yes,” said Walburga, her tone clipped. “What an interesting career choice, my dear. Surely, that wasn’t the only employment you felt you could get.”

“It was my first choice,” Jean countered. “The Headmaster and I thought introducing new students to Hogwarts would be easier if it was done by a person who also grew up not around magic.”

Walburga blinked deliberately. “You’re muggle born.” It wasn’t a question; it was a declaration, an accusation.

“Yes.”

For a moment, Jean thought she stunned the shrewish woman into submission. Her lips curled around slurs and insults she would have fired at will if in the seclusion of her own home. A vein pulsed in her temple almost hidden by piles of dark hair coifed tightly to her head. “Well,” said Walburga shortly, “that boy has always had questionable taste when it comes to his dalliances.” Walburga ended the conversation while she had the final say. “Come, Regulus. We have places to be.” Jean thought if Walburga jerked on Regulus’ arm any harder his shoulder would come out of his socket.
“Regulus,” Jean called out. Regulus eyes bounced back and forth between Jean and his mother like a spectator at a tennis rally. “Please come by for a visit any time.” Regulus was towed down the street before he could make any discernable response.

For Jean, it felt like she had had an out of body experience. Jean only just felt the way her fingers shook when she uncurled them from around the rim of the table and only then realized she was standing. Her vision widened and Jean saw everyone looking at her with expressions ranging from awe to outright concern. All but Lily. “You didn’t have to do that,” Lily said, looking down into her half drunk cup of tea.

“Yes I did,” said Jean, settling back down with a rough jerk of her chair.

No one felt like talking after that and Jean was happy to slip into her own thoughts. Walburga was as Jean had always expected her to be and was used to her shrieking slanders at her whenever she walked down the stairs of Sirius’ gloomy abode a little too loudly. But, Regulus. Regulus had faded into the background of her new life and Sirius never talked much about him save to say that he happily lived under their mother’s heel. Regulus looked anything but. He was too tall, too thin and his mercurial eyes made him look perpetually somber. Sirius may have escaped his family, but in doing so he left Regulus behind and Jean only had to recall Kreacher to get an understanding of what it was like living alone with that woman.

“Jean.” Jean pulled herself from her thoughts and looked over at Alice, while the others were pulling their packages out of Remus’ trunk. “We need to get going.”

Jean nodded, knowing what couldn’t be said. There was an Order meeting tonight and they could not go to Godric’s Hollow all at one time. Jean shrugged off her melancholic thoughts like a blanket and rose from her chair. “I’ll take this then,” said Jean, waving her wand over Remus’ trunk before pocketing it. “I’ll see you later then,” she said.

Lily and Alice Apparated without a word while Dorcas and Marlene lingered for a moment. “That was a really nice thing you did,” said Dorcas.

Marlene nodded vigorously, blonde curls bouncing. “I couldn’t have done it,” she added, “that woman terrifies me.”

Marlene looped her arm with Dorcas. “Well come on,” said the former to the latter. “We’ve still got shopping to do for certain somebodies.” Marlene eyed Jean and Mary playfully and Jean rolled her eyes. “Anything but orange, please.”

“But what if it’s cute?” Marlene answered her own question with a giggle. “Bye, Jean. Bye, Mary, it was so nice seeing you.”

Dorcas fell in line behind Marlene, giving Mary and Jean a little wave before pedestrians hid the pair from view.

Jean leaned against the back of her chair, feeling Remus’ trunk roll around in her pocket. “I have to get going, I guess,” said Jean.

“I know,” said Mary. Jean and Mary both leaned into a hug. “Be careful,” Mary whispered.

“We will,” said Jean. Jean pulled back, walking backwards for a few steps. “Bye.”

“Bye,” said Mary. As she walked away, Jean watched Mary sit back down at the table, almost immediately giving up one of the now empty chairs to a young witch who dragged it over to her group of friends.
Mrs. Townsend’s umbrella beat a steady rhythm into her thigh as she walked down the remainder of Diagon Alley, through the dim and smoky Leakey Cauldron and out into the muggle world. In an attempt to be an innocuous as possible, Jean took a muggle bus home and crammed herself into a seat as it lumbered like an elephant through the tight turns of downtown London. Jean fidgeted with the trunk in her pocket while a small girl in Sunday shoes kept poking at the handle of her umbrella, giving a wry grin whenever Jean looked in her direction.

There was a stop at the corner of the block of Mrs. Townsend’s shop. Jean shimmied her way off the bus and walked over the stained asphalt to the shop’s front door, opening it with the jingle of a warped brass bell.

Joanna looked up from her place at the till, a pink measuring tape wrapped around her shoulders and a pair of bulky fabric scissors clenched in her hands. Another older lady was across the counter scrutinizing a thick bolt of quilted fabric. “Well, hello there, Jean dear. Did you have a good shopping trip?”

“It was, thank you,” said Jean, winding her way behind the counter, careful to mind the wicker baskets full of fabric scraps. “Didn’t find anything though.”

Joanna clicked her tongue, sympathetically. “Rotten luck, Jean dear. And where is Mr. Black? It would be impossible not to hear him on that bike of his.”

“He’s at work still,” said Jean, “I just wanted—”

“My other tenant is a police officer,” said Joanna to the customer who undoubtedly was trapped there by Joanna Townsend’s tangents. The other lady could only nod as she readjusted her purse.

“Here’s your umbrella back, Ms. Joanna,” said Jean.

Joanna waved it away. “Oh keep it, Jean dear, I insist.”

“You sure?” asked Jean.

“Between me and Mrs. Plummer across the street we have enough umbrellas to blot out the sun. Besides, Jean dear, you never know when it’s going to rain.”

“Well, thank you,” said Jean dropping the umbrella over her elbow.

“Now then, what were you making again, my dear?” said Joanna turning back to her customer.

“Sundresses,” said the lady, clearly trying to be as monosyllabic as possible.

“My son, Georgie, has daughters that I used to make everything for. But they’re grown now. He’s such a good boy. Very practical. He’s an accountant up in Leicester…”

Jean took that moment to slip upstairs before her landlady could rope her into another conversation and dashed up the dirty interior stairwell.

Hephaestus figured through her ankles when she walked in, not quite tripping her like he did with Sirius more times than she could count. Jean removed Remus’ trunk of her other presents and magiked it back to its original size. She folded her legs under her and set about wrapping her gifts with the paper that she had used to wrap a stack of records for Lily the night before. Hephaestus had chewed a corner of her favorite shimmering blue wrapping with snowflakes.

Keeping busy with her hands kept Jean thoughts from buzzing around her head like mayflies. Jean
was always secretly amazed that Sirius liked her, loved her, and how all of her friends seemed to notice. She was in love with him too, but it had never crossed her mind that they should be in lust with each other. Marlene and the others knew Sirius well, and she Sirius’ reputation enough that it didn’t seem like a stretch for Sirius to ask her to move in just for the sex.

Jean blushed, her mind rebelling. The way Sirius looked at her, spoke with her about things that she knew he had never told another soul; the way her held her, those casual touches and his bark like laugh; none of those seemed like actions of a person who just wanted to be physical.

And would being physical be such a bad thing? Jean had never though about that with Sirius, and she had never thought that about herself. But, certain memories that were imprinted on her brain of Sirius pressing her against a wall as he kissed her for the first time, the intensity of his stare though hazy drunken eyes sprawled out on the sofa in the Head’s Dormitory, and the way water dripped down his chest when she caught him showering after a quidditch match were there not just because she liked Sirius’ winning personality. Jean rubbed her cheek, feeling the heat radiate through her fingers. Jean shook her head, looking at her empty rolls of wrapping paper and the stack of gifts beside her. Hephaestus had a bow stuck to his foot. She turned her head and looked through her bedroom door to the window. The sun was barely scraping the horizon and the clouds still hung heavy in the air. The meeting would be starting soon.

Jean huffed out a sigh and pushed herself off the rug and grabbing the umbrella that she had thrown across the couch. Clutching a fistful of floo powder she walked into the hearth, tumbling out a moment later into the Dumbledore family living room.

“Ah, Miss Granger,” said Dumbledore pulling himself out of his wing backed chair. “You’re a touch early.”

“Sorry, Professor,” said Jean picking herself up off the parlor floor. “I lost track of the time.”

“Well, no matter,” said Dumbledore. “Minerva, Arabella and Mr. Bones are here as well. I did take Mrs. Figg’s advice about hosting.” Dumbledore flicked his wand and a silver serving cart rattled its way from the next room. “Tea?”

Jean accepted, even if it was just something to do with her hands. Jean wandered without much direction until Mrs. Figg pulled her into a conversation she was having in the middle of the entrance hall.

“Hello, Miss Granger. Wonderful to see you again. Are you enjoying your new apartment? Though, I will say, I was never fond of living in downtown London. Too noisy.”

Yet again, Jean was amazed by Mrs. Figg’s ability to recall information that Jean had no memory of giving. “Yes, Mrs. Figg, Sirius and I are enjoying our new flat. It’s very convenient for work.” Jean quickly changed the conversation, not wanting to ruminate on she and Sirius’ living situation any more than she already had, turning to the only other person in the bare, narrow hallway. “Are you enjoying teaching without the Marauders causing mischief at every turn?”

Surprisingly, McGonagall gave a smile that was almost wistful. “I spent so long with the four of them underfoot I’m not sure what to do without them.”

Jean smiled at her old professor. “Well, maybe James and Lily will have kids sometime.”

McGonagall’s smile vanished like a light bulb bursting. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves, Miss Granger.”
At that moment, Jean spied Edgar Bones in the small kitchen, pensively looking out at the overgrown backyard. For the first time in a few hours, Jean’s day had direction and she quickly excused herself, smoothly walking up beside the older wizard.

“Mr. Bones,” said Jean, taking a sip out of her teacup.

Edgar Bones started as if Jean had pulled him out of a deep thought, but quickly composed himself. “Ah, Miss Granger,” I was meaning to speak to you this evening if we found the time.”

“How Remus?” Jean prompted.

“Yes,” said Bones, “I assume you’ve already spoken with him as well.”

“He said he’d won’t testify if we can’t reasonably expect to succeed. He said he could never get a job again if that became public knowledge.”

Edgar nodded. “He said the same thing to me and he’s right to worry. There is more than one werewolf in Azkaban that are there simply because of what they are.”

Jean felt herself deflating. “That’s upsetting to think about,” she said. “So are you thinking about scotching it? Using Remus for werewolf rights?”

“Oh, heavens no,” said Edgar, “his testimony is invaluable in proving that werewolves can go to school and work jobs without significant danger to the people they are around. But, Remus is right. We can’t just go into the Wizengamot, wands blazing, and demand people to make a law just because we say it’s wrong. We need to appeal to their better angels.”

“And how do we do that?” asked Jean.

Edgar drummed his fingers on his arm before he looked at her, tilting his head. “I believe you just gave us the answer,” he said, a grin blooming on his face.

“I did?” asked Jean.

“You just said that it was upsetting to think that people were in Azkaban just because they were werewolves.”

“Yes,” said Jean. Her eyes widened, understanding. “You want one of these werewolves to also testify. But, how are you going to be able to get one of them out to do so?”

Edgar gave her an amused look. “I’m the head of magical law. Locating someone will be no trouble. However, I can’t interview a werewolf and also have collected the information. People will accuse me of embellishing information and hiding others. They will say I was incapable of being impartial.”

“But,” said Jean, a smile mirroring his. “If someone wrote a report for you and presented it as a concerned citizen…” Jean trailed off and Edgar folded his arms, leaning against the countertop with a satisfied smirk on his face. “Exactly,” he said. “It won’t be everything all at once, but it will be a start.”

“But,” said Jean, “won’t someone be suspicious if I give you all this information and we know each other? Won’t they think you just told me to do it?”

Edgar laughed and Jean thought that as a younger man he could’ve been a lot like Sirius. “Miss Granger, as I’ve said I’m the Head of the Department of Magical Law and you are a satellite
employee of the Muggle Liaison Office stationed at Hogwarts. When would we have ever had the opportunity to meet?"

The parlor became more crowded as various Order members let themselves in through the door. Emmaline Vance took Jean’s place with McGonagall and Mrs. Figg. Sturgis Podmore and Ephias Doge tapped their hats at her and Dedalus Diggle greeted her like it had been ten years since they’d last seen each other. Jean flitted on the fringes of the group, not really attempting to be social, wandering where her feet led her until her eyes settled on someone that caused her to backpedal like she had almost stepped in a sewer drain.

“Mundungus Fletcher,” said Jean, not quite believing he was standing in front of her. He looked the same. A great coat was slung over his shoulders, caked in dust and cobwebs, the collar popped around his ears. He wore fingerless gloves with more holes than fingers and sported a five o’clock shadow that no doubt began at ten in the morning.

Mundungus looked at her but he barely moved, as if his whole body had conformed to perpetually skulking in back alley corners. “Well, you know me, and I don’t know you. Can’t have that.” He spoke like he was constantly choking on his own tongue.

“Jean Granger,” she said, sticking out her hand. Instead of shaking it, Mundungus kissed it and Jean felt like she had dipped her hand in Vaseline.

“Charmed,” said Mundungus, but there was a look in his eye that made an uncomfortable prickle go down her spine. “What?”

Mundungus shrugged his shoulders. “Just heard that name before…in interesting places by interesting people.”

Jean felt her heart stutter and her blood chill. She had a thousand questions but couldn’t get her lips to form around even one.

“Jean!”

The only reason Jean didn’t jump a foot into the air was because Gideon Prewett had slung an arm around her shoulders. “The old Dung isn’t bothering you is he?”

“No harm in making an acquaintance, Auror Prewett,” said Mundungus, his voice low and gravelly.

“What brings you here tonight Mr. Fletcher,” said Fabian, striding up to his brother’s side.

“I come when I have information to give. No need to be rubbing elbows with decent folk for too long. It’s bad for business.”

Fabian nodded at him dismissively and Mundungus tilted his head with the same faux politeness. “Evening ma’am,” he said before shuffling away.

Jean barely had time to process she and Mundungus’ strange and mildly threatening exchange before she was in the grips of a bear hug by Gideon. “How have you been, Jean?” said Gideon, ever laughing.

“Fine, Gideon. Thank you,” said Jean, trying to keep the air from being pressed out of her lungs. “Have you seen Sirius today?”

“I have, but he and James aren’t here yet,” said Fabian, giving Jean a slightly less forceful
embrace. “Come on, I think everyone’s starting.”

Dumbledore’s parlor had been crammed with possibly every chair in the family home from the overly ornate dining room chairs to the off green folding chairs that looked like they belonged to a card table. Jean sat in the back, flanked by the Prewett brothers, watching everyone file into the motley assemblage. Mundungus was crammed into a corner. Moody and Caradoc Dearborn occupied another. Dorcas took a stool in front of Hagrid hulking in the kitchen doorway and Benjy Fenwick took a seat next to Marlene who flashed Jean a toothy grin. Dumbledore stood in the middle of their cramped semi circle.

“Good evening, everyone,” he said.

Dumbledore had barely begun speaking when Jean felt a hand on her shoulder and lips on her cheek.

“Hello,” Sirius whispered against her ear.

Jean tilted her head against his face in greeting, the tips of her fingers ghosting across his knuckles. Out of the corner of her eye she saw James and Lily pull themselves out of the fireplace with Remus following suit. Frank and Alice were already huddled beneath a wall sconce. Jean’s gaze flitted around the room. No Peter. Jean quickly tuned back into what Dumbledore was saying.

“Mr. Fletcher has come today to share some information he has acquired,” Dumbledore concluded.

Mundungus didn’t move from his position on the wall, slumped, hands shoved in his pockets. Jean wondered if he was capable of speaking and making eye contact at the same time. “Saw people today; Wilkes, Rosier, the Malfoys and the Blacks.” Jean reached up and threaded her fingers between Sirius’ as Mundungus continued. “They were poking around Knockturn Alley. Saw Travers and Mulciber and Avery a few days ago too. They seemed to be searching for something. ”

“Thank you,” said Dumbledore. “This is the most recent Death Eater activity of this kind we have uncovered. Mrs. Figg reported similar actions on Fleet Street in London. Others have been observed in Telford Reddich and Basilton.”

“Safe houses,” supplied Alastor. “They’re scouting for safe houses.”

“Why would they need safe houses?” asked Emmeline Vance.

“It’s tactics,” supplied Moody. “Multiple safe houses mean multiple places to go if things get heated. They’re also good for deep cover operations. Using innocuous locations allow small pockets of their numbers to do surveillance in plain sight.” Moody paused. “Magnus had such an outfit placed in Hogsmeade. It went undetected even as the Death Eaters planned their attack.”

“More importantly they use them as meeting locations and for deceptive purposes,” added Dearborn.

“Deceptive purposes?” asked Dedalus Diggle.

“The Death Eaters never meet all at once in the same location,” said Caradoc. “I believe seeking multiple safe houses is creating splinter cells within the organization. Death Eaters interact only with their cohort, which conceals their numbers and their identities.”

“So even if the Death Eaters don’t know who everyone is and how many there are?” asked Sturgis Podmore.
“Correct,” said Dearborn, “which makes it incredibly difficult for spies. I can bring down a small group, but the whole will remain intact.”

“What do you suggest we do about it?” asked Edgar.

Caradoc sighed, crossing his arms, his finger worrying the hem of his coat sleeve. “Alastor and I believe there’s an inner ring; a group of lieutenants that communicate instructions between the smaller groups to keep the underlings in the dark. If I can supplant the leader of the group I’ve infiltrated and make my way into this inner ring, I may have a better idea about how many Death Eaters their are, their identities, and chains of command.”

“Do you know who the leader is of the group you’ve entered Caradoc?” said Ephias Doge.

Caradoc shook his head. “I just that know that she is a woman.” For Jean, this narrowed the candidates down to one.

“Have you seen Voldemort?” commented Dumbledore, calm and quiet.

“No,” said Caradoc. “I think he just meets with his inner circle and if he does use a safe house it’s not one that any normal Death Eater could walk into.”

Caradoc nodded at Alastor who stepped forward. “Ladies and gentlemen, Dearborn needs to prove himself invaluable to the Death Eaters’ cause to advance in the ranks. In order to aid him in his efforts, Gideon and Fabian will lead a team of Aurors to raid the presumed Death Eater safe house tonight. Dearborn will inform the Death Eaters of this plan and ensure their escape, engendering their trust in him.”

“Who will the Aurors be?” asked McGonagall.

“Mr. Black, Mr. Potter and a number of aurors outside the Order. If the Death Eaters are clouding their true numbers and identities we must endeavor to do the same.”

“Alastor,” said Sturgis Podmore, “many of the Aurors you have selected come from pureblood families. Can we trust that their allegiances won’t be divided?”

Podmore’s insinuation was thinly veiled and it only took a glance at the eyes peaking backwards to know that everyone had picked up on it. After all, it wasn’t the Potters or the Prewetts caught in Knockturn Alley by the Order’s seedy soldier of fortune. Jean felt Sirius grip her shoulder and heard Remus whisper under his breath. “Not now.”

But, Sirius didn’t have to speak because Moody spoke for him. “Mr. Podmore, are you implying that one of my Aurors that I’m personally training would betray us?”

Jean saw everyone shrink down in their seats by several inches. Podmore swallowed, withering under Moody’s dead eyed glare. “No, Alastor. Sorry.”

“No apologies needed,” said Alastor, the tone not yet gone from his voice. “How foolish of me to be so quick to condemn your character. As I was saying,” Moody continued, finally breaking eye contact with Podmore, “the intent tonight is not to capture any Death Eaters, only to put pressure on them and to prove Dearborn’s loyalty.”

“There is another thing,” said Dearborn. He shucked up his coat sleeve and his left arm, revealing a bandage wrapped from elbow to wrist. Jean put a hand over her mouth. It had never occurred to her that an Order member had gone so far into the enemy camp. “All Death Eaters have a mark on their left forearm. It’s very distinctive and something we should all be looking around for.”
Jean stood, numbly weaving her way through the Order and their sounds of disgust and horror as Dearborn revealed the Dark Mark from beneath his bandages. She didn’t want to see it. She’d seen it enough.

Jean weaved around Hagrid, deliberately ignoring Dorcas’ concerned look, only stopping when her hands anchored her to the kitchen sink. Jean breathed hard though her mouth, staring at her warped reflection in the porcelain. Jean turned the squeaky tap and gulped down several handfuls, stray streams of water dripping down her arm. Jean brushed away the droplets, pausing when her fingers ran over the now familiar ridges of the scars Bellatrix had given her. They had faded to white, but one could still make out the lettering. The water on her arm gave it a silvery sheen. Jean ran her thumb over the word again and again until the lines were an angry, irritated red.

“Jean.”

Jean came back to reality, turning as Sirius’ hands fell on her upper arms. “Are you okay?” he asked, concerned.

Jean nodded jerkily. “Yeah, I’m fine,” she said.

“You sure?” asked Sirius. He brushed a piece of hair away from her face.

“I’m sure,” said Jean, almost as if she was trying to convince herself more than Sirius. She felt like she was chained to the shoreline, watching the rising tide swallow her and everyone around her. Jean sighed, flustered, before pressing her face against Sirius’ chest. “I’m fine.”

Jean felt Sirius link his arms around her body and the oncoming wave pulled itself back into the ocean. He kissed the top of her head. “Okay,” he said against her hair. “Did you at least have a good day shopping at least? Anything interesting happen?”

Jean couldn’t help the very Sirius like grin that spread across her face. “I met your mother today,” she said into his shirt. Jean felt Sirius jolt away from her. He was a thin layer of calm over a hearty helping of panic.

“And?” was all Sirius managed to say.

“We went toe to toe a little because she was being rude to Lily, but that was about it.”

Sirius carded his fingers through his hair before dragging them down his face, groaning into his palms. “Oh, Jean. I’m so, so sorry,” he muttered. “Merlin, this is so embarrassing. What I would give to have a mother who just brought out the baby pictures whenever she met my girlfriends rather than threaten them.”

“She didn’t really threaten me. She was more openly disgusted,” quipped Jean.

“All the same,” said Sirius, sobering. Sirius took Jean’s hands and let them hang down at their sides. The obsidian stone in his family ring glinted off the ceiling light. “You know why I left. You know what type of people my family associates with. Please, don’t antagonize them.”

“Sirius,” said Jean, “what do you think they would do?”

“I don’t know and that’s what scares me.”

Jean’s lips thinned. She didn’t like how fear settled on him. It tinted his eyes and drained the color from his face. For a moment, Jean was back at the lake, pebbles turning under her feet and cold air rushing from her mouth as a swarm of dementors descended on Sirius, pleading for his life. She
blinks and was back in the kitchen, her hand cupped over Sirius’ cheek to keep him rooted in the present. “I don’t want you to be afraid.” Jean pressed their foreheads together.

Sirius looked over his shoulder at the rest of the house. “They’re winding down, so we’ll be heading off soon.”

“Do you want Ms. Joanna’s umbrella? It’s been trying to rain all day.”

Sirius huffed out a laugh. “What I sight I would be, wand in one hand, umbrella in the other.” Sirius laughed again, and Jean joined him, feeling silly for suggesting it. “I don’t know when I’ll be back, so don’t stay up all night worrying.”

“That gives me plenty of time to hide all of your Christmas presents in my secret spot.”

“Oh?” said Sirius, lifting an eyebrow, “and would this secret spot be in the cupboard over the fridge?”

“No, it’s under my bed where Hephaestus sleeps,” said Jean.

“Oh,” said Sirius shortly. “Well then, I’ll never get to that.”

Jean didn’t hear what Sirius said after that. Her mind went back to their beds. Beds. Plural. Once again, Jean was caught in the tides of sexual confusion.

“Are you sure everything’s okay?” asked Sirius. “You look like you’re worrying about something.”

Jean pulled up Sirius’ hands that were still hanging down by their sides. She kissed them each in turn, lingering. “Later, I promise.”

Sirius nodded. “Okay.”

“Sirius!”

The man in question jumped a foot in the air, turning wildly to face Moody, framed by emerald flames while Gideon and Fabian dove through the floo. “While we’re all still above ground?” he growled.

“Right, yeah,” said Sirius, gathering himself. “I love you,” he said quickly, chastely kissing Jean on the cheek before scurrying up to his grizzled superior.

Rather than awkwardly linger in the kitchen or suffer the small talk she has little energy for, Jean quietly crept out the back door and disapparated from the back garden, landing with a clatter on the fire escape outside the flat. Jean jimmed open the window and stepped down into Sirius’ room.

Even though she lived with him, this was still a foreign space to her. The bed was made as if Sirius just jerked the sheets towards the headboard and let the bedding and pillows fall where they may. There were two sports brooms in the corner along with his school chest. His dresser and nightstand were littered with odds and ends, snapshots of his personality: a bottle of fire whiskey, muggle motorcycle magazines, a pocketknife, and a photograph of James and Sirius younger than she had ever known them. Every once in a while, an older woman walked though the photo; she had thick, curly hair and wore glasses. She kissed James on the cheek and wrapped her arms around Sirius’ shoulder.

It didn’t long for Jean to shove all of the Christmas gifts under her bed and for Hephaestus to join
them, sitting like a sphinx amongst the iridescent wrapping paper, but looking more like an ever present dust bunny. Without much else to do Jean thumbed through her precarious tower of books looking for the latest Mary begged her to buy, thus continuing to be the one woman demographic for muggle fiction at Obscurous Books. Jean pried *The Fellowship of the Ring* from the stack and curled up on the couch, the knitted throw pulled over her, idly reading riddles in the dark.

Jean didn’t realize she was asleep until a burst of green light flashed before her eyelids. Sirius stepped through the fireplace, treading ash and soot. The top button of his auror’s uniform undone, exposing the dip in his collarbone. His eyes softened and he tilted his head. “Hi,” he said simply.

“Hey,” said Jean, her voice heavy with sleep. She stretched, her book falling to the floor with a rustle. “What time is it?”

“Just before one,” said Sirius.

Jean shifted and Sirius sat down on the sofa, Jean’s head pillowed on his thigh. “How’d it go?” she asked, staring at the emerald flames as they crackled themselves out.

“Like clockwork,” said Sirius, carding his hand through Jean’s hair. “By the time we got into the safe house they had already gone. No doubt, Caradoc is being praised for his efforts, on both sides.”

Jean nodded. “I hope he stays safe,” she said numbly.

Sirius let out a sigh. “Me too.” They sat in silence for a moment and Jean felt her eyes get heavy with every run of Sirius’ fingers.

“You did promise me that you would tell me what was bothering you,” Sirius commented. Jean huffed, deliberately staring at Sirius’ knee. “You’ll think it’s silly.”

“You don’t think it’s silly,” said Sirius. “Tell me.”

Jean’s lips thinned and she felt her tongue twisting around in her mouth. “Marlene…” Jean sighed, reconciling herself to ripping it off like a Band-Aid. “Marlene and the others seemed surprised that we weren’t…sleeping together. They seemed to think that you were renting this place because you were expecting that to happen. They said that sounded like something you would do.” Jean curled up on herself, hoping to sound as apologetic as possible.

Jean felt Sirius’ sigh go through his whole body. “It is something I would do,” he said at last, “if it were anyone but you.”

Jean sat up, the knitted throw pooling in her lap. She fiddled with the fringe. “Why am I so different?”

Sirius chuckled slightly. “I wish I could put it into words, but I lack the vocabulary to do it justice.” Sirius cupped Jean’s cheek and lifted her eyes to his. “Marlene knew me as a younger person, a different person, an unhappy person.”

“You didn’t seem too unhappy at school,” supplied Jean, “with your friends, and the Marauders’”

“I was happy with them, living with them, knowing that me being a part of their lives made them happy. You are the only one that has ever made me happy with myself.” Jean hadn’t realized just how vulnerable Sirius looked in that moment stripped clean of panache and gallantry. The simplicity of it was beautiful. “So yes,” continued Sirius, “the Sirius that they knew at least,
superfluous, short-tempered and overly sarcastic, would have expected that as part of this arrangement. However, you agreeing to live with me did not include sex in the fine print. I wanted you to be with me because, well, at school I liked knowing you were close. I liked coming into the Common Room and catch a glimpse of you curled up on the couch, or studying by the fire with all your books spread out in front of you.” Sirius smiled at the memory and kept going. “I liked hearing you laugh with Alice and the others. So yeah, I do was to be with you, but, more than that, I just want to…be with you.”

Jean didn’t say anything. There was nothing to be said. She felt blanketed in this odd sensation of excitement and peace. It felt like coming home. She was kissing him before she realized it.

Jean loved the feel of his mouth over hers, the roll of his jaw, the little breaths that escaped from between his lips. Jean ran her thumb over Sirius’ end of day stubble. Sirius’ arms had banded around her lower back, dipping under her sweater, as if they instinctively sought out skin-to-skin contact. Then, Sirius made a sound Jean had never heard before; a short low huff that came from deep within his chest. Sirius moved against her and Jean realized with a slight jolt that she was in his lap.

Jean looked at Sirius, taking in how close they were, his eyes the comforting constellation of light she had come to love. His lips were slightly pursed and she felt his long, hot breaths against her neck. Jean broke eye contact feeling that heat spread from her neck into her cheeks. She brushed her hair behind her ear.

“What?” asked Sirius.

“You like me that way?” Jean felt awkward, but the newness thrilled her in a way she hadn’t anticipated.

Sirius let out a small, short laugh. “Of course Jean, why wouldn’t I?”

Jean shrugged, both bashful and coy. “I don’t know,” she said. “I never considered myself attractive in that way.”

Sirius shook his head. “You sell yourself too short, beloved.”

Sirius leaned back against the arm of the sofa and Jean had a quiver of pleasure in her belly watching his eyes roam, his hands thumbing the wings of her hips. In the low light his casual elegance had morphed into a magnetism she found captivating. “Have you thought about me that way?” he asked.

Sirius’ mood and mannerisms were rubbing off on Jean. She looked back up at him through hooded eyes. “Once or twice,” she said, hiding a smile behind her fingers, delighted with her own mischievousness.

“When?” Sirius was hanging onto her every word.

“Once, when you were showering at the quidditch pitch,” said Jean, her voice tapering off, “and now.”

“Oh,” said Sirius, trying to act surprised while obviously pleased. “Well, you have me at a disadvantage. You’ve seen me with my shirt off and I’ve yet to see the same.”

A prickle of uncertainty popped her bubble of confidence. Her fingers touched where Sirius’ hands were resting on the hem of her sweater. “Do you…” asked Jean, but Sirius gently cut her off.
“What ever you want,” said Sirius.

Jean’s fingers threaded through Sirius’ and for a moment neither of them knew if she was going to pull them away. Then, Jean pulled her sweater up and over her head, dropping it to the floor beside them.

Jean crossed her arms, not really knowing what to do with them. Sirius didn’t touch her and part of her was really grateful for that. He shifted so that he was more under her, Jean’s legs on either side. “Do you want to get these buttons or shall I?” he asked, indicating to his doublet.

Jean’s tension dissipated and she gathered this new warmth around her like a blanket, bending down to undo the buttoning.

“Can I kiss you?” Sirius breathed into her ear.

Jean nodded, her tongue forgetting how to work. Jean fumbled a few times as Sirius kissed the shell of her ear, trailing down the curve of her neck before settling in her collarbone. Jean was silently amazed Sirius could peel himself out of his uniform and toss it over the end of the sofa whilst still being pinned between a person and a couch cushion. Even without quidditch practice, Sirius was still fit. Sirius casually put one hand behind his head and Jean watched his biceps bulge. Her eyes trailed down his abs, the shadows chiseling them even more. He had a trail of dark hair from his navel down into his pants. Jean put a tentative hand on his defined pectoral. Sirius ran his other hand languidly up and down her arm.

“Can I kiss you like you kissed me?” Jean asked.

“Please,” said Sirius, his voice heavy and rough.

Jean bent down again, settling her head against Sirius’ neck. His hair fell about her face, which smelled like sweat and soot with an undercurrent of crisp pine. Lightly she kissed the edge of his ear as he had done. Sirius took in a sharp breath and Jean felt his abdomen contract against her stomach. Jean kissed him again, this time beneath his jaw, feeling a pulse point breath her lips. Jean quickly discovered the little noises Sirius made, the slight twitches. They delighted her each in turn. Jean kept trailing down Sirius’ neck, her mouth coming across his Adam’s apple fluttering at the base of his throat. Jean nipped on the corner of her lip before licking him with the very tip of her tongue.

The reaction was instantaneous. Sirius gripped Jean’s head, fingers kneading into her scalp and drew her into a kiss that nearly blinded her. Jean molded her body against Sirius’ feeling his palms run across her arms, down her spine, dipping under her bra straps, as if his hands were making an intimate map of every feature. Sirius broke the kiss and tilted his head down, kissing the swell of Jean’s breast. She couldn’t help but curve her back into his ministrations, her head lolling back onto her shoulders. While one hand caged her to him, the other cupped her breast as he continued to kiss it. Jean felt her heart hammering out of her chest.

“Do you want to get more comfortable?” asked Sirius, when he came up for air. He jerked the belt loops of his pants.

“Yes,” Jean’s voice was airy. Clumsily, Jean shimmied out of her pants, feeling like a foal finding their feet for the first time. Again, she was amazed that Sirius could so easily shed his clothing given the position he was in. He wore black, silken boxer briefs, noticeably tented.

Jean stumbled again in the new dance she was trying to learn, grateful that Sirius took the lead. “You can touch it if you want.”
Jean nodded, her hand inching forward, gaging Sirius’ every reaction. There was a heat she hadn’t expected, a slight throbbing as she moved her hand up and back, exploring through the fabric.

Sirius hummed contentedly, his legs trying to spread to give Jean more access. “Keep doing that,” he murmured, eyes closed.

After a few more gentle strokes, Jean became emboldened, wanting to draw out more of those little squirms and short, sharp inhales. She felt him harden against her hand and Sirius’ head arced over the sofa arm. Jean’s eyes drifted upward, admiring the rosy flush that spread down Sirius’ neck and onto his chest. There was a thatch of dark hair dusting his pectorals. Jean kissed the hollow in Sirius’ throat, drifting down to his chest while her hand ran up and down his length, thumbing small circles at the tip.

Sirius made another breathy sound, his hips canting against hers. Sirius gripped her waist and pressed her against him, humming in his chest. Jean grabbed Sirius’ shoulders and kissed him just as hard while Sirius trekked aimless tracks up and down her spine.

“Jean,” said Sirius, kissing around his words. “If you want to stop—now would be a good time,” his voice sounded strained.

Jean snapped back to self-consciousness, nearly catapulting off of him. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Are you—”

“It’s okay, it’s alright,” said Sirius gently, his hands still keeping her where she was, hips still undulating beneath her. “Just let me hold you.”

Jean let Sirius maneuver them both till they lay side by side on the sofa. Sirius’ leg slotted between hers, Jean’s head tucked into his shoulder. Jean had never seen such a look of contentment on his face, a look of pure, unconcerned bliss. He pulled her closer to him. “You’re so soft,” he mumbled into her hairline.

Jean stayed in Sirius’ arms for minutes that felt like a million years, lulled into a dreamlike fugue by the doldrums of the breathing. Suddenly, a crack of sound stirred their calms seas.

“What was that?” asked Jean sitting up. Her was voice heavy with sleep and she blinked owlishly. All the lights in the flat were turned off and the blanket had been pulled over the pair of them, their clothes still scattered on the rug.

“It’s nothing,” said Sirius, his eyes still closed, hair disheveled, speaking as if still asleep. He drew her back down to him, swinging an arm over her body. “It’s just the rain.”

Chapter End Notes

I'm not dead. Nor have I abandoned this story. I know it's been a loong time since I've updated. Like unforgiveably long and for that I'm super sorry. I kinda needed to sit down with this story and really make sure I was committed to continuing it how I had envisioned it so I had moments where my confidence was shaken because I love this story and I want to write a memorable story for you, my wonderful, oh so patient readers. I would really really appreciate some reviews on this one simply because this chapter caused me so much anxiety about the future of this fic. The next chapter should be up soon as I'm already writing it. Hugs and kisses!!
Also, teeny tiny edit. She went on from reading the Hobbit to Fellowship of the Ring. There, now ya now.
Chapter 23: Someone Borrowed, Someone Blue

Much to Jean’s surprise, she had fallen into a routine. By day she took new students their Hogwarts letters and let them wander through Diagon Alley. By night, there were Order meetings or Jean was sprawled out on the living room floor, fighting Hephaestus for her quill as she compiled the werewolf inquiry for Edgar Bones. On the weekends, Jean would have some outing with Lily and the other girls or she and Sirius would take a drive on his motorbike through the countryside, taking it up into the balmy spring air when they were isolated enough. It had gotten almost predictable to the point that Jean didn’t know what to do with herself.

This Saturday was shaping up to be no different. Jean padded barefoot around her bedroom, hair pulled back in an elastic, throwing open the windows to let the warm weather inside. Jean had worn one of Sirius’ shirts to bed and every once in a while she smelled the collar, loving his scent on her skin. At the end of the day they still slept separately, though they went to bed with less and less clothes each time.

Jean was getting dressed for the day looked over her shoulder when she heard a sharp squawk coming from the living room. She ducked her head out to see Padfoot on his back haunches, tail wagging vigorously. He jumped a little, snapping for the newspaper clutched in the talons of a beleaguered barn owl. Hephaestus was puffed up and spitting on the sofa, offended by the whole affair.

Padfoot leapt again, grabbing the newspaper from the owl. It screeched again before fluttering down on Jean’s shoulder, bobbing its head at the dog.

“I know,” said Jean, scratching the owl’s feathery head. “It’s a circus.”

Jean paid the owl and it wasted no time flying from the flat to the chorus of Sirius’ laughter, pulling the newspaper from his teeth. “Go on Fester, shoo,” he said, slapping the sofa with the paper. Hephaestus skittered off the sofa and slunk under Jean’s bed.

“Don’t be mean to him,” said Jean flopping down beside Jean.

“He coughed up a hairball on my socks this morning. I can be as mean to him as I please.”

Jean rolled her eyes passing the strands of her North Star necklace. “Here, help me put this on.”

Jean fiddled with the pendant while reading the headline over Sirius’ shoulder. “Anything interesting today?”

Sirius shook his head. “Nope,” he said, idly tilting the page.

“Anything interesting that’s not in the news today?” said Jean after a beat.

Sirius drummed his fingers on his knees. “There’s been another disappearance. Flora Fawley.”

“Fawley?” asked Jean. “I thought they were purebloods.”
“They are,” said Sirius. “Flora is a blood traitor.”

“How do you know that?” asked Jean.

“I remember my mother muttering about her every once in a while. She made waves about ten years ago when she divorced her husband and married a squib. I have no doubt Moody will have something on my desk about this morning.” Sirius folded up the newspaper and tossed it on the coffee table. “Where are you going today?”

“Lily is picking out her wedding dress today so I’m going along.”

Sirius smiled warmly. “It’s still hard to believe James and Lily are getting married. I mean, I’ve known James since we were eleven years old and he was nothing but knees and elbows. Now, he’s riding off into the sunset with literally the girl of his dreams.” Sirius paused for a moment. “He’s asked me to be his best man.”

“Sirius, that’s wonderful,” said Jean.

“Yeah,” said Sirius, trailing off. To Jean, he seemed almost wistful.

“Hey,” said Jean. “What’s up?”

Sirius shook himself out of whatever thought had occupied him. “Nothing,” he said, flashing a grin. “Just thinking.”

“About?” Jean gently prodded. Jean settled back into the cushions, watching Sirius fold his fingers over and over again.

“Well,” said Sirius at last. “With Frank and Alice getting married and Lily and James right after them, it got me thinking about…well, you and me. And I know we’ve only been dating a year, but….I don’t know, think about it…It, to me, it’s nice to think about you and I being…you know…like that.”

Jean tilted her head, lifting her eyebrow. “Did you just ask me to marry you?”

Sirius jolted, his eyes going wide. “No, at least, not right now.” Sirius awkwardly reached behind his head and tousled his hair. “But, I have thought about it and I was wondering what you thought about it.”

Jean hadn’t thought about it, but it didn’t surprise her as much as she thought it would. She and Sirius felt so natural, so broken in it was almost like noticing you were breathing every now and again. It seemed so normal, yet she couldn’t live without it. Jean watched Sirius move around in his seat, twisting at his thumbs. He was both staring everywhere but Jean and looking at her so intensely his gaze was going through her. Jean smiled softly, shifting towards him.

Sirius let out a small sound of surprise when Jean casually slid into his lap, kissing him soundly. Sirius settled into it soon afterwards. Jean felt his fingers ghost the underside of her jaw while her arms fell across his shoulders. Jean pulled back slightly. Sirius’ lips were left pursed in silent wanting. “Does that answer your question?” Jean asked coyly.

“Yes,” Sirius replied breathily. His eyes were shimmering like starlight on ocean waves. She reached up to touch Jean, errant curls wrapping around his fingers. Jean leaned into his hand. “I love you,” he said, “so much.”

“I love you too,” said Jean kissing him again.
Sirius gripped the small of Jean’s back, keeping her close. “You sure we have places to be?” said Sirius, turning as if to lay the pair of them down on the sofa.

Jean rolled her eyes. “Yes, we do have places to be.”

“You sure?” Sirius persisted, lounging on the sofa beneath Jean, dark hair fanned on the pillows. “We could stay here, crack open the fire whiskey, watch all those muggle TV shows you like, throw Fester out of the fire escape.”

Jean leaned over Sirius, her body flush against his. She hooded her eyes, pulling a strand of hair back over her ear. “Tempting,” she said, kissing the tip of his nose, “but no.” Sirius chortled as Jean picked herself up off him and slipped on her shoes.

“What time do you think you’ll be back?” asked Sirius, getting up after her.

“Difficult to say,” said Jean. “Maybe the late afternoon or early evening.”

Sirius nodded thoughtfully. He slipped into his room and pulled on his auror’s uniform, hastily buttoning up the doublet. “I should be home by then,” he said, coming back into the sitting room. “May I take you out to dinner tonight?”

“You may,” said Jean. “In the meantime can you run by the department and order more Floo Powder. We’re almost out.” Jean lightly shook the flowerpot placed on the mantelpiece for added emphasis.

“Sure,” said Sirius, shoving his shoes onto his feet.

Jean poured the grainy, grey powder into her hand before stepping into the fireplace. She leaned out of the hearth, pecking Sirius lightly on the lips.

“Have a good time,” he said.

“Don’t work too hard,” Jean responded before calling out the address of the Evans family home.

Sirius’ grin disappeared in a swirl of emerald flames and for a long minute Jean felt like she was both flying and being squeezed through a garden hose. Jean tumbled out in the Evans’ living room in a puff of soot and cinders. She straightened up to see Mr. Evans peering over a newspaper.

“Well, hello Jean,” said Mr. Evans, as if people falling out of his fireplace was the most normal thing in the world. “The ladies are in the kitchen.”

Jean nodded and stepped through into the kitchen. Mary, Marlene and Alice had all taken one of the kitchen chairs while Mrs. Evans was at the sink. “Hello, everyone,” she said cheerfully.

“Hi, Jean,” said Marlene cheerfully from the table, Dorcas, Mary and Alice chorusing their hellos as well.

Mrs. Evans turned away from the sink smiling brightly. She pulled Jean into a quick hug. “Hello, Jean dear, it’s been a while. Are you enjoying your new place?”

“It’s been great, thank you,” said Jean. “Where’s Lily?”

“She’s upstairs,” said Mrs. Evans a little too quickly. “I’ll go see if she’s ready.”

Jean watched Mrs. Evans’ receding back before sitting down with Alice and the others. “Is everything alright,” Jean asked, her voice low.
“Why would anything be wrong?” asked Alice.

“Just a feeling,” said Jean.

“Did you hear about the Fawney disappearance?” Alice said.

Jean nodded. “Sirius mentioned that she was missing.”

“Frank said that it was shaping up into a big investigation. That’s why they’ve been keeping information from the Prophet. People will expect them to have more to say than she’s just gone missing.”

“Good,” said Marlene shortly. “The more attention this gets the more the Ministry and…well…we can do about it.”

“I don’t understand,” said Jean, “people have gone missing for months now. Why is this so different?”

“She’s pureblood, Jean,” said Mary, “she might be estranged from her family, but she’s still their family.”

“I would have thought they’d be happy she was gone,” said Marlene.

“Not every pureblood family is like the Blacks or the Malfoys or the Lestranges. They may be pureblood and they may genuinely believe that a pureblood lineage is better than a muggle born’s, but that doesn’t mean they want anyone killed over it.”

Jean caught the surprise on Alice’s own face seconds after she said it but there was no taking it back. The tone shift in the room was subtle yet profound as everyone readjusted in their seats, glanced at their watches or flicked a non-existent hair off their sleeve. Clarissa Binnington, the Cauldwell brothers, the Beagle family, and now Flora Fawney. None of them had been found and the horrible truth was beginning to dawn on everyone that none of them were going to be found.

Mary looked up from her watch. “I wonder what’s taking Lily?”

As if on cue, Mrs. Evans descended from the staircase, her lips drawn in a thin line. “Lily will be down in a minute.”

Lily followed ten minutes later, slipping into the kitchen and sliding up to her mother. She scrubbed her pinked eyes. “Everyone ready to go?”

“Um, yeah,” said Alice, “stumbling over her words, “but…”

“Great,” said Lily, cutting everyone off. “Let’s go.” Lily practically plowed through everyone to get to the back door, leaving everyone blinking in her wake.

Lily and her mother took the front seats of the family car while Jean and the others crammed into the back seat. Jean quickly rolled down the window and their other groaned their thanks while the cool spring air whipped through the car as it puttered into town.

“Try not to let it ruin your day, dear,” Jean heard Mrs. Evans comment from the driver’s seat.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” muttered Lily. Mrs. Evans didn’t say anything and neither did Jean as she settled back into her seat.

Mrs. Evans drove the silver Ford Cortina down he main drag of the sleepy town of Cokeworth,
pulling up onto a side street and parking alongside a boutique called Donna’s. The flowerpots outside were overflowing with orange and coral colored begonias and a wedding dress with a ball gown silhouette was perfectly framed in the window. Jean tried not to notice that Lily was the last one that clamored out of the car.

A lady with a bob and tall black heels directed them over to a mirror and a collection of chairs before setting them loose on the store. Marlene dove into the shop with an enthusiasm before unseen by Jean and within minutes Marlene was carrying a dress to Lily’s dressing room.

“You’d think it was her wedding,” said Dorcas with a laugh, even as she pulled a gown into her arms, eyeing the price tag. “So,” said Dorcas, “any ideas?”

“One or two,” said Jean drifting away into the racks. She had more than an idea. She had a picture stored in Harry’s family album.

Jean flitted through the aisles, her fingers running over the fabric. Every once in a while she ran into Alice and Mary. Alice was picking out one dress after the other and Mary was more than happy to be the model, twirling the long skirts pressed against her body. Mrs. Evans was across the store, Lily hovering behind her like a shadow. Every once in a while Lily would pluck at a long sleeve before moving on.

“Lily, dear, why don’t you go try on some dressed before Marlene puts the entire shop in your dressing room.”

Lily nodded wordlessly before drifting off to the dressing rooms while everyone settled, to the best of their ability, into the stiff starched beige chairs. In the reflection of the mirror, Jean saw everyone’s eyes shift in the direction of Lily’s dressing room before rooting to the floor again.

“What’s wrong?” Jean whispered to Mary.

“I don’t know,” Mary murmured back. “I just saw her when you did.” Jean glanced over at Alice and Dorcas who were listening in on the conversation. They subtly shrugged their shoulders.

“Okay,” said Lily walking from the dressing room at the back of the store. She was wearing a Tudor style gown made from ivory silk. It had a fitted bodice, a high neckline and a flowing skirt. Lines of pearls were sewn along the bodice and trimming the trumpet sleeves. Lily stepped up onto the pedestal in front of the mirror and gave an obligatory spin. “I don’t know, what do you think?”

“Lily, I think you look beautiful,” gushed Marlene, clearly betting on her own horse. “You look just like Princess Anne.”

“It’s really pretty, Lily,” said Mary, the other chorusing similarly.

“What do you think Lily?” asked Mrs. Evans gently.

“I don’t know,” said Lily, swaying from one side to the other. “I like it. I feel like I’m being choked by the neckline. I don’t dislike it though.” Lily looked almost apologetically at her mother.

“Why don’t you try on a few more and then we can come back to it.”

“Okay,” said Lily, practically dragging her feet back to the dressing room. Mrs. Evans sighed heavily before getting up to browse the dresses.

In the time between Lily’s first dress and the second, Marlene had found three more dresses to try on. Alice and Mary found one and Dorcas brought another. Jean settled in her chair once again
empty handed.

“Have you not found any that you like?” asked Alice sitting down next to her.

“I like some,” said Jean, “I just have a very specific vision in mind.”

“Goodness,” said Marlene. “I never pegged you to be a picky shopper.”

The group waited several more minutes and only when Mrs. Evans was about to get up to see if Lily needed help with the dress did Lily appear. It was an A-line frame with a sheer bodice and sleeves that came down to her elbows. There was an overwhelming amount of scalloped trimming and flowery eyelets everywhere else. Jean cringed a little.

“I don’t like it,” said Lily matter of factly, staring dead-eyed into the mirror.

“Yeah,” said Dorcas, eyeing the dress skeptically. “Not my best pick now that I’m seeing on your body.”

“It’s a bit…much,” added Alice.

Lily didn’t wait for anyone else to give their opinions, stepping off the pedestal and quickly retreating to the dressing rooms.

Jean leaned over to Mrs. Evans. “Mrs. Evans,” said Jean gently, “is everything alright?”

Lily’s mother looked over at Jean her eyes carrying the same heavy somberness that Lily’s was. “It’s a bit personal dear. Hopefully, Lily will feel better soon.”

Lily did not feel better soon. Dress after dress, Lily either had nothing good to say or nothing to say at all. Even Marlene’s enthusiasm had waned. Jean crossed her legs, the fabric of the dress resting across her knees rustling. Everyone one was silent, aside from an occasional cough or slight shifting, determined to power through the appointment as quickly and pleasantly as possible.

Jean rolled her neck, looking at the sun peaking through the large picture window, when Lily came out in her next dress, flanked by her mother who joined her in the dressing room when the wait between dresses had become almost painful. Everyone perked up a little at the simple white crepe dress with high neckline, long bell sleeves and rings of square patterned eyelets running around the hem of the floor length skirt. Everyone waited in silence to see what Lily would say. Jean thought Lily looked like she was bending under the weight of her own body.

Lily plucked at the dress. “I like the sleeves,” she said numbly.

Marlene took that small spark of interest and sprinted with it. “I think it looks adorable,” she said, “it’s a great dress for the season.”

“It’s a bit plain though,” said Mary.

“Plain isn’t bad,” Alice said, “just because it’s simple doesn’t mean it’s bad.”

“It’s not a bad dress, I just think there’s dresses Lily’s worn better,” offered up Dorcas, “the first dress is still my favorite out of the bunch.”

“If you’re happy in it Lily,” said Jean, “then that’s all that matters.”

“We seem to be divided down the middle,” said Marlene with a laugh, visibly pleased that the day was taking a turn for the better, “where’s your sister when we need her?”
It was like a glass had shattered. One moment, Lily was fine, the next she was falling to pieces. Lily bit back a sob while big fat tears spilled onto her cheeks. Lily clapped a hand over her mouth and almost blindly rushed through the assemblage, retreating into the dressing room with a sharp snap of the door.

Jean looked around, everyone wearing similar expressions of shock, confusion and distress. “What just happened,” asked Marlene, her voice soft and wobbly.

Mrs. Evan merely tightened her lips, eyes closed, hands steepled in front of her. “I think we are just going to have to try this on another day,” she said at last. “I’ll go let the sales clerk know we are finishing up.”

Everyone deflated and Jean ran a thumb over the dress. She didn’t realize how much she had been looking forward to seeing Lily try it on till this moment. Slowly, almost reluctantly, everyone began to gather their things. Jean hefted herself out of the chair to put the dress back up on the racks. Jean passed by Lily’s dressing room door and stared at it, debating. It probably wasn’t any of her business and there probably wasn’t anything she could do. But, Jean remembered how Lily leaned against the railing of the Hogwarts Express, wind whipping though her hair. Jean recalled how Lily always made sure Jean had new sheets in Petunia’s bedroom, and Lily’s smile on the first day Jean had met her poking a hole of light through such a darkness. Jean knocked.

“Lily,” said Jean, “it’s me. Can I come in?” Jean waited a few moments chewing on the inside of her cheek. Lily nudged open the door with her foot.

Lily was folded up on the ground wearing the last wedding dress she had tried on. Surrounding her were all the other dresses she had tried on, hanging off hangers, dangling from hooks and slung over the back of a wooden chair putting them in a cloud of ruffles, frills and satin ribbons. Jean hung her dress over the back of the door and sat down on the floor across from Lily. Jean didn’t say anything. She tucked her knees under her chin and wrapped her arms around her shins.

Lily stared down at her feet, bare toes poking out from the hemline. She sniffed once, twice, before wiping her nose and staring deliberately up at the ceiling. She rubbed her eyes and took a steadying breath. The red in her eyes made them look almost too green.

“Petunia,” said Lily, “has refused to be my maid of honor.” Lily slapped her hands on her knees, anger replacing sadness. “more than that she has refused to come to my wedding.”

Jean tilted her head watching Lily choke back fresh tears, almost shaking from the effort of trying to hold herself together. “And now my mum and dad are furious and I’m sure James is going to be mad when he hears and I’m just so angry and sad and hurt,” Lily cut herself off, her face twisting, “and it’s my wedding. I just want everyone to be happy.”

Lily tapered off, weeping into her hand. Jean blinked rapidly. “I’m sorry, Lily,” she said, not knowing what else to say. “I’m so sorry.”

Lily scrubbed her face, her breath ragged, but settling. She stared forward, but Jean wondered if she was seeing anything at all. “Sometimes I think it would be better if I never was a witch,” she said, her voice sounded airy, ethereal.

“You don’t mean that,” said Jean.

Lily sniffed through her nose. “No, I don’t mean that. But still, life could have been simpler without magic.”
Lily uncurled a little, resting her back against the wall of their little room. She turned her head up, tears leaking out of the corners of her eyes even as a wobbly smile drew itself across her face. “We went to the beach once, the four of us. I must have been five. Tuney was wearing this obnoxiously yellow bathing suit and doing cartwheels right where the water hit the shores. She taught me how to do one that trip. She’d hold my ankles while I tried to get over. We must’ve fallen in the ocean so many times.” Lily laughed a moment before continuing. “When I finally landed it you would’ve thought I’d won the World Cup. She was jumping up and down, sea foam splashing around her ankles, the strings on that stupid bathing suit flying everywhere. In that moment, I thought I could do anything in the world because she believed I could.”

“Lily,” said Jean “you didn’t ask this. You didn’t ask for magic or being a witch or to be in any way special in a way that Petunia wasn’t. It’s not fair for her to punish you for the rest of your life over something you had no control of.”

Lily gave Jean a lingering look, one that Jean couldn’t quite read. “She’s my sister,” said Lily, “she’s always going to be special.” Lily heaved out a sigh and her entire body shuddered with it. “I just wish she knew that too.”

Jean shifted as Lily lapsed into silence. “I wish there was something I could say to help you,” said Jean.

“How do you do it?” Jean asked Lily. “You left your whole family, your friends. You don’t write them. They don’t come visit and from I’ve been able to figure out it almost seems like you had to leave them.”

Jean looked down at the ground between them. She felt her body tighten. “You’re not wrong,” she said, her jaw pressed against her kneecap.

“How do you live with all that loss,” asked Lily.

“I just go one day at a time,” said Jean. “Some days I feel so fine and others I ache so much from missing them that I can’t breathe.” Jean felt her throat close and she swallowed. “With James and Sirius it’s…so hard. They remind me so much of them. Sometimes I feel like if I look away and look back they’ll be there wondering why I was gone for so long.” Jean bit down on her lip. “Sometimes I feel guilty, being with all of you, being happy, because it feels like I am betraying all the heartbreak I went through with them. But then one day, I realized I couldn’t spend the rest of my life being sad all the time out of respect for the people I had lost because I would miss out on the people I have found. I…I gave myself permission to be happy again.”

Lily looked at Jean, tears dried to salt tracks on her face. “We’re your family now, aren’t we, Jean.”

Jean hadn’t thought about it and was surprised by her answer even as she said it. “Yeah, I guess we are.”

Lily moved a little to sit down next to Jean and rested her head on Jean’s shoulder. Jean tilted her head against Lily’s temple. “I see what Sirius talking is talking about. You’re really great to talk to about hard stuff. I wish you could talk to us about the hard stuff.”

“What do you mean?” asked Jean, looking forward, face expressionless.

“I know that what you told us: why you came to Hogwarts, why you left, isn’t the whole truth.”

Jean let out a breath. “It isn’t,” she said.
“Will you ever tell me?” Lily’s voice was almost a whisper.

“Probably not.” Jean felt Lily nod again Jean’s skin.

Lily and Jean lapsed into silence for a minute. Jean pretended she didn’t see Lily trying to fix her face. “Jean?” asked Lily.

“Yeah?”

“Will you be my maid of honor?”

Jean felt her heart squeeze and explode at the same time. She remembered a time when Lavender Brown picked out her bridesmaids, piled up in a giggling mass on her bed in the Gryffindor girl’s dormitory. She watched their silhouettes hug each other through the crimson curtains of Lavender’s bed, back lit by wand light, before she turned her attention back to her studying. Jean squeezed Lily closer to her. “I’d love to be,” Jean managed.

The pair wiped their eyes once or twice before standing, Lily pulling out the wrinkles in the wedding dress she was wearing. “You want to get dressed and get out of here?” asked Jean.

“Don’t you want me to try on the dress you brought me first?” asked Lily.

Jean shrugged her shoulders. “There’s always next Saturday.”

Lily changed and she and Jean met the others loitering near the entrance of the shop, gingerly carrying Jean’s dress. Lily walked up to the lady with the bob who was standing behind the till. “Excuse me,” said Lily extending the dress. “I was wondering if you could put this dress on hold until I try it on next Saturday. Oh and while we’re at it, can I make an appointment for next Saturday?”

“Sure,” said the lady. She bagged the dress in a pink plastic sack, hanging it up behind her. “It’ll be here for you in a week.”

“Thanks,” said Lily.

Jean held to door open for Lily as they all went outside. Mrs. Evans touched Jeans’ shoulder as she passed by.

“Are you sure you want to pass up on dinner?” asked Marlene after everyone had returned to the Evans’ house. “Dorcas told me about this really great Italian place.”

“Yeah,” I’m sure,” said Lily, leaning up against the bannister, giving everyone a tired smile. “I just really want to go lie down.”

“Okay,” Marlene responded sympathetically. “What about you Jean?”

“I can’t,” said Jean. “Sirius and I are going out to eat.”

“You live with him,” said Marlene, “every night’s date night.”

“What Marlene means,” interjected Alice. “is have a nice time.” Alice pulled Jean and Lily into a hug. “I’ll see the pair of you next Saturday.”

“See you soon,” said Jean.

“Take care,” said Dorcas.
“Bye,” Mary added.

“I’ll be thinking of you as I eat my breadsticks,” said Marlene.

“Have a lovely evening,” said Lily, shuttling them towards the door. Lily leaned against the paneling her hand coming to a rest on the doorknob, laughing lightly once they’d left. “It’s almost too much when you put them together like that.”

Lily walked Jean over to the fireplace, the Floo Powder tucked innocuously away in a ceramic vase on the corner of the mantle. “So where are you going with Sirius?” asked Lily.

Jean shrugged her shoulders. “Are you sure you’re going to be okay. I can always let Sirius know that I’m going to stay over here with you.”

Lily nodded. “Yeah. I’ll be fine. Go on, don’t let me spoil your evening.” Lily pulled Jean into a hug.

“She doesn’t deserve you,” said Jean, into Lily’s shoulder.

“Yet, she’s always going to have me,” Lily responded. “I’ll see you next week.”

“See you,” said Jean.

The Floo engulfed Jean and she stepped out into the still silence of her sitting her. Jean flicked the lights on with her wand before tossing it down on the coffee table. A small crumpled note was balanced on the edge of the table, singe and sooty as if it had been thrown from the hearth. Jean unfolded the crumpled crusty page.

Jean,

I’m sorry to disappoint you, but I may have to cancel dinner tonight. The whole situation with Flora Fawney is much bigger than I anticipated. Her father has spoken personally with the Minister and the Minister has sent his undersecretary to Moody declaring her recovery was of ‘penultimate importance.’

Moody dolled out extra shifts to keep the Minister happy and he wants as many Order members involved as possible. I shouldn’t be out all night and but don’t wait up for me either.

Again, I’m sorry about dinner. I was thinking a lot about what we talked about this morning and, if you wanted to, I was hoping to revisit it. Anyways, I hope you had fun today, especially Lily. See you tonight.

Love,

Sirius

P.S Floo Powder should be delivered in a few days.

Jean traced the dramatic L above Sirius’ signature before folding it up. Hephaestus was lounging on the kitchen table when Jean stepped into the cramped room. “Well, Hephaestus,” said Jean opening the refrigerator. “I guess it’s just you and me tonight.”
Jean slapped together a sandwich, and cracked open a can of wet cat food, dumping it into Hephaestus’ bowl. Hephaestus looked at the bowl and up at Jean, yellow eyes blinking, fur fanning about his face like he licked a light socket.

“Don’t give me that look,” Jean said. “Sirius did that one time and I told him never to do it again.” Hephaestus looked down at the bowl again, sniffing it before taking a bite, chewing deliberately.

Jean ate methodically as well, peeling off the crust and popping it into her mouth, eating from a corner before turning it about in her hand and eating from the other side. Jean idly tapped on the vanilla parchment folded up by her fingers. “What do you think Hephaestus? How about a Fall wedding? It could be small, intimate. No more than 30 people. It could be at sunset, with candles. In a church. I’d like to get married in a church.” Jean glanced over at Hephaestus, whose entire face was now in the bowl. Jean smiled before biting into her sandwich with a crunch.

Jean almost missed it; the sound was so soft. A quiet popping sound came from the living room. Jean stilled, and slowly put the sandwich down on her plate, listening intently. There it was again, a swift, staccato cracking and a single emerald ember lobbed from the fireplace.

Jean got up and walked over to the hearth, bending down in front of it. There was more crackling and more sparks shooting from the array of logs. It was almost like someone was trying to fire call and was having problems getting through.

“Sirius,” said Jean.

The fireplace erupted. The entire inner well was wreathed in green flames, tongues leaking out to touch the walls accompanied by a roaring unrelenting heat. Jean would have jumped back in surprise if a hand hadn’t thrust itself from the inferno and seized her by her shirt. Jean grabbed at the bony wrist, feeling long fingernails digging into her skin. The arm attached was cloaked in a black robe almost an iridescent purple from the flames.

Jean turned, thrashing wildly, reaching for her wand setting mere inches from her on the edge of the table. A second hand joined the first, entangling itself in her hair. Jean felt a ring pressing into the back of her skull. The arms jerked and Jean’s head snapped back. Her legs gave out from underneath her and she landed on her hip. Jean felt herself being towed into the fireplace. Jean flinched at the hot coals bouncing against her face. The thick black smoke blinded her, burning her throat as she coughed. She kicked desperately kicked, but all it did was upturn the rug. With one final flail of her feet, Jean’s unseen assailant dragged her into the Floo, the fire behind her giving one last pulse before leaving the flat the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

So yeah, that happened. Reviews are always welcome

Warning: the next chapter may be upsetting for some readers to viewer discretion is advised.

Wedding dresses inspired from photos of Princess Anne's first wedding dress, Princess Caroline of Monaco and Lisa Najeeb Halaby's wedding dresses.
The cell that Jean was thrown into was mottled grey, held together by viscous algae as much as mortar. The ground was damp. The uneven, pockmarked ground held shallow pools of watery sewage. The arrhythmic water dropping on stone was the only sound aside from Jean’s breathing. The blackness around her was almost dizzying as she blindly tried to get her bearings. Jean felt bars, thick and damp with condensation. Rust came off in sheets onto her hands. If she squinted, Jean could see a faint light down the hallway from her prison. Jean ran the tips of her fingers along the walls, but could find no cracks, cervices or any hint of another way out. The air was stagnant and earthen, making Jean believe she was being kept underground.

Jean paced around, nervous energy building within her. She had no idea who had taken her or how long she had been taken. Jean wondered if the Order knew she was even gone. Jean about tripped over a pewter plate and cup that had either just appeared underfoot or had been there the entire time and Jean hadn’t notice. Jean held the items inches from her face to make out what they were. On the plate was bread that looked like it came from an artisan bakery and in the cup was water. Jean eyed the ration skeptically, sniffing at the bread and tasting the water with the tip of her tongue. Jean didn’t think her captors would go through the trouble of kidnapping her just to kill her, but she wasn’t taking any chances. Jean smashed the bread into her jeans pocket and held the cup in her hands. She tucked the plate beneath her shirt, pressed to the small of her back. Jean leaned against the grimy wall of the dungeon, not wanting to be caught sitting down. Jean folded her arms and contended herself with waiting.

Jean jabbed her elbow into the wall when the clang of tumblers on a lock echoed in her ears. Jean squinted at the pale light that suddenly lit up the narrow corridor, two shadows breaking the wide beam of light. The figures came to a halt in front of the bars, long black robes pooling at their feet, hoods pulled up over their heads. Jean released a breath through her nose to steady herself. Death Eaters.

The cloaked man on the right flicked the top of his wand, the cell doors grinding open. Jean dropped her arms to her side and tensed.

“Don’t make us hurt you,” said the Death Eater, reaching for her. Light from the doorway glinted off his sliver mask. Jean grabbed the Death Eater’s hand rather than pushing him back she yanked him down. In the same motion, Jean drove her knee up into his face. Jean’s kneecap was going to be bruised, but the surprised grunt and subsequent expletives made it worth it.

“You little—” said the second Death Eater, fumbling with his wand.

The Death Eater didn’t get to finish his sentence. Jean whipped out the pewter pate from her waistband and whacked it across his knuckles, sending his wand flying from his spasming fingers. On the backswing Jean cracked the side of the Death Eater’s head and he went down like timber. Jean scooped up the second Death Eater’s wand and leapt over the first, who was still rolling around on the floor, hands to his face, and skittered from the cell.

The wand felt clunky and awkward in one hand while with the other she skimmed the dingy walls
trying to keep her balance. The light hurt her eyes but she kept running towards it. Jean about rolled her ankle when she tumbled into a short staircase but managed to brace herself. A door was beginning to take shape and the room beyond it. If she could just see she could fight. She could escape.

Jean was on the top step when the hazy light was blotted out. A third Death Eater filled the doorway. He was taller than the other two, and thinner with a trimmed waist. Jean didn’t even have time to flinch before his wand was pointed directly at her chest.

“Stupefy,” he said, evenly.

Jean felt like she had been punched by a giant. Jean flew back down the staircase landing flat on her back. Jean wheezed, her eyes watering, trying to catch the breath that had been violently knocked out of her. Jean heard the heavy footsteps of the other two Death Eaters walk up to her.

“Get up,” one of them growled, the pair of them seizing her by the shoulders. The wand was roughly snatched out of her hand.

“Did that mudblood disarm you and take your wand without having a wand herself, Rosier? Disgraceful.”

Jean perked up, she recognized that voice laced with so much disdain and indifference. Jean closed her eyes, willing herself to be anywhere else as the two Death Eaters manhandled her up the stairs away from her cell.

Jean couldn’t help but gape at the vaulted ceilings of the greatroom, the swirled marble flooring, the cumbersome chandelier that wouldn’t be shattered by a house elf for another 20 years.

Jean’s eyes grounded on Narcissa immediately. She was like an alabaster statue in a hall of black stone. She sat delicately in a straight-backed chair, legs crossed at her ankles, demurely looking down into her teacup. Walburga Black sat next to Narcissa on a dark green chenille love seat. The volume of fur stoles Walburga had around her neck made her shoulders nearly twice their natural size. The woman stared at Jean with the hard gaze of a hawk. Jean saw a bulky opal ring resting on her middle finger when she wrapped her hand around the stem of her cane. There was another man standing off to the side of Walburga that Jean could only see in profile. He had black hair streaked with strands of silver and plain robes cut close to his body.

The stranger didn’t distract Jean for long. She was roughly shoved into a chair in front of the third Death Eater who pulled down his hood. He removed his ornate mask with a lazy wave of his wand. His hair was a bit shorter than Jean remembered, but Lucius Malfoy’s chilled countenance carried across all incarnations.

“How do you know who I am?” asked Lucius.

“I know who you are,” Jean replied.

The stranger stepped forward, past Walburga, walking in an almost unnaturally smooth gait. He was a half a head taller than Lucius. The man methodically removed his dragon skin gloves, pulling at each finer. He glanced at Jean with mild disinterest. Jean’s eyes widened. She would recognize those eyes anywhere.

“You offended my wife,” said the man. He sounded utterly indifferent to the situation.

Jean buried her emotions behind an austere expression. “She should learn to not be so easily offended.”
“You’re very presence is offensive, mudblood,” sneered Walburga, her voice waspish.

Orion Black held up a finger and Walburga fell silent. “Your affairs with Sirius will end,” he said.

“You disowned him,” said Jean. “Why do you even care?”

“Sirius has a higher purpose,” said Orion. He sounded bored. “And you are a chittering distraction.”

“You don’t own him,” said Jean, staring defiantly up at Sirius’ eyes set firmly in the face of his father.

“I tried to tell you, Orion,” said Walburga from the small sofa. Beside her, Narcissa sat primly, staring at the ground. “It can’t be trained.”

“I don’t need her to be trained,” said Lucius, stepping forward. “I need her to talk.”

Orion looked at Lucius, his eyes thinning. He looked like a viper nestled in the grass. “I am here for my own ambitions. Not yours.”

“Yet you brought her here, cousin,” said Lucius, almost placating. “And wouldn’t what she knows aid your son? The Dark Lord does not show favor freely.”

“Let him, Orion,” said Walburga. She looked at Jean hungrily. “No doubt she deserves it.”

Jean watched the exchange. She had never seen Lucius Malfoy ask permission for anything. Orion considered, even if it was just a pretense, a pecking order of power, before he nodded. “We were never here, Lucius.”

Lucius nodded gracefully to the elder Black, who turned, heels ringing on the marbled floor. Walburga stood and fell into stride beside him. Orion’s re-gloved hand fell to the small of her back.

Jean pulled her attention back to Lucius, who towered over her, a pleased smirk on his face. A slight shiver ran down Jean’s spine, but she schooled her face to be unreadable. “Jean Granger,” he said. “You’re a hard woman to find. Formerly of Boston, currently residing in number 2A Brick Street, Mayfair, London. Member of the Order of the Phoenix.”

“You’ve done your homework.” Jean tried to keep calm and still, looking up at the proud Death Eater.

Lucius tilted his head to the side. “You don’t scare easily,” he commented. “No matter.” Lucius pulled his wand from the folds of his robes.

Jean stiffened, her façade slipping slightly, fingers gripping the arms of the chair. “If you think I’m going to tell you anything about the Order, you’ve got another thing coming.”

“The Order?” said Lucius. “Oh, no. This is for trying to escape. Crucio!”

Jean’s entire body seized up, as if she had been electrocuted. Her muscles were contracting so much she lost the ability to move. Her body was covered in a wave of prickling pins and needles broken up by a stabbing sensation jabbing one part of her body before moving onto another. Jean’s head snapped back, mouth open in a scream, but her vocal cords were so constricted she couldn’t make a sound.
Even after Lucius lifted the curse Jean’s body felt taught as a wire. Jean consciously uncurled each finger from their grip on the chair. Beyond Lucius, Narcissa sat primly as ever, arms crossed, hands holding her shoulders.

“Now then,” said Lucius, leaning back on his heels. “Let’s talk about the Order of the Phoenix.”

Jean tried to get a handle on her breathing as Lucius circled her chair. “I know Dumbledore is the head of this Order, that much is obvious. Who is his second in command?”

“I don’t know,” said Jean.

“Pulsa,” said Lucius.

Jean gritted her teeth feeling electric sparks flying through her nerves. She felt like her skin was crackling and her hair was standing on end. Jean panted as Lucius lifted the spell, chest rapidly rising and falling.

“Let’s try something more simple then. Tell me where the Order has its Headquarters?”

“No,” said Jean. She tried to recover and brace herself at the same time.

“Adole.” Jean let out a sharp breath, twisting uncomfortably in her chair. She felt so warm it was almost like she was burning. She could feel sweat gathering at the nape of her neck. Through bleary eyes, Jean saw Narcissa quickly stand and clip from the room without so much as a word. Jean watched her with muted surprise. Narcissa was all talk when it came to her pureblood mania, but skittered away when the untidiness came inside her house. It was so laughable Jean had to bite down on her lip to keep from doing so.

Jean saw a red light from the corner of her eye. The spell struck her like a slap across the face. Jean saw Lucius tuck his wand back against his arm. “Don’t laugh at her,” he said, his voice low.

Lucius continue to circle Jean, prowling like a cat with eyes on the cream. “You are not making this easy for yourself. I don’t care that a flea bitten blood traitor is sleeping with a mudblood. Just tell me what I want to know and you can go home.”

Jean cocked her head, whinging slightly as her neck muscles strained. “Lucius,” said Jean, “the sad thing is that I actually believe you.” Jean tapered off not saying anything else.

The cat’s cream soured and Lucius’ cool façade was beginning to show crack. Lucius jabbed his wand at Jean’s face. “Condundito!”

Jean wheezed out a breath, feeling crushed as coils of magic tightened around her chest. Her tongue rolled around in her mouth as she coughed.

“I’m powerful,” said Lucius, still holding the spell on her, “and wealthy. I could send you and Black so far away no one would give you a second thought. You’d be free to live your lives.” Lucius flicked his wand and the invisible anvil lifted off Jean’s ribcage. “Tell me, who are you trying to protect in the Order? Do they work for the Ministry?”

“This doesn’t happed to you often, does it?” commented Jean, her breath coming out in a rattle, “not getting what you want.”

Lucius stiffened, keenly aware of the Death Easters loitering behind him. “I’d stop talking if I were you,” he said evenly.
Jean didn’t stop talking. Unnerving her captor was the only card she had to play. “Lucius Malfoy,” Jean almost drolled. “You say your name and they all but fall at your feet.” Jean noted a vein pulsing in Lucius’ pale temple, his fingers adjusting around his wand. “What are you without that name, I wonder?”

“Shut up!” Jean felt pushed back by the slash of white light coming from Lucius’ wand. She heard the chair skid across the floor.

In two strides Lucius was on top of her again. He gripped the back of her chair and leaned into Jean’s face. “You’ve exhausted my patience, mudblood.” Jean could detect a touch of desperation curdling his features. “I won’t ask again.”

“Then you’re going to have to kill me, Malfoy,” Jean countered, albeit weakly, “but we both know you don’t have it in you.”

“Crucio!”

Even braced for it, the spell still made Jean writhe in her seat. No matter how much air she tried to take in, it was never enough. For a moment, Jean thought she was swallowing her tongue. Lucius lifted the spell and Jean nearly tipped onto his chest, her body trembling and boneless. She stared up at him, slightly dazed. “As little value as you are, you’re worth more alive than dead,” Lucius whispered through his teeth.

Behind Lucius one of the Death Eaters stepped forward. “Want me to take over?” he asked, pulling out his wand.

Lucius jerked his head back, his aloof countenance settling back onto his face. “No,” he said simply. “Take her back. Let’s see how long with bravado lasts.”

Two pairs of hands seized Jean and the Death Eaters forcibly guided her from the room. Face set, Jean kept her feet under her, determined to show Lucius she could walk out of the room. However her knees did wobble as the two Death Eaters walked her back into the dark basement of the Malfoy manner, shoving her into her cell.

Jean stumbled, but refused to fall, turning, arms crossed, to glare at her captors as they shut the door with a clang.

“Filthy mudblood,” one of the Death Eaters grumbled before the pair faded into the darkness. When they had gone, Jean glanced down at her fingers wrapped around the cold metal bars. Jean peeled her hands away, looking down at the silty layer of rust coloring her palms. Jean scrubbed her hands against her thighs and resumed pacing in her cell.

Her confines continued to keep a means of escape from her. Jean paced to burn off her nervous energy and to stay alert. Her hand hit the bars in a rhythmic thwapping as she walked, vaguely hoping that the twelfth or twentieth pass over would produce a wiggle. Each strike produced a solid, unyielding resistance and a growing ache in her hand.

Jean winced pulling her hand back and rubbing the battered knuckle. Additionally, Jean felt pangs in her back and the arches of her feet. Jean rolled her shoulders and felt the cracking beneath her taught muscles. Jean sighed through her nose before retreating to a corner of her cell where she could observe the bars and the dark hallway beyond them.

Jean didn’t realize how cold she was until she stopped moving. Moisture seeped into her clothes from the drab walls and floor. Every time she shifted, Jean found a new ache in her body.
pulled her legs up against her, forming a tight ball. Steadily, Jean breathed hot air into her core. Jean wrapped her arms around her calves and rested her chin on her knees, her eyes ever sweeping.

Again, Jean wondered how long she had been there and, more importantly, how long she would have to last before her rescue. It must be the next day by now and Sirius would surely have returned to their flat and found her missing. Jean wondered if there were any signs of a struggle. Was there soot smeared on the floor? Was the rug drug halfway into the fireplace? Despite the circumstances, Jean really wouldn’t mind that fireplace now. She could barely feel her toes.

Jean pulled her head up off her knees with a gasp that sounded louder than than it was in the surrounding silence. Jean listened intently. In her half sleep Jean had heard something, a sharp popping sound. Jean squinted through the darkness before screwing her eyes shut, a headache pounding behind her lids.

Gingerly, Jean eased herself upright. Jean hummed behind her teeth, tendons stretching painfully. Her skin looked blue her fingernails tinged with purple. Jean blew hot puffs of air into her cupped fingers and stamped her feet trying to bring some warmth back into her body.

It was so tiny and so underfoot that Jean didn’t see it at first. When she clipped it with the edge of her shoe it went ricocheting away from her, plinking across the uneven ground like rain on a sheet roof. Started, Jean looked down to see a small amber bottle rolling to a stop. It was as long as her thumb, stopper and all. The label was smudged with food stains and the lip was chipped. It looked like it hand been fished out of a garbage bin. Holding it close to her face, Jean was able to read Vanilla Extract written in thin loopy cursive along the wrapping.

Jean opened the tiny bottle and it didn’t smell like vanilla. It smelled like citrus and cinnamon, almost like mead. At first, Jean thought it was veritaserum or poison and those thoughts nearly sent the innocuous dram smashing into the wall. But, Jean’s fingers loosened. If it was poison or truth serum the Death Eaters would surely have force fed her and they certainly wouldn’t have put it in a bottle she could have, and very nearly did, step on. Jean inhaled again, longer and deeper. It smelled like the comforts of the living room fire she had been daydreaming about.

Jean took a droplet hanging in the neck of the bottle on the tip of her tongue. It was heavy and syrupy. Jean felt an ember of warmth heating her insides. The muscles in her neck relaxed. Jean had no idea what the potion was or how it came to be there, but she didn’t think it was there to hurt her. She tossed it back like a shot. It was like wearing a sweater. The cold of that dank, dark room did not affect her as much and the twangs and pangs of all the curses Lucius threw at her body were fading under the weight of the comforting heat. Feeling markedly better, Jean stopped and propped her foot against the wall to brace herself, resuming her vigil. She tossed the bottle away, hearing it ring against the stone once, then twice, before being swallowed by darkness. It was the last sound Jean heard for an uncomfortably long time.

When the door of the manor above opened again it hurt her ears. Wincing, Jean tilted her head down from where she had been staring at the ceiling. She was counting the divots in the rock. She had lost count twice and this was the third time she made it to one hundred. Jean kicked herself off the walk and stood, shoulders squared, to meet the two Death Eaters who now stood before her cell, the door swinging open with the flick of an unseen wand.

One Death Eater immediately jabbed a wand at her face as he appeared. Jean lifted her chin slightly. “You break my nose again, mudblood, and I’ll break your arm,” he grumbled.

The Death Eater had his wand aimed at Jean until the tip was almost digging into her cheek. He then seized Jean’s shoulder and bodily moved her in front of him and his companion. “Move,” he commanded.
Like twin shadows the Death Eaters muscled Jean from her cell and drove her back up the short and creaky staircase into the atrium like space she had been brought before. Lucius was already waiting for them, leaning elegantly against the wall, examining the tip of his wand as if he were bored. Orion and Walburga Black were not present. Jean assumed they were waiting to see Sirius show up on the steps of Grimmauld Place to know the task was done. Narcissa must have also been hiding away somewhere in the house as she was not present either.

Jean was slammed down into the same plain wooden chair. Her burly captors skulked away from her, taking positions on the perimeter of the room. One had his thumb resting on the hilt of his wand.

Lucius looked at her out of the corner of his eye before pushing himself off the wall. Jean noted that the layer of cool smugness had settled onto his face again. Jean shifted in her chair, breathing deep into her lungs. “You’re friends seem quite eager to find you,” Lucius began, still idly turning his wand about his fingers. “I see them at work, you know. Sirius looks like he’s barely able to function.”

Jean hoped her face didn’t tell Lucius show much that bothered her. “What do you want now, Lucius?” she said, evenly.

Jean was already beginning to see a crack in Lucius’ demeanor in the corners of his eyes. “I want you to do us both a favor and tell me what I want to know. Which members of the Order of the Phoenix work for the Ministry?”

“You’ll get nothing out of me, Lucius,” said Jean, steeling herself.

Lucius bared his teeth and pointed his wand at Jean. “Puncto.”

Jean let out a sharp breath as the illusion of pins and needles pierced the soles of her feet, the palms of her hands and the backs of her thighs. She twisted in her seat but could find no relief.

“Do you think this ends with you?” said Lucius softly, circling her as she squirmed. “Do you think if you won’t talk we won’t just find another? One of your friends perhaps? Marlene?....Alice?....Lily?

“Leave them alone,” said Jean shakily. She chewed on the inside of her cheek.

“Ah, we have a winner,” said Lucius. “You don’t want them suffering do you?” I’ll tell you what, for every name in the Order I will personally insure the safety of one of your friends.”

Jean wasn’t sure when Lucius lifted the spell nor when she screwed her eyes shut. Blearily, Jean opened her eyes and saw Lucius leaning over her. “Tell me…” he urged gently.

Jean swallowed and coughed slightly, wrapping her tongue around her words. “Go to hell, Malfoy, and take your empty promises with you.”

Lucius let out a growl in frustration. He reared back, platinum hair flying about his face, jamming his wand into her chest. “Proten!” Lucius shouted.

Jean let out a strangled gasp. An invisible force began steadily pulling her as if she were being stretched across a rack. She felt the joints in her ankles and elbows coming apart. The vertebrae in her spine were close to snapping. Jean tilted her head back, eyes watering, struggling even to breathe.

“Is it your loyalty to Dumbledore then that keeps you silent?” Lucius pressed, still circling,
occasionally passing in front of Jean’s swimming vision. “Do you think he would be disappointed? I have kidnapped you, hurt you, and will continue to do so. How could he find fault in you wanting that to stop?” Lucius leaned down and his words were slithering directly into Jean’s ear. “Do you think he cares how you suffer for him? You are a pawn, easily disposable.”

With great effort, Jean twisted her head, Lucius’ eyes inches from her face. “Is that how you are to Voldemort?” she whispered.

Jean felt her vibrating body relax as the spell dropped, but Jean didn’t think it was on purpose this time. Lucius backed away quickly, the color dropping out of his face. It was as if all the sound, save for Jean’s breathing, had been sucked out of the room.

“Are you that eager to die?” said Lucius, eyeing her with a strange look.

“No Lucius,” said the silky smooth voice of a woman. Despite the ache in her whole body, Jean suddenly felt numb. It was not a voice that belonged to anyone previously in the room, but she would know it anywhere. It haunted her in the darkest of her dreams. Bellatrix Lestrange glided into the room, her heels ringing against the marble flooring. “She knows she’s already dead.”

Bellatrix, out of everyone save Sirius, looked the most different from how Jean remembered her. While still pale with faint purple veins running beneath her skin it wasn’t sallow and skeletal. Thick, voluminous curls fell down her back, black as midnight, not streaked with frenzied bolts of grey. Her eyes were the same, like looking into the colorless, cloudless eye of a hurricane; eerie calm rimmed with chaos.

Lucius hid his surprise behind a close-lipped smile. “Bellatrix,” he said. “Narcissa is somewhere in the house.”

Bellatrix wasn’t paying attention to Lucius, glancing around him at Jean with a look that sent a bolt of fear down her back. “I was told you were having trouble getting a member of Dumbledore’s Order to talk,” she said, matter of factly.

Lucius’ eyes narrowed to slits, staring venomously at the two other Death Eaters on his periphery. “I’m handling it,” he said.

One of the Death Eaters said nothing and silently shrugged his shoulders. The second lifted his thumb from his wand and flicked a fleck of dust off his hooded face. “Mudblood broke my nose,” he said simply.

“Oh really?” said Bellatrix almost jovially. Jean barely had time to react before a white bolt of pain blinded her. She felt a sickening crunch within her face. Jean cried out from shock as much as pain, bringing her hand up to her nose, blood pouring over her fingers.

Jean felt a hand seizing her, dragging it away from her face. Blinking hazily she stared into Bellatrix’s eyes. “Tell little Lucius what he wants to know and I may leave the rest of your bones intact.”

Jean took in a shaky breath, her voice garbled by blood. “No.”

Jean had a vague faraway memory of Harry telling her that for an Unforgiveable Curse to work the person had to mean it. Jean could tell that Bellatrix meant it, far more than Lucius ever had. She felt Bellatrix’s joy behind it. The cruciatus curse hurt. Indescribably so. Jean felt it taking her apart at the cellular level, burning her to nothing. Jean was almost surprised that she still had a body when Bellatrix finally lifted the curse.
Bellatrix flicked her wand and Jean was slowly pushed back upright in her chair. Jean wheezed, throat tender and raw. Only then did she realize she had been screaming. Bellatrix spoke. “Many times now, members of your order,” she sneered at the word, “have found where we meet. Many of us are now in hiding. I want to know if the order has a spy.”

Jean heard every other word, still trying to push breath through her mouth, let alone sentences. Blood was pooling in her mouth, behind her teeth.

“Speak!” said Bellatrix, going from soft to screaming. “Modere!”

Jean screamed as jaws clamped down on her shoulder, biting down through bone and muscle with unseen teeth. “I don’t know,” Jean’s voice rasped in her throat. She truly didn’t know. She couldn’t process anything beyond her own pain. A movement momentarily distracted Jean. Lucius had taken a step back, eyes wide and uncertain. Jean realized with a shudder that he had lost control of the situation.

“Look at me when I’m talking to you, you filthy mudblood! Confrature!”

Jean almost threw up when she felt her fingers break. A cry tore itself from her throat and Jean’s body doubled over, tucking her mutilated digits into her abdomen.

The tip of a wand was shoved her Jean’s chin, forcing it upwards. Jean cowered under Bellatrix’s gaze. Bellatrix tilted her head a smiled at her, as sweet as it was unhinged. “Who are you trying to hide from me?”

Jean didn’t speak. Part of her wasn’t even sure she was capable. Bellatrix rolled her eyes as if she were bored, bringing her wand down a few inches. “Paulum.”

Jean felt all the air knock out of her like she had been hit with a bat. She felt the bruises beginning to form under her ribs. Jean wheezed. “Paulum.” Bellatrix said again and Jean felt a blow on her arm, jolting her sideways. “Tell me, tell me, tell me,” said Bellatrix in a high, sing-song voice, waving her wand around like a baton, raining down spells on Jean in an arrhythmic barrage of pain. The latest blow sent Jean crumbling to the ground. A pulsing purple bruise was swelling Jean’s eye shut and her entire body was trembling. No amount of movement was not painful. Through her hazy vision she saw her fingers on her right hand twisted out into odd angles from where Bellatrix had broken them. Stiffly, Jean turned her head watching Bellatrix’s arm arc into the air again. She struggled to lift her hand to defend herself.

“Bellatrix, stop.” shouted Lucius, face pale, eyes switching from Jean to Bellatrix and back again. “You’ll kill her.”

“If she dies, she dies, and that’s one less worthless mudblood to give us trouble.”

“We need what she knows,” said Lucius.

“You need what she knows,” said Bellatrix. “Don’t think the Dark Lord hasn’t told me of your incompetence. How many of his plans have failed on your watch? Hm? You need to impress him.”

Lucius stayed quiet and Bellatrix flashed her teeth at him. “Don’t worry,” she said sweetly. “I’ll give you the credit.” Bellatrix lifted her wand again and Jean could only brace herself.

“If you kill her then Sirius will never come to our side.”

For a split second, Bellatrix’s eyes rounded. Her head tilted, her pursed lips slightly slackened.
Then her face morphed into the strange combination of revulsion and glee. “Suffocant,” she whispered.

Jean choked out an airless gasp and wildly reached up to her neck, clawing at nothing as Bellatrix’s spell strangled her.

“So you’re the one,” Bellatrix whispered. “How dare you think you can keep a man of such a lineage from his destiny? I should kill you for that alone.” Bellatrix turned her wand and the chokehold became even tighter. Jean’s vision was tinged by darkness and the only sound in the room was the scuffing of Jean’s shoes as she thrashed on the floor.

“Bellatrix, stop!” even though Lucius was shouting, Jean could hardly hear him. Through her tunneled vision Jean saw Bellatrix whip around towards Lucius, wand gripped in her white knuckled fist. She looked almost tempted to point it at him as her sharp features and sharper tongue spoke words Jean could not make out.

“Rosier, Wilkes. Take her away. I must speak with my cousin—”

The two Death Eaters swam into Jean’s vision seizing her by the arms. Jean stumbled to walk on her cold numb feet, her fingers digging into the dark robes to stay upright. Jean felt the air around her cool as she was ushered back underground. The sour sounding hinges of her cell shrieked and a firm hand shoved the muscles in her screaming back.

Jean tumbled into her cell, taking one clumsy step, then another, before falling roughly onto her knees. With what little energy she had, Jean dragged herself to the back of the drab cubicle, propping herself against the wall.

“Not so high and mighty now, mudblood,” groused one of the Death Eaters, slamming the barred door shut.

Jean didn’t say anything, watching the pair depart through bruised and bloodshot eyes. It wasn’t until she heard their footsteps recede into silence did Jean finally close her eyes and allow herself to rest. Consciousness came and went like the turning of the tides. Jean came to once an saw more bread and water tucked once again in the corner of her cell. When she woke again it was gone, but Jean had no memory of eating. Jean had fevered half-dreams of Harry and Ron in the quiet of Gryffindor Tower. Jean blinked and the walls around her had melted like watery paint into her Brick Street flat. James, Lily, Alice and so many others paraded around her like figments before vanishing when she blinked. Jean opened her eyes again and Sirius was there, the silvery starlight of his eyes lighting up his whole face. He reached out, fingers pressing into her temple and she leaned into his touch. He had calluses she did not remember. Jean let out a sigh as Sirius thumbed through her hair. His touch felt so real. Too real.

Jean’s eyes flew open and she rocketed away. Jean reached for her wand only to remember it was back at home. The small figure squeaked and scrambled back and Jean blinked unbelievingly at the form that took shape in the darkness. “Dobby?”

The house elf was how he had always been. Large ears with even larger, tennis ball like eyes. He was wringing his hands into the soiled front of an old flour sack and his feet were bare, covered in dust and small cracked blisters.

“Miss?” said Dobby, his high voice tapering off into a question. “Yes, miss. I am Dobby, miss. Dobby the house elf.” He bowed shallowly and repeatedly like a drinky bird.

Jean couldn’t help it: she laughed. Raspy, borderline manic, abruptly cut off with a wince. Jean
rubbed her throat. Jean watched Dobby scramble around beside her, still near delirious with the unexpected delight. Dobby pushed a small dram into her stiff fingers. “Drink miss,” said Dobby. “It will help with the hurt.”

Jean nodded and drank from the vial, feeling the familiar warmth spread through her belly. “You were the one that gave me the other bottle,” said Jean, her voice already sounding less choked. “Thank you.”

Dobby froze where he stood, swaying back and forth as if he might faint. “Dobby has never been thanked before,” he said airily, before he continued to fuss. “But, never mind, miss. Master and Mistress have told Dobby to make sure all the guests have what they need and Dobby is a good house elf.” Dobby paused and reached up to nervously tug on one of his ears. “Dobby is a bad house elf for stealing though. Dobby punished himself. Dobby smashed his fingers in the wardrobe upstairs.” Jean winced as Dobby held up his hands as proof. His bustled knuckles looked like they had been wrapped in bandages scooped from the trash.

“You shouldn’t have hurt yourself like this, Dobby,” Jean chastised gently. “Especially because of the Malfoys.”

“Mistress and Master are mistress and master and Dobby disobeyed,” said Dobby. Dobby produced another smaller bottle from inside the crinkly folds of his flour sack. “Here miss, for your fingers.”

With her good hand Jean took the container and turned it around in her palm. “What is it?” asked Jean.

“Skele-Gro, miss,” said Dobby. “It’s the only thing that’s not wizard magic to fix broken bones and Dobby can’t do wizard magic.”

“Delightful,” said Jean, her voice heavy with sarcasm. She pulled the stopper out of the neck and chugged the potion quickly. It tasted like rotten potatoes soaked in turpentine. Jean curled her lip back in disgust. “Oh, that’s vile.”

“Yes,” said Dobby pleasantly as if they were taking afternoon tea. “Dobby has drunk Skele-Gro once after Master beat Dobby for doing a bad thing.”

“What did you do?” asked Jean.

Dobby looked down at his wide, grubby feet. He reached up again and pulled on his ears, tugging them almost down to his cheeks. “Dobby forgot to launder the bed sheets,” he whispered, sounding truly ashamed.

Jean was sorely tempted to give Lucius a piece of her mind. She had to settle for flexing her fingers, feeling already returning to them. “I think they are on the mend,” said Jean.

Dobby’s grin could light up even the darkest of rooms. “Dobby is so pleased,” he said bouncing on the balls of his feet. “Will miss be needing anything else?”

‘A way out,’ Jean thought silently, knowing Dobby was incapable of defying Lucius and Narcissa that much. “Do you have anything for me to clean out these cuts?”

Dobby bowed so low his nose nearly scraped the ground. “Yes, miss,” he said. Before Jean could get another word in Dobby was gone with a pop that sounded like a firecracker. Without Dobby it was disconcertingly quiet and the aches once again settled into her bones and the fear into her heart. Gingerly, Jean bent her knees to her chest and rubbed her arms to stave off the cold. Jean’s
head was on a swivel, eyes straining in the darkness. “Dobby,” she said, voice barely above a whisper.

The subsequent crack was so jostling, Jean jumped back. Dobby appeared in a cascade of water and steam, a silver basin balanced precariously on his head. “Here Dobby is, miss,” Dobby said, clearly pleased with himself. Sloppily, Dobby placed the basin on the uneven floor. It wasn’t anything magical, just a pool of soapy water with a pinkish cloth floating amongst the suds.

Jean hissed slightly when the soap stung her abrasions. Jean strained the cloth and methodically cleaned her injuries until the water was tepid and coral colored. Dobby hovered by Jean in relative silence, wincing every once in a while, worrying his fingers. Jean rolled her sleeves down over her cleaned injuries. She folded the cloth in her hand and looked up at Dobby. “All right, now you.”

If possible, Dobby’s rounded bulbous eyes got wider. “W-What, miss?” he said, pulling his hands back to his waifish chest.

Jean gestured at his bandaged fingers. “That can’t feel good. Come here.”

Dobby’s eyes slowly drifted down to Jean’s hands and then back up to her face. “Yes, miss,” said Dobby quietly, giving Jean his long digits. Jean had to keep her lips from turning down as she gently unraveled the soiled bandages. Dobby must have bashed his hands in the wardrobe many times.

Jean worked mostly in silence, not wanting to alert the Malfoys or the other Death Eaters that there was someone down with her. She re-soaked the cloth in the water and the fabric unfurled itself. Jean spied a monogram tucked away in the corner: N. M. L. Jean scraped a broken fingernail over the loopy lettering. “Do you know how long I’ve been here?” Jean asked.

“Dobby can’t say, miss,” said Dobby.

Jean didn’t push the subject. Dobby either didn’t know or was forbidden to speak about it. “Do you know if Bellatrix Lestrange is still here,” she asked, trying to keep the tremble out of her voice.

Dobby couldn’t keep the shiver out of his body. “Yes, miss.”

Jean nodded once. She examined the house elf’s hands once more before dropping the ruined cloth back into the basin. “All fixed up,” she said, stapling on a smile.”

Dobby stared at his hands as if he couldn’t quite believe they were his. His eyes were glassy with unshed tears. Dobby sniffed and wiped his dribbly nose on his flour sack. “Why is miss being so nice to Dobby? Dobby is a house elf.”

“Dobby is nice to me, so I’m going to be nice to Dobby. Because that is what good and decent people do.”

Dobby pulled on the rough hem of his neck hole. He looked almost bashful. “Miss thinks Dobby is a good house elf?”

Jean smiled, her first genuine smile in days. “Miss thinks Dobby is the best house elf.” Jean playfully tweaked the tip of his ears. “Now off you go. Lucius shouldn’t find you here with me.”

Dobby bobbed his head again like a spring toy and gathered his supplies, water splashing over the rim due to his nervous energy. “Yes, miss. Good-bye, miss…thank you.” Dobby snapped his fingers and he was gone again with a crack. Jean was once again left alone in darkness.
Jean breathed freely for the first time in the house. She was fatigued, but the adrenaline in her body would not let her sleep. Jean folded her elbows over her knees, once again forming a tight ball with her body. Jean’s eyes focused in and out on the cuts and bruises that colored her arms, idly wondering if any would scar. Jean shifted, exposing the cruel word carved into her arm that she had become so used to that sometimes she forgot to notice it. The scar tissue was pale and stretched against her sin and when she moved her finger across the letters she felt raised edges.

Jean screwed her eyes shut, pushing away the memory of Bellatrix’s knife, slicing that word into her skin, her blood dripping from that wound onto Ron’s shoulder as he stared lifelessly up at her. But then, as bright and unexpected as Dobby himself, the warm memory of the brave house elf helping her then as he did now filled her. Jean settled back against the wall comforted at the thought of having one friend upstairs.

Jean was drawn from her daze when she heard footsteps, pulling her head up when Wilkes and Rosier purposely strode into her cell. “Wake up, mudblood,” said one of the Death Eaters. “Bellatrix would like a word with you.”

Jean knew it was ultimately futile, but she still swung anyways. She shoved her body into one and stomped her foot down on the other as they towed her upright.

“Quit your squirming,” grumbled a Death Eater as he dragged Jean forward.

Jean twisted an arm free and attempted to elbow one in the face but missed. She felt a wand pressed into the small of her back. “Stupefy.” Jean grunted, becoming boneless. If it wasn’t for the Death Eaters holding her up she would have collapsed to the ground. Jean nearly lost her shoes on the stairway as she was dragged back into the familiar room.

Lucius and Bellatrix were waiting for them. Bellatrix was lounging in one of the chairs that Narcissa and Walburga Black were sitting in when Jean first arrived. Lucius was standing, face stiff and strained.

“Sit her down, Rosier,” said Bellatrix, her eyes still honed on Lucius. Jean had a feeling they had interrupted a heated discussion. She couldn’t think for long before she was roughly shoved into the chair in the center of the room.

“She has some fight in her today,” said one of the Death Eaters as the pair, stalked away.

“Oh, does she,” commented Bellatrix. She sounded pleasantly surprised. “Well we should let her cool off then. Frigus.”

Jean’s eyes widened as ice crystals formed a layer of frost over her body, covering everything from her fingernails to her eyelashes. Jean felt like she had been thrown into a blizzard and was steadily freezing to death.

Bellatrix lazily put her wand back into her robes and turned her attention away from Jean like she was little more than a bothersome interruption. “Have some tea, Lucius.”

A silver tea set materialized out of nowhere, the ornate pot pouring the tea into two cups. The entire exchange made Jean feel even colder. Bellatrix languidly sipped from her cup, crossing her ankles while Lucius left his in its saucer. “They are getting closer to finding her,” said Lucius at last.

“Not close enough.” Bellatrix’s tone was clipped.

“Aurors have already searched all the Black family homes and no one knows how many order
members are among their number. How long will it be before they turn their sights here?"

“All those questions will be answered once that mudblood over there decides to start talking.” Bellatrix pointed a thin finger in Jean’s direction.

“But, she’s not talking,” said Lucius. “She’s more likely to be driven mad than to talk.”

“What do you suggest we do then, dear cousin?” said Bellatrix, venomously sweet.

“Obliviate her and drop her off on a street somewhere.”

“Or we could kill her,” said Bellatrix.

Lucius deliberately set down his tea and straightened his back, trying to be intimidating to a person that could obviously care less. “I will not have you murdering anyone in my home.”

“Why Lucius,” said Bellatrix, her voice high and mocking. “Afraid you’ll get blood in the parquet?”

“If the Order, or the Ministry traces a murder of a muggle-born girl back to here, I’ll go to Azkaban. Your sister will go to Azkaban.”

“A noble sacrifice for the Dark Lord’s cause,” said Bellatrix.

Lucius bristled. “I doubt I’ll be much use to the Dark Lord from inside a cell.”

“You aren’t much use anywhere, Lucius,” said Bellatrix.

“So, you would be willing to go to Azkaban over some useless mudblood we drug through a fireplace all because your Aunt Walburga wanted us to scare Sirius back to them?”

“And to also aid the Dark Lord in his mission? Yes.” Bellatrix paused. “I can’t help but wonder if you carry that same sense of loyalty, cousin.”

“I am a loyal servant to the Dark Lord,” said Lucius quickly.

“No, you are a coward, Lucius Malfoy,” Bellatrix whispered, leaning into Lucius’ face, “and that’s why you will always fail. You’re never willing to get your hands dirty.”

Bellatrix whipped out her wand and walked over to Jean, who was still violently shivering. Jean’s skin was white going on purple. She felt the painful burn of frostbite on her cheeks.

“Let’s see if you can still feel anything,” said Bellatrix. “Crucio!”

Jean’s nerves were burned open by the curse. It was like being thrown from the freezer and into the frying pan. Every muscle was shriveling and popping to the point of bursting. Jean wasn’t able to hold herself up anymore and she slid to the ground, shaking like one possessed.

“Wingardium Leviosa.” Jean was suddenly in the air, hanging arms slack like a limp rag. She stared at Bellatrix who was up side down to her.

Bellatrix tilted her head as she eyed Jean. “My cousin is running out of time and I am running out of patience. Tell us what you know about the Order of the Phoenix.”

Jean remained silent, floating in the air, giving Bellatrix a vacant stare. A gob of spit hung from her mouth.
“She’s too far gone, Bellatrix,” said Lucius. There was a nervous edge to his voice.

Bellatrix ignored him. Jean felt a crack of magic slap her across the face, then again, then again.

“You’re going to kill me either way,” Jean managed through her spit and swollen lips. “You have nothing to threaten me with.”

“Yes,” said Bellatrix. The tip of her wand gently brushed over Jean’s skin, tangling in the snarl of her hair. “But, you don’t want to feel this forever do you? This un-ending pain? The feeling of me taking you apart, bone-by-bone? Soon, you’ll tell me anything I want to know just to end it all.” Bellatrix leaned into Jean’s face and Jean recoiled in horror at exactly how much Bellatrix seemed to be enjoying this. “So, new question, mudblood. How badly do you want to die?”

Jean abruptly crashed to the ground. She was surprised her body didn’t break apart then and there. With her cheek and the side of her face smashed into the floor, sticky with her own drool, Jean saw Lucius, his face ashen, trembling. He shook his head slightly and back-pedaled out of the room.

Jean attempted to lift her head, to form words, to plead for him to stay.

Jean didn’t know how long it lasted. The only clue to the passage of time was the changing of spells. “Spiculus! Acuto! Flaggage! Confadere! Noton!” Bellatrix unraveled Jean’s fraying mind and unmade her body until it was a pile of raw, quivering meat. “Sectumsuptra!”

Jean could only let out a whimper as her shaking, cold and unfeeling limbs were enveloped in a warm stickiness. Everywhere was blood. Everything was blood. Jean couldn’t recall a time when it wasn’t so. Jean peeked her eyes open and saw Bellatrix looking down at her wand in slight surprise. “And all this time I thought little Sev was just all talk.”

Jean didn’t respond, lying spread eagle, practically paralyzed on the ground. Jean watched the hem of Bellatrix’s robe soak up her blood as she waded over to her. Bellatrix turned Jean’s arm over with the toe of her boot.

“What’s this?”

Bellatrix ran her forefinger over the scar that she unknowingly gave to Jean. Jean came back to reality in a cold sense of dread. “No,” she whimpered.

Bellatrix let out an airy breath. “Somebody tried to teach you what you are.” Bellatrix’s finger was replaced with her wand.

“No, no, no.”

“Let’s relearn that lesson.”

“No, please—” Jean tilted her head back and wailed. Blinded by pain, Jean twisted her arm wishing that someone would cut it off as Bellatrix rebranded in an ugly black burn the lettering into her skin. Bellatrix got to the crest of the second ‘o’ before Jean finally passed out.

Jean floated through nothing, detached from her broken body. Jean wanted nothing more than to be carried away into oblivion. However, a sound almost like a gnat buzzing in her ear kept pulling her back to the shores of consciousness. “No…no…bad D—…good…Dobby is…good house elf.”

A groan rattled in her chest. “Dobby?” Jean croaked.

“No, no,” said Dobby, quietly but urgently. His tiny fingers pressed her head back to the ground. “No, no.”
Through bleary eyes Jean watched the house elf wrap bandages around her forearm, fresh blood already pumping through the cream linen. Soiled bandages were scattered around his feet. His flour sack was splotched crimson. “Why,” Jean choked on air. “Why didn’t you let me die?” Jean drifted off again.

To Jean, it seemed like she only blinked before she awoke again, groggy but overall more alert. Jean felt tingly and numb like her leg had fallen asleep but only it was her whole body. Jean didn’t know if it was because her body was trying to heal or her nerves had been fried beyond sensation. Dobby was crouched in the corner, murmuring to himself and only when Jean let out a strangled gasp for air, did he skitter over to her. “Miss, miss,” he chattered nervously. He pushed the familiar vial into her fingers. “You must drink, miss.”

Jean’s fingers relaxed and she let the bottle roll across the floor. “This isn’t going to help me, Dobby.”

“But, Dobby doesn’t know any other medicines without using wizard magic and Dobby isn’t allowed to use wizard magic. Master said so.”

“Dobby,” said Jean, cutting the house elf off. “Listen to me. You need to go get help. You need to go to Hogwarts and tell Albus Dumbledore where I am.”

Dobby reached up and pulled on his ears, almost covering his eyes with them. “Dobby is forbidden to leave the house grounds without permission from Master or Mistress and Dobby is a good house elf.”

“You are,” said Jean. “But, I’m dying. Bellatrix is going to kill me if I don’t get rescued and that potion is just…dragging it out.” Jean shuddered, tears leaking out of her eyes. She didn’t have the strength to lift up her hand to wipe them away. “And I can’t—I don’t want—But I have to keep everyone safe.”

Jean felt a tiny finger, brush at the corner of her eye before Dobby backed away, his eyes sad and downtrodden, thin body wilting on itself. His hands clutched at the ruined flour sack, ribbons of bandages between his fingers. “Will miss be needing anything else?” Dobby mumbled.

Jean stared blankly at the ceiling, her body settling into a rigor mortis like stiffness. “Go get help,” said Jean simply, “or go away.”

Dobby was quiet for such a long time that Jean thought he had already gone. “Yes, miss,” said Dobby, disappearing with a pop.

Jean resumed counting the little divots in the ceiling of her cell. She counted to ten ten times over. If she was really focused she managed to get to twelve. A droplet of cold dingy water steadily dripped onto her face, just under her eyelid. Jean didn’t blink. Half the time Jean didn’t feel it at all.

“I’m surprised you’re still alive, mudblood.” Jean didn’t look up at Bellatrix, leaning against the bars of her cell.

Whether the Death Eater had been there minutes or days Jean could not say. “You know I’ll die before I tell you anything,” said Jean her voice raspy from screaming and lack of use.

“Oh, I don’t doubt it,” said Bellatrix, “but playing with you is the most fun I’ve had in a long time.” The cell door opened and Bellatrix glided in, kneeling down beside Jean’s prostrate form. “Be assured, mudblood. I will kill you eventually. But, I think Sirius and your friends would do almost anything to get you back, so why waste good bait.” Bellatrix curled her fingers and Rosier
and Wilkes came out of the shadows, flanking her. “Bring her up.”

Jean closed her eyes as her captors stepped forward, not even having the will to stand as they dragged her upstairs.

Meanwhile, miles away, Hogwarts castle slept, the only light gleaming from the Headmaster’s office. Dumbledore sat at his ornate desk, his head bowed over his steepled fingers. His eyes tiredly swept the room. Minerva was at the side. Emmeline Vance was just behind her staring out the window. The Prewett brothers, Alastor, and Edgar Bones framed the fireplace. Benjy Fenwick was quietly speaking to Dorcas Meadows and the Longbottoms. Remus sat cross-legged on the ground his toe digging into a hole in the rug. His eyes were shadowed and looked on the verge of sleep. Lily and James were hovering over Sirius Black. Sirius himself had collapsed in a chair the moment he arrived, his face in his hands. “Any news?” Dumbledore asked, adjusting his half moon spectacles.

“We’ve raided the homes of Orion Black and his brother,” said Fabian, his voice uncharacteristically deadpan. “We also searched the Lestrange household. We followed every lead Fletcher gave us. There’s no sign of her.”

Dumbledore closed his eyes. “And Dearborn?”

“He hasn’t heard anything either,” said Edgar Bones.

“Albus,” said Moody gravely. “I think we should start considering that we aren’t going to find her.”

“Surely it’s not come to that Alastor?” said Emmeline, turning away from the window. Beside her McGonagall was white lipped and silent.

“Ms. Vance,” said Moody, “this is my area of expertise. Jean has been gone a month. We need to face reality.”

“Shut up,” said Sirius, dragging his fingers through his hair.

“Padfoot,” said James gently, placing a hand on his shoulder. Sirius shoved it off of him and kicked himself out of his chair, pacing with no particular direction.

Suddenly, Dumbledore’s fireplace erupted in emerald flames. Marlene McKinnon tumbled out of the ashes, hair frazzled and clothes askew. “I’ve searched every floo line that’s been connected to Jean and Sirius’ flat. I even dug through the requests for temporary and emergency connections. There’s nothing. I don’t know what else to do.”

Dumbledore leaned back with a heavy sigh. “Miss McKinnon, I don’t think there is anything else we can do.”

“You don’t mean…” Marlene wildly looked around the room. “We’re not giving up are we?” Her breath hitched when she was answered by silence. “Headmaster,” said Marlene, her voice cracking. Benjy Fenwick stepped forward and gathered Marlene in his arms, rubbing her back as she cried on his navy tie. Alice and Dorcas were leaning on each other for support while Lily wept into her palm.

“We need to go underground,” said Moody. “Non-essential order members should go into hiding. We need to say safe in case she talked.”

“Shut. Up.” Sirius growled. He stalked across the room, teeth bared, nose-to-nose with the
seasoned auror. “No one is going into hiding and Jean’s not dead.”

Moody cocked his head and squared his shoulders. “Watch it Black. I know you’re grieving but I’ll still knock you across the room.”

“Sirius, that’s enough,” said Dumbledore gentle but firm. Remus struggled to stand, unbalanced by sleep deprivation, while James moved quickly across the room towards Sirius.

“Please don’t fight,” Lily mumbled through her fingers.

Moody looked over Sirius’ shoulder at Dumbledore. “This is why I told you they were too young for the Order, Albus. They still believe all of us are getting out alive.”

Sirius seized Moody’s robes and nearly hefted him up the wall. “SHE’S NOT DEAD!”

“Excuse me.”

Every head in the room turned to stare dumbfounded at the bloodstained little house quivering in the entryway. “Dobby’s friend needs help.”

So, heavy stuff. But hey look, Dobby! Here to save the day again!
“Runnin’ like a hairy troll…spinnin’ round like a crazy elf.” Jean babbled, lying flat on her back, hair fanned around her in the Malfoy family manor basement. She waved her hands erratically in front of her face. She was fifteen years old at the Yule Ball with Sirius Black. He was a famous seeker from Bulgaria. He had red hair and a stripe of freckles across his nose. He kissed her on the hand, in a broom closet, before getting mad and running away to find Harry, who was twenty years in the future. “Boogie down like a unicorn…and no stoppin’ till the break of dawn…Can you dance like a hippogriff….na na na na na na na.”

“Going a little mad, mudblood?” asked one of the Death Eaters, swinging open the door to her cage. Wilkes. Jean was able to tell them apart now, even with the hoods. Wilkes was taller. She broke Rosier’s nose.

“What’cha singing?” jeered Rosier.

“Hasn’t been written yet,” said Jean, her voice far away.

Rosier didn’t say anything, shifting from side to side. “Get up,” he said.

Rosier and Wilkes grabbed her hands, still drawing circles in the air and pulled her up. They barely had to hold onto her as she drifted wherever they nudged her. Jean was oddly fixated on the chandelier hanging from the ceiling as she was sat down in the familiar plain wooden chair. “I don’t think she’s all there, Bellatrix,” said Wilkes, walking away to his usual spot on the edge of the room.

Jean was barely aware of a wand poking at her cheek, turning her head from side to side. She was hyper-focused on a scuff on the pair of boots in front of her. “Augumenti.”

A stream of water doused her face, shooting up her nose and down into her throat. Jean sputtered coming back to reality. She wiped her sodden tangled hair out of her eyes and looked tiredly up at Bellatrix, grinning down at her like a Cheshire. “Back with us?” asked Bellatrix pleasantly.

Jean spat a mouthful of water in response. Bellatrix cocked her hip out and folded her arms, wand cradled in the crook of her elbow. “Good,” she cooed. “You’re just in time to meet your new friend.”

Jean then realized Bellatrix was not alone. Several other Death Eaters were loosely scattered around the room, looking at her through the dark expressionless slits of their masks. Some were unhooded and Jean recognized the younger visages of Death Eaters she knew from the future: Dolohov, MacNair, Karkaroff. Lucius was also with Narcissa sitting in the two squat chairs tucked in the corner of the room. Narcissa was clutching at Lucius’ forearm, shifting nervously. Lucius looked like he hadn’t slept in days. “Bellatrix,” he said weakly, timidly. “I must insist that he leaves….”

A low predatory growl vibrated the whole room. Lucius’ mouth clicked shut and he shrunk back
into his chair. Jean’s eyes widened as she panned back over the room. Fenrir Greyback stepped forward, broad shouldered and snarling. He was wearing street clothes, tattered and stretched tight over his barrel chest, sleeves turned up at the elbow. He did not have the Dark Mark tattooed on his forearm. Jean wondered briefly if he ever was officially a Death Eater or if he just joined Voldemort for the sport of killing wizards.

The werewolf gave a toothy grin. “Hello, little miss,” he said. “I remember you.” Jean watched Greyback chew a cuticle off his thumb, tipped with a jagged yellowing nail.

“Did you know,” said Bellatrix, “the scars from a werewolf attack never truly go away?” Bellatrix’s wand lightly brushed over Jean’s forehead and down her cheek. “If I were you, I’d tell me what I want to know. I always have trouble getting the mad dog to stop after he draws blood.” Fenrir grinned at that, nearly salivating with anticipation.

Bellatrix continues to skim Jean’s skin with her wand, wrapping a curl of Jean’s around the end. “What ever does he see in you?” she said quietly. Bellatrix straightened. “Who is in the Order of the Phoenix?” Jean didn’t say anything, her shoulders slumping, eyes dropping to the floor. Jean didn’t see the point. “Not so mouthy today, are we?” said Bellatrix.

A spell cracked across Jean’s face but she hardly felt it. A thin cut spilled a drop of blood under her eye when the spell hit her again. “Answer me,” said Bellatrix pointedly. “Tell me what I want to know or he’ll make you.” Jean remained silent.

Bellatrix huffed out a sigh, beleaguered, like she was trying to train an animal without success. “Fine,” she said, an airy note of finality in her voice. “If you won’t tell me what I want to know, then you can scream it at me.” Bellatrix turned her head towards Greyback, one eye still on Jean as if she wanted to see how she would react. “Greyback, play with her. But keep her alive, if you’re capable.”

Jean swallowed a whimper as Greyback lurked forward, his hulking frame casting a shadow across her body. He circled her slowly until he was behind her. Jean could smell the pungent rot. Fenrir leaned down. “You smell sweet,” he whispered. It was almost a relief for Jean. A fatigue longer than her time in captivity was being lifted from her shoulders. Her pain and more importantly her secrets would die with her. Jean closed her eyes, settling into her resignation.

“Let me speak to her.”

The room got cold and even Fenrir backed away. The sea of black robes parted, revealing a single man, tall, unnaturally skinny and hooded. He glided forward on soundless footsteps. Bellatrix, her shoulders bowed, reached for his pale spider like fingers, but he brushed her away. Lord Voldemort pulled back his hood and stared down at Jean, his face emotionless.

He was not as serpentine as he would become, but he was not human either. His skin was pallid but still looked alive. He had great hollows in his cheeks, sharpening his cheekbones. His lips were thin and colorless and his nose was receding into his face but not all the way gone. Jean could see his scalp through a layer of thin dark hair. His eyes were heavily bloodshot instead of full crimson, his irises like elongated almonds than snake like slits. Jean could not look away, almost entranced, like a hare staring down a hungry viper.

“Jean Granger,” said Voldemort, his voice thin but strong.

Jean didn’t say anything. It was like she had been rendered mute. She wasn’t entirely sure she was even blinking.
Bellatrix quickly stepped forward, still openly groveling. “You need not trouble yourself with this filth, my master,” she said, all arrogance sapped from her voice. “Leave her to me. I’ll see that she talks.”

Voldemort didn’t lift a finger. He glanced sideways like one would look at a chittering child. Bellatrix abruptly shut her mouth and, body still bent, back pedaled to the others.

“I don’t need you to talk,” said Voldemort, his eyes drifting back to Jean. “I will hear you all the same.”

Voldemort lifted his wand in a lazy arc, thick black smoke billowing from the tip. It corporalized, forming a wide stocky chair made from glossy black wood with a twisted ornate back. It looked more like a throne than a chair. Voldemort sat, eye level with Jean. A small voice in the back of her mind told her to look away, but she couldn’t. “Sleep,” Voldemort said, his whispered words stretching into a hiss. His voice wrapped around Jean’s bones. She heard nothing but him and saw nothing but his mottled red eyes.

It was like a daydream. Images floated through her mind’s eye while she walked the thread between sleep and wakefulness. Her head lolled to the side and her eyes were heavy. Jean smelled layers of neglected dust, the brush of broom bristles against her leg. Sirius backed her against the door and kissed her again, his thumbs framing her jaw. Sirius’ hand dropped, running down the ridges of her spine. Jean was lying down on Sirius’ chest. He was asleep, face half concealed by the sofa pillows. Jean could hear the rhythm of the rain beat against the windows of their flat.

“What a handsome couple.” Jean felt more coils wrap around her mind.

Jean moved her head and suddenly she was standing. The walls of the Shrieking Shack rose from the mists around her. She looked through the doorway into a dilapidated bedroom. Remus was sitting on the warped, sunken bed, his back to her. The waning sunlight accentuated his thin shoulders. Jean blinked again, momentarily blinded, maybe by the light, maybe by the flashbulb of Marlene’s camera. Marlene placed the camera back on the dresser as she Alice, Dorcas and Mary continued to get ready for graduation that afternoon. Jean’s eyes drifted over her unexpected friends before settling onto the door of their dormitory bathroom. Jean suddenly felt nauseous and was on her knees before she realized it. Jean stared blankly at the chunks of vomit floating in the toilet. The wound on her arm ached as well as the wound in her heart. He was dead.

“Sleep. Tell me.”

With a jolt, Jean realized what was happening. Voldemort, a skilled Legilimens, was thumbing through her memories like a photo album.

“Sleep,” Voldemort said again and Jean could feel the tendrils of magic wrapping around her mind. The images came faster, even as Jean struggled to close the book on her thoughts. She stared her knobbly eleven-year-old knees in the claustrophobic privacy of a bathroom stall. She wiped her eyes. She had been crying. She jerked up at a roaring sound that vibrated the partitions around her. A mountain troll. She was in a long, dark hallway, her heart beating in her ears. In one hand, she clutched the yellowing page of a library book, in the other a mirror. The moonlight flashed across the silver handle. She peaked around the corner and didn’t even have time to gasp in recognition at the yellow eyes reflected in the glass. She was curled up on herself, simmering in her shame and frustration. Hephaestus—Crookshanks hopped up onto the bed, his squashed orange face nuzzling into her hand. She pushed him away, furious with the cat that killed Pete—Scab—Ron’s pet.

“What are you trying to conceal from me?”
Jean felt like she was trying to run through water. Water rushed into her lungs as she was pulled deeper and deeper, tethered by her ankle. Through glassy eyes, she saw Viktor Krum emerge from the silty, reedy depths, his upper body transformed into a shark. Jean felt herself being pulled upward, the siren's song fading away. They broke the surface and Jean tilted her head back for air. She didn't see the sky. She saw darkness, a dais, an empty archway, a body falling through a silvery veil, a stunned smile frozen on his face.

"No!" Jean didn't know if she said that aloud or if her protest was echoing in her own head. She crouched down, hands clapped on either side of her head, tightening into a ball. The walls around her were memories melting into one another like watery paint. Faces strobed in front of her eyes. Sirius—Remus—James—Alice—Neville—Marlene—Peter—Draco—Dorcas—Mary—Luna—Lily—Ginny—Ron—Hermione—Harry.

Jean was in a cramped cupboard under the stairs, a naked bulb swinging overhead. She pressed against the flimsy door feeling a great pressure building from the other side.

"Let me in," Voldemort whispered.

The light bulb burst overhead leaving Jean in darkness. The room was closing in on her, touching her shoulders. She heaved her entire being into the door feeling it splinter underneath her fingers. Jean had to stop him. She had to force him out or it would be over before it began. Jean reached down for a shard of the burst bulb frantically scratching in the cheap white paint of the door. The filament faired overhead. Jean saw her eyes red and slit like in the warped reflection of the knob. They glanced up and the flickering orange glow illuminated what she had written: Tom Marvolo Riddle.

For a moment, Jean was falling. When she landed she was kneeling on the floor of the Malfoy manor. Jean looked up and saw Voldemort sitting in his oily black throne. He was leaning forward on his knees, his face inches from hers. "What do you know of me?" Jean wasn't sure if he asked that aloud or his voice was still slithering around in her mind.

Maybe it was Voldemort's Legilimency. Maybe it was Hermione desperately trying to keep her secrets. Maybe it was Jean finally answering Bellatrix's question of how badly she wanted to die. Jean's jaw relaxed. Her mouth dropped open and she spoke the great and terrible truth. "You're going to lose." Jean's voice was flat and emotionless. "You're going to die."

Voldemort physically recoiled. He stood abruptly, his elaborate chair dissolving behind him. Jean heard the mumbled chatter of Death Eaters around her but did not turn away from Voldemort. She was the only one close enough to see his shock, his fear. Like a green flash at sunset, it was there for a moment and gone in an instant.

"Greyback," Voldemort said coolly, stepping away from her. "Do what you want with her, but make sure they find the body."

Fenrir didn't say anything, but Jean could feel the rumble of satisfaction in his chest. Jean heard Narcissa whimper in horror as a clawed calloused hand gripped her and dragged her to the ground. She was so weak and disoriented she could barely lift her head from where it fell on the floor. One of Fenrir's hands was pressed so hard into her back her spine popped. The other groped her head, stretching and pulling until her neck was exposed. She felt his spit drop onto her scalp. "You can struggle. I like that."

"REDUCTO!"

Jean felt Fenrir lift off her body, thrown back by a beam of red light, roaring in her ear like a freight
engine. Jean twisted her head to look up. In her slanted, watery vision Jean saw James Potter and Frank Longbottom dressed in their Auror uniforms their faces stern. Lily, Alice and Remus were wearing street clothes. Lily had a look of cold fury that looked out of place on a face that smiled so much. Centered between all of them, Sirius lowered his wand. "Get away from her," he growled.

"Sirius," Jean mumbled, dazed, not quite believing they were there. "Sirius."

Jean heard a faint popping sound, knowing without looking that some of the Death Eaters had Disapparated. "Cowards," Bellatrix's hissed. Jean felt herself being hauled up and braced against a body. A hand snaked around her shoulders, choking her. A wand was jammed under her chin. "Take another step and she dies." Bellatrix's voice reverberated in Jean's skull.

Sirius twisted his wand around in his fingers. "Bellatrix," he said, his voice balancing the knife's edge between fear and fury. "This is between you and me. Leave her out of this."

"She is between you and me. You and your destiny. I can't very well leave her out of this."

"Let her go!" said Sirius, errant sparks shooting from his wand.

"Sirius Black," said Voldemort, gliding across the floor almost as if he were floating. Once again, it was unnerving how cool and even his soft voice was and how Jean couldn't look away from his slim figure. "At last we meet. Lower your wand and let us talk like wizards."

Frank sidestepped Sirius, eyeing Voldemort hard, his wand half raised in a white knuckled grip. "My name is Frank Longbottom. On behalf of the Department of Magical Law and the Minister of Magic you are under arrest for multiple charges of murder."

Voldemort's face betrayed no emotion, save for an eerie serenity. He extended his arms, opening his palms almost supplicating. "This is not what I want: sons of noble houses warring with each other."

"We don't care what you want, just who you have," said James. "Give us Jean and come quietly."

"In an exchange something is given and something is gained," said Voldemort.

"We are not bargaining with kidnappers and murderers," countered Remus.

Voldemort gave Remus a lingering look. "Yet you'll fight for a failed state puppetted by lesser men that forces the magical world to hide from the rest of it. You are jailers for those who would reach for their greatness. How many concessions have worthy wizards made to protect muggles, placate mudbloods and indulge…half-breeds."

Suddenly, Jean heard Fenrir inhale deeply, letting out a breath that could only be described as bliss. "You," said Greyback, eyes honing in on Remus. Jean struggled under her captor's grip as Fenrir stalked forward. He was easily a head taller than Remus and twice as wide. Remus rolled the hilt of his wand between his fingers and let out a small breath. Fenrir paused, inches in front of Remus and sniffed the air. His face lifted with a look of perverted glee. "You're one of mine."

Jean watched Remus' face rapidly pale. Lily let out a little breath. James shifted his stance, his face betraying everything. Frank's eyes flicked over to Remus and back to Voldemort. "What's he talking about, Remus?" Sirius remained unmoved, his eyes rooted on Jean. It seemed like he didn't even hear them.

Lily made to grab at Remus' shirtsleeve but Remus pushed her away. Fenrir gave the shorter
slender man a yellowed grin. "They don't know?" jeered Greyback, circling Remus, almost salivating. "Lyall's little pup's all grown up. That spineless half-breed hunter. He despises you. He'll never say it to your face, but he despises you, me, and the rest of us werewolves." Remus visibly flinched and Jean heard Alice's small gaps. Fenrir shoved Remus' shoulder, nearly toppling Remus. "You're a mangy thing though. That's what you get for being Dumbledore’s dog. I should have come for you sooner; taught you how to be a real wolf."

Remus was shaking where he stood, his breath coming out in ragged gasps. He almost seemed to be at the point of tears. To his left, Alice and Frank exchanged a look of stunned understanding. Fenrir reaches out a hand, his half broken fingernails scraping the hem of Remus' collar. "I wonder if you can still see the bite."

"Don't touch him," Jean managed with as much force as she could.

"Crucio!" Bellatrix's wand sent Jean to her knees. The cry that ripped itself from her mouth was more from shock than from actual pain. However, even the tingle in her deadened, overtaxed nerves grew to be agony.

Distantly, Jean heard shouting. "Stop! Stop! Please! Stop!"

Jean felt the spell lift from her body, but it still took her many moments to uncurl her stiff body from the ball she had formed. Jean peeled her face off the floor and looked at Sirius through red-rimmed eyes. She could see the slight tremor in his hand as he glanced back and forth between Jean and Voldemort. "What do you want?" he asked, bravado nearly gone.

"You," said Voldemort simply. He raised his hands. "All of this is for you."

Sirius shifted his stance. "What do you mean?"

"Your cousin speaks the truth. You have been running away from your destiny, from the future I want to build for our kind. But, I need powerful wizards, like yourself, to make that future real." Voldemort gestured to the clocked Death Eaters behind him with his long, pale fingers. "I am a generous Lord, and I reward those who serve me well. Join me, and she lives. Defy me, and she dies."

"Sirius," Jean whimpered, trying to pick herself off the ground. Her body was screaming in protest. "Sirius...don't..." Jean's elbows gave out and she collapsed.

Sirius looked at her, feet away, but miles apart. His eyes were wide with terror and all the color had fallen from his face. Slowly, he turned his gaze back to Voldemort. "And she'd be safe?" he asked.

"Sirius," said James sharply. He clapped Sirius on the shoulder, but Sirius shrugged him off, stepping forward. "You swear you wouldn't hurt her?"

An explosion took place in the pit of Jean's stomach. Summoning strength she didn't know she had, Jean pulled herself up to her hands and knees. "Sirius," she shouted her voice cracking every other syllable, "don't do this."

"Be quiet, mudblood," Jean heard Bellatrix say.

Jean felt hands seize her, towing her upright. Hands clasped at her jaw, trying to close over her lips. "Don't do this, please!"
Sirius looked helplessly at her, looking younger than she had ever seen him. "He'll kill you if I don't."

"I'd rather die," Jean shouted back, trying to throw her captors off of her.

Sirius blanched and for Jean it was like going forward through time, Sirius’ haunted lamp like eyes stared at her almost unseeing. It was the same thousand-yard gaze he had given her the night she had first met him in the Shrieking Shack. He looked like a man who had lost everything that mattered to him. Sirius slowly shook his head. "I can't allow that to happen." The resolution in his voice frightened her more than anything she had experienced in her captivity.

"I'll hate you forever if you do this," Jean screamed, nearly hysterical. Wild snarls of hair fell down in her face and spittle flew from her mouth. "I'll never speak to you again." A moment later Jean couldn't speak at all as a thick set of fingers sealed over her lips.

"She'll be alive to hate you," said Voldemort softly. "Choose, Mr. Black. I will not offer again."

Jean was in a tangle of limbs. Arms struggled to hold her as her own clutched at the fingers wrapped around her mouth. Jean was nearly wheezing and her legs were beginning to give out beneath her. Her eyes widened, feeling a holstered wand tucked inside a sleeve.

Over the edge of her captor's knuckles, Jean watched James reach forward and grab Sirius by the robes. Remus attempted to do the same, but a growl from Fenrir rooted him to the spot as the werewolf continued to stare him down. "Sirius be sensible," said James, trying to be firm even as his own hazel eyes darted over to Jean's wilting body. "This isn't helping and you know it."

"I don't have a choice, James." Jean didn't know if Sirius was talking to James or to himself. "I don't have any other choice."

"Sirius," said Frank. "We need to regroup. We know that she's alive."

"Not for much longer," goaded Bellatrix in a high playful voice.

Sirius rounded on Bellatrix. "If you threaten her again—"

"Argh!" One of the Death Eaters holding Jean released her, a row of pinkened teeth marks in the meat of his palm. Jean yanked the Death Eater's wand out of his sleeve, nearly jerking the holster out with it. Flailing around, Jean arced the wand back over her shoulder. A shower of sparks stung her back, the Death Eater behind her crying out as they released their hold. High on adrenaline, desperation, and fury Jean whirled around, aiming the stranger's wand at Voldemort. Jean wasn't entirely sure what spell she screamed at the Dark Lord but at scramble of consonants created a jagged bolt of white light, cracking though the air towards his chest.

Voldemort smoothly lifted his wand and deflected the spell, parrying it into the cluster of black-cloaked Death Eaters scrambling to get out of the way. The spell hit the ground with a thunderous boom, cracking the floor and knocking several Death Eaters off their feet. Voldemort pulled out his wand. "Kill them!"

The entire tableau was suddenly thrown into motion. James and Frank charged at Voldemort, firing a flurry of spells. Fenrir Greyback launched himself at Remus who barely lifted his wand in time to protect himself. Through the sea of hoods, Jean spied a flash of red as Lily, twirling like a dancer, dueled two Death Eaters at once. Jean shifted to face the two Death Eaters stomping towards her, one with a bleeding hand, the other with smoke rising from his shoulder.

"Expelliarmus!"
Jean ducked, moving more from muscle memory than present ability. She jerked around a red beam of light from the second Death Eater, feeling the heat of the spell on her stomach. "Immobulus!" Jean spun again, already feeling winded.

"Stupefy!" Jean wheezed, shooting wide.

"Pertrificus Totalus!" Jean flinched expecting the spell to hit her square in the back. It raced over her shoulder, hitting a Death Eater in the chest. The Death Eater's arms snapped to his sides and his legs locked, falling to the floor with a slam. Sirius moved forward with sharp, purposeful strides. He looked murderous. His wand rolled through his fingers with a practiced ease, aiming at the other Death Eater before he could even shift. "Levicorpus!"

With an undignified yelp, the Death Eater was flipped upside down, dangling by his ankle. Jean gasped, desperately trying to stay upright. Jean reached out to Sirius like he was life ring amidst crashing waves, her stolen wand nearly falling from her fingers. "Sirius," she said, sputtering over her syllables.

The clouds rolled away from his eyes, leaving them clear and over bright. Sirius closed the distance between them with a few quick steps, pulling her tightly to his chest. "Jean," he breathed out, his voice high and tight. "You're okay. Are you okay? Merlin, you're bleeding."

Jean was only partially aware of Sirius' hands pawing at her. She clutched the front of his robes with a vice like grip, fearful that if she let go he would fade into nothing.

"Sirius!" Alice called out, blocking a spell from a couple of Death Eaters she dueled at once. "Rictusempra!" One Death Eater collapsed, doubled over holding his middle, paralyzed by laughter. "We have this," Alice continued. "Get her out."

Sirius nodded once before looping his arm under Jean’s, attempting to prop her up against him. "Come on," her muttered quickly, "we've got to go."

The world swayed like the deck of a ship as Jean limped alongside Sirius, her face pressed into his shirt. They barely made it a dozen steps before Bellatrix glided in front of them, her wand balanced on the end of her fingers. "Leaving so soon, Sirius?" she said playfully.

Sirius lifted his wand. "Get out of my way," he said evenly.

"Crucio!" Bellatrix cried out in response.

Jean felt herself being shoved to the side as Sirius dodged the spell. It took all of her effort to stand now as Sirius and Bellatrix dueled each other, wands flashing a spectrum of colors, their wrists nearly clacking together from how close they were.

"You've caused enough trouble, mudblood," Jean heard someone growl. She turned in time to see two burly Death Eaters charging at her, one brandishing a wand. "Incendio!"

"Portego!" Jean gasped, wrapping a silvery shield around her body. The fire was tinged with tongues of blue and she felt the strength of the spell reverberating through the core of her wand. The edges of her flimsy wards were curling in on itself like warped glass. Magical fissures crept deeper into its center. Jean tried to pull more strength from within her to bolster the spell, but she had no more energy to give. Jean only had moments before the protective magic shattered.

"Jean!" Jean drowsily searched for the source of the voice. It could have been Sirius, it could have been Alice, it could have been Dobby for all she knew. Jean blinked owlishly as the column of fire abruptly faded. One Death Eater howled, pulling off his silver mask, revealing eyes that
were pink and pus filled. The other fell to his knees, his hands covered in red, pulsing lesions. Jean fell to her knees, wand rolling out of her hands.

"Locomotor Mortis!" Sirius called out, spinning on his heel to fire a spell back at his cousin. Bellatrix yelped as her legs locked together. She stumbled for a step before gracelessly falling over. Sirius kicked her wand out of her fingers, before scrambling over to Jean, deaf to Bellatrix's yowling. "Hey," he said, seizing her shoulders. "Come on, get up. We have to go."

Jean's breath hitched, looking around anxiously, her fingers skimming the floor. "Where's my wand? Give me a wand."

"Jean, please," Sirius begged. "You have to get up."

"I need a wand," Jean repeated.

Sirius hauled Jean upright, practically dragging her forward. "We're getting out. I am getting you out—James!"

Jean watched James fly back several feet, slamming into a wall before crumpling into a heap. Frank was still on his feet in front of him, continuing to survive Voldemort's assault of spells.

"James!" Lilly cried out, her voice breaking. She sprinted over leaving one Death Eater clinging to a wall sconce as his legs jigged about beneath him and another flat on his back, his nose ballooning up like a beach ball. Lily shot a pale blue spell at Voldemort's shoulder. "Leave them alone."

Jean gasped as an emerald beam of light barely missed Lily, exploding a window overhead. Lily crawled through a shower of glass to get to James while the latter pulled himself back onto his feet, rolling his shoulder. Alice was also clamoring to get to the trio, levitating whatever chair, table, or candlestick that was in her path and hurling it back towards the Death Eaters that pursued her.

Remus all the while was locked in combat with Fenrir Greyback, Remus fighting with a wand and Fenrir with his ferocity. Remus looked pale and winded, his hair plastered to his forehead. He stared at Fenrir with a look of muted horror, like he was gazing at a twisted reflection of himself. Fenrir grinned, snapping his teeth tauntingly. "Come on," he goaded, "show me how a trained wolf fights."

"Flippendo!" Remus called out, his voice reedy.

The thin crimson beam hit Fenrir square in the chest but he muscled through it, a foot falter the only sign of the spell making any impact at all. Sirius let out a cry of warning and Jean felt all of her blood drop to her feet at the four long gashes Fenrir slashed through Remus' chest. Remus fell to the ground with a grunt, weakly back-pedaling as Fenrir bore down on him.

"Lumos Solem!" Jean turned her head into Sirius' shoulder as the blinding flair of light erupted from his wand. Fenrir's howl pitched into a dog like keen. He stumbled backwards, palms pressed into his eyes. Sirius weaved around the hulking mass, towing Jean along with him.

Sirius seized Remus' wrist and hauled him to his feet. "Can you stand?" he asked.

"Yeah." Remus' voice was as wobbly as his legs.

Sirius roughly transferred Jean over to Remus' shoulders. "Take her," he said urgently. "Go, I'll cover you."

Sirius turned and aimed his wand at Fenrir, who straightened, his eyes watering. He was flanked
by Death Eaters, who hung back far enough to be out of eye line of the werewolf who was finished playing with his food. Fenrir growled. "After I kill that mudblood and that mutt, I'm—"

Sirius flicked his wand and a small spell slapped Fenrir across the face. "You talk too much," Sirius said quietly.

Remus did not give Jean the opportunity to gape as Sirius and Fenrir throwing themselves at each other. Remus physically turned Jean and the two toddled towards the entrance of the now ruined great room.

"Come on, Jean," Remus panted. "We're nearly there." Remus pulled her along inch by inch.

Suddenly, the two oaken doors thrown open by her rescuers snapped shut. Jean flinched at the series of pops like corn in a kettle. Five Death Eaters, fresh for the fight, lined the doorway, drawing their wands. "Oh God," Remus whispered. They fired.

It was a war zone. Plaster was exploding off the walls and the floor was coming up in splinters. Lily, James, Alice and Frank were pinned in a corner, surrounded by destroyed furniture in a makeshift barricade. Lily and Alice held up a magical shield while Frank and James threw spells at Voldemort and the many Death Eaters slowly closing ranks. Sirius fought Fenrir and the other pair of Death Eaters in unending waves, throwing one back only to be engaged with another. Remus also lifted a barrier, already buckling from magical blasts. Jean cupped her hands over her ears, muffling the sounds of her friends' frantic dialogue, the hailstorm of magic, and Bellatrix's manic laughter as she lay on the floor.

"There's too many of them!"

"What do we do?!"

"The shield's breaking!"

"Jean, I can't hold it."

BOOM.

For a moment, Jean thought the mansion was falling in around her. The double doors were blown open with such force they put dents in the walls. Jean let out a little breath as Dumbledore smoothly slid his wand back into his robes. "Good evening, Tom," he said smoothly.

Jean stumbled forward, drawn to Dumbledore like a magnet. She didn't see the Death Eaters Disappear around her or Sirius moving forward, reaching for her carefully. A lightness bloomed from deep within her body, an almost crushing sense of relief that left Jean both boneless and bone tired. Jean felt herself falling, but couldn't remember what to tell her body to keep that from happening. Jean felt a hand on her and tried to shake it off. She couldn't let the Death Eaters have her again. But, the hand held firm and there was another, and another. Distantly, she heard someone calling her name.

"No…give me a wand…I need a wand."

Jean didn't realize she had passed out until she came to again. The silence caused her ears to ring and the light above her hurt her eyes. She squinted, turning away, and felt a starched, over-fluffed pillow beneath her head. She blinked rapidly, her white washed vision coming into focus. Jean was in a small olive colored room that made her nauseous, folded into a narrow bed with coverings tightly tucked under the mattress. Despite the initial brightness, the wall lights were dim, casting long gangly shadows on the people with her.
James and Frank were braced on either side of the door like twin pillars of stoicism. Both were still wearing their Auror uniforms, now dirtied and frayed at the edges. Lily was sitting with her elbow propped up on a table, staring down any the ground. The limb competed for space with a large bouquet of sunflowers squeezed into a vase. Jean could read from her bed Marlene's large loopy handwriting on the 'Get Well Soon' card, Mary and Dorcas' signature skirting the edge. Lily sported a half a dozen cuts and bruises but was otherwise unscathed. On the other side of the room, almost beyond Jean's line of vision was Remus propped up in the only remaining chair. His ruined shirt was unbuttoned and bandages were wrapped around his chest. His head was tilted back against the wall, sandy hair collecting around her shoulders, dozing.

Jean felt a weight on her chest and looked down, a faint smile tugging at her mouth. Sirius' head was resting on her middle, one arm brushing up against her hand and the other slung across her body. He was dead asleep.

Jean pulled her eyes away from Sirius, the small movement catching Lily's attention. Lily's emerald eyes widened and she brought her fingers to her lips. She made a small warble of a sound before quickly walking over to Jean, careful not to disturb Sirius. "Hey," said Lily, her voice like soothing rain. "Hey you're alright."

"Am I dreaming?" asked Jean, her voice raspy.

Lily shook her head. She gave Jean a strange look, a look she couldn't place. "No you're not dreaming. You're at St. Mungo's. You're safe now."

Jean sank back into her pillows, letting out a long sigh, trying with mixed success to quell the hammering in her heart. From her slumped position, she looked up at Lily. She looked tired. There were bruise colored rings around he eyes. Her hair was limp and had lost some of its luster. Lily fretted with Jean's pillows almost to reassure herself that Jean was actually there. Jean couldn't blame her. She felt like all she had to do was blink and she'd be back in that basement. "How long was I asleep?" asked Jean.

"You've been in and out for two days. It's a little after noon, now."

Jean nodded, her body freezing when she noticed a thick layer of bandages covering her forearm. There were flecks of blood sprinkling the linen. When she touched it, her entire limb throbbed painfully. "How long...." Jean swallowed and tried again. "How long was I gone?"

Lily's soft smile shattered. She nervously threaded he fingers through Jean's. "A little over a month," said Lily quietly.

Jean let out a thin stream of breath before canting her head back to the ceiling. "It felt longer than that."

"You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to," said Lily. "Don't want you to get worked up again."

"What do you mean?" asked Jean.

"Well," said Lily, running an awkward hand through her hair. "You've just been having a lot of nightmares, you know, like before. We've been giving you Droughts of Dreamless Sleep to keep you from screaming."

Jean tensed, poorly hiding it. "What was I saying?"

Jean saw Lily pale slightly. "He's dead. They're all dead."
Jean's eyes tightened shut and suppressed a shudder. Lily drew the blankets tighter around Jean's body. "Did everyone make it out okay?" Jean's voice came out strangled.

"Remus is pretty banged up," said Lily. "Nothing but cuts and bruises for the rest of us. When Dumbledore arrived all of the Death Eaters started Disapparating. Even, well…You-Know-Who."

"Don't call him that," said Jean. "His name is Voldemort." Jean ignored Lily's slight flinch at the name.

Jean glanced at Remus again. She was surprised he wasn't in a hospital bed himself after the way Greyback went after him. Jean's eyes widened and her head snapped back to Lily. "Remus. Lily, everyone knows. Everyone in that room heard what Greyback said."

Lily nodded stiffly, remaining silent.

"What's going to happen?" asked Jean quietly.

Lily heaved out a sigh that seemed to weigh down her entire body. "Remus quit his job as a precaution. Beyond that, I don't know."

There was a soft knock at the door and Lily's head whipped around, her hand reaching for her wand. Frank and James also jumped to attention and Jean realized with a jolt that they were more than just visitors. They were her bodyguards. Frank nodded at James and curled his fingers around the wand strapped to his belt. James swung open the door and Alice walked in, her heels clicking against the linoleum. A silver tray laden with bottles and a plate of food hovered at her shoulder. "I've brought more pain medication and another round of dreamless sleep. Oh, you're awake."

"Hi Alice," said Jean weakly. "Are you my Healer?"

Alice nodded. "Lily and I have been switching off. How are you feeling today?" Like Lily before her, Jean noticed Alice giving her a strange look. It was almost pained.

"I'm really sore," Jean replied.

"I'm not surprised," said Alice. "You are…you were really hurt when we brought you in. Alice plucked a small vial containing a silvery blue liquid and passed it to Jean. "Here, this should take the edge off."

Jean dutifully sipped the potion, half listening to Lily and Alice's side conversation. "Is he sleeping? Good. I was ready to drug his food." Alice bustled over to Remus, turning his head to rest at a more natural angle. "We should get the Healer from the Bite Unit to come look at this," said Alice, hastily gesturing at Remus' chest.

"He's had worse than this and bounced back," commented Lily.

"Well, you'd know better than I." Alice's tone was clipped.

"It wasn't my secret to tell."

Jean jumped when she felt Alice's fingers on her arm. "Let's see how this looks." Jean bit back a grimace. The ugly word was burned black against her skin. The tight knotted scarring had a sheen to it and even some of the arteries under her skin were stained by the dark magic. Alice ran her wand over the wound, a white light washing over it. The throbbing ache lessened somewhat but it
did nothing for its appearances.

"Any luck?" asked Lily.

Alice shook her head. Jean curled her fingers, testing their movement. "It'll never fully heal," she said numbly.

"Doesn't mean I can't try," said Alice grimly. After a few minutes, Alice let out a breath of frustration. "We can try again later. It may be like a knot. Work at it long enough and it'll work itself out."

Jean watched as Alice's small fingers wrap fresh bandages around her forearm. In the muted light the gems on Alice's engagement ring shimmered. Jean reached up and clasped Alice's wrist, turning her hand to see the second golden band nestled against the first. "I missed your wedding," said Jean stunned. A bubble of disappointment popped in her chest. "I'm sorry," she said pathetically.

"Oh, Jean," said Alice. "It wasn't your fault. Frank and I wanted to cancel, but Dumbledore said it would be dangerous for the Order if we all ran off there looking for you. Sirius wasn't there either...." Alice tapered off, looking at Sirius, still sleeping peacefully against Jean.

Lily looked worse for wear but Sirius looked awful. He was pale, and his cheeks were sunken in like he had barely eaten. His eyes were shadowed and deep in his face. There was a wrinkle cutting though his forehead. "Was he really that worried about me?" asked Jean.

"We all were," said Lily.

Jean reached out gently running her fingers through his hair. It felt coarse and snarled, like he had barely showered. Sirius stirred, turning into her touch, his eyes blinking open. He looked at her through the hazy film of sleep, as if she were a pleasant dream. He blinked once, then again, before his mind caught up with his reality. Jean felt Sirius stiffen, a look of timid hope rising onto his face. Jean laid her hand over his. "Hey," she said.

Without a word, Sirius pulled himself up her body, cupping her head with trembling fingers. His eyes were watery, like starlight reflected in a pool. He opened his mouth several times, his lips forming half syllables before closing again. He kissed her chastely on the crown of her head before pressing his forehead to hers. A heavy sigh of relief rattled out of his ribs. Jean lost herself in the feeling of Sirius' skin against her own. His fingers blazed trails of warmth along her skin, long chilled by the damp dark basement, easing the zings of pain that burrowed deep in her bones. Jean readjusted her hold on Sirius, rediscovering him hand over hand. "I was so worried," Sirius murmured, his lips pressed to Jean's temple.

Jean folded Sirius to her body. She felt her eyes misting over. "You're real," she said. "This is real."

Sirius nodded jerkily. "I'm real." Jean lost count of how many minutes they held each other, rocking back and forth in small arrhythmic movements.

Alice tapped the tray floating in the air and four claw-footed legs unfurled themselves from underneath like a lazy cat stretching. She set it on the bed. "You want to try to eat something?" she asked.

"I'm not hungry," said Sirius.

"I'm not currently hounding you, Black," said Alice. Jean briefly wondered how many times Alice
and Sirius had had this talk. Alice turned to Jean, nudging the tray towards her. "Just a nibble, if you can."

It was a simple meal: a cheese sandwich, salted potato chips, and a glass of water. There was a part of Jean that knew she should be hungry and another part that was adamant she couldn't eat a bite. Jean pulled the crust off the sandwich and tore it into pieces, occasionally eating one of the ragged chunks. "Good, that's good," praised Alice. "At least someone eats when I tell them to."

Sirius scowled, deliberately picking up a chip and popping it into his mouth. "Happy?" he asked.

Jean pushed a few chips across the small plate towards Sirius. He shook his head. "I'll eat later."

Jean pushed more chips in his direction before chewing on another bit of crust. Sirius rolled his eyes. "Fine." He took a handful of chips and bit down on them with an audible crunch.

Jean smiled, wincing slightly as her lips cracked. She swallowed dryly. "I'm thirsty," she rasped.

Sirius passed her the tall glass of water from his side of the tray. After a few timid sips, Jean began gulping not able to swallow enough. She gagged on a mouthful, water spilling over her lips and down her neck. "Careful," said Sirius, tipping the end of the glass back down. "Don't choke."

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," Jean sputtered, suddenly flustered.

"There's nothing you need to be sorry for," said Sirius.

Jean coughed a couple more times before it morphed into a yawn. "I don't know why I'm so tired. I just woke up."

"Don't worry about it," said Lily, "if you need to sleep, then sleep."

"Before you do though," said Alice uncorking the Draught of Dreamless Sleep and sliding it over to Jean. "Take this first."

Jean eyed it skeptically, not reaching for it. "What's wrong?" asked Alice.

"Do I have to take it?" Jean asked.

"I would recommend it," said Alice. "You haven't been able to sleep well without it."

"But what if..." Jean's own voice choked her. "What if something happens? What if they try to take me again? I won't be safe."

"Jean," said Sirius, easing the tray off of Jean and setting it on the floor. He moved to sit on the edge of the bed, taking both of Jean's hands in his own. "I know you're scared. But, nothing's going to happen. And if something does, it's got to get through Frank, James, and most importantly me, to get to you. You're safe. I swear it." The fierce determination that sharpened the edges of his eyes grew soft. He took the small dram from Alice and extended it to Jean. "Please," he added, "just focus on feeling better and let us take care of the rest."

Jean worried on the inside of her lip, nearly drawing blood, but stopping short. "Okay," she said, tossing the potion back before she could change her mind.

Jean felt immediately weightless as Sirius maneuvered her back into the bedding. Sirius perched on the edge of it, his bent elbow propped on the metal headboard, holding his head up with his hand. He reached down and tucked and errant curl behind her ear. Jean thought he looked sad. "I love you," he mouthed.
Are you going to sleep, too?" Jean's voice was slurred.

"If you want me to," said Sirius. Jean thought for a moment and then nodded. "Okay."

Jean didn't last long enough to see if Sirius actually went to sleep. Her vision dissolved around her and Lily was swimming through air as she walked back to James. "The others should here soon," she heard him say. Jean fell back into the embrace of a dreamless sleep. It was like lying on a black-sanded beach with waves crashing over her body. They covered her head, wrapping her in liquid cocoon. Every so often they would fall away and she could hear sounds from the worlds above her, lazy planets sailing through an empty sky.

"It's…only…safe…can't be…understand…this…is absolutely ridiculous."

Jean peeled her eyes open, somehow even groggier than when she first awoke. Jean had more visitors. Replacing Frank and Alice were Fabian and Gideon Prewett lounging against the door as her present pair of burly gatekeepers. Dumbledore was front and center in her line of vision. He was sitting in a small chair placed at the foot of her bed. Edgar Bones and Alastor Moody were also standing on either side. Bones was straight backed in official looking robes while Moody was cross-armed, his dark eyes staring pointedly across the room. Lily was folded up in a chair, her baggy Healer scrubs falling over her feet, staring blankly down at the be-speckled linoleum floor. James was standing, a bracing hand on Remus' shoulder.

Remus was furious. All traces of exhaustion had been burned away by rage. His teeth were bared and his hands were balled into fists. "I will not accept this. It's insanity."

"It's already done, Remus," said Bones. "Informing you was s courtesy."

"Then undo it!" Remus looked around, his eyes snapping to each of his friends, searching for something and clearly not finding it. "Sirius," he said, his voice nearly breaking. "Sirius, please. Please tell me you're not okay with this. She deserves justice."

Sirius looked like he had just woken up and could use a few more days of rest at the same time. His hair was tousled on one side and there was a blanket thrown over his shoulders. There was a tract of shadowy stubble on his jaw. "Moony," he said running a hand over his face. "I just got Jean back. I don't want to trade her life for yours. Jean would feel the same, you know it."

"They tortured her!" Remus nearly shrieked.

"Potter and I would have to take you to Azkaban," said Moody gruffly. "Tonight."

"Then lock me up!"

"Hey, Jean," through the throngs of people Gideon waved a meaty hand at Jean. "You have a nice nap?"

Jean felt a hand on her shoulder. "Hey," said Sirius, his voice both gentle and strained. "Sorry we woke you, sweetheart. Try to get some more sleep. We can take this outside."

"She deserves to know. Look her in the eye and tell her," said Remus darkly.

"Watch your tone, Lupin," growled Moody.

All through the exchange Dumbledore's warm eyes watched Jean over the rims of his half moon spectacles. He had that same strange look as Alice and Lily had before him, a discomfort that soured his pleasantness. "Hello, Jean," he said. "I'm glad to see you're recovering."
"What's going on?" Jean asked, climbing out of her valley of pillows.

James heaved out a sigh. His face was pale, but his hazel eyes behind his glasses were fierce. "Dumbledore just gave us some... some news." James ignored Remus' scoff.

Edgar stepped forward, both of his hands curled around the metal railings of her bed. "Dumbledore, Moody and I had to make some quick decisions regarding the aftermath of your rescue. We discussed this at length." Jean thought that Edgar looked uncomfortable. "We decided —"

"There's not going to be a trial," said Moody, ever getting to the point. "No arrests. It'll be as if it never happened."

Jean stared at the assemblage, blinking. She didn't know if she was stunned into silence or if that's numbing feeling filling her body had been there long before. "I see," she managed.

"Fenrir Greyback revealed what—who Remus is to at least a dozen people. Remus broke into the Malfoy home. With Remus being a werewolf, Lucius would be well within his rights to—" Edgar cut himself off and Jean saw that he took no joy in what he was saying. "I would have no choice but to declare him a threat to the public. Moody would have orders to take him to Azkaban to await a trial that most certainly wouldn't go well for him."

"So be it," said Remus.

"Remus, don't say that. You could be in jail for the rest of your life."

"It's my choice," said Remus, rounding on Lily.

"Dumbledore is also concerned about other secrets of the Order that could possibly be revealed to or by Death Eaters if this got out," Moody added gruffly, "a concern he and I both share."

Jean's eyes drifted knowingly over to Dumbledore's, an entire conversation passing between the blue and the brown. That was the real reasoning. Jean Granger couldn't go before the whole Wizengamot to accuse a powerful wizard of kidnapping and torture all on the orders of Lord Voldemort if Jean Granger wasn't supposed to exist. "What about Malfoy?" Jean asked, clinically calm. "Just because I don't say anything doesn't mean he won't."

"No," Remus scrambled over to Jean's bed, kneeling to the point that he was beneath her. His hands were clutching the coverlets and his eyes were wild. "You don't have to be okay with this," he said. "It isn't fair."

Jean looked over at Remus, her eyes softening. "Neither is having you locked away in Azkaban," she said with a wearied finality. Jean flicked her shadowed eyes up to Edgar Bones and nodded for him to continue.

"We offered Lucius Malfoy a deal," said Bones.

"A deal?" Jean croaked.

Edgar nodded, "A man like Malfoy loves power and Dumbledore informed me this evening that a position on Hogwarts' board of governors is conveniently open. If all of this remains secret he keeps the position in perpetuity."

Jean nodded as years of her childhood suddenly made sense. "He'd like that," she mumbled to herself. Lucius would do anything to keep such a posting, or silence anyone. Jean imagined that
Voldemort would like this arrangement as well. A Death Eater always in Dumbledore’s business. Dumbledore has sacrificed a pawn to save the queen, only in this particular game, both pieces were the same person. “So it’s done then?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Edgar, glumly. “There’s an owl on the way to the Daily Prophet as we speak with the announcement.”

Remus keened, his fingers fistling his hair, rocking back on his heels. Jean felt Sirius fingers run over her shoulder blades like an apology.

“Moony,” said James, cautiously stepping forward.

Remus practically threw himself away from James, staggering to his feet. He breathed audibly through his nose, as if he were doing everything in his power to hold in his anger and self-loathing. He let out a huff in frustration and kicked the end table next to him. Marlene’s flower arrangement wobbled in its vase before Remus whirled around and left in a flurry of ruined robes. Gideon and Fabian barely had time to get out of the way before the door snapped shut between them.

“Remus,” James called out, scrambling after him. “Remus, come back.” Jean heard James’ voice fading down the hallway.

Sirius braced his elbows on his knees, rubbing his temple with his thumb. Lily stood briskly out of her chair, attempting to busy her hands. “I’ll go make some tea,” she said, “and bring back your next round of medication, Jean.”

“I’ll take a cup with lemon if you please,” said Dumbledore pleasantly.

“No course, Headmaster.” Lily slipped out the door through gap between the Prewett brothers’ broad shoulders. Jean idly wondered if Lily was actually making tea or was looking for an excuse to go chase after James and Remus. Moody looked over his shoulder and nodded at Fabian who shut the door with a firm click.

“Are we secure, Alastor?” asked Dumbledore.

“Well enough,” he responded.

Sirius straightened to the best of his ability, his shoulders still slumped over from fatigue. “Before we leave and let you rest,” continued Edgar. “Albus, Alastor and I would like to know if you recognized any of the Death Eaters that abducted you, or if you discovered any of their names.”

“Can’t you see that she’s exhausted,” said Sirius, a barb of exasperation in his voice. “Why do you even need to know? We can’t take them to trial.”

“Our hands may be tied by the Ministry, but this information is vital to the Order,” said Moody. “And I’m sure you can also find a reason or two to have a random house raid or some such on these persons, can’t you Bones?”

Jean lifted an incredulous eyebrow at the Head of Magical Law. “You can do that?”

Edgar pulled out a navy gold tipped quill and a small roll of parchment from the folds of his well-tailored robes. “You just leave that to me,” he said in what could only be described as cheeky.

Jean swallowed a chuckle and looked down at her hands. Her bones were prominent in her wrists, the left almost eclipsed by the thick swath of bandages. “Bellatrix Lestrange and Fenrir Greyback, obviously,” said Jean. “Lucius and Narcissa Malfoy. Then there was a man names Wilkes and
another man names Rosier.”

“Evan Rosier,” Edgar prompted over the scratching of his quill.

“I think so,” said Jean. Jean recalled the younger faces of the Death Eaters she knew from before. “There was Antonin Dolohov, Walden Macnair, and Igor Karkaroff.”

“Karkaroff?” said Moody, in a rare tone of surprise. “You know him?”

“I’ve heard of him,” said Jean. “Isn’t he the High Master of Durmstrang?”

“He teachers,” Dumbledore corrected quickly.

“Right,” said Jean. Jean wondered how many Death Eaters she knew in that room that were merely hidden by a mask: Rodolphus and Rabastan Lestrange, Barty Crouch Jr., Avery, Nott, Crabbe, Goyle. Jean jerked away from the temptation. It was too much of a gamble. “That’s everyone,” said Jean, her voice neutral.

There was a quick knock at the door and Gideon slid out of the way to open it. Lily walked by in, her lips pinched tight. Neither James nor Remus were with her. “Here’s your tea, Headmaster.”

Dumbledore graciously accepted the plain porcelain teacup while Edgar Bones pocketed his quill and scrap of parchment. “Well,” he said, “I’ll take this back to the Ministry and see what I can do with it. Will you be joining me Moody?” Moody grunted in the affirmative.

“I’d like to speak with Jean for a moment longer,” said Dumbledore, wisps of steam swirling around his silvery beard. “Privately.”

“Can’t it wait, Albus,” said Sirius. “Look at her.”

“I’m afraid it can’t,” said Dumbledore, a firm edge around his pleasantries.

Sirius began to open his mouth in protest but Jean laid her hand on his, rubbing a small circle into his thumb. “It’s alright,” she whispered.

Sirius let out a long sigh, his body visibly deflating. Sirius gave her the look that she was getting used to, but still couldn’t place.

“Come on, Sirius,” said Gideon. He swung his arm across Sirius’ shoulders and steered him outside. “Lily, where does the Welcome Witch keep the good crisps?” The door closed on Sirius, Lily and the Prewett brothers leaving Jean and Dumbledore alone in the little room.

Jean watched Dumbledore take another sip of tea, squeeze the tiny wedge of lemon, and settle the little cup in its saucer. “Does he know anything?”

Jean inclined her head, knowing exactly whom he was referring to. “No,” she said simply, “but it was close. Too close.”

“Good,” said Dumbledore, a note of relief in his voice. “We’ll have to be more careful. He will be suspicious.”

Jean nodded not really listening. The pair sat in relative silence, Dumbledore watching Jean and Jean looking but not really seeing anything. Jean slumped back into the pillows and closed her eyes, not sure if the tear that rolled down her face was caused by the harsh hospital lighting. Images of Bellatrix flickered across her lids like a grainy kineograph. In each frame the dark haired
witch was older, then younger. She was wielding a knife, then pressing her wand into Jean’s writhing wrist. Ron’s pale face, slackened by death rested in Jean’s lap, then Sirius was pointing his wand at her, his face white with rage. “Jean,” Dumbledore’s voice kneaded its way inside her head. “Is there something you want to talk about?”

Jean let out a watery sound trapped in the back of her throat. “It’s like I was right back in it,” she murmured, “back before.” Jean gestured vaguely with her hand before it flopped back down on the bed. Jean looked at Dumbledore, her eyes blank and glassy. “I can’t do this again, Albus.”

Dumbledore nodded, his face sad. “I know how you feel,” he said quietly.

“How?” asked Jean.

Dumbledore smiled but there was no mirth to it. “This is not the first wizarding war I have fought, Miss Granger, and, like you, I’ve stood in its ruins having lost everything.”

Jean felt abashed. “I’m sorry,” she said. “I knew that.” Jean drew her legs up to her chest and dropped her chin down onto her knees. “I know too much,” she said into the bed sheets.

“Another thing we unfortunately have in common,” said Dumbledore.

“That’s not entirely true, Albus,” said Jean. Jean pulled her head up to look at Dumbledore, his expression guarded. “Albus,” said Jean, her voice pleading. “Now…no that the war has started, I could tell you about—”

“No, Jean,” said Dumbledore.

“—but, I could save so many lives. I promised Harry. There’s a traitor—”

“Stop, Jean.”

“—you don’t understand! He won’t die. He can’t die—”

“I said stop!”

Jean’s mouth clicked shut. She felt like the air was vibrating around her. Dumbledore let out a deliberate breath and smoothed his beard over his mauve robes. “You need to understand that there are consequences for even good intentions.” In all the years that she had known him, Jean had never heard Dumbledore speak like this. It was not kindness, nor was it anger. It was bitterness knotted together with a deeply seeded sense of regret. “If I were a younger man I would have heard all you had to say before now. But, back then, when I truly believed I was destined to be the greatest sorcerer who ever lived, back when I tried to bend fate to my will and whims….carried such an arrogance in me that I could dictate even who lived and who died….what it cost me…..”

Dumbledore broke off and quickly moved his glasses higher up his once broken nose. Jean thought of the faded snapshot of a red headed man with long, thin fingers, his arm casually slung over another who had feathered hair so light it was nearly platinum. Jean thought about the painting of a young girl with bright blue eyes tucked away and almost forgotten in the Hog’s Head. “You’ll forgive me if I don’t tempt myself again,” said Dumbledore.

Jean’s body collapsed on itself in defeat. There was an ache settling in her neck, slowly expanding down her spine. She brushed knotted curl away from her face. “I can’t just stand aside and do nothing.”

“I don’t expect you to,” said Dumbledore.
Jean looked up at Dumbledore long and steady; two seasoned warriors looking out onto the same front. “What should I do?”

“I don’t think Moody would mind if you joined Frank, Fabian and the other auors out on field missions. As you know, Mr. Fenwick has been training Lily, Alice, Marlene and Dorcas. They will join you as well.” Jean nodded, if she could not be their sword then she could at least be their shield. But sword or shield alike to protect them, she must also endanger them.

“Won’t Voldemort just try to capture me again?” said Jean, “if he suspects something about me?”

“I think if we hide you away somewhere then Voldemort will know you are someone worth hiding.”

“I guess I’ll just have to not be captured then,” said Jean grimly.

If Dumbledore was going to say anything else it was interrupted by a timid knock at the door, startling Jean. “Headmaster,” Lily’s voice called through the wood, “can we come in?”

Dumbledore smoothly stood. “You may.” He had barely finished his reply before the door swung open and Lily and Sirius entered. Sirius swiftly brushed past Dumbledore and bent down over Jean. “You okay?” he asked, as if he’s been gone for five days instead of fifteen minutes.

“Mm-hm,” said Jean, hoping she didn’t look dead on her feet.

If Sirius saw through her façade he didn’t comment on it. “You ready to go home?”

“I can leave?” said Jean, giving a confused look to Lily.

Lily nodded. “Medically, you don’t have any more reason to stay. All you need now is rest.”

For Jean, the thought of going home had been such a far off concept that being so close to it now was just as unsettling as her cell. “Will you visit?”

“Of course,” said Lily, “every day if you want.”

“And James and Remus?” she added.

“Whomever you want,” said Sirius. “Let’s just get you home first before you invite over everyone we know.”

Dumbledore hid a small behind his beard lingering by the half open door. “I’ll leave Miss Granger in your capable hands,” he said, “I must go and inform the other school governors of the newest member of the board.” Jean didn’t miss the Dumbledore’s hesitation, the lingering look at Sirius and herself, or the way his finger tapped against the doorknob. “Jean,” he said, his voice neutral. “The person you mentioned. Do you think you can handle him?”

Jean worried on the inside of her cheek, debating what to say and, more importantly, what not. She briefly wondered how Dumbledore seemed to intuitively know that the traitor was male. “I think so,” she said.

“I’ll leave you to it then,” said Dumbledore, brightening up his tone. “Oh and Miss Evans, you should receive my RSVP to your nuptials in your morning post.” Sirius helped Jean sit up as Dumbledore closed the door behind him.

“When I was younger,” said Lily, “I thought growing up would help me make sense of that man,
“but all it’s done is make him more mysterious.”

“You and me both,” said Sirius.

“Anyways,” said Lily, turning her attention back to Jean, “do you need anything before you go? Pain potions? Another Draught of Dreamless sleep?”

“I think I’ll be fine,” said Jean.

“Okay.” Lily flashed a glance at Sirius and Jean anticipated there would be an entire pharmacy on their windowsill by the next day.”

Sirius looped his arm under Jean’s shoulders and eased her out of bed. Jean looked down at her shapeless puce hospital pajamas and how her bare feet wobbled like a newborn calf.

“Are we going to Apparate?” said Jean with trepidation.

“Oh, heavens no,” said Lily. “Sirius would have to bring you right back. I’m going to use a spell I learned in my Healer training.

On any other day, Lily would have had Jean’s rapt attention, however today, all Jean could do was lean heavily against Sirius’ body, not even faking an interest. Lily looped her wand over her head.

“Reverteur In Terram.”

Jean felt an odd sensation of running though a torrent of rain. It was cold and blinding. Jean rubbed at her eyes, trying to blink her vision clear. When it did she saw, dimly lit by hallway lighting, the lopsided lion-shaped doorknocker of she and Sirius’ flat. Jean’s couldn’t tear her eyes away from the tarnished, tacky, ornament, completely oblivious of Sirius fumbling with the key and escorting her inside.

It was like stepping back into a life that didn’t entirely belong to her anymore. Jean knew everything so well, but there was a foreignness that made her uncomfortable. Jean was almost irritated at how ordinary everything seemed, at how non-pulsed her surroundings were in light of her absence. Sirius eased her down onto the couch before drifting away from her into the kitchen. Jean was sitting in what seemed to be a nest of blankets. There was a pile of dirty plates collected at her ankles. Empty glasses and half drunk bottles of fire whiskey littered the end tables or gathered dust in the corners of the room. Most noticeably, the fireplace had been bricked shut, clumsily lain but tightly mortared. It looked liked Sirius had hurled the bricks at the hearth.

Jean jumped at the sudden movement beside her, straining her eyes in the dim lighting. Hephaestus kneaded her leg, his sour meow pitching into a whine. Jean gathered the cat into her lap, folding her fingers though his coarse yet soft hair. “Hey, you,” she said.

“He’s been unbearable,” said Sirius, coming back into the small den. “He ate holes through my socks.”

“He’s not the only one who has been destructive,” said Jean, still taking her surroundings. “Did you sleep out here?”

“Not all the time,” said Sirius. It felt awkward, the two of them. A pat-de-deux that came so natural was now an ungainly exchange of side glances, a chaste touch, and polite conversation. Hephaestus clambered out of Jean’s lap when Sirius knelt in front of her, passing a teacup full of room temperature orange juice into her clumsy fingers.

“Sorry,” said Sirius sheepishly. “I ran out of clean glasses a few days ago.”
“Sirius,” said Jean, immediately setting the cup aside amongst the clutter and trash. “You can’t fall apart like this if…” Jean choked on her own voice, not even wanting to cater to the notion of being captured again.

Sirius tilted his head down, staring at nothing. “I know,” he mumbled. In a flurry of motion that startled Jean, Sirius pressed a hand to his face, his back curling. He made a small strangled sound, his breath hitching. “I’m so… so… sorry,” he said, his voice wobbling.

Jean wanted to reach out to him, to gather him in her arms and hold him till all the hurting stopped, but she was just so tired. “It wasn’t your fault,” she said, her voice monotone.

“They took you because of me.”

“They took me because they are Death Eaters and that’s what they do.”

Sirius sighed, his shoulders bowed. Sirius touched his chin to her knees, lifting his eyes up to Jean. “I would never have forgiven myself if something had happened to you.”

“Neither would I,” said Jean.

“What do you mean?” asked Sirius.

“Sirius,” said Jean, she didn’t know where this barb in her voice came from. “You nearly gave yourself to Voldemort to save me. You shouldn’t… you shouldn’t have done that.”

“I was trying to protect you.” Jean caught the bristle in Sirius’ voice.

“Yes, but Voldemort knows you have a line now, a line you’re willing to cross. And so do they.”

Sirius’ face darkened; in the half-light he looked skeletal, like he just escaped from Azkaban. “The Order knows I would never betray them,” said Sirius evenly.

“They don’t know that,” said Jean. “They know that your mother and father kidnapped me, that your cousins tortured me. They know we’re at war with half your family.” Jean heaved herself up with the last burst of energy she had. Sirius made a sound of surprise, leaning forward to brace her. Jean’s fingers shook at they dug into his robes. “Promise me. Promise me you won’t do that again— ever. Nothing—no one—is that important.”

Jean saw her eyes reflected in his, dark and fearul. Sirius reached up tracing the contours of Jean’s face. He shook his head. “I can’t promise that, Jean. I’m sorry.”

Jean ground her teeth, her eyes screwing shut. A nervous energy was popping through her body and she was torn between shaking Sirius senseless and taking him to a pace where no one would find them ever again. Jean felt her stomach drop as Lucius Malfoy’s bargain suddenly seemed appealing. Jean felt Sirius arms loop around her, pulling her close to him. “Are you angry with me?” he murmured into her hair.

“I’m angry that you mean it,” she said.

The awkward pause stretched out between them like a lazy cat. Jean realized she wasn’t the only one holding onto her life, like pieces of a puzzle knocked from a table, wondering if they should attempt to reassemble or put it back in the box. Sirius coughed to break the tension. “Is there anything you’d like? Are you hungry?” The attempt at normalcy was unnerving. It felt like a play and Sirius was an actor coming back late from work. Never the less, Jean attempted to act her part. “I think I’d like a bath actually,” she said.
“Sure,” said Sirius gently. “I’ll help you get started.”

Through the small window in their bathroom Jean looked at the sky, colored with smears of cornflower and lavender. “What time is it?” she asked.

“Almost morning,” said Sirius, his voice echoing around the small space along with the rolling sounds of water filling the tub. “Do you need any help?” he asked.

Jean tugged at her floppy sleepwear. They smelled like sweat and cleaning solvents. She winced when she tried to pull them over her head, her shoulders screaming in resistance. “Please,” she almost whimpered.

Sirius folded her out of her clothing like a tiny paper crane, tossing them into the misshapen mounds of his own unwashed clothes, damp with humidity and clearly stepped on. Jean let him move her around, gasping suddenly when he inadvertently angled her towards the mirror. Jean understood why everyone was looking at her strangely. She looked awful. Purple welt like bruises bloomed on her cheeks, jaw and temples. Her eyes were squinted and bloodshot and her hair was frayed and scraggly, almost colorless. Jean was vaguely surprised that her clothing didn’t just fall off of her due to weight loss, her collarbone sharply jutting out from her chest. Jean brought both her hands up to her mouth, her garbled sound of distress reverberating through her body.

“It’ll be okay,” she heard Sirius say, his firm hands turning her away from the waifish visage. “It’ll be alright.”

Sirius eased her down into the steaming water, wincing along with her as her scrapes and cuts dipped under the surface. Jean rested her back against the curved slope of their claw footed tub, tilting her head up to the ceiling, all the while trying to untie the knot in her stomach. Jean felt Sirius pull her hair back from her shoulders, tying it up with a hair band. “There’s a towel by the tub,” said Sirius softly, “if you need anything just call.”

Jean nodded, or at least she thought she did. Remembering things, even from moment to moment, was difficult. Through her half aware haze, Jean watched Sirius pad into his room, swiping the door shut, but not completely closing it. Through the sliver of a gap, Jean saw Sirius crumple onto his bed, which was more a tangle of sheets and exposed mattress than anything else. His body physically deflated with a sigh.

Jean pushed the lump of bar soap in lazy circles through the water. She looked up at the gathering dawn peeping cautiously through the little window. It felt strange to be so sleepy when everyone else was just starting her day. Her mind was tired and racing at the same time. For a moment, she thought about how Hermione had to pick herself up off a bathroom floor and start a new life as Jean. She wondered who she was now, Jean, Hermione or some strange new creature caught in the turbulence of their shared lives. Was she too to be dashed against the rocks along with everyone else the two beings living within her loved?

Jean felt something stick to her foot. She pulled it out of the tepid water, bracing it on the lip of the tub. Jean scowled when she saw a clot of lumpy black blood clinging to her toe. Jean submerged her foot, swirling it around in the water, bringing it back up after a beat. Her heart dropped like a stone. Her entire foot and ankle were covered in violently red blood. Jean jolted splashing water around. Not water, blood. The entire bathtub was filled with it. Jean scrambled forward, her chest covered in a heavy film of crimson. She turned on the tap and both the faucet and the showerhead exploded in red. Everything ran red. Jean felt like she was going to pass out her heart was hammering so fast. Jean’s hands were slipping in the substance sliding back down into an ever-deeper tub as she tried to escape. It clung to her hair, washed into her mouth. Red. Red. Red. Jean shrieked, trying to rise once more only to fall back again.
“Jean! Jean!”

Jean felt herself being picked up, flailing about in the arms that held her. Her head snapped up to find Sirius illuminated in the half-light from the small bathroom window. His shirt was drenched and he had pulled half of the water out of the bath along with Jean.

“Hey,” he said again, trying to cut through Jean’s panic. “You’re alright. You were dreaming.”

Sirius’ words did nothing to help her. Jean’s gasped not able to get enough air and her body was shaking itself to pieces. “I…can’t…stop.”

Sirius readjusted his grip and Jean was vaguely aware of him carrying her somewhere. Sirius bent down and placed her in his unkempt bed. “Here,” he said quickly. “Let me just get you some clothes.”

“No, no!” shouted Jean, her voice breaking, frantically clinging to any part of him she could. “No!”

“Okay, it’s okay.” Sirius stripped off his soaked shirt and pants and allowed Jean to pull him into bed in just his underwear. “It’s okay,” he said, tucking her into his chest, his fingers gripping her tangled hair. “It’s okay.”

But it wasn’t okay. It wasn’t going to be okay. Jean felt Sirius’ hand run up and down her bare back. She saw that he was speaking but could not hear him. She pressed her face into his chest, but it gave her little comfort to know that he was alive, that they all were alive, for the moment. “I don’t want you to die.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello all my lovely readers! Wow I can't tell you how crazy this chapter was for me to write. I completely 5 drafts before I finally found one that worked for me. So here's me asking for a little reader to author feedback. Every time I post a chapter I get a lot of reviews saying 'when is Hermione going to tell everyone/it's silly she's not telling anyone' Now, I totally welcome critical reviews because every writer is a learning writer now matter how much they have written and this chapter was an attempt to justify why she hasn't informed anyone about the future and why she will continue to do so. Anywho, we get to look forward to some nice fluffy lemony chapters next cause it's Lily and James' wedding soon. Hugs and kisses all around let's get these two hitched.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!