

Countdown

Written February-November, 2004

I. August/September

"G'night."

"G'night."

There was a slight rustling of sheets as George Weasley shifted in his bed, placing his freckled hands behind his head. He stared up at the now-familiar ceiling at 12 Grimmauld Place, eyebrows furrowed in thought.

"Hey Fred?"

His twin stirred in the bed across the room. "Hmmm?"

"How's this for an additional delicacy for the snackboxes? 'Fever Fudge.'"

An appreciative but sleepy noise came from his brother's direction.

"You remember those Sandblast Snaps we had in Egypt? Those were fiery alright. If I can just figure out..."

"Leshtalkaboutitinmorning," Fred mumbled.

George sighed, listening to his brother's deepening breaths which soon turned into an expected, all-too-familiar snore. With a practiced arm, he lobbed a fake wand at Fred, who muttered, "Ickle prefect," and rolled over, his snoring temporarily silenced. George snickered, though Fred's subconscious reply reminded him of just how much on his own he was.

They were.

He had been as shocked as Fred that Ron had been appointed prefect that year for Gryffindor, and in a convoluted way, he was grateful. If nothing else, it had stopped his Mum's seemingly unceasing litany of how many ways he and Fred had managed to be continual disappointments to the Weasley name. After Percy's royal row with their dad, George had, in a rare attempt at familiar maturity, made a point of mentioning to their mum that he was actually doing not half-poorly in Transfigurations. It had not made the positive impression he had hoped for.

"Doing passably well in Transfigurations and only three O.W.L.s?" she replied absently, flipping through the recipe section of Witches Weekly and glancing furtively at the ever-moving hands on their kitchen clock. Suddenly she sat up straight, her blue eyes boring into him, surprising him with their intensity. "It's not too late," she said, eyes shining. "You and Fred are clever boys, if you would only stop putting so much energy into those infernal toys of yours."

At that, George lost his temper, a rare enough event given his agreeable personality, but made even more so because he had been sitting alone with his mother.

"First of all, Mum," he simmered, "those 'toys' are not infernal, they're popular. They've got market value. We can actually make real money selling them. I've been talking with Zonko, and he says-"

"The joke-shop owner?" his mother interrupted, reproach heavy in her words. "You should have higher aspirations than running a store like that. You two-"

"I'm the only one here talking with you," George fumed, standing up, his face scarlet with rage underneath his freckles. "Even you may not always be able to tell us apart but we are NOT one person."

As his mother gaped, George paced from one side of the table to the other before rounding on her. Heatedly he said, "For your information, Fred's piss-poor at charms. Ruddy brilliant at numbers, though. Maybe if all else fails he can work at Gringott's." The wave of anger was receding, but he had to leave with one last jab. "Wouldn't that be irony for you; one of your non-perfect, non-prefected sons working at a bank with Bill."

"GEORGE XANADU WEASLEY!" she yelled to his retreating shoulders. "Don't you EVER talk back to me like that again!"

He continued with pounding footsteps to a side door of the Burrow and then, after getting outside, let it slam satisfyingly behind him. He was later forced to be especially ginger around his Mum for days afterwards, and had had to deal with mini-lectures from Fred about leaving her out of it on top of it all.

Admittedly, it would be far easier to think of himself as GeorgeandFred, though it was usually FredandGeorge. Always together, and identical.

Only they weren't. And they weren't.

Really, it was much more apt to say it was FredandGeorgeandLee. George didn't want to give much thought to the fact that while Lee Jordan was the Third Musketeer in their trio (having a Muggle father, Jordan had come up with that analogy, and their other roommate, Kenneth Towler, had never been as close to them), he actually had plans beyond Hogwarts that did not include being a part of their joke-shop enterprise. They had invited Lee in, of course, but he really had his heart set on being a professional Quidditch announcer.

And they weren't identical. Not really. Well, they were in appearance, usually, though Fred was more likely to forget to do his shaving spell for days on end until Kenneth, who was decidedly priggish and came from a well-off wizarding family in Oxford, asked if he was trying to emulate a young Dumbledore. George was also left-handed, and Fred was not. It was part of what made them such brutally seamless Beaters, able to act like two hands on one body. George sometimes wondered if Hermione, Ron's overly-observant friend, had told Harry about that, as the two of them were among the few outside of their immediate family who almost never confused their identities.

Fred's newly rumbling snores brought George out of his reverie, and he leaned over to find something - anything- under the bed to toss at him. At Hogwarts they all had curtains which shut out the noise, but he'd always been a much lighter sleeper than his twin. While being in this house had certainly had its advantages, namely a perfect place to pick up unexpected things like Doxies and snuffboxes with Wartcap Powder, for some reason it seemed to amplify noises in ways that didn't happen in their own house, which, granted, was never quiet.

His hand scrabbled around on the floorboards until they closed around a broken quill. "Useless," George grumbled, his fingers still searching for something that would make it across the room. He smiled tiredly as he found a dungbomb, then closing one eye, aimed it at Fred's thigh.

"Fizshing... Filch, never there, honest..." Fred commented in his sleep, one arm rubbing his nose.

Though he didn't know how long they would actually be there, George was more than ready to return to Hogwarts. He closed his eyes and dozed off in the interim quiet.

George hadn't been standing on the platform long before he saw the unmistakable dreadlocked head of Lee Jordan. Lee grinned at them as he started up the steps of the train, then he caught sight of Padfoot and yelled, "Nice dog, Harry!" before disappearing in the crush of returning students.

He and Fred reluctantly hugged their mother, vaguely acknowledging her admonitions to stay out of trouble and not to undermine Ron's new authority as prefect without actually agreeing to any of her warnings. George took the stairs two steps at a time despite lugging his trunk behind him and hit his head soundly as he reached the top step. "Bloody hell!" he swore, rubbing at his forehead as he made his way down the corridor.

He shoved his trunk next to Fred's as his brother quickly made the pronouncement to Ron and company, "Well! Can't stand around chatting all day, we've got business to discuss with Lee. See you later." Fred bid a hasty retreat from the compartment and George followed.

Soon they were at their usual haunt on the Express, sprawled across from each other on the seats and listening to the details of Lee's summer adventures. He'd travelled to Brighton where he'd met a young woman with the unfortunate name of Prunella who was fortunately skilled in many pleasurable ways. He also seemed to be suffering from the grief he was getting from his parents about his post-school plans.

"Too right!" George agreed, shaking his head. "Mum's not exactly supportive. She made us chuck out our first orders of trick wands."

"She didn't!" Lee exclaimed, clearly appalled.

"She did, the wicked woman," Fred echoed angrily. "Stood over us with her wand, threatening to hex us into next week if we didn't destroy them properly."

"And it gets better," George muttered, rolling his eyes.

"Ron. Hopeless, sodding *Ron* is a prefect," Fred finished.

Lee stared at them in disbelief. "It must be a joke."

"But it isn't," George said, pulling a small bag from his pocket. "Chocolate frog?"

Lee shook his head. "No thanks. Shoved down a huge breakfast not long ago."

Fred nodded. "Well, his new status won't change our plans. George and I have come up with several new items over the hols for our Skiving Snackboxes. We'll just need to put up some signs and convince some of our innocent, brave first-years to try some of them."

"We've been trying them out on ourselves, of course. Still perfecting some of the ingredients," George added.

"No permanent damage," Fred continued, grinning.

"Yet," Lee chuckled. "Oy, how many N.E.W.T.s are you pair going for? I tried explaining to Mum how useless they are, which brought on the 'there's more to life than Quidditch' speech."

George looked at Fred, who shrugged and pulled out a deck of cards. "As few as possible," Fred said vehemently. "Exploding Snap, gents?"

The rest of the trip was relatively uneventful, though there were two somewhat unexpected visitors. Their compartment had been quiet; George had been staring at the Muggle contraption Lee called a CD player while Lee himself was splayed prone on the floor, listening to some music on it. Suddenly Angelina Johnson burst in, announcing her Gryffindor Quidditch Captaincy and that Fred and George had best not been getting soft over the summer.

"Who could be soft when you're around?" Fred leered. George and Lee both looked up, staring at Angelina to gauge her reaction.

"Rude git!" she shot back, but she seemed to be smirking as she left the compartment as hastily as she had entered.

"Hey mate," Lee scowled, twisting his napped chocolate-coloured hair between his fingers. "I'm the one who's had my eye on her for years."

"Why didn't you ask her to the Yule Ball, then?" Fred retorted, but held up his hands in mock surrender. "Not that we have anything going on."

Lee looked suspiciously at him. "You don't?"

"Well," Fred admitted, stretching out his long legs to the seat across from him, "We have snogged a couple of times. But we aren't dating or anything."

"Snogged?" Lee uncurled from the floor and stood upright, his imposing height shadowing their window as George shook his head. "You're supposed to tell a friend about things like that."

"What do you want to know?" Fred asked, instinctively drawing his legs back closer to his body. "You've mooned over her, but Merlin's beard, Lee, a bloke's gotta..." But the lesson in what a bloke should do in such instances was unexpectedly cut short by an enthusiastic rapping on their compartment window.

"Why is she here?" Lee asked, irritably.

"Probably coming to pay her respects," Fred replied, glancing knowingly at George. "She has a thing for redheaded Quidditch players."

"Shut up, twit," George answered, his stomach churning in rather unexpected ways as he waved in their visitor.

Thalia MacGhinty was a rather plain-faced, auburn-haired Gryffindor sixth-year from Dublin. George had danced with her during a couple of the more enthusiastic songs at the Yule Ball until he heard one of the Slytherins from his year loudly exclaim, "Oh, the horror! Even their hair clashes!" At that, George had made a rude gesture toward the offending student unseen by his dancing partner. While Professor McGonagall pointedly had not taken points away from her own house, her disapproving eyes were message enough and George had only hoped that Thalia hadn't heard. She was the youngest of four with three older brothers, and came from a family of similar means to the Weasleys. That and the fact that one of said older brothers played for the Kenmore Kestrels meant that George had a soft spot in his heart for her, especially since she cheered for Fred and him with sentiments that only someone who truly knew and loved Quidditch could express.

She seemed to have matured somewhat over the summer. George motioned for her to enter and tried valiantly not to look at her jeans which hung on newly-exposed hips.

"Thalia!" he enthused. "How was your summer?"

She stood, uncertain, in the doorway. "Alright, I suppose," she ventured, then walked into the testosterone-filled compartment and sat on the cushioned seat across from the twins. Lee glowered menacingly from the far wall. "You?" Her brown eyes danced with mischief. "More progress on the Snackboxes?"

Fred glared at George as he shrugged as innocently as possible, rolling a Galleon over his knuckles, then, in a wave of prestidigitation, the coin vanished.

"I think they're brilliant," she continued.

"Care to buy an Extendable Ear?" Fred suggested, always eager to make money whenever possible.

"What does it do?" Thalia asked.

Fred explained and her eyes lit up. "I can think of plenty of uses for that. What'll it cost me?" Soon the haggling began.

Seven Galleons and a few moments later, she and their first sale of the school year had left the compartment. Next Ron walked by, looking rather official and proud and very wary as he motioned that they would be at Hogwarts soon and should change into their robes.

"Prefect," George exhaled, then jerked his head toward the back of the train, indicating that he'd get their trunks and robes.

"Prat," Fred spat, looking at Lee. "You wouldn't believe the righteous spewing from Mum. As though being a Weasley was a shoe-in for being on the right side of the law. Except for us, of course."

"That combined with the shite with Tripe, and you have an idea of our summer," George went on, opening the door.

"Tripe?" Lee asked quizzically, pulling his robe over his 'Got Quidditch?' t-shirt.

"Tri-P," Fred explained, a clouded, menacing expression on his face. "Percy, the Poncey Prick. Huge, dragon-sized pile of droppings. Told Dad as much as he was embarrassed by the family and that Dad was clinging to Dumbledore's robes."

"Worst summer ever," George offered.

"Bollocks," George heard Lee say in affirmation as he wove down the corridor, trying not to trip over the younger students who looked petrified, much like bees without a queen and .

"Nice first years," George cooed, patting a few on their ridiculously short heads. He ducked into the compartment where his and Fred's trunks were, pulled them out and headed back toward the front of the train.

This was it. Their last year.

Couldn't come too soon, he reckoned, accidentally running a trunk into a dazed third-year Hufflepuff as he hauled their belongings into their compartment.

"They're getting shorter," he pronounced.

"Shut the door," Fred murmured in a suspiciously quiet voice.

"Right," George replied.

He heard a disguising spell quickly cast while Lee produced a bottle of Bitter Banshee.

"'Ere's to us, mates. This is it," he said, having thrust recently-transfigured glasses into the twins' hands. He poured the potent green liquid in, then gesticulated for a toast.

"To us!" Fred roared.

"To us!" George echoed. "'Here's to us, 'oos like us, damn few, and they're all dead.'" He raised his small glass, they all clinked, and tossed back the **Merlin!firedownthethroat!oh, that's better now** substance.

Lee shook his head, grinning.

"Let's make it count, lads."

"All for one, and one for all!" George said, swaying only slightly.

"Best pack this up, mates, before the prefects start banging on the door," Lee said, tossing the bottle into his trunk.

"Best," Fred and George replied in tandem.

"What kind of shite was that?" Lee queried, tacking his well-worn Chudley Cannons poster in its familiar locale on the wall to the left of his bed.

The beginning of term feast and sorting process was over and the four male seventh-year Gryffindors were moving their belongings back into their room for the last time.

"Shite? Which shite?" Kenneth answered, carefully hanging up his robes on hangers enchanted to keep any garment draped on them wrinkle-free.

"That Umbridge woman," Lee continued, placing a new picture to the right of his four-poster, a fledgling Quidditch team, the Green Knights of Glasgow. Youths dressed in emerald robes swooped from one side to the next, looking very enthusiastic and a just a bit unnerved.

"Oy! What are you two up to?" Lee stared at Fred and George, who were taking an astonishing amount of bottles, carved boxes of seemingly ancient origin, and suspicious-looking cauldrons from out of their trunks and placing them in some kind of predetermined order on a shared bookshelf.

"Unpacking. What does it look like?" Fred replied, raising an eyebrow. He stood up straight and paused, staring at the wall. "What is that?" he challenged, pointing at the new poster.

"Green Knights," Lee said, provoking a confrontation by standing even straighter. "They're new. Oliver owled and recommended I keep an eye on them."

George turned around to his roommate. "Wood owled you?"

Lee shrugged dismissively. "Yeah. So what?"

"Was the Umbridge woman spouting shite?" Kenneth interjected. "I had quite ceased paying attention to any of the staff once I saw Leonora."

"Of course you did," Fred sniped, placing two flasks of blue liquid between a rather dangerous looking clawed foot and a more innocuous bottle of ink. "How is our darling Duchess of Dorset?"

"Shut it," Kenneth grumbled as he walked toward the twins and their ever-increasing panoply of unlabeled containers. "How did you get all of this?" he asked suspiciously. "Did you actually bet on something and win?"

"We..." George began.

"We aren't at liberty to discuss our excellent skills in acquisition right now, Kenneth Antonius Towler, the Third." Fred smiled benignly at him.

"No, really," Lee said, walking over from his bed and gazing at the astonishing array of legal, questionable, and highly suspect substances now jumbled in the shelves between Fred and George's beds. "Where'd you get the funds for that?"

George looked uncomfortably at his best friend, and then back at Fred. They had never kept any secrets from Lee, not until Harry had shoved that bag of Galleons at them. What could they say?

"We..." George tried again.

"It's best that we not tell you," Fred said softly. "Far better to protect the innocent, right lad?"

Lee scowled, but seconds later a look of hurt ghosted across his face. "Right," he muttered, as he went back to his bed. "I'm just not used to not being in on it, that's all."

Kenneth had gone off to the toilet with a disapproving noise after his full name had been invoked, so only the three remained in the room. Their other roommate, Muggeridge Finlayson, had moved to Canada during their fourth year, so it had been just the four of them for the last two years. George looked at Lee, who was now rubbing a sleeve against a picture of his parents, smiling and tilting their heads despite the motion.

"It's not like that." George dropped onto his mattress. "We'd let you know, honest, you know we would, but..."

"But we can't," Fred's tone left no room for argument. "Doesn't mean we aren't going to raise some serious hell this year, and we're counting on you being a part of it."

Lee looked up as he placed the frame on his bedside table and smiled. "I would expect no less."

"All for one!" George exclaimed.

"And three for all," Kenneth finished as he strode back into the room, his voice betraying a modicum of resentment. "This year cannot go by quickly enough. Why on Merlin's verdant hills I was sorted into this house I can't imagine."

"You're the one getting laid, not us," Fred offered as he slammed his trunk shut.

The blond youth winked.

"Too right I am."

George chucked a fake wand at Kenneth's curtains as they were hastily drawn shut.

II. October

George aimed his wand at the flames under the cauldron and watched them subside until their glowing blue flickers were barely visible. Casting a hovering and shadowing charm on a mid-sized hourglass, he stepped away from the impromptu potions lab by his bed and traversed the room to the opposite window, the timer gliding along behind him. His other project was nearly complete, and he smiled in satisfaction, leaning over a heated tray. He checked that the colour was what it should be, a shining tawny brown, before using a makeshift spatula to lift it onto a small serving dish.

The door to the room flung open.

"Hey!" Lee's voice rang from the doorway. "That smells great, for once! What are you concocting today?"

"Grilled cheese and tomato," George replied, cutting into his sandwich.

"Y'know, you could have just come to lunch," Fred commented, dropping several rolls of parchment on his bed. "I couldn't imagine that you were still in the library. What we're making isn't complicated enough to warrant spending quality time with Madam Pince."

George swallowed a bite, then gave his brother an affronted look. "Somebody had to babysit this particular potion. I'm glad it was me or we would have had little more than boiled custard a la dragonsbane. And you know that ingredient didn't come cheap."

Charlie, trying to resurrect some peace in his family, even from another country, had agreed to send them the tradeable-only, illegal substance on the condition that they contractually vowed not to send anything else suspicious or dangerous to Percy. "Tripe's got his head so far up his arse he wouldn't know it was from us anyway," Fred had muttered, and signed the agreement next to George's scrawl.

"Hrmp," Fred acknowledged, looking out the window. "Who's practising on the pitch?"

"Slytherins," Lee said, collapsing onto his bed. "They've not improved over last year, but I must say that, no offence to the Weasley name, little Ronnie has launched the team into new levels of mediocrity."

"Don't remind me," Fred groaned, snaking out his hand to grab a bit of George's sandwich, but George batted it away. "He's dismal."

"Not all the time," George said in his defense. Fred cocked an eyebrow at him. "Well, most of the time."

Fred snorted. The hourglass made a small chiming sound and George shoved the rest of the grilled cheese into his mouth before walking back to the cauldron. After extinguishing the flames, he got a spoon to stir the viscous contents, counting the rotations under his breath.

Lee and Fred spoke disparagingly of the current state of the Quidditch teams at the school for a few minutes before Fred approached the table and peered over George's shoulder.

"Now what?" Fred asked, eyeing the cauldron.

"It needs to sit, undisturbed and covered for four days. Reckon I'll put it in the back corner of the loo."

"It's not going to suddenly explode while any of us are in there starkers, is it?" Lee asked, looking apprehensive.

"Oh you faithless friend!" Fred exclaimed. "Georgie here is brilliant." George grimaced at the nickname as Fred clapped an arm around him. "I am the Master of Galleon Management, as well as coming up with a never-ending string of ideas for products. George here, with his non-Hogwarts-appreciated exceptional wizarding skills, makes it all work."

Lee was forced to smile. "You two are quite a pair. Multitalented."

George leaned back against the wall. He paused to think before speaking, a new and odd habit which unexpectedly and inexplicably manifested itself on occasion. "There's still room for a third, y'know," he said, hope creeping from his chest and into his voice. "Can't you just see it? Three carefree bachelors, the world at our feet, each day an adventure. Bollocks, but we'd share some good times after getting out of this prison they call a school."

"Cause some riots, I reckon," Fred grinned evilly.

"A different girl each day!" Lee chimed in with enthusiasm.

"Who could resist us?" George added, arms crossed and his thumbs thrust into his armpits.

Silence descended upon the room, and George's enthusiasm was smothered by the reality of the situation.

"Now, mates, you know I would," Lee said, looking first at Fred, then George, a confusion of wistfulness and determination battling in his expression. "But this is your dream. Being a match commentator is never going to make me rich, but it's what I want. My dream."

Fred offered up a rueful smile. "Merlin knows, we could be in and out of business in a year and you'd suddenly find yourself with Gred and Forge again, like it or not."

George turned to look at him, shocked. "You've never said anything like that before!"

Fred shook his head as though to dislodge an irritating insect, or shard of honesty.

"Momentary lapse into drama." He sighed. "Must've been channeling Ginny. Wrong Weasley."

Lee coughed, looking from twin to twin with an awkward gaze.

"Between a never-ending succession of perfect prefects and the youngest generation who obviously don't have nearly the good sense in making friends that we do, I guess we've found our niche." George loosed his hands. "I'm taking this to the bathroom."

Using his wand, he levitated the cauldron and, clasping his DADA text in his right hand, walked toward their toilets. Once there, he lowered the sludgy substance into a neglected corner against the far wall then placed the book on top. *Ought to write a note to the house-elves, too*, he considered. *Can't have them mucking it up.*

George passed one of the mirrors above the sinks and paused to look at himself. As weird as it might seem, he really didn't know what he looked like, despite the fact that most people assumed he was constantly looking into a mirror when he looked at Fred. *Hags' hounds*, he thought, disgusted. *I only see Fred. My brother. Not me.*

George stared, categorising what stared back at him. Wide face, brown eyes, freckles. Stubbled cheeks and chin, the latter with a small cleft. Hair, that damnable and immediately recognisable colour that certainly needed a trim. Ears that stuck out. Not hideous, but certainly not anyone would call attractive. *Irresistable, my arse*, he contemplated when he saw Fred swing into the doorway.

"You're gorgeous. Now let's go charm some ladies by the lake while we have this decent weather, shall we?"

That evening in the common room, the trio were showing off a new prototype, a deck of cards charmed to a spoken keyword to reveal nubile witches wearing precious little clothes and writhing or winking at the cardholder. Too many of the boys in the younger Gryffindor classes showed interest in them and kept clustering near the table where Lee, Fred and George were playing a rather demure game of Hearts. Hermione kept patrolling the room, positively growling, while the Queen of Spades continually unrolled black stockings down her legs, only to pull them back up again.

After an hour or so, George pocketed the contraband deck to play regular exploding snap with Lee. Fred sequestered himself near them in a high-backed chair with a long parchment and quill. George knew that he hadn't tallied their expenditures in days, and for all of Fred's spontaneity and generosity, he wanted to know how every Knut had been spent, and where they stood from a fiscal vantage point. *He really should work at Gringott's*, George mused, but knew that he didn't really mean it. They simply had never had any money before now, and they knew this could well be the only time they did. They couldn't afford any mistakes.

"Hey," George asked. "Where's Towel-head?"

In tandem, Lee replied, "Trying to be the first Gryffindor to defect to Hufflepuff," while Fred deadpanned, "Practicing his skills at 'hide the sausage' with Leonora."

Hermione, Ron and Harry had all been hovering over some book near the fire when Hermione's head snapped around.

"Fred Weasley," she fumed, as Ron's face turned a disturbing shade of fuchsia and Harry gaped. "There are first years here. First Years!"

"Why, yes there are," Fred scoffed. "With such exceptional skills of observation, no wonder you were chosen as prefect. Still doesn't explain Ron, though."

Lee inhaled a laugh which soon exploded in a series of throat-clearings while he rubbed at his eyes. George glanced over at Ron, who was fuming and resisting his friends' attempts at pacification.

"And no wonder why you lot are constantly on your own," Alicia taunted, though she leaned down, perching her elbows on Fred's shoulders to speak into his ear. "You all have such delightful, charming manners."

Angelina chuckled from another part of the room, and George felt a prickling on the back of his neck as though he were being watched. As Lee regained his composure and the room resumed its normal din, George turned around and saw Thalia smirking benevolently at him, curled up sideways in a chair.

Fred instinctively followed his gaze, and after giving George a "this should be good" wink, shouted, "Oy! Thalia! Don't you think we're a charming, delightful lot?"

She raised an eyebrow. "I have older brothers. Don't think I haven't heard such commentary before. It takes more than that to embarrass me." After brushing some hair out of her eyes, she continued, "And yes, at least one of you has been known to be charming on occasion."

George let the words settle into a rather stunned part of his brain while he watched Fred start to make what was sure to be a provocative parry. Suddenly Hermione was standing there, planted in front of Fred, hands on her hips and wand clutched in her hand with a grip so tight her knuckles stood out pink against her pale skin.

"Don't think I won't banish all three of you from the common room," she threatened. "First testing your potentially dangerous products on innocent children, and now using incredibly vulgar language..."

"Now, now," George found himself saying, walking over and pulling her to him, his hand grasped firmly to her hip. "You would miss us. Who else would you pick on? It would become dreadfully boring."

Hermione harumphed, but her posture relaxed against him, and George nodded imperceptibly at Fred.

"Anyway," Fred drawled, "you know I'm right. He probably is knackered around in The Duchess' knickers."

"FRED!" Hermione squealed as he uncurled from the couch, picked up his scroll and quill, and left the room, an uncompromised grin on his face.

"He's incorrigible," George apologised to the back of her head as she had shrugged out of his embrace and was stalking across the room.

Lee stood and stretched, faking an enormous yawn. "Yes, time for bed, lads and lassies."

A few students waved at them, and George made one last scan before heading up the staircase. Angelina rolled her eyes, and Thalia made a mock gesture of submission, throwing the back of her hand to her forehead and mouthing, "my hero."

As George turned and started up the stairs, he was suddenly struck by the thought of her saying that again with a much more serious expression on her face and wearing many fewer clothes. As a shiver ran through him, he doubled his pace up the stairs. *Ridiculous*, he chastised. *You heard her, she has older brothers, that's how she sees you, nothing more.* He could hear Fred and Lee rehashing the scene as he entered their room, and moments later, he was doing the same.

After checking up on the potion, George bid all three of his roommates goodnight. Even smug Kenneth had been welcomed back into the fold, appearing ruffled and right on the cusp of their curfew, but exuding happiness. He had half-heartedly threatened Fred with one of the more obscure and definitely personal hexes he had learned while studying Ancient Runes for sullyng his good name, but after weathering a couple of taunts, they all settled down for the night.

George dreamt of sunsets, and freckles and fire-breathing dragons; a sanguine-flecked kaleidoscope of imagery whose colours he could never escape.

He didn't remember any of it in the morning.

"Right Lee? Got the chronomos set?"

"Bloody hell, yes!" Lee stood at the end of George's bed, holding the timepiece in his hand and looking insulted. "I'm not dim. All I have to do is write down how long it takes for the fever to set in and how long before it subsides."

George glanced down at the square of confectionery in his hand, then back at his friend.

"We're none of us Ravenclaws, though I'm beginning to wonder about you two," Lee continued.

Fred chuckled. "They care far too much for rules to my taste. No, it was always Gryffindor. The few, the brave. Eh, Georgie?"

"Most certainly," George replied. "Let's give this a go."

"Right lads." Lee stood at attention. "On my mark. Now!"

Lee waved his wand at the timekeeper and it began tallying the passing seconds. George put the fudge in his mouth at the same time as his twin. They both chewed, then swallowed. George looked over at Fred, who was licking his fingers with zeal.

"Where'd you get the recipe?" Fred asked, sitting on the edge of his bed.

"Where d'you think?" George retorted. "Mum, of course. Tried and true. It's not as though I spent the summer sitting on my bum looking through her cooking books."

"You wouldn't know it," Fred said, admiringly. "Excellent stuff. Very chocolaty, but smooth as silk. And nuts! You put-"

"A few bits of walnut. Shut it. I wanted to be sure to cover the taste of the potion." Fred grinned at Lee. "George here has missed his calling! He should be a chef at one of those posh... Oh. Bollocks."

George felt the sensation as Fred started to swear. It was a wave of heat, beginning in his stomach and spreading outward, settling in his forehead and in the palms of his hands. He began to sweat.

"Now, Lee," George muttered.

"Got it." His hands clutched at a quill, scratching down the time that had elapsed from when they had ingested the chocolate until the effects took place. "Wow, that was fast." He gazed at them worriedly. "How d'you feel?"

"Hot," George answered.

"Ill," Fred said, and George quickly turned to look at him. "No, not really," he backpedaled. "Just hot. Guess it's working."

While George was uncomfortable, he was gratified that his research into the mysterious ingredient in the biscuits he'd had in Egypt had come to fruition. Now all he had to do was sit out the odd sensation of getting a sunburn from the inside out.

Fifteen minutes later the heat dissipated as quickly as it had surged through him at the onset. George looked at his twin. "Gone?" he asked.

Fred nodded. "Vanished!" he said encouragingly. "Time?"

Lee turned the face of the chronomos to the pair and confirmed it had lasted a quarter of an hour.

"Just long enough to get out of class and say you're going to have a lie-down and have proof to back up your claim if you get waylaid in a corridor," George explained as he stood up from his bed.

Lee shook his head, a look of awe on his face. "You're really clever, you know?"

George acknowledged the compliment with a grudging shrug of his shoulders, then busied himself with juggling three items currently transfigured into red and gold balls with a big "G" on them. He enjoyed juggling; it allowed him to concentrate one part of his mind while the rest worked through other, more complicated thoughts and issues. Or not being embarrassed.

"We should celebrate the creation of yet another successful product in the Weasley line!" Fred said with enthusiasm.

"Firewhiskey?" Lee motioned toward their well-stocked pantry of contraband alcohol.

"Excellent choice," Fred replied, rubbing his hands together. "You in, George?"

"Course." He applied more muscle into his throwing and the balls arced into impressively high zeniths before he collected them in his left hand and dropped them onto his bedcovering. He joined Fred and Lee in a toast to their continued success, tossing back the liquid and slamming down the glass when their door opened.

"Towel-head!" Fred enthused as their roommate walked toward them.

"Gentlemen," Kenneth said, making disapproving 'tsk'ing sounds with his tongue but striding straight toward the bottle. "There are terms for people who are found drinking at two o'clock in the afternoon."

"Magnificent," "Bloody fantastic," George and Fred said at the same time.

Kenneth got his own glass and poured a healthy shot, then raised his glass to the trio.

"Hypocrite," Lee scowled as he watched Kenneth drain the contents.

"No, my dear Lee. I was merely making an observation." He looked over at George's lab table, saw the fudge and chronomos and suddenly went pale. "Bloody hell," he swore. "Did you put something in this? I'll kill you both. I'll kill you all if..."

"No, Towler," George reassured him. "We were trying something out, but only Fred and me. If anybody's doctored the Firewhiskey, it's Lee."

Lee raised his hands in innocence. "We're all drinking from the same bottle. You're safe."

Kenneth relaxed his shoulders. "After the Bulbadox Powder incident, you can't blame me for wondering."

Fred snickered. "Water under the bridge, mate."

"It wasn't funny," Kenneth glared.

"We aren't wasting our time on trivial pranks like that now," George said. "Too many other projects. Speaking of, I need to visit the library." He poured himself another dram of the amber liquid and swirled it around his mouth briefly before swallowing. "Lee, thank you. You are a true gentleman, generous in all things."

"I'll go with you," Fred volunteered. "The weather's dismal and there's just no challenge anymore into seeing how quickly I can make Ron wish he were invisible. The common room isn't like it used to be." He looked at Lee. "You coming?"

"Nah," Lee said. "All those people studying. Gives me a headache. Got the new *Quidditch Weekly* at breakfast that I'll read in the comfort of my bar. I mean bed."

"Off you go," Kenneth said, dropping several books for his Ancient Runes class on the floor beside his desk with a resounding thud. "For whatever reason, I find it far easier to concentrate without you two around."

George rummaged around for some parchment and a quill. Fred picked up a small journal and an extendable ear and shoved both into his robe pocket. George eyed him curiously.

"One should never go anywhere unprepared," Fred explained.

There was only the quiet sounds of pages turning and a quill scratching on paper as they left the room.

It was the next day when George realised that there was a flaw in his potion. He woke up uncharacteristically early with painful, unfamiliar swollen sensations in his... unmentionable area. It was still dark when he gingerly got out of bed and walked carefully to the bathroom, only to find Fred already there.

"You have them too?" George asked, sitting on the toilet in the stall next to his twin.

"Piss off," Fred replied grumpily. Then, after a pause, he tacked on, "I trusted you."

"You piss off!" George railed back. "Let's see you do something as complicated as a time-release potion next time. You knew there might be side-effects. They're bound to be temporary. Very temporary," he echoed quietly, reassuring himself.

"They'd better be," Fred said, sighing. "We have Quidditch practice this afternoon."

"Merlin's mangy moustache." George leaned his head into his hands and tried not to think about what it would feel like to be on his broom in his current state with throbbing blisters on his backside.

George took the lead as he and Fred tried valiantly to walk through the common room as normally as possible; as though it didn't feel like he had miniature volcanoes erupting in his bum with every step. It didn't work. He had to slow his usual fast pace and widen his stride as though he were a cowboy from a Muggle American western, recently dismounted from his horse.

"You all right there, Fred? George?" Patrick Gross called, overseeing a game of chess being played by two of his fellow sixth-years. "What's with the silly walk?"

"Oh. Nothing," George managed, but the pain in his rear would not allow him to put his legs any closer together.

"Nothing to see here," Fred said as he grimaced, and a few of the first years who they had paid to try their Nosebleed Nougat looked as though they would faint.

"George?"

He looked around to see Thalia staring at him, anxiety veiled loosely in her gaze.

"Rough Quidditch practise, that's all," George lied. "'Til we got rained out. Couldn't see a bloody thing." That, at least, was honest truth.

"You lot should just subscribe to *The Quibbler*," Fred suggested. "You'd find as much truth there as anywhere. Nobody else would care so much about Gryffindor Quidditch players. See you later."

"Another cup for Gryffindor, eh!" This was uttered by Grant St. George, an enthusiastic fourth-year, who sparked a chant soon picked up by the rest of the students in the room. "Gung-ho for Gryffindor! Gung-ho for Gryffindor!"

George and Fred made their way to the staircase where they bowed with all of the aplomb they could muster, waving as they climbed the stairs.

"It's like a circus," Fred grumbled.

"Who's the one who wanted fame and fortune?" George threw back, cranky and ready to go and beg Madam Pomfrey for whatever it took to make him feel like a regular person again.

"Not me," Fred replied, bow-legged and cross.

"Shut up, you liar," George said, shoving him against their room door.

"No! I didn't want this," Fred snarled.

George stared at him, physically uncomfortable beyond belief and furious. "Always wanting to be on the edge. Always. Well, here's the edge of my potions knowledge. Eat it and weep."

"Wish I hadn't," Fred said, repentant, pushing George away.

George pondered that comment for a moment. "It's still a prototype."

"Well, don't go too much more proto with it."

Despite the aching in his backside, George couldn't help but laugh. "Pomfrey?"

It was raised as a flag of peace, and he knew that Fred would acquiesce.

"Yes, but you'll have to explain why we're going back through the common room."

"I don't feel like explaining anything," George grimaced. "But this is dismal."

"Too right it is." Fred shook his head.

"Not that I want anyone of any persuasion, male, female, neuter, whatever, touching that part of me," George breathed out, angry at himself.

"I don't either," Fred agreed. "But I'm sure as hell not asking Lee to put some kind of salve on my arse."

When couched in such obvious terms, the rest of the plan fell into place. Get to Madam Pomfrey's, as quickly as possible without being caught.

Not a problem.

Three hours and infinitesimal questions later, George found himself much relieved but in a rather unfamiliar area of Hogwarts.

"All praise to Madam Pomfrey," Fred enthused.

"Indeed," George agreed.

She had seen them often enough in their seven years to know better than to ask any questions which required more than a yes or no answer, but she continued to ask nonetheless. She also sent her Healer's notices straight to McGonagall, whose only admonition was a raised eyebrow as long as points had not been deducted from Gryffindor prior to the twins landing in the infirmary. If points were lost, it was another issue entirely.

"Hush," George hissed, suddenly aware of another noise. It was music. A mournful tune, almost certainly not meant for anyone else to hear.

He stood still, pressing his back against the cold stone wall as though to hide from the secretive melody

"What the...?" Fred asked, then George saw that he heard it as well.

"Clarinet," George answered. "But who? And why?"

"Dunno."

"Got an extendable ear on you?"

"Course."

They put the fleshy string near the door and the music continued on, then stopped suddenly. Fred had just yanked the ear and was wrapping it around his hand when the door swung open. A very malcontent Severus Snape stood glowering in the doorway.

"Ten points from Gryffindor - apiece- for lurking." Snape gazed in a focused, malevolent way at George and Fred.

"But we aren't..." Fred began.

"Ten more - apiece - for talking back," Snape continued.

"I haven't even..." George offered in consternation.

"If I were you," Snape drawled, drawing his robes around him in what was surely meant to be an intimidating manner, "I would stop speaking."

The problem was that that George and Fred really couldn't give a hair out of Merlin's beard what made Snape intimidating or not, but as he continued, they did take a breath before talking.

"You are not in my house. However," Snape drew in an admirable intake of breath through his nose, "I do have the sense that Professor McGonagall will be, shall we say, livid, should she find that it took only two students under five minutes to empty her house coffers of the few points it previously contained."

George shut his mouth, and in a flight of cognizance, realised that he was as tall as the Potions professor.

"You shouldn't keep that talent hidden," Fred went on casually.

"I beg your pardon?" Snape asked, his dark glaze glittering as he stared at Fred.

"The music. It was profound, in a dark sort of way."

George counted the twelve or so times while his heart continued to beat, waiting for he and Fred to be hexed into the sixteenth century or so. If they were lucky.

"Get out."

"Good evening to you, too, Professor Snape."

George pulled on Fred's elbow, and they walked upward into far more neutral territory. They were standing on one of their favorite trick staircases when George looked at Fred.

"Why?" he asked.

"Why what?" Fred shot back.

"Why... Oh, I dunno," George repeated, petulant. "Why in poltergeist's purgatory would you pick a fight with Snape?"

Fred feigned ignorance. "It wasn't a fight. I was telling the truth. He is talented."

George rolled his eyes. "Great. Be sure to remind him next month at our Quidditch match that you are his one person fan club."

"When did you become so cynical?" Fred asked.

"Must've been the Fever Fudge," George grumbled as they walked up the stairs toward the Gryffindor Tower.

Fred draped an arm around his shoulder. "You're forgiven for that, y'know."

George made a half-hearted chuckle. "Thanks for nothing."

Fred was quiet for a few steps. "Do you know how much we've already made?"

George shook his head, noticing that they were in front of the Fat Lady's portrait.

"Enough that we need to be getting serious about putting some Galleons down on a place after we graduate."

George looked at Fred, his shaggy red hair falling into his eyes. "You need a haircut," he observed.

"So do you. Shut it. We're a success. The fudge incident was a temporary setback. 'Naughty knickers,'" he spoke cheekily to the portrait.

"Ooh!" she giggled. "Not quite."

"I knew that, love," Fred quipped. "*Mimbulus mimbletonia*."

The door swung open.

III. November

In an abandoned classroom, George found a broken desk leg and channeled his magic through it, something he'd taught himself after his mother began taking Fred's and his wands away in the summers. He had to do something to drive out his anger after the match, and he was still in his dirty Quidditch robes, without his wand. He transfigured his double-headed coin, ostensibly a lucky talisman, into a glass ball which shattered with a satisfying sound against the wall.

"No."

smash

Reparo

"More."

smash

Reparo

"Quidditch."

smash

Reparo

"No."

smash

Reparo

"No! Fucking! Way! Not my broomstick! And Fred's!"

smash

Reparo

He stared at the wall for a moment, imagining Umbridge's doughy face before aiming again. "You won't get away with this," he said with surprising calm, then hurled it against the wall a last time.

Good luck charm my arse, he thought, glaring at the mess of shards.

"Best check on the rest of the team," he said to himself, dropping the stick with a clatter before stalking up to the Gryffindor tower.

After forcing out the password through gritted teeth, George scanned the room. He saw Alicia, Angelina and Katie, Fred and Harry, Ginny and Hermione all clustered near the fire. Heedless of a pair of second years intently poring over a parchment rolled on the floor, he stepped through them, leaving a muddy footprint on their assignment. He continued on, their indignant yelps hushed when he turned and scowled at them.

"About time you showed up for the wake," Fred said, shoving Ginny over to make room.

"Don't seem to have missed much," George replied, looking up in annoyance when the Snitch buzzed around his head. He gave it an authoritative swat and it zoomed away, Hermione's cat chasing it with predatory purpose.

"Can't bloody believe..." Fred began until he heard an exaggerated throat-clearing sound from Hermione, who was sitting nearby. He gave her a blistering look and continued, "can't believe we're banned."

"Banned," Angelina echoed. "No Seeker and no Beaters... What on earth are we going to do?"

George shrugged, looking at Fred. "Leave," he mouthed.

Fred's face took on a passing shimmer of glee, which vanished as Alicia took him to task for getting kicked off the team. George lay back on the floor, one hand behind his head and one over his eyes. He halfheartedly listened to Fred and Katie bandy disparaging remarks about the Slytherins, their mutual loathing rising to a fevered pitch when Angelina announced she was leaving. George couldn't bring himself to look at her; he was quite content to wallow in his own misery and self-righteousness.

"Mum'd better not send a Howler after all this," he sulked, poking Fred in the leg. "Wouldn't that be icing on the cake?"

"She wouldn't!" Ginny shouted, rushing to their mother's defense.

"You don't know her like we do," George retaliated. "She would. To us."

"Wouldn't!"

"Time to go," Fred said, pushing Ginny back onto her cushion and offering an arm to George. "I haven't seen Lee; we don't want to lose him to the bottle a month before the Christmas hols."

George allowed himself to be pulled up from the floor.

"Bottle?" Hermione asked, suspicious.

"Absinthe," Fred deadpanned. "Nothing to worry about. G'night prickly prefects."

They were almost to the dormitory staircase when Fred turned suddenly, and George crashed into him.

"Oy!" Fred exclaimed, looking pointedly at Hermione. "Where's our brother?"

"Ron?" she asked, clutching her fingertips and looking at the windows, where snow was falling outside.

George rolled his eyes. "We're sure as Merlin not talking about Tripe."

"Haven't seen him since..." Harry admitted, his expression one of guilt. "Since Malfoy was such an extraordinary basta-" he stopped as Hermione gasped and hit him in the shoulder. "Was so extraordinarily Malfoy."

"Right," Fred said, eyes blazing. "I'm sure he'll show up. Sweet dreams."

George followed him up the stairs to their room.

As Fred had hypothesized, Lee was well into at least his second glass of Firewhiskey. He was engaged in an animated and profane one-sided discussion with the players on the Green Knights poster who appeared rather put out at being so disturbed. He whirled around when the door opened, clamping his mouth shut and shaking his head mutely at the twins.

"Fred!" he bellowed at George, then, realising his mistake, slurred, "Sorry George. Dammit, Freorge! Gred! I mean, Fred! This can't be happening!"

George awkwardly held him in a hug while Fred tried to take the glass out of his hand. "Can't believe it," Lee spoke into George's neck, wrenching out of the embrace as he discerned Fred's intentions. "Mine," he growled, clasping the glass tightly.

In the midst of the debacle of a tipsy Lee Jordan bemoaning the end of Quidditch at Hogwarts, Fred trying to wrest the Firewhiskey out of his hand, and George backing away from it all to go straight for the bottle of Bitter Banshee, Kenneth burst into the room. The door hung open for a few seconds before closing resolutely behind him.

George paused in the brief stillness, his glass at his lips.

"Towler?" Fred asked, a rare thread of worry in his voice.

Lee shifted and leaned against the nearby wall, steadying his stance.

"She dumped me." Kenneth's normally imperious face verged on vacant. George watched him glance around the room at the three of them, he and Fred still in their Quidditch gear; at the open bottles of alcohol, and finally at the Quidditch players in the Glaswegian poster who had all stopped flying and were staring at him.

"What the bloody hell are you looking at?" he roared at them and they zoomed off.

Lee righted himself and walked to Towler, offering his glass of Firewhiskey. "Sorry mate," he consoled, draping an arm over his shoulder. "She never deserved you."

Kenneth let out a long breath through his teeth. "I know you mean well, but now is not the time," he muttered, but took the glass nonetheless. After drinking the entire contents, he looked at the twins. "Sorry about the ban. Only wish you'd gotten in a few more punches into that bastard of a too-self-satisfied pureblood while you had the chance. It looked great, y'know?" he mused, holding his glass out to Fred, who was nearest the bar. Fred poured a bit more Firewhiskey into it, and Kenneth gestured a toast in his direction.

"Do, go on," Fred said, sarcastically. "Especially since it was George here who actually hit him."

Kenneth looked oddly at George. "Really?" he articulated, looking from George to Fred. "Hmmm," he decided. "Yes. Gryffindors standing up for their names. We're all about our pride, are we not?"

"How am I going to be able to be the commentator at the other matches?" Lee lamented.

"Circe's tits," Fred snorted, looking at his brother and roommates, misery on every face. "We're taking the tunnel tonight."

From the Marauder's Map, Fred and George had discovered a tunnel which traversed from behind the statue of Gregory the Smarmy down to the basement of The Hog's Head where the Butterbeer and other items were stored.

"Everybody in?"

"D'you reckon there's enough there for us all to drown our sorrows?" George asked, downing a second shot of Bitter Banshee.

"Yes," Fred replied. "If we're lucky."

George felt a shiver go through him. "I think my luck has run out."

"I'm sorry about Leonora," George said a couple of hours later, lounging in one of the transfigured cushiony chairs they had cleverly modified prior to ingesting several Butterbeers apiece. In Kenneth's case, he had gone straight for his own bottle of Firewhiskey, and was sipping slowly, albeit steadily. Given his circumstances, the other three had felt it only appropriate. Quidditch, while sacred, was one thing. They would all leave Hogwarts, they could play recreationally. Only Towler had had a serious girlfriend, and only he had known true heartbreak.

Kenneth sighed over the top of the bottle, making a haunting, hooting sound. Momentarily distracted, he did it again for good measure.

"I am too," Kenneth answered, turning to face George, his bright blue eyes lit with intensity and forced focus due to his inebriated state. "I thought I loved her," he admitted, challenging George in his desperation. "Have you ever been in love?"

George stared back. "What?"

"Been in love. Have you?" Kenneth repeated.

"I don't think George has had the pleasure," Fred offered.

"How about unrequited love?" Lee said, dejected. "Let me tell you about a wonderful Quidditch player named Angelina. Who, apparently," he paused to give Fred a dirty look, "can't seem to see far enough to somebody who cares about her, and instead, snogs a few blokes, including one of the Weasley Beaters. Ex-Beaters."

"Who else has she been kissing?" Fred looked stunned.

"I reckon that Thalia might be a good kisser," George mumbled, glancing at his watch. "Bollocky banshees!" he whistled. "It's after two. We need to go."

"I don't even care about Ancient Runes anymore," Kenneth said, dispirited. "N.E.W.T.s. Any of it. I'll just go and work for Dad."

"You do care, you big twit," Fred said, holding his hands down to Kenneth to help him out of the chair. "You're good at them, and you can now read and come up with some of the most horrifying hexes of any age." He huffed for a moment after pulling Towler to his feet, the mostly empty bottle rolling on the floor. "That'll come in handy one day, mark my words."

"You're by far the most academically successful of the Gryffindor seventh years," Lee opined, following his proclamation with a satisfyingly loud belch and following self-pardon.

"Academically successful Gryffindor *male* seventh years," George clarified. "I think McGonagall gave up on us lot – save you, Towler – for the ladies a long time ago."

"Too right," Lee agreed.

"Let's go," Fred suggested. After transfiguring their chairs back to their normal form as wooden crates, the quadruplet of young men made their unsteady way back to Hogwarts. They were almost to

Gryffindor tower when disaster struck. Lee tripped over a corner of his robes and fell to the ground, cursing a blue streak as George helped him up.

"Well, well, well," Snape bloviated as he appeared out of a corridor, his approach more silent than shadow. "What have we here?" he asked rhetorically, his probing gaze alighting on each of the group in turn.

"Oh shite," Lee whispered, rubbing at his newly-bruised shoulder.

"Fred Weasley," Snape began, looking at George, who, out of instinct, shook his head.

"George. Whichever." Snape clipped at the syllables as though cutting a distasteful potions ingredient. "Both. And Lee Jordan, making the usual triumverate of havoc and chaos."

Fred looked meaningfully at George, indicating that he would do the talking, were he to find a window of silence to reply.

"Kenneth Towler?" Snape raised his wand to point at him. "Step forward. I would have expected better of you than skulking around Hogwarts with these charlatans posing as students."

"Yes sir," he said, shuffling a few steps forward. All four of the young men were as tall as the professor, so while Snape's height was no longer domineering, only Kenneth was planning to take a N.E.W.T. in potions, and he cowed in front of his instructor.

Snape sniffed the air between them and his mouth turned down even further. "Have you been drinking, Mr. Towler?"

"Kenneth lost his girlfriend today, professor," Fred said.

"I can speak for myself!" Kenneth said through gritted teeth, turning his head just slightly to the side.

"Ah. Romantic woes," Snape clucked in a decidedly non-nurturing manner. "Which I care to know nothing about, rest assured," he continued as Kenneth opened his mouth to defend himself. "I assumed given your present company that you were lamenting the lifetime ban rightly imposed on your house's ruffian Beaters and Seeker."

"Malfoy insulted our family," George seethed.

"I see," Snape said, turning his attentions to George. "And am I to assume that such a thing has never before happened in the history of Hogwarts, and therefore justifies pummeling one of the students in my house to the ground?"

"Malfoy is a premium grade wanker," Fred muttered. "He deserved more than what Harry and George gave him."

"I am not deaf, Mr. Weasley," Snape snapped. "Detentions. All of you. For blatant disregard of rules pertaining to, but not limited by: student curfew, student drinking policies, and respect to Professorial staff. Messers Weasley, report to Filch for the next two weeks at nine o'clock. Sharp. I am sure that he will be most pleased to know that he has such strapping young men to clean some of the more – stubborn – parts of the castle."

George stared furiously at Snape.

"Messers Towler and Jordan, you will report to me. I expect to see you in the potions classroom at eight o'clock tomorrow. Depending on your ability to follow directions, your detentions may last as few as six days or as many as those of your comrades." Lee groaned.

"Your enthusiasm is noted, Mr. Jordan. Now I recommend that you and your obstreperous gaggle of Gryffindors get to your tower post-haste before I find myself contacting your head of house."

"What does 'obstreperous' mean?" Kenneth asked quietly as they turned around.

"Who cares?" Fred said, his hands clenched in his robes.

"The library is full of dictionaries, Mr. Towler," Snape said, the corner of his mouth quirked into an unsympathetic, grim smile. "I suggest you consult one."

The four trudged back to the common room in uncharacteristic silence. Mostly.

"You can consult my white Weasley arse," George said to the ground, a few steps after they left the potions master, all pleasant effects from their revelry having disappeared as surely as the Leprechaun gold Bagman had given them a year prior.

"It could be worse," Kenneth said, and Fred glared at him.

"How?" he said. "No Quidditch, no brooms, detentions for two weeks. Well," he paused to appraise Towler and Jordan, "two weeks for some of us."

"He didn't take any house points away," Lee said, his brow furrowed as they approached their portrait.

"What?" George asked.

"Snape. He didn't take away any house points."

"So?"

"Yeah," Fred snapped. "Why bother taking away house points when you can have four seventh-years as slave labour?"

"Boys! You're out so late!" The Fat Lady shook her finger at them, though she was mostly asleep. "*Mimbulus mimbletonia*," Kenneth sighed, and they all crossed into the common room and made their way up the stairs.

The following morning dawned bright. Blazingly so, to the four hungover students, once they each opened their bedcurtains. Lee was the first to discover why their room was lit with sharp, reflected light.

"Snow!" he said excitedly before wincing in pain and rubbing his forehead. "Loads of it. Must've been snowing all night."

"Don't shout, Jordan," Towler moaned from the opposite bed. "Fred, you have some Pepper-up?"

"Of course," he replied. "Four draughts of George's Sunday Morning Special, coming right up."

A few minutes later all four of them felt remarkably better, and ready to tuck into some breakfast before going outside.

George took his usual seat in the Great Hall and quickly piled his plate with scones, jam, sausages and a hillock-sized mound of butter. Still chewing a mouthful of strawberry and dough, he glanced over at Ron, who was looking oddly contemplative, pushing his toast through a golden puddle of egg yolk.

"Coming outside, Ron?" he asked.

"What? Oh, no. Can't," Ron said dejectedly, putting the bread in his mouth. "Too much homework."

"You take those classes far too seriously, little brother," Fred added, having just shoved an impressively large forkful of sausage and eggs with tomato sauce in his mouth.

"Ugh!" Hermione shook her head in exasperation, looking from the twins to Ron and back. "Do any of you think you could be bothered to chew and swallow your food before you speak? It verges on disgusting to watch, meal after meal."

"No," all three replied, still chewing.

Hermione made a rumbly disapproving noise in her throat, turning away to talk to Harry.

"Yeah, Ron," George said. "If you aren't careful, they may consider you for Head Boy."

"Wouldn't Mum be proud," Fred continued, launching into a nearly perfect imitation of Molly Weasley. "Oh Ron! Head Boy!"

"Better than those lazy twins, never applied themselves," George went on, wagging his finger at Fred.

"Shut up!" Ron said, a look of loathing on his face. "Can't you pick on someone else for a change?"

"Well, we could," Fred said thoughtfully, turning a triangular wedge of toast between his fingers. "But why should we when you make it so easy?"

"Piss off."

George took the rind of a wedge of orange and charmed it to flash different colours, then put it in his mouth, grinning every few seconds at some second years a bit further down the table. They laughed, and George thought about how simple things had seemed their first couple of years, even in the shadows of Charlie and Percy. Nobody had mistaken them for their older brothers, that was sure.

"Fred? George?" Lee called from a bit further down the table.

"Yesh?" George replied, flashing the orange rind.

Lee rolled his eyes. "You ready?"

"Indubitably, my good man," Fred answered.

The Great Hall was rapidly emptying as students from all of the houses rushed through their breakfasts to go outside into the snow. Fred, Lee and Kenneth led the way and George followed, pausing to wrap his gold and scarlet scarf around his neck.

The grounds were a riot of black robes contrasting with white snow. Fred and George conscripted a couple of sixth years and commenced pelting Angelina, Alicia and Katie with snowballs. The girls retaliated by pulling over Patricia Stimpson, Thalia, and Vicky Frobisher, another sixth-year, and erected a hastily built but sturdy defense. Snowballs flew from both sides as Kenneth oversaw the engineering of a snow wall of their own. Getting her fifth pile of slush directly at her face, Angelina stood up and yelled, "Fred! You're playing dirty, you lousy prat! You've charmed yours!"

He stood as well, a saucy grin on his face. "What of it?" he taunted, twisting sideways as a snowball went flying past him. "Now who's the brave Quidditch captarrrrrgh!" he spluttered as six packed snowballs pelted him, and he fell soundly on his backside.

"Victory for the Girls of Gryffindor!" came from across the lawn. They danced in a modified conga line, whooping and kicking their legs.

Kenneth sighed. "Gents, I'm done in."

"Oh, c'mon," Fred said, brushing snow off of his robes and holding a hand out to George to help him up. "We're just getting started!"

"Not your N.E.W.T.s again!" Lee said, packing another snowball. "You have loads of time to study."

"Just not fully recovered from last night's rather unexpected change of events," Kenneth said, the words heavy with meaning.

"Go on, then," George said, smiling through a thin haze of regret. "We promise not to throw too many snowballs at your back."

"Or Leonora, though she deserves it," Fred said.

"Don't," Kenneth said, giving him a warning look. "Any revenge, should it be taken, will be done by me. I have my dignity."

As Towler turned to go back to the castle, George wondered for a moment what it would feel like to have been so involved with someone, to spend so much time with one person, only to be suddenly be faced with their very distinct absence; like losing a tooth and constantly sticking your tongue in the spot to remind yourself that it was no longer there. He watched Lee roar a cry of pursuit before running after Katie Bell, who had pummeled him with several well-aimed missiles, and decided such serious thoughts had no place for pondering on a day like today.

"Oh Fred?" George heard at his side, seeing Fred nodding downwards, indicating for him to squat by his twin under the shelter of their wall of ice.

They didn't 'switch' very often any more, since their personalities, while still interchangeable to most, were not nearly so much so to each other. George tilted his head into the reckless breeze, sniffing the wild anarchy of possibility.

"Right," George answered, fingering his clothes. "But you've got to put a knot in your scarf. And for Merlin's sake, don't go throwing ice bombs at Leonora while posing as me."

Fred smiled with a devilish look on his face. "It's not as though anyone can tell us apart anyway. But first, I think there's a prefect who could use some distraction, and then we can split up."

A twinge of guilt threatened to make a dent in George's outlook, but it was squashed posthaste without remorse. The sun shone. Snow was imminently packable. His broom might be locked away, but he still had his wand.

"On my mark!" he said, now acting like Fred to an F.

"Ready?" Fred replied, as George.

"Three. Two. One!" they said together.

In timed release, they lobbed snowballs up to the Gryffindor tower window. When Ron didn't appear, they took a short break to make and pile some more. After a few minutes, they launched three apiece, strategically timed.

No response.

"One more go," Fred as George said, taking on his twin's tenacity.

George as Fred agreed, and seeing a sudden glint in the window, held his projectile in his hand.

"For all Weasleys, everywhere!" Fred and George said, winking as they saw the unmistakable sight of Ron's shaggy red head leaning from the tower.

"Oy!" he bellowed from the stone sill. "I am a prefect, and if one more snowball hits this window..."

He hadn't stood a chance. Once his face was visible, Fred and George had both thrown the remainder of their arsenal, and hit their mark. The tower window slammed shut.

Fred and George shook hands, then proceeded to make their way around the snowfield.

That evening in the common room, George sat on the couch, looking back and forth from one of Towler's Ancient Runes books to a parchment where he was doodling the word 'taffy' in different lettering styles. It had been an excellent day. He'd packed three snowballs and juggled them while wandering the grounds, seeing where some impressively artistic upper-level Ravenclaws had made a snowraven, charming the wings to beat outward if anyone else got too close to it. At one point he saw Thalia run at Fred and shove two handfuls of snow down the back of his robes, which made him shamefully jealous. Fred had hauled her up and over his shoulder while she kicked madly into the air and beat on his back while he walked a few steps before putting her down. She whirled around to face him and hit him on the chest a few times, then after looking at him for a few seconds, stepped back and tilted her head. George had watched as they spoke, surprised to see Fred put his finger to his lips for her to be quiet. *She'd meant to find me!* George had thought, and grinned.

There was a swish of robes and George looked up to see Thalia hefting Towler's book so she could plunk herself down next to him.

"Whatcha doing?" she asked, her accent not as thick as Seamus', but still noticeable. "Thinking about a new product?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," he replied, brushing his hair out of his eyes and trying to act completely normal even though her thigh was pressed next to his. "A couple of them. Towel-head came across an old Italian potion that seems to have the same effects as Veritaserum, but less potent. Thought it could be fun to make truth-telling taffy or some such."

Thalia nodded, looking intrigued.

"Good for a laugh, which is the point," he continued, focusing on her fingers as they traced some runes on the page, her fingernails chewed to the quick. "Any of your friends want to buy an Extendable Ear? We've got heaps."

"No," she said forcefully. George's surprise at her comment must have showed on his face, because she hurried on, "They're great, it's not that. But everyone's caught on to them. Flitwick's beside himself that the sixth-year Gryffindors are all so good at their Imperturbable charms." She smiled. "He just doesn't know how we got so much practice."

George found his attention torn away from Thalia's lips, which he'd been admiring while she gave her explanation, when suddenly Lee swore and threw down his hand of cards.

"Who pissed in your porridge?" Fred asked, sitting across from him.

"Fred!" Hermione yelled. "Mind your language."

Fred ignored her.

"Detention's coming up. Or had you forgotten?"

"Dragon's droppings," Fred growled. "I had."

"Oh, bloody hell," George said, scrawling a black smear through one of the decorative capital Ts he had written.

"Detention?" Thalia asked, looking at George, then over to Fred and Lee.

"Yes. Don't ask, because I can't tell you."

"Wasn't going to. It's not as though you've never had detention before."

George raised an eyebrow. "You noticed?"

She made an odd sound, somewhere between a cough and a laugh. "Someone's needed to keep an eye on you two," she said, looking thoughtfully at him. "Anyway, gotta go meself." Thalia closed the runes book and got up from the couch, dropping the text into the curved indent where she'd been sitting. "Herbology. Loads to write up about *Emmalexis* buds and potential dangers in growing them too near other plants. Hope your detention's not too terrible."

"It's just Filch," George replied, trying to postpone her departure. "The usual drudgery."

"Thalia! Herbology!" Vicky called impatiently from near the stairway to the girl's dormitory.

"See you," Thalia said. She turned and jogged across the room and climbed the staircase with her roommate.

"...but it's with slimy Snape, you tosser!" George heard Lee say to Fred, as he nervously twisted one of his dreadlocks in his fingers. "He never liked me."

"You're in good company," Towler added, striding into the common room and looking as though he'd been force fed a lemon. "He doesn't like anyone. He just happens to loathe Gryffindors especially."

George stood and saluted Lee and Kenneth as they went through the portrait hole while Fred hummed the tune from a funeral march. After they left, he played a couple of half-hearted games of Exploding Snap with Fred before begging off and going to their room. An unsettling vision of Thalia sucking on a prototype of the taffy he'd been envisioning had burrowed into his imagination. He decided to go and quickly take care of the effects that image were having on a certain, very insistent and very private part of his anatomy.

"Gotta check up on you know what," he lied to Fred, moving toward the boy's dorm.

"Right," Fred said knowingly. "Don't make me come up and separate you and George junior."

"Fred!" Hermione's face blushed so deeply even her ears were scarlet. "Crudel!" she gasped. "First years are in this room!" She turned to her left. "Ron, you tell him!"

Ron stared intently at his knees, seeming to steel himself before he looked Fred in the eye. "You should be setting an example for the younger students," he intoned, turning his head toward some gaping second years and giving them a curt nod.

"Oh, we'll set an example, don't you worry," George heard as he took the steps two at a time.

George had experienced an unexpected ominous feeling when they approached Filch's office. He and Fred were more than familiar with the caretaker and his cleaning tasks, never in places where they

could discover more secrets. Filch stood in his doorway, Mrs. Norris purring and manoeuvring feline figure-eights around his feet.

"So!" Filch said, grinning.

"Filch," Fred and George replied at the same time, in monotone.

"You have a special assignment tonight," the caretaker continued, just as George heard the sound of footfalls approaching purposefully from their left. Like a crow descending on carrion, Snape took his last few steps and stopped in front of the small assembly.

"Weasleys, Fred and George," he acknowledged.

A wave of nauseous hatred rushed through George as he looked at the potions master. The smug, self-righteous expression he saw there was the same as the one he had seen on Percy's face, months ago, and he wished for nothing more than his wand and an opportunity to wipe it and everything else off of this man.

"Follow me," the professor said. Snape turned on his heel and walked down the corridor.

Fred turned to George, an untrusting, rebellious look in his eyes. George shook his head, furious and resigned. They trailed in the wake of Snape's billowing robes down to the dungeons level and toward the Slytherin dormitories.

"What the..." Fred began.

Snape turned to face them. "I must now cast a silencing spell on you. Wouldn't want to find you here again, unaccompanied, to create mischief."

"Not bloody likely," George said under his breath. Suddenly everything was quiet. He found himself marched past the stone wall leading into the house common room. Once inside, the spell was released, and he and George were subjected to taunts, catcalls, and an enthusiastic rendition of 'Weasley is our king' by all of the Slytherins in the room. George didn't even pause to look at the omnipresent green and silver decorations as they walked even further into the catacombs of Slytherin house.

"Where do you think we're going?" Fred asked, looking over his shoulder at him.

"No idea," George replied.

After multiple twists and turns, they found themselves in front of an elaborately carved wooden door with a sturdy silver doorknocker in the middle. It was, unsurprisingly, in the shape of a snake.

They were suddenly in a realm without sound, and George sensed the magic in it. Snape had cast another silencing spell as he spoke the password.

"After you, Messers Weasley," Snape drawled, and George suddenly knew where they were.

"Merlin," George breathed, his anger threatening to explode out of the freckles on his arms. "The prefect's bathroom."

"Well," Fred commented, looking venomously at the tiled shower floor he was scrubbing, "It can't get any worse than this."

George leaned back from the toilet he had half-heartedly wiped down, taking every precious bit of self-control not to think of whose arrogant arse had probably sat on it not long ago, and shook his head. "I wish you hadn't said that."

"When did you get so superstitious?" Fred asked, the disapproval heavy in his voice.

"I'm not superstitious, so piss off," George answered, returning to his unpleasant task.

"You are. Don't you still carry around that bloody two-headed knut?"

George looked witheringly at his brother. "Not anymore, I don't." He resumed his attentions to the commode and the floor around it.

"Since when?"

"Piss off, I said!"

"Fine."

The twins laboured in silence. Draco's haughty comments still hung in the air, from when he had stood in the doorway until he got bored.

No, George decided, it can't get any worse than this.

IV. December

"Fred. Fred. Wake up."

George felt his shoulder being shaken and heard a feminine voice above him.

"I'm George, woman. When will you learn?" he said crossly before his sleep-fogged mind caught up with his mouth. Comprehension trickled down around him like icicle droplets, and his tongue froze against his teeth. He wasn't at home, he was at Hogwarts, which could only mean that he had just spouted off to his head of house, not his mother.

"Sorry. George," she apologized as George sat up stiffly, blinking against the light from the small glowing lamp Minerva McGonagall held in her hand.

"No. I'm sorry, Professor," he mumbled, chastened and suddenly filled with trepidation. "What are you doing here?"

His mind raced, thinking back to when he'd heard about Ginny. Something really awful must have happened for Professor McGonagall to be waking them up in the dead of night, and her worried expression only confirmed his fears.

"Has Ginny been taken again? Is it-"

"It's your father," Professor McGonagall said, cutting him off while placing what he supposed was meant to be a reassuring, albeit bony hand on his arm. "He's not dead, but he has been gravely injured."

George gaped fish-like at her as he threw down his covers. She took two steps back and motioned her head toward the door while he ran his left hand through his shaggy fringe, grounding himself.

"Please wake your brother and meet me in the common room," McGonagall said in hushed tones, though each word fell heavy with authority. "Immediately. I will get Ginny. We need to go to

Dumbledore's office but we mustn't alert," she paused, pursed her lips and with a mutinous look continued, "Professor Umbridge."

George watched the light glide across the room. He got out of bed and walked the few steps to pull open Fred's curtains.

"Fred. Oy," he whispered, leaning over his brother's prone figure and unceremoniously rapping on his shoulder blade. "Wake up. Dad's been hurt."

Fred muttered something incomprehensible, then snorted as George flicked his ear a few times. "Up. Now."

"Whazzit?" Fred asked bleary-eyed, raising his head.

"Dad," George pleaded. "It's bad, Fred. McGonagall got me up. We're going to Dumbledore's office. C'mon."

He grasped Fred's hand and began pulling him from his bed until Fred shrugged off his assistance.

"I'm awake. Bollocks," he swore. Comprehension of what George had said slowly settled on his face, then all in a rush, he was out of his bed, still clad only in his pyjamas, and careening across the room. "Shite, George!" he hissed over his shoulder. "What are you waiting for, an inscribed invitation?"

George tore across the room after him, his bare feet slapping the floor.

The next forty-eight hours were a blur: Dumbledore's office; holding Ginny's hand as they took the portkey to Grimmauld Place; the interminable night of waiting; seeing their father. Alive. Pallid, and weak, but alive. And Bill was there too- more of the family.

* * * * *

"Not exactly where we expected to be spending Christmas, eh?" Fred said a few days later as he and George decorated the main drawing room, shaking his head each time there was a visitor at the Order's headquarters and Mrs. Black's portrait began screaming bloody murder yet again.

"No," George agreed, grateful that at last he had his wand since their belongings had been sent from Hogwarts. He thought hard for a minute, waved it at some tinsel which turned a shiny red colour, formed two lines and engaged in a risqué, rouge-imbued tango. Risqué for tinsel, at any rate.

"Nicely done," Fred acknowledged. "But far too serious."

With a flick of his wrist, the tinsel changed from red to silver and began sprouting miniature wings and doing the chicken dance. The lines flapped their elbows of sorts, leaned from right to left, and attempted to clap, which Fred found hilarious. A polka tune emanated from a pillow on the nearby couch, and a witch in the portrait above the now-abused chaise glared down her nose at the twins. She sneered in disapproval before leaving the confines of the frame, freeing them to enjoy their own amusement without any Black family voyeurs.

"Fred! George!" Ginny's shocked voice carried from the kitchen. "You've got some mail."

George looked curiously at Fred, who seemed just as surprised. "Who'd owl us?"

"Dunno," Fred replied, muttering a *Wingardium Leviosa* on the restored tinsel. He guided upward, draping the shiny icicles on the enormous tree which commandeered the room.

The two clomped into the kitchen, earning a scowl from their mother. Ginny was sitting at the table, licking chocolate off of a spoon. "'S'a beautiful owl," she cooed, as an eagle owl unhurriedly ate the small pile of leftover bacon pieces she had placed before him. "Who's is it? You two almost never get anything by owl."

"Not sure," George said, looking from the bird to the scroll, sealed with burgundy wax, a gothic T set in the congealed circle.

"Towler," Fred surmised, dropping down next to Ginny and sticking his fingers into the bowl of chocolate batter.

"That's mine, you rotter!" Ginny squealed, grabbing the bowl from him while Fred licked his fingers.

"It is, too," George said in response to Fred after unrolling the page. He skimmed the parchment, saw that there was a message for them that their mother didn't need to hear, and read the first part aloud while Ginny and Fred wrestled over the abused bowl.

"Dear Fred and George,

I am so sorry to hear about your father's injuries, but am glad to hear that he's going to be okay. You can imagine how surprised Lee and I were to wake up and find you gone— we've kept up with what was going on through the Granger girl. I hope that your dad will be well enough to spend Christmas with you, and that you have a really good holiday despite this recent scare."

"That was nice of him," Molly said, stirring a large pot of stew. "But Ginny's right, you don't usually get anything unless it has to do with that joke-store nonsense." She turned and pushed a damp tendril of hair behind her ear, looking suspiciously at them. "You aren't still taking orders for those fake wands, are you?"

"No Mum," Fred lied without a moment's hesitation.

George quickly racked his brain for a further explanation. "Kenneth got dumped recently- maybe he just wanted to write because he's lonely."

"What, for advice for the lovelorn?" Bill said amicably, walking into the kitchen with Ron behind him, taking two Butterbeers out of the refrigerator. "He should know better than to consult with you two. What words of wisdom could you possibly give?" He handed a bottle to Ron who sat down at the table, looking a bit apprehensively at the twins.

"Yeah," Ginny teased, "Nobody'd date you two. You're not serious enough."

"Shite, we don't come as a pair!" George exclaimed, and the owl gave an affronted hoot and ruffled its feathers.

"George! Watch your language!" his mother said, then turned back around and resumed her vigorous stirring.

"Yes, I'm sure you're right," Fred said, as though George hadn't spoken, draping his arm around Ginny. "Though since Charlie's not married, Tripe's not married, apparently we're not worth dating, and Ron..." He stopped to give him a fiendish grin. "Well, he may have his eyes on someone, but goodness knows if she'll ever look twice at our ickle prefect."

George watched a lurid blush raise in Ron's cheeks. "Give it a rest, you wanker," he muttered as he got up and stomped out of the room.

Unfazed, Fred continued, "So I guess all of Mum's hopes are left to you, our little Ginevra."

"Molly," George added.

"Weasley!" all three brothers chorused.

"Mum!" Ginny wailed. "Make them stop."

"Stop it, you lot," their mother snapped, brandishing her spoon. "Fred and George, go make yourselves useful. Somewhere other than here."

Fred took a last swipe of chocolate batter as George saluted their mother. They left the kitchen, following Bill's lead and stopping by the fridge to liberate two more Butterbeers en route. Fred held out his arm to stop George at the bottom of the stairs. "Shall we?" he asked, and George grinned. With a *crack!*, they Apparated into their room.

Half an hour later, they were still talking about the rest of the contents of Kenneth's letter. They had *Accio'd* two additional Butterbeers, ignoring their mother's shouts when they did.

"I just don't know that we should have anyone else involved," Fred said for at least the third time.

"But it gives us more clout if we have a backer, in addition to our own resources," George said, also for at least the third time.

"Clout?" Fred scoffed. "Bracken Towler has a lot of money, but the man is the manager of a potions research lab. Who in Diagon Alley is going to care about that?"

"All right, all right." George took a pull on his Butterbeer. "Maybe clout's not the right word. But it's not like we're going to march into the Alley with a couple of bags of Galleons and say, 'Oy! We want to rent a shop. Trust us!'"

Fred appraised him with a curious, but respectful look. "Yeah, I s'pose you're right. Guess I hadn't actually thought about that part. Yet."

"We'll seem serious if we can show not only your very thorough business plan, but also that we have the money to run the shop for awhile. And if the impossible happens, and everything goes up in a shower of Wild-Fire Whiz-Bangs, we'll only be indebted to Towler's dad."

"As opposed to who?" Fred asked, leaning back in his chair and sprawling his legs on his bed.

"Dunno. But I've heard that the Malfoys own a lot of those properties. I'd really rather not have any interaction with any of them. Or their representatives. Ever."

Fred made a *hmmm*'ing sound while George rolled a Knut over his left knuckles from one side of his hand to the other, the copper coin undulating over his freckled skin.

"Fred! George! You've got another owl!" Ginny's voice was outside of their door. "Mum's ballistic. She thinks you're getting in last-minute Christmas gift orders."

"C'mon in, then," George yelled to the door, and moments later their sister was handing Fred another scroll.

"Are you?" she asked, a glint in her eye.

"I wish," Fred answered honestly, unrolling the parchment and glancing at the message. "Nope. Just a note from Lee. And I quote: '*You're bastards for not saying goodbye; should've said something; glad your dad's getting better; have a great holiday.*' Well," he chuckled, "he's never exactly been one to mince words. We seem to have made quite an impression, leaving in the middle of the night and right under Dungfridge's nose."

"She's evil," Ginny said.

"As if it weren't hard enough to stay and finish our N.E.W.T.s for Mum's sake, we have to do it with that woman sucking the life out of the place," George said rebelliously as he finished his Butterbeer.

"We'll just have to make sure that we have a memorable exit," Fred replied, dropping Lee's scroll and rubbing his hands together in glee.

"Sometimes you two really scare me," Ginny admitted, looking from Fred to George.

"No!" George drawled, pulling her over to sit on his lap. "We're just two harmless, bachelor seventh-years who like a good joke," he went on. "And you know we'd never do anything to you, the first Weasley girl in- oh, how many generations, Fred?"

"I forget," he said sourly. "Though not for lack of reminding."

Ginny stopped squirming and sat very still.

"What is it?" George asked, beginning to tickle her.

"Stop it," she said, her voice uncharacteristically timid.

"What'd we say?" Fred asked, picking up three of the now-empty bottles and beginning to juggle them as stray droplets of Butterbeer fell on the floor.

"Nothing. It's just, well..." her voice trailed off while she tugged anxiously at the ends of her hair, sucking on them for a second, then pulling them back behind her ear. "Mum told me something recently. I wasn't supposed to say anything." She scooted off of George's lap to go lean on a nearby carved mahogany desk, tracing the ornate 'B' with a finger.

"Spill," Fred threatened.

"Oh, fine," she said in an irritable voice. George was struck that despite her age, after the trauma she had suffered during her possession by Tom Riddle, she had become more mature and serious, and he felt ferociously protective of her.

"No," George said, shaking his head and glaring at Fred. "You don't have to tell us anything you don't want to."

"Oh yes she does!" Fred exclaimed, still keeping his eyes on the brown bottles circling in the air. "She's our sister. It's her obligation."

"You sound like Percy," George said, disgusted.

"That's it," Fred growled, catching the bottles and dropping them to the floor where they rolled to a corner. "What's your problem, anyway?"

"All of it!" George said, barely civil. "No bloody Quidditch, bloody Dungfridge, and I really hate this blasted house. I know the Burrow seems like it's about to fall apart, but at least our stuff is there. Christmas at this bollocky place is crap."

Fred got up and patted his shoulder in consolation. "You mean you don't find our decorations satisfactory? I'm offended," he said, with an expression of mock horror. "As for our belongings, that sounds like an excursion to plan out, don't you think? Mum's not around all the time, and we can distract little Ron and company—"

"You're actually triplets," Ginny said, looking at the floor, as though she hadn't heard any of the previous outburst.

Fred and George turned to stare at her. She fidgeted with a drawer pull in the thickening silence, the twins stunned into quiet after such an absurd proclamation.

"We're what?" George said finally, not able to grasp what Ginny had revealed.

Ginny raised her gaze to look at him, and he could tell that she wished she didn't know whatever it was. "Mum said that she had been carrying triplets. But something happened when she was more than halfway along. She had to go to St. Mungo's and she lost one of the babies. And it was a girl."

"Bloody hell," Fred cursed softly. "But why hasn't she ever said anything?"

"Or dad?" George echoed. "Or Bill? Or Charlie?"

Ginny shrugged. "I guess they were so glad when you and Fred were born with no problems that they decided not to bring it up again. Then Ron came along, then me, and they've been a bit busy." She started to twist her hair again. "That's why Mum's so protective of me, though, and why she's been so intense about this Order stuff. She really worries about all of us, Harry as much as anybody."

George thought about this secret that their mother had kept, and wondered how many other things he didn't know about her.

"Don't tell her I told you," Ginny warned, just as unexpected knocks on the door made the trio jump in surprise. "It doesn't change anything."

"Fred and George, dinner!" Ron shouted, his voice cracking on the last word. "You in there too, Ginny?"

"Yes," she called back. "Be right down."

"That's more than a bit weird, isn't it?" Fred mused, walking to the corner to pick up the Butterbeer bottles and dropping them in the bin with a loud clatter. "Could've been three of us."

"But a girl?" George said, following Ginny to the door and into the hallway. "Wouldn't be the same." He found that he was strangely unsettled by the knowledge of this ghost-sister, combined with an equally odd wave of respect for his mother and what she had been through.

"Weasley women are full of secrets," Ginny said, quirked an eyebrow as they descended the stairs.

Fred leaned forward to speak privately to George. "I don't find that reassuring."

"Nope," George agreed as they walked into the kitchen, the table already full with family and those of the Order not out doing whatever it was that they did. "Hmmm," he sniffed. "Oy, this smells beautiful, Mum!"

Molly looked more tired than usual, but at the unexpected compliment, a bright smile flooded her face. "Well, thank you George."

George smiled back.

V. January

"And next is Ron Weasley, Gryffindor's newest Keeper! Hope you were practising over the holidays—oops, watch your step!"

Fred had chosen Lee Jordan to act as Master of Ceremonies given his well-honed abilities at keeping a crowd involved with a commanding voice. Ron, sporting a rosy glow underneath his freckles, strutted a bit unsteadily down the makeshift catwalk the twins and Lee had transformed in one part of the common room.

"I'm too sexy for my shirt, too sexy for my shirt, so sexy it hurts..." Right Said Fred crooned over the crowd, as Lee had also been put in charge of the music spells for the small gathering.

On the bruising ride back to Hogwarts on the Knight Bus, Remus asked them if the seventh-years still engaged in a "Beginning of the End" party the night before their spring term began.

"No," Fred said, his eyes lighting up in such a way that George knew meant one thing: he was planning. "But certainly if it used to be a Gryffindor tradition, it should be revived!"

"Oh no," Ginny moaned as Fred shoved her over when the bus took a sickeningly sharp turn. "Mr. Lupin, why'd you go and give him an idea like that?"

"Make room for George," Fred said. "We need to talk."

"Ow! Stop pushing me!"

Remus had only smiled as he clutched the seat pole and said that he had fond memories from that time, and after being cooped up in Order headquarters for a month, they all certainly deserved it.

Fred and George had conferred through the trip and decided that a party was indeed in order. Now the seventh-years and a few other brave souls were taking their turn walking down the catwalk while the others stood to the sides, parchment and quills in hand to judge poise and ability not to take themselves too seriously. Katie Bell had embraced the celebration with gusto and transformed one of George's juggling balls into a large, rotating disco ball which hovered in the corner. George, with some help from Kenneth and an old Towler family recipe, had concocted a blood-red punch which bubbled in a cauldron, a pink iridescent haze hovering over it.

"Boo, hiss!" Fred shouted up at Ron. "Too prissy! You get a 2."

"I am not prissy, you twit!" Ron slurred back, and to prove his point he unfastened his robe until it fell around his shoes. He stepped on it while tugging his Chudley Cannons Forever t-shirt over his head. There was a gasp from a nearby cluster of sixth-years as Ron twirled the shirt around like a lasso. Lee whistled a cat-call and Fred and George applauded.

"You're at least up to a 4, now!" George yelled, scribbling a large number four on his parchment and waving it at him. "But put your shirt back on. You'll blind the first-years!"

"Bloody hell!" Towler swore, patting his robes. "Where's my flask, you no-good thieves? I know one of you stole it."

"Just using the contents for comic relief, mate!" Fred replied, producing the item in question but not returning it to Kenneth's outstretched hand until he had poured some of the potent contents into his own goblet of punch. "It seems to be working, wouldn't you say?" He glanced meaningfully at Ron.

"Our Keeper's a keeper!" Angelina hooted, bumping hips with Alicia and raising her chalice in a toast.

Lee Jordan announced, "Ron Weasley, ladies and gentlemen! A round of applause!"

Ron unsteadily pulled his shirt over his head as Harry and Hermione came through the portrait hole. Fred had, of course, put a silencing spell on the common room.

"Ronald Weasley!" Hermione exclaimed, looking shocked behind the stack of books in her arms.

"They made me do it," Ron apologised, struggling back into his robes.

Hermione shoved the books at Harry before storming toward the upperclassmen. Lee had changed the music to another of his Muggle favorite bands, and the words *all I learned in school was how to bend, not break the rules* wafted through the room.

"Have you been drinking?!" she squeaked in fury. "I wasn't even gone but an hour! And you a prefect!"

"No," Ron mumbled. Comprehension hit him. "Bollocks, Fred! You spiked it, didn't you?"

"It was George," Fred answered, turning to his twin. "How could you?" he asked, smirking.

"Liar. You know it was Towel-head."

"Me? The last thing I want to see is any of you out of your robes. All those freckles." Kenneth shuddered and took a hefty swig of punch.

"Enough," Hermione seethed. "We're back at term."

"It's our last one!" Katie complained as she bounced enthusiastically with Lee to the fast tune. "Give it a rest, will you? Or is having fun now forbidden under Umbridge's Educational Decree Number Fifty-Four?"

"She can shove her decrees up her- "

"George!" Hermione hissed. "There are first-years..."

"Who will, in all likelihood, need to have *Obliviate* spells cast on them to protect their innocent memories from the vision of seeing Ron without his shirt on," Fred joked.

"Piss off," Ron said darkly.

"Fine." Hermione looked at Angelina and Alicia who had joined Lee and Katie in a writhing, jumping circle, obviously happy, and her expression relaxed. "But if your spell isn't strong enough and Professor McGonagall comes up here, you're on your own."

"Oh please," George said, rolling his eyes. "That was one of the first ones we learned to master, way before Hogwarts."

"Think about it," Fred suggested. "All of our family under one roof?" He grabbed Kenneth and George by the shoulders, and went to accompany their classmates.

"Baggy trousers! Baggy trousers!" Lee sang along as he hopped around, doing a zealous do-si-do with Angelina.

"Catchy song, Lee!" George said, linking elbows with Fred and performing a similar dance move with his brother. "Baggy trousers! Baggy trousers!"

A while later, out of breath and for the first time wishing that he had some pumpkin juice, George found himself distracted by the sixth-years, clustered around Vicky Frobisher. Thalia waved him over, and he left Fred and company dancing to another of Lee's favourites.

"Thanks for the owl," he said, noticing that her hair was shorter than it had been before Christmas. "It meant a lot. Dad's okay. And yes, we've been working on new products. Just wait 'til tomorrow!"

She smiled warmly at him.

"How were your hols?" he went on.

"Passable," she replied, then pointed to Vicky. "Not as exciting as hers, though. Look at that!"

"Again?" Vicky feigned irritation, but she looked rather pleased as she swept up her robe and raised the hem of her shirt. At the base of her spine was an orange flower.

"It's a tattoo!" Thalia exclaimed with a thrill in her voice. "Can you believe it?"

"Wicked," George agreed. "What flower is that?"

"Tiger lily," Vicky said, dropping her robe. "Lily's my middle name. My sister and I sneaked out to get them."

"Sister?"

"Her parents sent her to a smaller school in London," Thalia said.

"Oh," George said, as though he understood the implications of that statement.

"Looking forward to Hogsmeade next month?" Thalia asked, tilting her head just a bit to the side as Vicky turned around to talk to the other sixth years.

"Definitely," George said, quickly scanning for a wall, or chair, or anything to lean against. *Wall.* He nonchalantly put out his hand and planted it on the stone surface. "Must say that we didn't get out much over Christmas. Say- Fred and I will have some business to do, but would you like to meet at the Three Broomsticks?"

"Oy!" Fred hollered from across the room. "Heart-breaker! Need you this way."

Thalia's face took on an odd, amused expression, wrinkling her nose in the process. "Sure. He keeps you on a short leash, doesn't he?"

George raced for a comeback. "Yeah, but I'm the keeper of the handcuffs."

Her brown eyes widened. "I knew you two were close, but..."

"And I thought I had a twisted mind!" George winked. "Well, brotherly love and all that, gotta go."

Thalia's coughing laughter rang behind him as George walked back over to the catwalk where Lee and Angelina and Towler were trying to show off dance moves. Fred was leaning back in a chair, his legs providing a tenuous fulcrum to his seat, feet resting on the makeshift runway.

"Have a seat," Fred offered with a sweeping gesture of his arm. George sank into the chair, sticking out his legs in parallel to his twin's. "Pranking. Seriously, mate. It's been ages since we've done anything memorable."

George pondered the possibilities. "Filch?" he said hopefully. "Or maybe Mrs. Norris. We could enchant a bell with some kind of sticking charm and tie it to her tail."

"Good concept, though perhaps too obvious," Fred said, scratching his upper back with his wand before shoving it into the pocket of his corduroys. "Maybe some kind of unwashable ink we could put on her paws, and drop her outside of Filch's office."

George snickered. "Can you imagine the look on his face if he saw black pawprints all over his pristine hallways?"

Fred nodded in appreciation.

"Wait- I've got it," George exclaimed. "That swamp idea you've got. We could give it a test run outside of the Slytherin common room."

Fred mulled over the idea, steepling his fingers and placing them under his chin. "Excellent," he said. "But I'm pretty sure we'll need to get in touch with our friend Dung."

"Right. Let's see what Ron says to us using his owl." George turned toward the back of the common room where Ron and Harry were playing chess, Hermione watching. "Oh Ronniekins?" he shouted, earning an irritated glare from his brother. "Can we borrow your darling Pig for a wee bit?"

"No. Bugger off!" Ron yelled back.

George turned back to Fred and shrugged, unsurprised.

"Worth a shot," Fred agreed, dropping his feet to the floor with a loud thud. "Reckon it might be inventory time- what say we go up and see just how much we need before starting another successful term?" He levered out of his chair and extended a hand, pulling George up from his chair.

"Fine with me. Dancing's not really my thing, though the music's not bad. Lee!" George's voice carried over the small crowd. "Later! Brilliant music, mate!"

Lee smiled in acknowledgement and continued his enthusiastic, though uncoordinated dancing as close to Angelina as she would allow.

George led the way from the disco light after waving to the assembly and Fred followed. They pounded their way up the staircase until they reached their room. Both brothers shucked off their robes, then George went to the locked cupboard that housed their more unique ingredients. Fred retrieved a red ledger book from below his bed. It snarled at him until he stuck his wand up its spine — rather perverse, George thought — and tickled it, at which point it fell open. He brought it over to the cabinet, quill in hand.

"Right. So," Fred pronounced. "I think we should start off selling our Headless Hats as soon as possible while everyone still has their Christmas money. Do we have what we need to keep going with the rest of the yet unnamed product line?"

George worked the unlocking spell and the doors opened. There were a number of glass bottles on a couple of shelves, some making the wood underneath them buckle with weight, but mostly they were at least half-empty. Some remnant bits of withered bucksnort jostled together in one corner, and toward the back of the cabinet some dismal-looking toadstools who had tried to make a colony on the bottom shelf, covering in the light. A liquid of malevolent blue began rising against the confines of a glass decanter and some skittish moths flattened themselves against the inside door.

"Bloody hell," George moaned. "This is hopeless. We've definitely got to do some buying, and fast, if we're going to try out the portable swamp." He shook his head as some miscreant moonshadow sloshed in its beaker, moving toward the end of its shelf. "Oy! Back with you," George snarled, pushing the glass against the wall.

"Time to talk to our friend Mundungus?" Fred prodded. "And how much do you think it'll set us back?"

"Shouldn't break the bank," George admitted, giving the cabinet contents an experienced eye. "Especially if we sell a few hats."

"I'm sure they'll be popular, especially with the younger ones," Fred said, slamming the ledger shut and walking over to his bed.

George pointed his wand at the cabinet doors, which shut and locked with a fair number of clicking sounds. "Talk to Towler?" George asked, tossing his wand on his bedside table and toeing off his shoes.

"Not yet. It's only our first night back," Fred reminded him, wrenching open his trunk and hauling his set of clothes up onto his bed. "Plenty of time for that. We've got ages to draw up any official documents we might wish to present to the right shop-owner."

George knelt in front of his trunk, emblazoned with a Chudley Cannons sticker. He heard Lee's unmistakable three-knock rap on the door before bursting in. "Plenty of time," he agreed, though he found himself thinking that there wouldn't be enough hours to do all that he wished. They had stopped doing homework for the most part, which helped, and more than once George thought that Professor McGonagall was keeping them there purely to spite Umbridge since they were barely passing their courses.

"Gents!" Lee enthused, Kenneth mere steps behind him.

The rest of the evening was a rehash of their holidays, yet another toast to their final term, and an atypically early bedtime.

George dreamed. He was sledding through Hogsmeade, capturing as many woollen hats off of passersby as he could. He tossed them back behind him into a sleigh, which he suddenly realised he was pulling. Fred was in it and had a whip, cracking it at his back, though it seemed to be miles away and never hit him. They slowed through a narrow alley, going past all of his professors. McGonagall. Snape. Lupin. Flitwick. Face after face, then there was no ground below him. He was falling down a cliff, falling, falling... he tried to grasp at anything, but there was nothing to hold onto. Then he was in a valley, brushing snow off of himself. Fred was nowhere to be seen. Thalia stood next to him. "Eat this," she said, holding out a piece of chocolate.

"Okay," George shrugged, reaching out toward her.

He started awake, sitting abruptly, his left hand clutching air.

"Shut it you git!" he heard, and was about to explain that he'd been dreaming, but realised that it was Fred, speaking in his sleep. George sank back into his bed, fumbled for his wand and said a Silencio toward his curtains. He was back asleep in minutes.

"SHE DID THAT TO YOU?"

Fred yelled a string of profanity so foul that even George winced. Lee simply nodded his head in agreement, staring at the back of his hand.

"Someone's got to get rid of her! I'm owling Dad. The Ministry has got to kick her Dark Arts arse out of this school, or I'll do it!"

"The Ministry sent her," Kenneth reminded him, handing Lee an open Butterbeer since he was unable to unscrew the top himself. The words 'I must not talk back' were oozing blood which glistened sickeningly against his skin.

"Not helping, Towler," George warned, quickly boiling some murtlap tentacles in an effort to recreate the salve that Harry had told Lee would help with the pain.

"I've got to go back," Lee said thickly. "Four weeks of this."

George had never before seen the expression of controlled rage now present on Lee's face like an ill-fitting mask. Lee was one of the most naturally cheery people he had ever met, and seeing him like this made George furious.

"UNFORGIVABLE CURSES ARE TOO GOOD FOR HER!" Fred was still shouting, pacing in front of a window.

Kenneth came over to the cauldron and looked at the contents. "You should have stayed in Potions," he said appreciatively. "You don't have to work at it like I do, and Merlin knows I could have used the company."

"Thanks," George said. Still stirring with one hand, he pulled open a drawer and fumbled through a chaotic pile of instruments and utensils until he found a strainer. "Can you get the pestle for me?"

They finished the solution and poured it into a bowl. As Lee let his hand soak, he began to look much more like his usual self, even joking that he was going to change the words next week to say 'Lee Jordan, Commentator Extraordinaire.'

"It's not as though she pays any attention to what I'm writing," he said. "She's too busy with other things and making those hideous noises to know what I'm doing. I would write 'Umbridge should be sacked,' but then I'd be stuck with it. Permanently."

"Swamp! Slytherins! Tonight!"

George turned as Fred let out his last barrage. "Tonight?"

"Yes. Serious pranking. It's the only thing to keep me from going to Umbridge's office, knocking, and hexing her from here to next week once I saw her fat face. Or next year, if I could."

"You'd be expelled," Kenneth observed, finishing off Lee's Butterbeer.

"Big loss, that," Fred said, busying himself at the cabinet of ingredients.

"Right," George echoed, actually knowing the elements required to make a sudden swamp, which included bogmyrtle gas and patina of grindylow gallbladder. Like most of their potential or actualised products, this one was Fred's idea, though unlike most of them, it took an inordinate number of materials that were not inexpensive. Personally, George felt that they should have stuck with the instant pond concept, but Fred said it didn't have enough pizzazz. Or something along those lines.

"Um, Fred?" he began, before getting cut off.

"We'll improvise!" his twin continued.

"You're a nutter."

"Takes one to know one."

Kenneth coughed behind them. "Care to get a move on?"

Not long after, the quartet of seventh-years carried a smoking cauldron and satchel of dry ingredients quietly down a staircase to a particular portrait not far from Professor Binns' offices. There was a hidden passageway found behind the potentially gruesome picture of a maiden tied to a tree, a large black snake undulating in front of her. It led to the dungeons, right around the corner from the Slytherin common room, to be exact. If one knew to sing the first verse of the Slytherin House song of 1748, that is. Which, of course, they did.

They made their way outside the common room. Kenneth kept watch, putting one end of an Extendable Ear near Snape's office. The twins pored over the cauldron, Fred handing George the ingredients in very particular succession. Lee kept asking questions until George told him he'd explain the process, but not right then.

"Go get Towler," he said, keeping his voice low. "We're almost ready."

"If this works, every Slytherin who goes through here will look like they've gone for a nice dunk in the lake," Fred said, cheered by the whole process. "The bottom of it."

The group was reassembled, and George nodded to Fred. "You do the honours."

"Gladly." He strode over to a space a few paces from the door. "Gents, I'd move back a bit," he stage whispered over his shoulder. He poured out something resembling a fat slug trail into a coiled thick pile.

"Not the right colour, Fred," George said, shaking his head. "Improvise, my arse."

"Now! Just add..." Fred walked quickly back to the group, now down the corridor and near a fountain, ready to run. "Magic." He aimed his wand, said something that sounded a lot like a frog ribbeting, and stood back.

The substance seethed, oozing out all over the floor. The horrible-smelling liquid began pooling, making a shallow lake inch its way up to them.

"Needs work," Fred gasped as the odour hit him.

"Let's go!" Lee shouted, and he stuck his wand in the unblinking stone eye of the fountain around the corner in the hallway. The snake unfurled, making an arch shape, and he tugged at it, opening the door. They ran through and up the corridor, Kenneth making sure the fountain-door was completely shut behind them. After staying quiet on the staircases, they erupted into laughter once they made their way into the Gryffindor common room, ignoring the Fat Lady's admonitions that they were out far too late and shocking a fourth-year couple snogging by the fireplace.

"Brilliant!" Lee said, still laughing and leaning against their closed door, brushing a tear from his eye. "Can't wait to see what kind of idiotic decree Umbridge will come up with for that one."

"By order of the High Inquisitor of Hogwarts, students are hereby banned from making the Slytherins look like the slimy gits they are."

"Excellent, Kenneth!" George exclaimed.

"The above will becomem null and void with Educational Decree 'Your Arse is Grass' when Dumbledore is reinstated." Towler had opened the beverages cabinet and was rummaging around for glasses, but his voice still carried.

Fred hooted, hands clutched at his sides.

"Oh, mates." Lee sighed, falling into his bed, throwing his bandaged hand up onto his forehead. "That was beautiful."

There was a Firewhiskey toast, the cauldron sequestered in a corner of their bathroom, then bed.

George was enjoying a very satisfying third helping of bacon at breakfast the next morning when the alert came.

"Filch and Mrs. Norris at ten o'clock. Looks furious," Lee said matter-of-factly.

"High hell. Snape is right behind him," Kenneth said with much more apprehension in his voice. He was the only out of the four who still took Potions, after all.

Fred merely reached over and plucked a scone from a paten. "And all of the Slytherins, while distressingly clean, do smell abominable." He grinned, and tossed the roll to George, who caught it handily.

"You." Filch's hatred was almost physical, pulsing in his words, undecided on which twin to inflict his rage. Mrs. Norris hissed for emphasis while Fred and George blithely ignored both. "You. Did. That. Foul. Bog."

"Messrs Weasley," Snape's icy voice cut through the caretaker's monosyllabic chanting. "A word?"

"Word about what?" Fred asked even as George stamped on his foot. It earned George a quick, furious backhand to the stomach under the table. He winced.

Snape's robes swirled rancorously around him as he slammed his hands down on the table, staring at the twins. The rest of the Gryffindor table had grown quiet.

"Where were you last night?" His black eyes glinted.

"What time of night, Professor Snape?"

"Professor Snape!"

Professor McGonagall's voice was like sunshine in spring— with a hint of frost.

"Is something the matter?"

Snape whirled around. "I cannot prove it yet, but with every hair on my head I believe that it is your seventh-years who made the foul-smelling pond outside the Slytherin common room."

"Oh. Dear me," she clucked, wrenching Snape's arm into hers and escorting him to the faculty table. "Not them, I'm afraid." She turned and gave them the most imperceptible of winks before rounding back to face the Potions Master. "Shamefully hopeless, the four of them. Except Kenneth Towler, perhaps."

"He'll pay for this," Snape rumbled.

Kenneth blanched. "How'd I end up in Gryffindor?" he asked, digging his fork through his eggs.

"Because you're brave and loyal, Towel-head." George threw an arm around his shoulders and shook him.

"In case you forgot, you spineless bastard," Fred said mockingly, beginning to juggle some grapes.

"Fred Weasley!" Hermione's shrill voice carried down the table.

"Worse than Mum," George and Fred said together. Fred lobbed a grape at George, who caught it in his mouth.

There was a flash.

"Creevey!" George warned. "What did we tell you about having that blasted camera at breakfast?"

Colin thrust the camera under the table.

"School is useless," Fred said.

"Too right," George agreed.

VI. February

"But I thought we were going to go to Diagon Alley, during the Hogsmeade trip," George said, his voice muffled as he pulled one of his Mum's less-atrocious jumpers over his head.

Fred shrugged. "We can go anytime. I think it's definitely more important that we be there to support our dismal Quidditch team while they practise."

"I told Thalia I'd meet her."

"Then you'd best tell her you're not going."

George shook his head, conflicted. He had finally decided to see her without Fred around, but on the other hand, it was true that he really did want to watch their beleaguered team. And be somewhat encouraging- if possible.

"Right," he said, after a pause. "But if we lose to Hufflepuff-"

"You mean, when we lose," Fred interrupted. "Without us and Harry, what're the chances?"

"Dunno. Anyway, we've got to find a location for the bloody shop." He began rooting through a jumble of half-finished Skiving Snackboxes, looking for his wand. "I can barely stand to put my robes on anymore. It's such a joke."

"We will," Fred said, his tone indignant. "You know I'm in this as much as you are." He walked over to George and threw his arm around his shoulder. "I've even come up with a name, oh ye of little faith."

George turned, looking skeptically at his twin. "Oh really. Let's hear it."

"Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes," Fred announced, sweeping his arm in an arc in front of them.

"Hmmm." George pondered the front of the imaginary shop, the words flashing brightly in his mind's eye. "I like it. Sounds catchy."

"Of course it does, you git. I'm brilliant." Fred shook his shoulder. "Better go disappoint the lovely Ms. MacGhinty before she simply thinks you stood her up. Though she might be grateful."

"You tosser! I never gave you grief when you and Angelina- "

"Kidding, George, just kidding." Fred neatly dodged the fist George aimed at his side. "Blimey, but you take things so seriously sometimes. You need to stop that."

"Right-o. See you on the pitch?"

Fred nodded.

George raced down the boys' dormitory stairs and saw Thalia and Vicky and some other sixth years about to walk through the portrait-hole.

"Thalia!" he yelled, and she turned.

"George?" she asked, looking puzzled as he jogged across the Common Room. She took a few steps toward him. "I thought I already saw Jordan and Towler..." Her voice trailed off as he approached. "Let me guess. You're not going."

George felt an uncomfortable, complicated churning of surprise and regret. She was disappointed, he realised, suddenly feeling loutish. "That's right," he affirmed. "Felt we should really hang around and take in Gryffindor's practise."

She snorted, thrusting her hands into her Kenmore Kestrels jacket. "Just won't be the same without you and Fred," she sighed. "And Harry."

"Thalia!" Vicky called out, her look of displeasure painfully obvious.

Thalia looked at the floor for a moment, George feeling more and more like a cad and wishing that he had stood up to Fred.

"Y'know," she said, looking up at him, her face brightening, "I didn't really want to go to Hogsmeade anyhow." She turned around and made a shooing motion toward her friend. "I'll stay here and watch the Quidditch practise."

Vicky rolled her eyes, then went through the entryway.

"It's not like I've any money to speak of," Thalia said a bit morosely.

"Yeah. Wouldn't know what that's like," George said, grateful at the abrupt turn of events.

"Miss MacGhinty," a familiar voice sounded behind them. "I assume if you're still here that George has managed to, if I may say so, weasel his way into your affections."

"Fred," George warned as his brother approached, "Shut it."

Thalia let out a throaty laugh. "I can defend my own honour, George." She pulled her dark red hair behind her ears. "Let's go. I'm sure they need all the inspiration they can get."

She turned around and walked over to the portrait-hole.

"I'm going to kill you one of these days," George promised his brother, agreeably falling into step with Fred.

"Get in line." Fred winked.

The trio stood somewhat sheltered at the stands, trying to avoid the cold drizzle. Some of the drops turned to tiny ice pellets as the temperature dipped seesaw-like, first a hair above and then a hair below freezing.

"Our Ginny's not bad," Fred said thoughtfully, watching her manoeuvre a rather spectacular turn to catch the Snitch.

George nodded. "Ron's not so dismal either, given a chance."

"Yes, but that's only because there's no pressure," Fred replied, pulling his scarf up to his chin, frustration in his voice. "He'd as soon as fall off that ruddy broom if the Slytherins yelled his name. His lack of concentration is going to be a catastrophe."

"He's certainly not as bad as Sloper," Thalia interjected. "But we're going to be absolutely massacred." She shook her head. "It's hopeless."

"Oy!" Fred said, turning to face her. "That's our family you're talking about."

"I know." She shrugged. "But it's the truth, and you and George of all people know I'm right."

"Why don't you play?" George asked. "You've got a brother on the Kestrels."

"Yeah," Fred echoed, still disgruntled from her earlier comment.

Thalia looked from Fred to George. "Haven't you wondered about my nickname?"

"You have a nickname?" Fred appeared less than interested, but asked the question anyway.

"Irie," George said. "Reckoned it's 'cause you're Irish."

"No. It's short for irony. Ironic." She crossed her arms and gave the twins a defeated look. "I'm the only girl in the family, I'm the youngest, I'm from a line of brilliant flyers. And I'm useless on a broom."

There was a slight pause.

"You're joking," Fred and George said in tandem.

"If only," she said glumly. "First day of flying lessons when Madam Hooch saw I had no ability at all, well, I think she almost cried."

"I can't imagine not flying. Well, until now." Fred turned his attentions back to the team, thrusting out his jaw so his lower teeth covered the front ones, rubbing them together, a subconscious habit from childhood. "I'm going to watch from the other side of the pitch," he declared, and walked away, his eyes intent on the goings-on above the field.

"You were a bit brutal," George said, looking into Thalia's face, her cheeks pink with cold. "Only other Weasleys get to criticise Ron and Ginny."

"No. It was honest. The team's pathetic without you and Fred and Harry." She thought for a moment, rocking back on her heels. "Ginny is pretty good, though. Looks like she's had a lot of practise."

"Lot of practise?" George couldn't fathom it, and found instead that he was more focused on the drops of sleet nestled onto Thalia's eyebrows.

"Must've," she said, scooting back against one of the stadium poles. She fell silent, the distant sound of Angelina shouting various encouragements or epithets and the tinkle of frozen droplets settling around them. "George?" she asked, hesitant.

Expectant, George realised. *Here goes nothing*.

George leaned down. They kissed, his lips meeting hers, cold and soft. He kept pressing his mouth against hers, eyes shut. Wasn't something supposed to happen? Her tongue flickered out and rubbed against his closed lips. He opened his mouth, thinking how odd it was to be breathing into someone like that, when her tongue met his.

Oh. This is interesting. He took a sudden breath through his nose and felt the cold air burn in his nostrils. He willed his tongue to move forward into Thalia's warm, open mouth. The sensations were all very intriguing, and yet... Thalia pulled back, breathing a bit heavily. George suddenly felt cold on his neck, realising that she had clasped her hands there during their interchange and had now withdrawn them.

"George," she whispered, her mittened hands resting on his shoulders. Her expression was pensive.

"Yes?"

"Can we try that again?"

He nodded. He cradled the back of her head in his hands, kissing her deeply, analysing how small her teeth were compared to his own, how she tasted faintly of pumpkin juice and toothpaste. After more inquisitive tongue thrusting and lip nipping she pulled away again, licking her lips. Puffs of warm air drifted between them as they breathed, fragile interlopers that dissipated in moments.

"Um," she began, pulling him to her until their foreheads touched. "George."

"Last time I checked."

She smiled. George felt strangely unmoved. He had just kissed the girl he had a crush on. Or sure reckoned he did. But nothing was stirring in those parts of himself that he knew sure could be. What was the matter with him?

"Did you feel..." her voice trailed off while she wriggled her mittens under the hair at his neck.

"You're a great kisser," George said, willing himself to believe it. "I don't have a lot of experience. Sorry."

She tilted her head back so she could look at him. There was an odd expression on her face. Disappointment? *Bollocks*. He was obviously a bloody atrocious kisser.

"That's not it. I'm awfully fond of you," she said, moving her hands down and across his back to massage his shoulders. "But I don't think, well," she continued, gazing at him, looking at one of his eyes and then the other as though to stay balanced, "that we're supposed to be together. I mean like a couple."

The sentences, spoken in her lilting accent, rang in George's head.

"My kissing's that awful?" he blurted out, stepping back a pace.

"No, no," she said, taking George's hand and pulling him back. "You're not awful at all. It's just that there should be some..." She wrinkled her nose, trying to find the right word.

"Sparks?" George offered, then wished he hadn't. *Bloody hell, George. Think, then speak.*

"Yes." Thalia nodded her head with enthusiasm.

Idiot.

"Yes, that's it. You're brilliant, and heaps of fun in the best dodgy kind of way, and certainly not an eyesore. It's just that I didn't feel any sparks. Oh." She looked horrified, covering the 'o' of her open mouth with her hands. "Did you?" she breathed behind her mittens.

George wavered. *Dodgy. Not an eyesore.* "No," he replied. "I guess not."

"Good. Oh, I'm so glad," she said in a rush, throwing her arms around him. "I mean, not good that it's not right, but good that-

"Look, can we give it one more go?" George interrupted. "Just to make sure."

Thalia leaned back and gave him an appraising look. "Well, okay."

George tilted his head down and closed his eyes as they kissed. She was a good kisser, a mixture of tender and intense, their tongues now more familiar in their movements against each other. It was very pleasant, and he liked feeling her hands on his shoulders as they remained there. Maybe he did feel something...

"Oy! Sir Snogman!"

George and Thalia broke apart in shock at the voice right behind them. Fred had returned. George ran the back of his hand over his mouth, shooting daggers in his gaze at his brother.

"Piss off."

"So!" Fred draped an arm over Thalia's shoulders, despite the scowl on her face. "Is he any good?" He thrust his thumb toward George.

"I wouldn't tell you," she said crossly. "Unlike you, some people have tact." She wriggled out from under his arm to step over to George and clasp his hand. "You're a great friend," she murmured, kissed him meaningfully on the cheek, and walked back toward the castle.

"Hard luck," Fred said as George watched her, thinking of what she'd said. Great friend. So that was it.

"Couldn't you just go and get stuffed?" George asked, deflated.

"Yeah, but then I wouldn't have your charming company."

George listened vaguely to some more of Fred's jibes as he was steered back to the stands.

The Gryffindor/Hufflepuff match played the following Saturday was brutal. Unsurprisingly, they lost. That it was only by 10 points had everything to do with Ginny, and her spectacular catch of the Snitch. The rest of the game was certainly worthy of an Obliviate spell for all Gryffindors in attendance.

That night, George stood next to Fred in the toilets, both of them brushing their teeth at the same time.

"I'm shick of thish," George said, scrubbing with more ferocity than he usually lavished on his teeth.

Fred only nodded. He knew exactly what George had said, despite the impediment of the toothbrush in his mouth.

George spat into the sink. "No. Really." He turned to look at Fred, who had stuck out his tongue and was brushing its pink surface. "I don't care if Mum cries like a tap, or if she yells loudly enough to be heard in sodding France. We've got to secure a shop. We've got the money. We've got the products."

Fred drank from his cupped hands and stood up, stowing his toothbrush in the holder, which grasped it. "Don't you know I think this place is as ridiculous as you do? Piss of a poltergeist." He leaned back against the sink. "So we go. To the Alley. Next weekend. You doing anything?" He waggled his eyebrows.

George turned and looked at himself in the mirror. No, he really wasn't. He and Thalia, despite an attraction, apparently had no chemistry. *Life. Full of irony.* But that only made him think of her, which was hopeless.

"Cheer up, old chap!" Fred massaged his shoulders lightly. "There'll be others. And besides- we'll need all of our attentions to getting Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes ready once we graduate."

"Who said that was going to be the name?" George turned around, looking incredulously at Fred. "You just said you'd come up with one. I didn't agree to it."

"Well. Do you have something else, something better, in mind?" Fred stepped back against the edge of a shower stall, his arms crossed, looking defiant.

"Not yet."

Fred made a vague 'oh well' sound as he left the toilets. George took a look around at the institutional facilities that had been a part of his life for seven years, and resolved to make an exit from the school that would go into the famed annals of *Hogwarts, A History*.

"Next step?"

George, fighting off boredom, was quizzing Towler on one of the more complicated potions that would probably come up on his roommate's N.E.W.T.s. He suspected that Kenneth understood George's continued interests in the possibilities involved in the subtle craft of potions-work, especially after the imperfect attempt with the instant swamp. He really wanted that to work, and Kenneth might have some insights that weren't forthcoming to George.

"Add half a hermetic cup of deliquesce of nettle." Kenneth paused. "Shite. While stirring counterclockwise."

"Deliquesce of nettle?" George squinted at the ingredients list.

"Oh! And the nettle has to have been soaking in lygus for at least three full moons."

The blond looked very pleased with himself.

"What's the point of this?"

"It's a very particular potion, but after ten monitored doses, you're rendered impervious to almost every jealousy curse there is."

George nodded in appreciation. "'S'a lot of work, though."

The door crashed open. "Gents, gents!" An enthusiastic voice bellowed from the doorway. "Wondered where you'd gone off to. Studying, on such a fine day?"

Fred and Lee were finally back from lunch. Kenneth scowled toward the window, looking at the seventeenth consecutive day of drizzle or rain. He turned back to Fred. "Just because you've given up on school doesn't mean that all of us have that luxury, Weasley."

"Ah, but just because I've given up on school doesn't mean I have the luxury of sitting around on my arse on a perfectly good Saturday. Coming with, or staying?"

"Where?" Kenneth eased further back into his bed, causing the top book in his stack of potions texts to teeter precipitously before crashing to the floor.

"Diagon Alley," Lee replied, pulling off his robe and donning a navy peacoat, a Christmas present from his uncle.

"Brilliant. I'm off, as well," George said as he jumped up and handed his roommate back the copy of *Eye of Newt, Heart of Stone: Sir Alabaster's Methods for Achieving Emotional Self-Preservation*. He foraged around his trunk and found a decent cardigan and scarf. "You're coming too, Lee?"

"Wouldn't miss it." He grinned and fished out a scrap of parchment from his pants pocket. "Been waiting for you two to decide to venture forth so I can get a gander at Piadora's Palace."

"You're still not on about that, are you?" Fred groaned, pulling an overcoat out of his trunk.

"Dare I ask?" Kenneth said, one eyebrow raised.

"Think about it. Lee. Almost eighteen." Fred paused for dramatic effect. "Horniest bloke I've ever met, honestly."

"Next to you, that is," George said cheerfully, enjoying renewed enthusiasm for the day.

"Oh. That kind of shop." Kenneth smirked. "Bring me back something, so I won't feel completely left out." He chuckled as he returned his attentions to his parchment. "Wondered why the house elves were in here so bloody often, taking care of your bed. They must be tired of washing your sticky sheets."

"Piss off!"

Towler dodged the projectile, which happened to be one of Lee's shoes, as George buttoned up his own overcoat.

"Back in a bit, Kenneth. And thanks again for all of your dad's help."

Kenneth waved absently in reply.

"You thought I'd forgotten from last week, didn't you?" Fred accused George as he and Lee surreptitiously made their way down two sets of stairs to the statue of Gregory the Smarmy.

"Well, it's not like you'd said anything."

A strategic wand tap and incantation later, the trio were making their way down the corridor that led into the Quidditch changing rooms into a 'broken' locker in a neglected corner of the room. From there it was a quick dash across the lawn to the Forbidden Forest where they regrouped, pulling their hoods down and shaking the rain off of their robes.

"Definitely need a *Repello* charm today," George said, casting the water-repelling charm on himself as Fred and Lee did the same.

"Where're we Apparating?" Lee asked.

"Thought we'd start near that shop Charlie's mentioned a couple of times."

"You up to it?" George asked. Lee had barely passed his Apparation license, though he'd said he'd made a good show of working on it over the Christmas holidays, scaring his younger sisters half to death.

"Yes. Thank you, mum." Lee looked disgusted.

"Right."

There was a sequence of *crack!*ing sounds, then they reappeared in a narrow alley.

"Out of my way!" An exceptionally large and brutish wizard shoved past them, muttering about Apparating and that there ought to be laws.

George leaned over Fred's shoulder to look at the piece of parchment Kenneth's father had sent them. While Bracken Towler was an upper level manager in a potions lab, his niece, one of Kenneth's oldest cousins, managed several properties in Diagon Alley and Hogsmeade. Some of them were going through transition in tenants, and she had written down their addresses for the twins.

"Here. Let's look at this one." George pointed at the top one on the list, 93 Diagon Alley. "It's closest."

"Sounds good." Fred re-rolled the parchment and put it in his coat pocket.

They made their way up a few steps and were soon carried up the street in a throng of people, like sea-borne flotsam moving inexorably toward shore.

"Aren't you a bit worried somebody will see us?" Lee asked. "We don't exactly blend in or anything."

"Who's going to know?" George replied. "Everybody else is in stupid school. And we know Mum only does her shopping on Thursdays when it's not as crowded."

"There it is!" Fred said, pointing across the street. 93 Diagon Alley was currently a shoe repair shop, and it did look rather run-down. "Let's go in and take a look 'round."

George tried to gauge its potential. Tall windows that would have lots of space to showcase their joke products; it was in between a bookseller and a cooking supplies shop, so they'd probably get a lot of passers-by; hopefully since it was a shoe repair place the back area would be larger than many and they could convert it to a small lab for working on new products. He grinned.

An hour later they were at Gringott's, signing what seemed like at least several dozen copies of the same form. Anastasia Towler had taken the floo network from her office as soon as they had contacted her, which was immediately after they had all but run from the store to the bank. It was perfect. They wanted to rent it immediately, though she insisted that the current occupant still had another month in his lease and they couldn't begin occupancy until April first at the earliest.

They were so excited, they'd reverted to a habit that annoyed most people, sometimes even themselves. They were talking over each other.

"On our bloody birthday!" Fred said, clenching the feathered tip of the quill in his teeth.

"Couldn't be better-" George interjected.

"Did you see the shops to the sides? We'll have heaps of pedestrian traffic-"

"Monstrous windows. Did you see all that shelving? We can-"

"Bill'n Charlie'll be beside themselves. Can't you just see their faces?"

"Bloody hell. 'S'all ruddy brilliant."

The nearby goblins and banking patrons gave the twins and, by default, Lee and Anastasia, rather pointed, disapproving looks, which Fred and George promptly ignored.

"Fred! That area in back. That's mine. I've got to get back to work on that idea about the fortune-telling frogs. I know they're complicated, but-"

"Should we go ahead and sneak into the Burrow to get our stuff together, or will that be too bloody obvious? Bollocks. Mum's bloody clock will give us away-"

"I know how to make that permutation work. I just have to prod Hermione a bit about the Arithmancy bits, and then-"

"Have to let Ginny know. Don't trust Ron further than the Common Room grate. Unless I've tossed him into the fireplace myself."

"Fred. Fred! I've just figured out what's missing from the swamp, I've got it!"

"So. D'you think Gin will go along and help us? Or should we just keep this to ourselves and wait for a Thursday?"

"What?!" they exclaimed at each other in unison, both faces flushed with excitement.

A few seconds passed.

"Sign here. Both of you."

The normal, low-grade hubbub of people going about their business began to roar in George's ear as Fred took the quill from Anastasia. "It would be my absolute pleasure," he said in his most officious voice as he penned his name, before handing the quill to his brother.

George willed his hand to stop shaking as he signed his full name in binding ink to the parchment, a bit surprised that no blood was involved. He and Fred were going to be shop owners. *Bloody hell, praise Merlin and All Magical Folk*, he thought. This was no idle passing dream. Thanks to Harry, they really were going to make Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes a reality. Despite not being Prefects. Despite every block in the road their Mum had imposed. Despite Percy, despite all unexpected impediments in the way. Even if Umbridge became Imperial Ruler of Hogwarts with ruddy Decree Number 'Who Gives a Whizz,' they would still have their shop, and there was nothing that any of them could do about it.

George Xarada Weasley

Just as he was blowing on the ink, he heard a disturbingly familiar voice behind him.

"Boys?"

Lee Jordan moaned. "Oh lads, you're in for it now."

"Hi, Dad," Fred and George said together.

Ginny practically pounced on them when George, Fred and Lee entered the mostly empty common room.

"Where've you been?" she asked, eyes wide. "You've got Howlers. From Mum."

"Bloody hell," Fred exclaimed.

Hermione, sitting in a nearby chair, opened her mouth to chastise him but he and George beat her to it. "There are first years. We know," they said together.

"Were you getting a present for Ron?" Ginny asked, pulling the twins away from Hermione's hearing. Lee trailed along, giving an apprehensive look at the smouldering Howlers.

"Why would we do something stupid like that?" George asked, scowling at the red envelopes which were following them to the corner.

"It's his birthday tomorrow! Had you forgotten?"

"Forgotten? I can barely remember George's birthday," Fred joked. "And his is infinitely more important."

"Um, blokes, you may want to- " Lee began, but the Howlers opened of their own accord and Molly Weasley's voice filled the room.

"Fred Xavier Weasley!" "George Xanadu Weasley!" the voices shouted together. "How could you? You should be studying, not breaking Hogwarts rules to go to Diagon Alley and CERTAINLY NOT signing a lease! I don't care that you're both of age, you will FINISH SCHOOL, do you hear me?!"

The angry noise stopped and Ginny stared at them. George stamped over to the shredded remains of paper before jumping on it and pounding it into the ground with both feet. "Nothing! You! Can! Do! About! It!" he yelled as he kicked the small pile for good measure.

"Let's go upstairs," Lee suggested, tugging on his arm. "Got heaps to discuss."

"You really did it?" Ginny said incredulously. "You've really-"

"Sorry, Gin, can't tell you any more," Fred interrupted.

"Or it would be *Obliviate* central, and we know how you hate it when our wands are pointed at you," George continued.

She glared at them. "I'll find out," she promised. "And you'd best at least conjure a card or something for Ron. He's been wretched and mopey since that match."

"Not my problem," George said. "I can't bloody play, can I?"

"And tying him to one of the goal posts is a bit obvious, though it's been suggested," Fred went on.

Lee snickered.

"You two are impossible," Ginny said. "Mum's right- you're self-centered, you really only care about yourselves, and sometimes you're just really mean."

Fred feigned hurt. "Oh, George, I've been cut to the quick."

"How can you know us so well?" George said, leaning on Fred. "Oh. You must be a relative."

Ginny made a menacing growling sound and stormed away.

"Such a Weasley," Fred said affectionately. "Let's go."

The three went up the stone stairs to fill Kenneth in on all that had happened. Over some celebratory Firewhiskey, of course.

It was nearly midnight when, on the verge of collapse, the four roommates fell into their beds.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am to have missed that!" Kenneth was still incredulous. "If I ever told my Dad to 'read it and weep' in answer to any question, especially, 'What exactly do you think you're doing?' I'd've been hexed to the Dark Ages. During the plague, for certain."

"I've never seen him look so astounded in all my life," George gasped, laughing at the memory of their father. Arthur had been stunned into silence, staring open-mouthed at the twins, at the deed parchment, back at the twins, and even a sideways glance at Lee. "There wasn't a thing he could say, he was so utterly gobsmacked."

"He's always let Mum do the yelling for him, anyway," Fred said, tottering toward their toilets.

"He's a brave one, your Dad," Lee said, waving his wand to light his bedside candle. "Good thing there's only one girl in your family. If he survives all of you he should have his own statue."

"Give it a few months, and he'll be begging to live with us rather than be stuck with Mum, Ron and Ginny."

"Too right," Lee said, reaching under his bed for a battered copy of a rather risqué magazine.

"Oy! You didn't bring me anything back from that Piadora's Palace."

"Didn't get there." Lee sounded very disappointed.

"Yeah, but we'll be going more often, right mates?"

Lee and Kenneth looked at George.

"Gotta pass my N.E.W.T.s, George." Lee shrugged.

"Unlike you and your infernal, luckiest bastard twin, bags of Galleons have not fallen into my lap, and I'm in the same boat as Lee."

"We'll do right by you," Fred vowed, having re-entered the room and toppled onto his bed. "One for pornography, and pornography for all!"

"Hear, hear!" Lee cheered.

"Oh Merlin." Kenneth pulled the curtains around his bed.

VII. March

"All of you shall stay behind- except you, Mr. Towler." Professor McGonagall's lip quirked in sympathy. "I know that Professor Snape expects you for a double Potions class this afternoon." She swept her hand to tidy her already-perfect coiffure. "It is a shame that you are the only seventh-year Gryffindor to be pursuing a N.E.W.T. in Potions, but so be it. Different years bring different skills, and yours will be missed if you don't get to the dungeons post-haste."

Kenneth had already leapt up from his desk, slinging his bag over his shoulders, blond hair falling in his eyes and panic suffusing his expression.

"You'll be fine, Kenneth," she went on, giving him a warm smile. "You and I will meet later this evening. Now off to your Potions class."

He bolted as the remaining Gryffindor seventh years lounged as comfortably as possible in their desks.

"So." Minerva stood imperiously, looking at George, at Fred, and the remainder of their classmates over the top of her glasses. She walked to the front of her desk and crossed her arms. "It's been two years since we've had a talk such as this. You're all of age now." She waved her wand, shutting the door to her Transfigurations classroom. "What are you planning to do after you leave Hogwarts, and what can I do to facilitate your getting there? You're a frightfully talented group, and I'm not saying that merely because I am your Head of House."

Chaos ensued. Lee and Angelina blathered on about Quidditch, Lee giving Professor McGonagall the names of the teams he had contacted in regards to being a commentator. Angelina tried to keep her blushing to a minimum as she announced that she had been owling Oliver Wood and was going to have a try at professional Quidditch.

Patricia Stimpson shook her head morosely. "Not good for anything. Don't know what I'm going to do post school," she said, biting on her lower lip. "Any ideas would be really helpful," she muttered.

Minerva turned and waved her wand at a piece of chalk which then made a few notes on the board at the front of the classroom. "Not to fret," she said, and Patricia brightened.

"Well," Alicia said timidly, "I haven't told anyone but Patricia, but I want to be an animal healer. I've spoken to Hagrid about it, but he didn't have proper schooling, so I went to Madam Pince to look into schools." She looked down at her hands. "I've done some additional research with some of the more conventional creatures and have written it up, which I hope will make a difference."

"What a splendid idea and an admirable calling," Professor McGonagall enthused. "And I believe your marks are such that you should have no problem in that area. I'd be happy to write you a letter of recommendation."

Alicia beamed, and grinned at Patricia.

"Fred? George?" Their Head of House walked until she was standing in front of their seats, her insightful gaze plumbing them both for information. "I've heard all sorts of unlikely rumblings of what you two are planning. Not that I blame you, of course," she went on, placing one hand on each desk, looking from George to Fred and back again. "And not that I would admit any of the rumours to be true. What I do know is that both Professor Flitwick and I will be exceedingly disappointed if you don't take your exams, because I fully expect to see you at your graduation..." She paused and glared intently at them. "Despite the fact that we are currently under the supposed rule of a nightmarish biddy sent by the ineffectual, pushover Ministry."

There was a gasp.

"And nothing that I say to you is to leave this room," Professor McGonagall went on sharply. "You're all from good families and have astoundingly sound minds. Just use them. But for Merlin's sake, don't be stupid." She paused. "So. Messrs Weasley."

"An Auror. Of course," Fred said solemnly, fingers steepled and his thumbs beating a slow rhythm together. "No higher calling."

"Auror," George echoed.

Minerva rounded on them. "This is serious!" she said menacingly, her hat quivering on her brow as she suppressed her anger. "You two don't truly mean to try and be Aurors, do you?"

Fred looked at George, who lifted an eyebrow, then almost imperceptibly wrinkled his nose. George didn't really care to lead on his head of house, who had defended and aided them more times than was really necessary.

"Right. No, not really," Fred replied, stroking his chin in a mock thoughtful voice.

"Pretty sure we'll be shop owners, though," George said, looking Professor McGonagall in the eye. "And we owe a lot of the future patented items to your continued and never-flagging instruction."

"Just wait'll you see our Kaleidoscoping Kilts," Fred enthused, then blanched under Minerva's gaze.

"I know that you boys won't believe me, but this is not a joke. Clever people are needed in every capacity when there's a war on-"

"Are we at war?" Patricia asked querulously. "I didn't think that anyone in the Ministry really believed that You-Know-Who was back."

"You read Harry's article in *The Quibbler*," Alicia said, incredulous. "I thought you'd believed him."

"I did," Patricia retorted, grasping on to the desk. "But there's still no proof beyond what he said. Aren't I allowed to think for myself for once?"

Angelina turned around. "Yes, but not if you're going to be a bleeding idiot-"

"I believe him!" Jordan chimed in, cutting Angelina off.

"Well, you'd believe anything Angelina said, since you still follow her around like a lovesick puppy," Patricia sneered.

"Oy! That's our mate you're insulting!" Fred threw into the fray of voices, silencing Patricia who stared stormily at him.

"You're just furious because you were thrown off the team," she said, scowling.

"Bloody hell we were, by that fu-" George began.

"ENOUGH!" Professor McGonagall yelled. The noise was so loud and so authoritative that a partially transfigured cactus morphed back into its usual form of a bin.

The room fell eerily quiet.

"Messrs Weasley, you will remain here momentarily. Angelina, Patricia, Alicia and Lee, I will meet with you each independently. And no," she waved her hands in a calming motion as agitated sounds began to rise from her students, "none of you are in eminent strife from me. As I stated originally, what we say here as members of Gryffindor House, in this room, are all kept in strictest confidence." She gave the twins a piercing look. "I've found that I now instinctively cast an Imperturbable charm on my classroom door, thanks in no small part to your all-too-ingenuous Extendable Ears which seem to have been purchased by all of the third and fourth years. So even if your fellow Gryffindors had tried to listen in - or Hufflepuffs, or Ravenclaws, who doubtless are kicking themselves for not having thought of such a clever device first, they will find themselves bereft of information."

She shook out her robes and realigned her hat. "You four are dismissed. You'll find a parchment outside of my office door with spaces to sign up for individual counsel. Please don't squabble over it."

As their classmates tromped out of the classroom, George had his gaze fixed on Professor McGonagall and saw her give them what was surely a slight, but fond smile as the heavy door swung shut.

"Fred and George." Minerva turned and looked from one to the other. "A joke shop, is it?"

George nodded as Fred blurted out, "How did you know? Was it Dad?"

She shook her head primly.

"Mum," George sighed.

"Molly Weasley contacted me and begged that you not be expelled," Professor McGonagall said through pursed lips, "If only so she could, and I quote, punish you as only a mother can. You're lucky you two and Lee weren't put on instant probation. You know that you're not permitted off Hogwarts' grounds unless it's a Hogsmeade weekend. And you are certainly not permitted to be caught!"

They were trapped under her steely gaze.

"Not caught," Fred repeated dutifully.

"And for Merlin's sake, finish at Hogwarts." Professor McGonagall stood, an imposing figure, hands settled firmly on her hips, then her expression softened. "You're both incredibly talented wizards, despite your less than orthodox approach to your schooling. Though you might never admit it, the shadows of your older brothers may be more imposing than you'd care to think about, but you have your own paths to take. I trust you to do that, and I trust you to do it splendidly."

George was flabbergasted as a genuine feeling of pride overtook him. "Thank you," he said forcefully. "We won't disappoint you."

"Nor our adoring public!" Fred chimed in with enthusiasm. "There are Galleons to be made, and not enough time to make them." He swooped up from his desk and approached their head of house, who now looked dour. "Why didn't you put us on probation?"

"And deny Umbridge your charming presence in her class? Not on your life." Her eyes sparkled as George got up and followed Fred out of the room. "But I expect nothing but Outstandings out of both of you in Transfigurations. Highest marks. Don't you dare shame me in your N.E.W.T.s."

Fred winked at George as the door shut firmly behind them. "You know what I think sounds outstanding?"

"Going outside on this glorious day and selling some Headless Hats."

"Ah, how well you know me."

"Mr. Weasley?" George gestured forward with his arm.

"No, no, Mr. Weasley." Fred chuckled. "After you."

They strode down the hall side by side. Fred and George. Invincible.

The next several weeks were a flurry of activity.

And unfortunate accidents.

"Augh!" Kenneth vociferated as he entered their toilets. "What in Guinevere's Gloaming is that stench?"

"Stench?" George attempted, using one of Lee's *Witch of the Month* magazines to persuade the pungent, purple clouds of smoke out the window while Fred bellowed in a toilet stall.

"George! Here! Now!"

"You might want to use one of the toilets on a lower level. Perfecting our pyrotechnics. Learning curve, and all that." George continued to wave at the vapour and put on his best *'please don't ask me any more questions right now'* face. "We'll have it cleaned up momentarily."

"GEORGE!"

Kenneth scowled, eyebrows knit as he backed out of their bathroom. "Just make sure you do. Smells atrocious. Burning hair must be the worst-smelling thing known to wizardkind."

"Duly noted."

"GEORGE!!!"

The door shut.

"Oh, FUCK!"

"Lee! Lovely to see you," George said amicably from a nearby sink, goggles and a magical noseclip on his face.

"Bloody hell!" He waved his hand in front of his nose. "Are we ever going to get to use our own toilets again?"

"I think the more appropriate question is, would we want to?" Kenneth grumbled behind him.

Fred and George had learned a lot about enchanted fireworks, but modifying the smell involved in the surprisingly complicated timed-response *Incendio* was proving a bit tricky.

"They'll be genius in another day or two," Fred said defensively, ducking his head around the shower stall at the end of the room. "Considering your father was willing to back us up, it does seem a shame that you don't have the same faith in us."

Kenneth snorted. "Faith. In you." He stepped around Lee and walked over to a box of fireworks. "You're creative, I'll certainly give you that." He toed gingerly at the exterior of the container. "And astoundingly dedicated when it comes to your own pursuits—"

"Don't mess with those, they're still too volatile—"

"Hags' hounds." George shoved Lee out of the doorway and slammed the door shut. "Fred! Silencing charm! Now! FRED! SILENCING CHARM!!" He propelled Kenneth and himself into the closest stall, glaring at him. "Cover your ears, and next time, look, don't touch!"

The toilets were filled with the sound of loud explosions.

Once the ringing in their ears stopped, Kenneth turned to George and brushed some hair out of his eyes, his expression unreadable. "If I fail my N.E.W.T.s because of you and Fred, I swear to Merlin that I will find some way to kill you, and not get caught."

George nodded solemnly. "You're not going to fail."

"Sure," Kenneth said gloomily. "When I do, and can't get a job, maybe you'll let me work at your place."

"Kenneth, Kenneth," George said, all benevolence. "Just give us another couple of days."

"What's going on in there?" Lee yelled, pounding on the door.

"Nothing!" Fred and George shouted in tandem.

Kenneth sighed and let himself out of the stall.

"So." George lay on his back on the cold tile of the bathroom floor, his wand pointed at the ceiling where he made a sparkler write *Umbridge sucks eggs*.

"So," Fred replied from the stone window where he sat precariously, one leg outside and one leg inside.

"The time has come to take matters into our own hands."

"You sound like me."

"Of course I do."

Fred hopped down from the ledge to retrieve another sparkler. He lit it, thought for a moment, and waved it over in front of the mirrors. He bit down on his lip before scrawling some words backwards so they read *Umbridge can kiss my arse*.

"Wow." George was impressed. "Do you practise writing backwards when I'm not looking?"

"Nah." Fred shrugged as he slid to the floor. "Born with the talent, I think."

They sat in comfortable silence.

"Fred? George?" Lee's voice sounded in the doorframe.

"Come in," they said together.

Lee walked in and joined them, sinking to a sitting position. "What is this school coming to?" he moaned, only then noticing Fred's enchanted message. "Ooh. Nice one."

"Dunno," Fred said, contemplating his wand and tossing it from hand to hand. "But if anything were to make us care less, it would be what happened today."

"We've decided that we don't give a pixie's piss about Umbridge's decrees. Tomorrow Hogwarts gets to see the trial run of our weeks of slaving on the Whiz-Bangs," George continued. "Apologies about the toilets, but we needed the space."

Lee made a shooping motion. "Anything to make her miserable," he said venomously, glancing down at the back of his hand where the ghostly message 'I must not talk back' resided.

"Oh, the fun we'll have," Fred replied gleefully. "Don't look so glum, chum."

Lee looked from Fred to George, smiling. "I can't wait."

The next evening before they went to bed, Fred sat, legs sprawled out, still shaking his head. "I can't believe the orders!"

"I've got to hand it to you," Kenneth said appreciatively. "That was a splendid bit of work. Very creative."

"Splendid? It was bloody brilliant!" Lee said, walking over to George and clapping him on the shoulder. "You're the most talented blokes I know."

"And now the most in need of new supplies from the Alley," George grinned as he closed up the mostly-bare cupboard. "Guess there's no time like the Easter holidays for a trip, plus it has been a little while since we checked up on the future home of Weasleys' Wizard Wheezes."

"What, all of a week?" Lee snorted. "Well, I'm in, but this time I swear we are going to get to Piadora's Palace. Much more exciting than looking at the bare walls in your shop."

"Lee! You've insulted what is to be the culmination of our life's work! How could you?" Fred said, feigning hurt. "Your miniscule, uncreative mind is obviously not capable of visualising the splendour and majesty that will make up the Weasley enterprise."

"Weasley and Weasley," George corrected.

"You're off to a good start," Kenneth conceded. "George, I think if you pick up some Stinksap essence and add a few drops to your basic instant swamp recipe, you'll get the efficiency in oozing that was lacking last time."

George nodded. "Worth a try. Reckon that'll be our next phase in the Anti-Umbridge Attack."

"So when are we going?" Lee asked from his bed where he was changing into his usual bright red pyjamas.

"On our birthday, of course!" Fred said matter-of-factly, rolling up the parchment of orders and stowing it in his bedside table.

"Ah yes. The infamous twins' birthdays. So can we expect the usual barrage of chocolate, gift certificates to Zonkos, and 'I love you, my special boys, but if you pick on Ron anymore I'll come there myself to set you straight,' or Howlers this year?" Kenneth asked, smirking.

"Hard to say," George acknowledged, taking off his undershirt, balling it up and tossing it into their overflowing laundry basket. "I don't know that she'll ever get over the fact that we did something responsible." He climbed into his bed and got under the covers.

"Howlers it is, then," Kenneth said, blowing out the candle by his bed.

"Their Mum'd never do that," Lee said defensively.

"No, she wouldn't. The day after our birthday, though, all bets are off," Fred snickered before growing serious. "Anti-Howler charm! Why haven't we thought of that before?"

"Now that's something worth learning," Lee said, fumbling under his bed for a well-worn magazine. "Night, all." He pulled the curtains around his bed closed.

"Silencing charm!" George, Fred and Kenneth shouted in unison.

Towler shook his head. "Eighteen, is it?"

"Yes," Fred said, sighing happily. "Eighteen blissful years, beginning our second being of-age wizards."

"All we have to do is survive the next couple of months, then freedom, freedom, freedom," George said, smiling and putting his hands behind his head. "That's enough to warrant sweet dreams. G'night."

"Night," Fred and Kenneth said as George pulled his curtains shut.

VIII. April

It was nearly a month later when George and Fred made their way up the stairs to their dormitory from the Common Room, conferring about what Ginny had told them.

"Harry needs a diversion. Well. We have diversions, eh George?" Fred said meaningfully as he opened the door with a force that caused it to swing back and slam into the wall.

"Oh, sorry, Lee!" George noticed their best friend was lying with his back to them, curled up in a foetal position on his bed.

He didn't move, but there was a muffled snuffling sound in reply.

"You ill, mate?" Fred asked, taking more care in shutting the door than when he had opened it.

George sat down on the edge of Lee's bed. "Lee? Do we need to take you to Pomfrey?" Lee had only been sick a few times that George could remember, and he wasn't much of a nap-taker.

"S Princess. Died," Lee said heavily, running a sleeve under his nose.

"Your tarantula?" Fred said, incredulous. "You're crying over your spider?"

"Piss off!" Lee sniffed. "It was the gift my dad gave me when I got my Hogwarts letter. You know that he vanished not long after that. She was one of the last ties I had to him. So just bugger off. Leave me alone."

George looked over at Fred, who shrugged his shoulders while rolling his eyes. It wasn't that they hadn't lost pets. In fact, after a particularly unfortunate incident involving marmalade, a then-orange toad with one eye missing and one of Percy's best shirts, also orange, their mother had specifically forbidden the entry of any further animals into the house. Only Scabbers had ever managed to elude them, obstinately clever in his will to live. The greater issue was that he and Fred weren't sentimental; it simply wasn't built into their nature, and it wasn't fostered at home. Above all else, the need to be practical was drummed into each Weasley child.

Out of nowhere, the image of their dad at St. Mungo's, ghostly pale and putting up a brave front on the fact that he'd almost been killed leaped to George's mind. If their father had died, would George have suddenly instilled an irreplaceable value on the few Muggle artifacts their dad had modified for them, now clustered somewhere in the bottom of Fred's and his closet? He couldn't imagine it. George's flights of fancy had to do with pranks and expanding their not-even-opened-yet shop; on occasion they turned a bit dark in his gleeful desire to throttle Percy with his bare hands for turning his back on their family. But Lee had been their best friend for years. If possible, he was more loyal to them than he and Fred were to him.

"I'm really sorry, Lee," George said, awkwardly rubbing what he thought were Lee's calves.

"Thanks," Lee replied, his response muffled as he'd draped his robe-clad arm over his face. "I just wasn't expecting it, y'know? Tarantulas are supposed to live longer than that." He let out a resigned sigh. "Just leave me, okay? I need to do this on my own."

"Do what?" Fred asked skeptically, having moved over to his own bed and taken out the shop ledger that he kept stowed under his pillow.

"Bury her, of course, you bleeding heartless bastard."

Fred took the abuse in stride. "You know me so well. You're essentially a-

"I'm not a relative!" Lee shouted, the emotion ringing in his voice. "And today I'm glad of it."

"I'll go with you," George offered, continuing to run his hands over what he hoped were Lee's legs. "Forbidden Forest?"

Lee shuddered in reply.

"Right then," George went on. "I'll just get, um, conjure... no..."

"I don't want her to be in a cage," Lee moaned. "She's dead. Let's just put her in one of my shirts and take her to the Forest. I've been thinking about a marker, but I don't want to talk about it right now."

George felt Fred's look of disdain, and met it. "Fred, you coming?"

"No. I'll skip the dramatics, if you don't mind."

"Course not. Back in a bit."

Fred had the decency to go and ensconce himself at his bed while Lee went through his trunk and picked out a shirt he was ready to part with. George mindfully kept his distance, pretending to need an inordinate amount of time to stare at the Green Knights as they practised their feints.

"Aw, blimey. Can't you at least look before you go and do something as daft as trying a Truslow Turnover?" he scowled. The player in the poster glared back at him, hanging from his broom by his knees and wrestling with the Bludger that was sequestered in his chest.

"Don't mind him," Lee said blithely to the two-dimensional player, leaning over the glass container that had held Princess for almost seven years. "Just bitter, he is."

The Beater flew off, his gaze still shooting daggers as he went off to a far distant corner of the poster.

"Ready?"

George nodded, pulling his thin robe around him. "Should I rescue Fred? He's far better at speeches."

"S'alright." Lee shrugged, cradling his very dead, very hairy and very large tarantula. "You'll do."

"Thanks. I think," George said, his eyebrows furrowed as he stared at the massive spider in Lee's arms. "Best take the most discreet route, don't you think?"

Lee turned at the door, his long hair falling in napped curls to his chin, his face the description of morose. "Whatever you say, mate."

George nodded, again, feeling miserable for him. "I'll lead."

Lee attempted a smile, and gratefully followed George down the stone stairs. "You're the best. You and Fred. I know he doesn't mean to be like that," Lee continued. "Glad to have at least one of you around, though."

"Thanks, I think," George repeated. With stealth that came as second nature to him, George got them to Gregory's statue, passing only a couple of the castle ghosts on the stairwells. After using the tunnel to arrive in the Quidditch changing rooms, from there they crossed the grounds to the Forest. Once relatively hidden in the trees, he transfigured a stray branch into a small shovel and spent some time digging a trough while Lee wandered aimlessly through the woods a short distance away. Upon Lee's return, George attempted to be the Master of Ceremonies.

"Here we bury Princess, a loving tarantula, or at least loved by Lee. She did scare Finlayson's bat, before he left, anyway, but she was always tidy, and kept our room free of all midges and flies for as long as she lived."

There was a distinct sniff to George's right. He plunged on.

"Princess will be sorely missed. Her somewhat creepy but controlled noises she made when she climbed around her cage became familiar to us all, and our nights will be far too silent without her. But mostly her loss is lamented by Lee," George was fully in M.C. mode now, his hands clenched fervently at the middle of his chest, not even looking at the shallow grave over which he stood, "because she'd been his constant companion since he came to Hogwarts. He's almost eighteen now, and one gets a bit melancholy looking back on one's youth, and while we were never lucky enough to have our own pet, we feel for Lee now in his time of-"

"That's... that's enough." Lee, all gangly arms and elbows, briefly clasped an arm over George's shoulder. "Let's put her to rest."

"Too right," George agreed. Together they lowered the t-shirt with the black tarantula into the soil, then George used his transformed shovel to cover it up as quickly as possible.

Around a half hour later, the two sat near the lake in the balmy evening, disinclined to return to the castle.

"You and Fred didn't have a pet," Lee observed, flinging yet another stone into the inky waters.

"No," George said, his voice more caustic than he'd intended. "Even Percy's hand-me-down rat went to Ron. Apparently we weren't to be trusted with an animal. But Fred and I've had each other," he acknowledged. "And honestly, after the two litters of kittens, and at least a dozen goldfish, and the badger, and then the toad..."

"You two had a bloody badger?" Lee's brown eyes stared at him.

"Well. For a while. We didn't mean to harm any of them, really, it's just that we've always been overly curious, see, I mean, you know how it is." George's voice trailed off. "Okay. We're not meant for pets."

Lee narrowed his gaze.

"We never touched Princess. Honest. Never liked spiders."

A heavy breath came out of Lee's nostrils.

"Honestly. Did she ever look peaky to you?"

Lee stared at George, then out over the unruffled surface of the lake. "No," Lee admitted.

"Now that she's gone, I'll level with you. She always gave me the willies," George muttered.

"Gave you the willies?" Lee echoed. "And you and Fred've been my best mates for seven years? Why didn't you blokes tell me?"

"Dunno!" George exclaimed, scuttling back vigorously from the lakeshore on palms and feet like a crab. "Wasn't appropriate. Bloody hell."

Lee laughed, sorrow and understanding all rolled into one. He lay on his back, gazing at the pink-smeared sky. "Just don't you dare leave me, you and Fred. It's one thing to go through this together. Quite another doing it alone." He turned his head, his gaze accusatory.

"Wouldn't dare," George insisted, hand on his heart. "Then again, there's always Kenneth."

Lee sighed. "Kenneth. He means well, but he's not like you two. He's too... obligated."

"And we're too 'been gone far too long,'" George pointed out. "I swear that I can smell a most excellent steak and kidney pie even from here. Continue this after dinner?"

A chuckle manifested itself in the violet dusk. "Of course. I'm starving. Help a mate up, will you?"

George pushed himself up from the sand and walked the few steps to Lee, leaning over and offering both hands. "Our free meals are coming to a hasty end," he noted. "Best eat up while we can."

"Hear, hear!" Lee rejoined, grasping George's hands and levering himself up from the lakeside. "But George, there's no way you can smell what's coming from the castle."

"No. But it is spring term, and the fourth Saturday of the fourth month, right?"

Lee turned his head to stare at him as they strode toward the greenhouse where there was yet another hidden tunnel into Hogwarts. "I guess. Why?"

George's forehead wrinkled in surprise. "That means it's steak and kidney pie night."

"There's a pattern?"

"Of course! I thought everybody had figured it out. Spring term, fourth month. The first Monday is pot roast. The first Tuesday is beef stew. The first Wednesday is lasagne. The first Thursday is-

"Enough, enough!" Lee shook his head as they entered the greenhouse. "But that's far too many meals for there really to be a system to it. You're pulling that out of your arse."

"Just you wait," George promised. "It'll be steak and kidney pie or I'll eat my robes."

Lee snorted.

"What'd I tell you?" George said triumphantly through a mouthful of meat and pastry.

"You're impossible," Lee replied.

"Could you please not talk with your mouth full?" Hermione seethed from across the table.

"No. I may be brilliant, but I have horrible manners, Miss Granger," George said happily, smacking his lips.

"Augh!" Hermione flounced to the side, turning her attentions to Neville, who was so shocked he knocked over his pumpkin juice.

George tucked into his dinner, quite pleased.

"Tell me you think the portable swamp will work," Fred insisted.

George leaned against his brother's pillow, rolling a Knut through his fingers. It was Sunday evening, one of the few times when Lee actually studied, or at least spent strategic time in the Common Room when Angelina was most likely to be there. Fred and George had their room to themselves. Product Planning night.

"I think the portable swamp will work."

Fred chucked a glob of Popping Plasticene at him that George avoided with ease. The goo smacked the wall with a small exploding sound.

"You're having me on."

"No, I'm not. Kenneth was right. The Stinksap will give it the perfect oozing qualities we want."

Fred grinned. "'Perfect oozing qualities.'"

"Yes. Perfect oozing qualities. Reckon we should give it a second trial run tomorrow?"

"You read my mind."

"We must be twins." George scraped the Plasticene from the wall and threw it at Fred, who caught the fiery orange globule.

"Must be. So. We said fiveish. When do we rally the troops?"

"Troops?" George asked, incredulous. "I thought just the two of us were instigating this prank." He tossed the Knut to his right hand, rolling the coin more slowly over his non-dominant knuckles. "Lee, Merlin love him, asks too many questions about the ingredients. Kenneth's balmy with his Potions N.E.W.T.s. I say we skive off Herbology and at five to five, pour out the swamp."

Fred stuck out his jaw, grating his teeth over his upper lip. "Agreed." A focused attention entered his gaze. "This'd best be brilliant. I'm counting on you."

"Don't you always?" George teased.

"Yeah. Weasley and Weasley," Fred sighed happily, rolling the Plasticene into a small warm ball in his palms. "This will be the best prank ever."

"Too right."

The swamp *had* worked. Brilliantly. They'd filled the corridor with a not-too-pungent swamp in a most satisfying putrid green colour, and only a few first- and second-years had been scarred by the process. George and Fred had been near Gregory's statue, suppressing their laughter, caved in on each other's shoulders when they felt the wands.

"Weasley," a malicious voice said behind George's neck as Fred stiffened in turn.

"I can't believe we caught them!" a mousy sound echoed behind Fred, who instinctively juted his elbow back into whomever was standing too near. There was an "Oof!" as he gutted the form behind him, whirling around and about to draw out his wand until he saw they were surrounded.

"Not so fast," Draco Malfoy said, the words dripping sardonically from his tongue. "I think that Umbridge will be most delighted to see you two, trapped, for once, in your own net. Or lake."

"It's a swamp, you Slytherin bastard!" George swore, feeling the wand trace up his back to a rather sensitive point behind his ear.

"Shut up," Malfoy hissed, running the wand through George's hair.

George bristled, trying to gauge Fred's reaction to the Slytherins around him as Fred put up his hands in mock surrender.

"Gregory, go get Umbridge. She'll be ecstatic that we've caught these two lowlifes at their own game," Malfoy said viciously, dragging his wand uncomfortably down George's spine. "Well? Go to your awaiting public," he jeered, jabbing George in the shoulder. "You too." He motioned to Fred. "I don't know if you're Fred or George, and I don't care. Besides, it doesn't particularly matter, now does it?"

He laughed as Fred and George traipsed back to the swamp, trapped. George glanced over at Fred, whose face was as dark and bleak as George had ever seen. This was it. Loyalty to Jordan notwithstanding, there was nothing left to lose.

"Piss off," Fred snarled under his breath.

George nodded curtly.

The exchange with Umbridge was a blur. Fred took the lead, and George went along. Somehow he knew to raise his wand in tandem with Fred, and yelled "*Accio* brooms!" and their beloved Cleansweeps zoomed toward them. In the brief time it took for them to summon their brooms, this thought raced through George's mind:

From zero to infamy, in fifteen seconds.

They shot up from the Hogwarts floor, seeing on their level the poltergeist who had been the bane of their existence.

"Give her hell from us, Peeves," Fred said, saluting the spectre, who doffed his hat in return.

Applause roared in his ears as they shot out the front doors of the castle into a blazing sunset.

IX. May

"So," Fred said, munching his way through an egg salad and bacon sandwich.

"So," George replied, eating the same. It was the fifth sandwich for lunch in as many days. Neither Fred nor George had ever been much for culinary pursuits.

They chewed in silence for a while.

"I feel like I've really let a mate down, y'know?" George said suddenly, dropping the crusts on the plate in front of him.

They'd received an owl from Lee two hours after they left Hogwarts in their splashy fashion.

Fabulous exit. You two are genius. Now get your arses back here.

"He's a big boy, our Lee," Fred uttered through a mouthful of crisps, having tossed back the lot and tapping the bag with his hand. "He can fend for himself, and would probably be insulted that we're even discussing him like he's some helpless child."

"I never said that!" George said, banging his elbows on the table as he shoved his plate away from him. He jerked his head as yet another Howler banged intrusively against the window of their two room flat, repelled by their hastily constructed, but quite impervious charm.

"Didn't say you did," Fred coughed, grasping for a Butterbeer. After gargling, he dropped the bottle to the table. "But we've got to unblock Wheezes' fireplace. And when we do, we'll have to face the music," he said sardonically, huffing at the red papers plastered to their window.

"Mum doesn't sing," George reminded Fred, then shook his head. "But we've got customers. She's bound to show up someday."

"Someday. Like today. Or tomorrow," Fred snickered, grabbing for George's Butterbeer.

"Yes. Both," George lamented.

"George. We're in this together. Hullo. Please pay attention to me. I'm your best mate."

George stared at Fred over his intersecting knuckles. His best friend. His brother. His twin.

How could he ever have doubted?

Together they were indestructible. Fred and George. The paperwork was signed. They already had more orders than they could keep up with. What possible trauma could they suffer meeting their mother?

"Skiving Snackboxes," Fred said with authority. "And some more of those Popping Plasticenes. And for good measure, we need to stew up a few more Swamp-Boxes and, oh yes, the fireworks. You have a long night ahead of you, Mr. Weasley."

George couldn't help but smile. "You too, Mr. Weasley. There's a piss-load of orders, and if you're honestly going to be our bookkeeper, you've got to know how we stand with our Galleons. Those buggery swamps don't come cheap."

"Mr. Weasley!" Fred slapped his hand across his heart. "I can't believe that you would insult me like that. Of course I know every single ingredient that goes into the insta-swamps, and exactly how much we have at Gringott's, and how much we have made over the past..." his voice trailed off as he stared intently at his left wrist and his newly-purchased watch. "Over the past 72 hours." He winked at George. "Best get cracking."

George picked up a brown crust of bread and chewed on it.

"I think it's hilarious." Fred waved his wand and turned the sign from "Open" to "You Must Be Joking" and back again.

George nodded. "Pretty brilliant, even for you," he admitted, regarding the glowing letters.

"Well." Their mother's voice resounded behind them and they both jumped instinctively.

"Mum," they said together as the sign swayed on the glass. George and Fred stared at her. She met their gaze, grasping hold of the bag that she always used for her Thursday shopping already sporting bulgy lumps from her morning's outing.

"Aren't you going to give me a tour, then? Or do I have to beg for one?" she asked, her freckled hands poised on her hips. "You would think that as your mother you could at least show me around this dratted shop." A sly smile blossomed on her face. "Lovely advert in *Witches' Weekly*. Couldn't be prouder."

George stared as Fred opened the front door and bowed as their mother entered the store.

"Well, you should have finished school. But you continue to surprise even me by being responsible, at least in some aspects- Merlin!" she gasped, staring at the shelves, packed floor to ceiling with products. "You've made all of these in a week?"

"You might've noticed that we were pretty quiet during the hols," Fred reminded her. "We might have made some of these during Christmas and Easter."

"Not the fireworks, though," George said, scooting behind his mother and clasping her around the waist. "I reckon you heard from Ginny that we'd gone through a righteous lot of those back in April." He gave her a quick squeeze as she shook her head, her gaze going from one side of the shop and back again. "Had to start over from scratch with those. Quite popular!"

"Third best-selling product," Fred said enthusiastically. "Right behind the Extendable Ears and Fainting Fancies. Dunno why the Fancies are so popular."

"They're great gag gifts," George surmised. "Or maybe it's because I added that extra dollop of vanilla to them."

Molly turned in George's arms before stepping back, raising her hands to hold his hips. "Dollop of vanilla?" she echoed. "You're cooking?"

"Not much," Fred and George said together.

"Must say I've been getting a bit tired of egg salad and bacon," Fred admitted.

At that moment the bell above their door rang and a flock of adolescent boys hurtled themselves into the shop. The room was suddenly full of exclamations of "Wicked!" and "Didn't think it was true!" and "Noseblood Nougat! That'll get me out of class for sure." Fred led a small band away from their mother, eager to show off their plentiful products.

"Mum, our customers await," George said, pulling one of his mother's hands to his lips and making a dramatic smacking noise as he kissed it.

"Ewww," one of the youths said at the show of affection, but tilted his head and looked admiringly at George. "Wait. You're one of the owners," he said knowingly. "You're George Weasley."

"Nope! I'm Fred," George replied. "And this is my Mum, Molly."

Molly looked at George in consternation, glancing over at Fred who was demonstrating the qualities of their Headless Hats in a corner.

"Only joking," George said, grinning at his mother. "Of course it's me, George. When has Fred ever kissed your hand?"

"That's what I thought," she retorted with a disdainful sniff. "As if I don't know my own children." She gave George's hand a quick squeeze before turning to yell across the shop, "I expect to see you at Friday dinner." She wagged her finger as Fred looked wide-eyed at her, towering above the circle of boys. "And don't be late."

Fred stood at attention and saluted. "Friday dinner it is," he said jauntily. He plopped one of the hats on his head so that his grin and whole head vanished.

"Tomorrow night," Molly repeated to George as she walked out of the shop.

Thank Merlin, George thought as he made his way to Fred. No threatening hexes, and we'll have a home-cooked meal. A warm feeling of triumph coursed through him as he picked up some Canary Cremes and began juggling them. She's proud of us. Who'd've thought?

George was watching Fred shamelessly flirt with a young witch while her son waved his wand at the sample instant swamp when two owls swooped to the front door. George decided not to interrupt Fred's pursuits, so he strode to the door and let the birds in.

"Thanks Pig!" he said to the one, taking its roll of parchment. He curiously stroked the family owl which took off, zooming around the shop, twittering constantly. The Hogwarts owl followed the frenetic path of its younger counterpart with massive golden eyes, its head swiveling. George opened the scroll from Pigwidgeon, and was surprised to see that it was a note from Ginny, not Ron, as he had assumed.

"Bloody hell!" he exclaimed after reading the contents.

"What is it?" Fred asked, looking irritably at him.

"Ron actually helped Gryffindor win against Ravenclaw! Can you believe it?"

"No," Fred replied. He excused himself from the young mother and walked over to join George, who was scanning the second note.

"No, really." George waved the parchment and handed Fred the page with Ginny's tidy handwriting. "This other one's from Lee. Honest truth. Ron helped win a game!"

Fred's eyes darted back and forth as he quickly read the parchment. "I'll be a hag's hound," he said with approval. "Our ickle Ronniekins has, for the first time in his life, done something to warrant our respect."

"Never thought I'd see the day."

"Got a quill?"

George pulled his wand out of his back pocket and accio'ed a self-inking quill from beside the till, making it dance crazily in front of Fred, who snatched it out of the air.

"Need a writing surface. Turn around," Fred commanded.

George complied, feeling Fred smooth Ginny's parchment on his back before scratching out a hasty reply.

"Oi! Pig!" The owl responded immediately to Fred's summons, deciding to perch on George's head.

"This can't look good," George said. "And he hurts! Sodding claws and all in my tender head." He put the butt of his wand against his temple and insistently shoved the small owl over until it scooted onto the wood. He turned around and lowered his wand so Fred could tie the reply to the owl's leg.

"Poor George. Surely you know I've seen worse than you deciding to put your wand to your head and shoving a midget owl onto it." Fred snickered. "At least you had the sense to have the end pointed outward."

The bell above their door rang. Two wizards came in, most likely early adolescents given the red bumps on their faces.

"Be right with you!" George hollered. "After I kill my rude brother here and dispose of his body, that is."

"You wouldn't dare," Fred said. "Go on, write back to Lee. I'll send Pig back after I deal with the pubescent pimplyes."

"Thanks." George took the quill from Fred, who winked at him as he walked past the child still toying with the instant swamp, Lee's brief missive clutched in his hand. He made his way to the back of the shop through a door with the words **Here There Be Mayhem: Weasleys Only** above the entryway into their small kitchen-lab combination where he plunked down at a narrow bench.

Lee, Thanks for sending the news. The Ravenclaws must've been pissing themselves when Ron made that block. Can't believe that he actually did something right. You coping? Heard about the Niffles- you really are an honorary Weasley, and you're welcome here anytime. Business is booming. It's unreal. Any news from the Green Knights? We'll see you at the train station in just a few days, kidnap you, and shout you several rounds at the closest pub. I'm sure your Mum'll have no problems with that. We're such reliable young men now.

George paused to flick the quill end between his eyes, thinking.

Reckon Kenneth's wondering why you're laughing out loud. Tell him hi for us, and that we really owe him free gags for life. And that he's a raving lunatic for taking a N.E.W.T. in Potions. Best of luck to both of you. Must say I'm not terribly sorry to be missing the whole exam thing.

Best,

George (and Fred)

He rolled up the paper and tied it with a spare bit of twine before pushing himself away from the countertop. Once back in the shop he found the Hogwarts owl and attached his message and opened the door so it could return to the school. George lounged for a moment in the doorway, watching the owl wing away above the crowd. He really was glad that they weren't in school anymore. It was only hearing from Lee that reminded him that their former roommates would soon be sweating through exams. He and Fred were so caught up in keeping their products in stock that the days since the swamp incident had flown by like he'd never experienced before.

Hogwarts, shmogwarts, he thought, smiling at the passers-by, rubbing at the new sore spot on his scalp. *Education is most definitely overrated.*

X. June

"George! I got them!"

Fred practically ran from the door and slammed two large black boxes on the counter. He looked frighteningly pleased with himself.

George slid the ladder down the row of shelving so he could look down at the wood and his twin's grinning face.

"What're you so smug about?" George asked, backing down the steps until he could hop onto the floor. "And what are 'them'?"

He walked over to Fred, who was impatiently drumming his fingers on the top lid. George glanced down at the glittering gold script, stared at the name and emitted a low whistle.

"Fred. You shouldn't've."

"We deserve it."

George cocked his head. He knew Fred like he knew himself, and knew what was in the boxes. It was the colour of the items that was a mystery.

"Green?" George asked hopefully.

Fred rolled his eyes. "Of course. Now take the top one, open it, conjure a mirror, and put the bloody thing on."

George grabbed at the black container.

Moments later they stood side by side, admiring themselves in their new jackets.

"Brilliant," George sighed contentedly.

"Bloody brilliant," Fred corrected. He looked at his watch. "We're just in time. Got to go to the Burrow before Mum throws fits, then it's off to the train station to meet little Ronniekins and Ginny."

"And Lee," George reminded him. "We're treating him to the finest that the Alley has to offer. Anywhere he wants to go. He's a free man now."

Fred slapped George on the shoulder, letting his hand rest there for a moment. "We've really done well," he said to George's reflection in the mirror. "Pity we didn't have these for that sodding portrait Mum made us sit for. Must say how dashing we look in dragonskin. Well, me, anyway."

"You're so conceited!" George joked. "Unlike me, of course. I'm dashing no matter what I wear. Guess you'll have to get over that."

Fred made the mirror vanish, turned the shop sign around to "You Must Be Joking," and cast a locking spell.

"Youth before beauty," George said at their fireplace, gesticulating generously in front of him.

"If you think you're beautiful, you're dreaming," Fred said, shoving George out of the way. "And it's handsome, anyway. I'm the only good-looker in this pair." He wiggled his ears and tossed in some powder. "The Burrow," he yelled clearly.

"Arrogant git," George chuckled. "The Burrow."

"Oh, boys!" their mother greeted them as they crashed into each other from the Burrow fireplace. "Watch you don't tread ashes into the carpet. And you're late! We've got to leave now to greet Ron and Ginny and the members of the Order. Those coats!"

The sentences ran unbroken one after another like cars on the Hogwarts train.

"Coats?" George asked provocatively, rubbing soot from the vivid dragonskin.

"What coats?" Fred followed, innocently tugging up the zipper on his new jacket.

"Sorry we're late. Been incredibly busy." George tidied his hair.

"Thanks for the owl about Ron and Gin, though." Fred licked his index fingers and ran them across his eyebrows.

"We were especially glad to hear Ron's doing better, now that there's hope for him after that stupendous win against Ravenclaw," George said as they approached their mother.

Molly glared at the twins. "You could always reply to my letters, you know." The menace in her gaze transformed to melancholy. "It's been a rather difficult time for the rest of us while you've been sequestered in that shop of yours. While I wasn't all that fond of him, Sirius Black was Harry's godfather. And Remus isn't taking it well."

Fred gave George a knowing look as their mother sighed and turned away. George pursed his lips and mouthed, "I knew we were right."

During the Christmas break, when not having the joy of tormenting Ron, or not working on new products, they had monitored the actions of the Order members' comings and goings. They'd had their suspicions that somehow Lupin and Black were some sort of bizarre couple, and now it had been confirmed.

"Think Mum knows?" Fred replied soundlessly as they headed for the door.

"She doesn't have a clue," George silently confirmed with confidence.

"Stop chattering behind my back," their mother huffed, stopping suddenly in front of the door and whirling around. "My hearing is far better than you two think."

George shrugged at Fred as they followed her out of the door to their usual Apparating point in the grass outside of their house. Fred was shaking his head in resigned amusement as George willed the thought of Platform 9 3/4 into his mind.

George and Fred clutched at each other as they stumbled up the stairs to their flat.

"Lee. Shuch a good mate," Fred slurred.

"Couldn't agree more," George said, enthusiastically pounding Fred on the back.

Fred got his wand out and waved it toward the door. "Dunno why Rosmerta kicked us out of the pub," he said crossly. "And why's the door not open?" He whacked the wooden surface with his wand. "Open up!"

"Think we spelled it with a password," George reminded him. "Think it was three o'clock and pub had to close. Such a good bartender."

"Too right. Lee should have come over. Dunno why he went home."

"Undulate!" George shouted, his wand aimed at their door, which flew open. "Think his Mum said he had to," he mumbled to himself.

"Oi, is this place a mess," Fred said as he weaved toward the kitchen.

"Then you clean it!" George cheerfully yelled at his brother. "Your cleaning spells are better anyway."

"Too right they are."

George padded through their bedroom into the bathroom and got his bottle of Pepperup, poured a capful, and drank it. After a couple of years of modifying the recipe, George's version worked perfectly for Fred and him. Within a few seconds, the pleasant foggy haze had vanished, leaving him alert, but not jittery. He leaned on the sink for a moment, staring at his reflection. So much had happened over the year; it was odd that he didn't appear to look much different from the fall. He tilted his head, studying the underside of his chin where he had a new scar from a recent experiment for an exploding egg prototype.

"George! Don't keep all that Pepperup to yourself. Bring me a capful too." Fred's voice carried from the living room.

Righting his head, George continued to look at himself in the mirror. Why didn't he look more changed? And why had those couple of blokes spent so much time glancing over at him and Fred and Lee? Surely he wasn't that unattractive. The two intrigued wizards, who seemed to be in their early twenties, were certainly rather good-looking. With a shrug, he leaned back and poured the potion for Fred.

The shock of what he'd just thought ricocheted through him, and the lid fell out of his hand and into the sink with a clatter.

"George! Pepperup!"

"Keep your shirt on! I dropped the cap. Won't be a sec."

Grasping the lid, he willed all thoughts about being stared at by wizards or witches out of his mind. They were looking at Fred. Or Lee, who was as distinctive as he and Fred. George cringed when he

saw how shaggy his hair was, and pulled it back behind his ears. He gazed back at his brown eyes framed by bushy red eyebrows.

Celibacy isn't so bad, really, he decided. Especially *since there's nobody you're keen on*. He had Fred, and Lee, and there were the young witches who came by the shop, though Fred was far more apt to chat them up. George wanted to make sure that Wheezes did well and-

"Shirt's on, but not for much longer." Fred pouted in the doorway, swaying slightly. "Give me the bloody potion and quit staring at yourself."

George handed Fred the capful. "Can you believe we were signing autographs?" he asked, still incredulous that Hogwarts students of all houses save Slytherin had asked the two of them to sign things while they were milling around and meeting their parents. "We're celebrities. You and I are famous!"

"Somehow I doubt that a Colin Creevey photograph of us on our brooms above the swamp is ever going to make it into the *Daily Prophet*," Fred deadpanned after drinking the potion. "Ah. Much better." He licked his lips. "Add a dash of cinnamon to that and you could give them a run for their money."

"No, I s'pose leaving Hogwarts in a blaze of glory isn't really newsworthy," George agreed, following Fred to their room. They had the money for a place with two bedrooms, but after a lifetime of sharing a room, they knew each other's habits and patterns and decided not to change things, at least not yet. "Still," he went on, changing into his pyjamas, "don't tell me that you didn't get a bit of a rush having all those people asking for your autograph."

"Well, sure," Fred said, nodding as he got into bed. "Though I thought Ron's eyes were going to pop out of his head when that Vicky Frobisher asked us to sign her back above her tattoo."

George snickered. "Probably more witches' skin than he's ever seen in his life!"

"Shame, that."

There was a pause.

"Well, it's not as though I've done much better," George admitted. "Though perhaps this summer is the time to change that."

"That's for bloody sure." Fred propped himself up on his elbow. "How is it that we know everything about each other and I've managed to neglect you in these matters?"

"You've not gotten that far, you big poser."

There was another pause.

George sat up and stared at Fred, narrowing his eyes. "So you're saying that while I was up in our room, slaving away on those prototypes, you were off slaving away on some... some..."

"I said no such thing," Fred insisted. "But this is going to be the best summer ever. We don't have to worry about money. We have the shop we've been dreaming of, we're out of school, and Mum hasn't disowned us."

"There's nothing to disown."

"Exactly." Fred sighed a *Nox* into the room and all of the lights went out.

Several minutes of silence went by. George cradled the back of his head in his hands, staring at the ceiling.

"Fred?"

"Yes." The voice was fraternally reassuring.

"We've really made it, y'know?"

George heard a rustling of sheets and blankets and he knew Fred had turned over to face him.

"Yes, George. We've really made it. Thanks to you."

"And you, Mr. Weasley."

There was a sleepy chuckle.

"No, that's you, Mr. Weasley. And thank Merlin you've applied some of that potions knowledge of yours to cooking."

"I was sick and tired of egg salad and bacon," George said, unconsciously sticking out his tongue. "If I can improve the Fainting Fancies, the least I can do is improve on a grilled cheese sandwich."

"Don't forget the pot roast you made," Fred mumbled, turning sides in his bed.

"I just don't understand how we can be identical twins and you can hate carrots the way you do. They're crunchy, or slightly crunchy, and have this yummy taste."

"We can't possibly be related," Fred sighed. "Going to sleep now. Sweet dreams."

The vast expanse of Fred and George's Best Summer Ever lay before them. George snuggled into his pillow.

"G'night, Fred."

"G'night."

~~~end~~~

### ***Author's Notes, just a few***

My eternal gratitude to Jen for yet another extraordinary and fabulous beta; my thanks also to Pirate Queen for her beta at the Sugar Quill archive. This story is dedicated to all red heads and all who love the Twins Weasley as I do.

The sequel is "Together, Alone", found here on the website or at the skyehawke archive.

A further (adult) trajectory for this, post-"Together, Alone" is the "Cartography of Fire" series. If you're interested in it, please email me at thevina33 (at) gmail (dot) com and I'll lead you to it.

I also made a soundtrack of appropriate songs to go with the story- if you're interested, please email me and I'll burn you a copy, which of course features Right Said Fred, and Madness, and other fun stuff. Feedback and concrit are always welcome, but most of all, I hope you enjoyed this. The twins tend not to be written about as three-dimensional people, and I hope to undo that just a little bit with this bit of fanfic.