

## **Author's Notes, briefly**

You're about to read 6 different stories about Fred and George Weasley, and also Remus Lupin in the last four. There's no twincest in this, but the "Cartography" series of it is slash, so please consider yourself alerted. I began writing "Countdown" in February of 2004 because I love the Weasley twins and noticed there wasn't a lot of fanfic out there that took them seriously and not as cookie cutter versions of each other. It's set entirely within the canon of *Order of the Phoenix* and includes tiny snippets of actual dialogue from the book. Next is "Together, Alone," which is my trajectory for the twins post-OotP. After that we get into a complex, adult, post-War relationship that I'll let you discover and hopefully savor. This pdf version has all of the stories within this trajectory that include the twins; this series also fits in with most of my Remus/Sirius stories, many of which would have happened about 15 years prior to this, though a couple of the R/S stories have "current" elements in them which also weave into this overarching set of stories. This is a year's worth of writing, literally being done on top of each other, the exception being "Together, Alone," my third ever Harry Potter-universe story written independently in February of 2004. The others were all written between February and December of 2004.

I hope you enjoy them.

## **COUNTDOWN**

### **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 quit 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.

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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 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 toss 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. 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, when Angelina Johnson burst in, announcing her Gryffindor Quidditch Captainship 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 sixth year in Gryffindor 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 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 as the Weasleys. That and the fact that one of said older brothers played for the Kenmore Kestrals 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 purchase 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 Fred's and his 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 of 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 resembled bees without a queen and looked petrified.

"Nice first years," George cooed, patting a few on their ridiculously short heads, then he ducked into the compartment with Fred's and his trunks, and pulled them out and 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, then, with years of habit, bent over and found his robe, not even looking at the other contents held within its confines, trusting in his own packing.

"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, his white teeth shining against his dark face.

"Let's make it count, lads."

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

"Best pack this up, mates," Lee said, tossing the bottle in his trunk.

"Best," Fred and George replied in tandem.

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"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, 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 blonde 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 Madame 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.

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

"Slytherins," Lee said, collapsing onto his bed. "They're 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 all 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 clapping 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 announcer 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. *Irresistible, 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?"

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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 to 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 have 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 untensed 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.

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"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 confectionary 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 dark 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 "C" 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. "Fuck," 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.

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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. 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.

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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 arse 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 arse 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 Madame Pomfrey for whatever it took to make him feel like a regular person again.

"Not fucking 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 Madame Pomfrey's, as quickly as possible without being caught.

Not a problem.

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

"All praise to Madame 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's that?" 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 to the Gryffindor Tower. Immediately."

"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 part of a broken desk 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 fucking 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 bloody 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 laid 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 two months 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 announcer at the other matches?" Lee lamented.

"Oh, fucking hell," 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."

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"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, owl-like sound. Momentarily distracted, he did it again, just because he could.

"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 come up with and read some of the most horrifying hexes in 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 had 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 labor?"

"Boys! You are 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.

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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?" Jordan 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.

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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 did a dance of sorts, raising their arms and shimmying their hips.

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. And besides, 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 as 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 fabricated 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. "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 has been so pleased that the 6<sup>th</sup>-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 attentions torn away from Thalia's lips, which he had 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 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 had 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 had burrowed into his imagination and 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 deadpanned. "Don't make me come up and separate you and George junior."

"Fred!" Hermione's face blushed so deeply even her ears were scarlet. "Crude!" she gasped. "First years 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."

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"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."

"Fine."

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

*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 Professor 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 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," 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, then continued, "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 tapping 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. 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, weak, but alive. And Bill was there too. More of the family.

"Not exactly where we expected to be spending Christmas, eh?" Fred said as he and George decorated the main sitting area, shaking his head when 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. Risque for tinsel, at any rate.

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

After 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, much to his hilarity. 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 newly de-animated tinsel which he guided upward, draping it 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 did not 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 Jordan 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 business." She turned and pushed a damp tendrill 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, you're 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 as he muttered, "Give it a rest, you wanker," 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 not 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*'ed 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?"

"Alright, alright." 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 Jordan. 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 and 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 pulled it 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 on 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 is 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 think our decorations aren't 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."

"It is 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, quirking an eyebrow as they descended the stairs.

"I don't find that reassuring," Fred said, leaning forward to speak privately to George.

"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.

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## 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 Towler and an old 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, stepped on it, and tugged 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 some of 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 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 Towler 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!"

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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 snuck 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 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 his courderoys pocket. "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."

"Let me try. 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. ""Jordan!" 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 had tried to make a colony on the bottom shelf and cowered against 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 the 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 Mundugus?" 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 McGonagall was keeping them there purely to spite Umbridge since they were barely passing their courses.

"Gents!" Lee enthused, Towler 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 woolen 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 *Silencio* toward his curtains. He was back asleep in minutes.

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"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," Towler 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 brightly against his dark 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.

Towler 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, Announcer 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," Towler 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."

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

Not long after, the quartet of seventh-years was carrying a smoking cauldron and satchel of dry ingredients quietly down a staircase to a particular portrait not far from Professor Binn's 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, which led to the dungeons, right around the corner of the Slytherin common room, to be exact. If one knew to sing the first verse of the Slytherin House song of 1748, anyway. Which, of course, they did.

They made their way outside the common room. Towler 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 hall 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 inching 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, Towler 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, Towler!" George exclaimed.

"The above is in accordance with Educational Decree 'My 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.

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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," Towler 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 platter. "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."

"Messers 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!"

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 of 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.

Towler 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 around 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."

"Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes," Fred announced, sweeping his arm in an arc in front of them.

"HmMMM." George pondered the front of the imaginary shop, the words flashing brightly in his mind's eye. "Why wheezes? Sounds like a disease or something."

"Because it starts with 'w,' you daft git." 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 and 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.

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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." 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 ream on 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 the 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, though they remained there, and 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 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.

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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.

"Fushking 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. D'you have plans?" He waggled his eyebrows.

George turned and looked at himself in the mirror. No, he really didn't. He and Thalia, despite an attraction, apparently had no chemistry. *Life. Full of fucking 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 Weasley's Wizarding 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 never agreed 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 Towler 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 Towler might have some insights that weren't forthcoming to George.

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

"Deliquesce of nettle?" George squinted at the recipe.

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

The blonde 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. Towler 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 don't have the luxury of sitting around on my arse on a perfectly good Saturday. Coming with, or staying?"

"Where?" Towler 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 shrugged off his robe 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 this shop."

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

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

"Think about it. Jordan. 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." Towler 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, Towler. 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, his mind obviously still on whatever was carried at Piadora's Palace.

"Thought we'd start in Alleyway 8, near that shop Charlie's mentioned a couple of times."

"You up to it?" George asked, knowing 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 stare at the piece of parchment Towler'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.

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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 had 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 bound to go to Headquarters-"

"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, then handed 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.* This was no idle passing dream. Thanks to Harry, *No, not just Harry, you'll say a word for Cedric, you ungrateful sod,* they were really going to make Weasley's Wizarding 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 fucking 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 Alexander 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.

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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."

"Oh, bloody hell," Fred muttered.

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 one of bits 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 Towler 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!" Towler 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 confused in all my life," George gasped, laughing at the memory of their father, stunned into silence, staring open-mouthed at the twins, at the deed parchment, back at the twins, and even a sideways glance at Jordan. "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 Towler 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 Jordan."

"We'll do right by you," Fred vowed, having re-entered the room and toppling onto his bed. "One for pornography, and pornography for all!"

"Hear, hear!" Lee cheered.

"Oh Merlin." Towler pulled the curtains around his bed.

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## **VII. March**

"All of you shall stay behind- except you, Mr. Towler." 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."

Towler had already leapt up from his desk, slinging his bag over his shoulders, blonde hair falling in his eyes and panic glazing 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." McGonagall 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 McGonagall the names of the teams he had contacted in regards to being an announcer, while 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.

Katie Bell 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.

McGonagall 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 Katie brightened.

"Well," Alicia said timidly, "I haven't told anyone but Bell, 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 Madame 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," 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 Katie.

"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 kinds 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," 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.

McGonagall 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 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 McGonagall'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?" Katie asked querulously. "I didn't think that anyone in the Ministry really believed that you-know-who was back."

"You read Potter's article in the Quibbler," Alicia said incredulously. "I thought you'd believed him."

"I did," Katie 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 Johnson said, since you still follow her around like a lovesick puppy," Katie sneered.

"Oy! That's our mate you're insulting!" Fred threw into the fray of voices, silencing Katie 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!" McGonagall yelled. The noise was so loud and so authoritative that a partially transfigured cactus morphed back into its usual form of a wasteparchment bin.

The room fell eerily quiet.

"Messers Weasley, you will remain here momentarily. Johnson, Bell, Spinnet and Jordan, 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-ingenious 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 will find a parchment outside of my office door with spaces to sign up for individual counsel. Please don't squabble over it."

As Lee, Angelina, Alicia and Katie tromped out of the classroom, George had his gaze fixed on McGonagall and saw her give them what was surely a slight, but fond smile as the heavy door swung shut.

"Fred and George." McGonagall 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," 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 Jordan 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," George repeated dutifully.

"And for Merlin's sake, finish at Hogwarts." 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. "You should have 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.

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The next several weeks were a flurry of activity.

And unfortunate accidents.

"Augh!" Towler vociferated as he entered their toilets. "What in Guinevere's Gloaming is that stench?"

"Stench?" George attempted, using one of Jordan'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 smoke 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 wizard."

"Duly noted."

**"GEORGE!!!"**

The door shut.

"Oh. FUCK."

\*\*\*

"Jordan! 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?" Towler 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—"

"Bloody hell." 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, Towler."

"Sure," Kenneth said gloomily. "When I do, and can't get a job, maybe you'll let me work at your place."

"Towler, Towler," George said, all benevolence. "Just give us another couple of days."

"What the bloody hell is going on in there?" Jordan was pounding on the door and yelling.

"Nothing!" Fred and George shouted in tandem.

Kenneth sighed and let himself out of the stall.

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"So." George lay on his back on the cold tile of the toilets 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 then thought for a moment, waving it over in front of the mirrors. He bit down on his lip, then scrawled backwards so it 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.

Jordan 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 bit of 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 shooing 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."

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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," Towler said appreciatively. "That was a splendid bit of work. Very creative."

"Splendid? It was bloody brilliant!" Jordan 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 Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes."

"What, all of a week?" Jordan 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."

"Jordan! 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," Towler 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?" Jordan 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?" Towler 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," Towler said, blowing out the candle by his bed.

"Their Mum'd never do that," Jordan 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," Jordan 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 Towler said as George pulled his curtains shut.

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### **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, Jordan!" 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," Jordan said heavily, running a sleeve under his nose.

"Your tarantula?" Fred said, incredulous. "You're crying over your spider?"

"Piss off!" Jordan 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 leapt to George's mind. If their father had died, would he 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, Jordan," 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 must be--"

"I'm not a relative!" Jordan 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 Jordan'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 in their toilets 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, as 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," Jordan 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." Jordan 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 Jordan's arms. "Best take the most discreet route, don't you think?"

Jordan 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 Jordan wandered aimlessly through the woods a short distance away. Upon Jordan's return, George attempted to be the Master of Ceremonies.

"Here we bury Princess, a loving tarantula, or at least loved by Jordan. 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 Jordan," 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 Jordan 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," Jordan 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?" Jordan'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."

Jordan narrowed his gaze.

"We never touched Princess. Honest. Never liked spiders."

A heavy breath came out of Jordan'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?" Jordan 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."

Jordan laughed, sorrow and understanding all rolled into one. He lay on his back, gazing at the pink-smearred 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 Towler."

Jordan sighed. "Towler. 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 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!" Jordan 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 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!" Jordan 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 kidney pie or I'll eat my robes."

Jordan snorted.

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"What'd I tell you?" George said triumphantly through a mouth of kidney pie.

"You're impossible," Jordan 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.

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"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 Jordan 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. Towler 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.

"Jordan, Merlin love him, asks too many questions about the ingredients. Towler's balmy with his Potions N.E.W.T.s. I say we skive off Herbology and at five til 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."

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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 idiot!" 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.

"Goyle, 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.

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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.

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## **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 and dinner 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 had received an owl from Jordan five 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 Jordan," Fred uttered through a mouthful of crisps, having tossed the lot back and tapping the bag with his hand to further expedite their entry. "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 Wheeze's 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. 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.

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"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 of the door. George and Fred stared at her. She met their gaze, 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 clasp 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.

"Ewwww," 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 he 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?*

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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.

"Pig!" he greeted, as took both rolls 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 its 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 Jordan. 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 shop 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.

"Oy! Pig!" The owl responded immediately to Fred's summons, deciding to perch on George's head.

"This can't look good," George said. "And 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, reply to Jordan. I'll send the owl and deal with the pubescent pimplyies."

"Thanks." George took the quill from Fred, who winked at him as he walked past the child still toying with the instant swamp, Jordan'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.

*Jordan,*

*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 Nifflers- 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 Towler's wondering why you're laughing out loud now. 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.*

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**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 its off to the train station to meet little Ronniekins and Ginny."

"And Jordan," 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, and turned the shop sign around to "You Must Be Joking," then cast a locking spell.

"Floo or floo, George?"

"Floo, I think, Fred," George answered with a grin.

"Age 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."

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"Oh, boys!" their mother greeted them as they crashed into each other from the Burrow fireplace. "Watch that you don't track ashes. 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 when not working on new products, they had monitored the actions of the Order members' comings and goings. They had had their suspicion 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.

"Jordan. Shuch a good mate," Fred slurred.

"Couldn't agree more," George said, enthusiastically pounding Fred on the back.

Fred got out his wand and waved it toward the door. "Dunno why Rosemerta 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. Shuch a good bartender."

"Too right. Jordan 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.

"Oy, 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 pepper-up, 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 pepper-up 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! Pepper-up!"

"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 Jordan, 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 Jordan, 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."

~~~~~

My eternal gratitude to Jen for yet another extraordinary and fabulous beta. Dedicated to all red heads and all who love the Twins Weasley as I do.



While writing this, I got so inspired that I made a corresponding "soundtrack." The songs and artists are below! Let me know if you'd like a copy; I'm happy to burn it for anyone who read this story, one of my favorites that I've written.

- 1- Harry Potter theme
- 2- Our House- Madness
- 3- Salty Dog- Flogging Molly
- 4- Twelve- Seven Nations
- 5- Legal Tender- B52s
- 6- On the Loose- Saga
- 7- I See Red- Split Enz
- 8- On the Subway- 'lost in translation'
- 9- Baggy Trousers- Madness
- 10- Time- Jen's 'whatever'
- 11- Mirror in the Bathroom- English Beat
- 12- Horseshoes- Moxy Fruvous
- 13- In the Lowlands- Crowded House
- 14- I'm Going Straight to Hell- Drivin n Cryin
- 15- Tubthumping- Chumbawamba
- 16- Celebrity- Barenaked Ladies
- 17- I'm Too Sexy- Right Said Fred

## Together, Alone

August 22, 1996

They had been working in the joke shop when the attack hit. Two Death Eaters came blasting through the door, Tongue-Tying Toadstools and all sorts of clever merchandise flying from the shelves in a splintering hail of noise and shards of glass. The two unfortunate customers were dead in a moment, a sickening green haze dissipating from their still forms into the riotous cacophony of the shop.

Fred and George Weasley ran to each other's sides and stood, shaking with adrenaline and fear, wands pointed at the intruders. They were fast, but they had also been caught off guard, and seconds later they found their wands had been captured by the hooded figures who strode quickly toward them. George soundly punched the chest of the one who grabbed him around the neck, and the Death Eater gasped, but he was undeterred. Then the floor swirled from under him and with sudden wrenching recognition, George realized that the restraining baton that had been shoved into his gut and he had grasped ahold of by instinct, was a portkey.

While his mind frantically tried to wrap itself around what was happening, hard ground reassembled itself under his feet and he was thrown to an earthen floor. It was dark, but not pitch black, and George could hear the labored breathing of the Death Eater who had kicked him to the ground. Suddenly two more people appeared. *Fred*. He knew his presence even before he heard the thud as his twin was unceremoniously shoved toward him.

George scrambled toward his brother, anger and shock ricocheting through his scattered thoughts, still grabbing futilely for his absent wand.

"What the fuck?!" he heard Fred roar, rising to his knees before a hex hit him and he crashed back to the floor.

One of the two cloaked Death Eaters stood staring at them, oddly feral eyes shining in the dim light.

"We need some information," a feminine voice purred as George found Fred and held him as he writhed in pain, groaning repetitive obscenities. "You two know Hogwarts inside and out, and we need a discreet way into the castle." As she paused, there was a *crack!* and the other wizard disappeared. "This can be a brief process, or a long and painful one." Fred moaned while George tried to sit up straight, one arm still clutching to his twin.

"We won't tell you anything!" George spat, then found himself panting anxiously as he felt a wand tip pressed to his chest, the cat-like motions of the hooded wizard stunningly quick and deathly intimate.

"We will see about that," she replied, running the wand up his tense neck along his pulsing veins, under his chin, and then tucking it under her robe. She turned and left the small room, murmuring a spell before approaching the door, which she then closed deliberately behind her.

"Are you okay?" George asked his brother, who sat up gingerly.

"Bloody hell, no," Fred replied, rubbing his chest with a freckled hand. "Where are we? What do they think we know about Hogwarts that they can't find out on their own?"

George shook his head, retracing the path on his neck where the Death Eater's wand had travelled with his index finger. "The shop," he moaned.

"How can you think about the shop?" Fred stared at him. "There are two dead people in it right now," he continued, pulling his knees into his chest. "Dad'll be ballistic, getting Ministry people to find out who attacked us, finding out where we are; mum'll be..."

His voice trailed off.

George knew what Fred was thinking as surely as though the words had been spoken in his own head. It was an affirming, familiar sensation; comforting, even, if he gave it any notice, which ordinarily he

didn't. It was just part of being a twin, of being two parts of one whole, of heard words unspoken, of simply being in tandem. Always.

"Worried," George finished the sentence.

Fred threaded a hand through his ginger hair. "Crying at the kitchen table."

Silence hung heavy in the room, stifling like the locker room after a lost Quidditch match.

"Shit, I'm scared," George growled as he stood up and began pacing the room. "How long d'you think it'll take the Ministry to find us?"

Fred shrugged, his hands clutching at his knees under his robe. "Dunno. It was done in broad daylight- they weren't secretive about it at all. But we could be anywhere." He stared at George in the gloom, his blue eyes conveying both anger and rising panic. "I'm scared too," he said, a slight tremor in his voice. "No wands, no food, don't know where in bollocks we are..."

"I have a couple of chocolate frogs," George said helpfully. "In an inside pocket of my robe."

Fred grunted in appreciation as a packet was tossed to him. He chewed quietly as he got up and the twins explored the small confines of their prison.

"What time is it?" Fred asked, grasping at his bare wrist.

"Time to get the hell out of here," George muttered, looking at his watch. "Two forty-three," he said.

George tilted his head, looking anxiously at Fred. "She didn't say *when* she was coming back, did she?" His skin crawled at the memory of the Death Eater crouched in front of him, the wooden point of her wand journeying along his prominent jugular.

Fred shook his head and shoved his hands into his pants pockets. "I'm glad they took us both, " he said thoughtfully. "That way you can hide behind the door when she come back and I'll divert her, then you can- "

"Can what?" George's voice was incredulous. "No wands, no weapons. What?"

"You gave that other Death Eater a pretty wicked punch," Fred replied, a wan smile on his face. "I saw it before the bitch hexed me and I couldn't see anymore. Nice one."

George snickered, though his face was troubled. "Thanks." He walked over to his brother and stared intently at him, vaguely knowing the turmoil in Fred's mind as surely as the thoughts which roiled in his own. "But really. D'you have a plan?"

Fred's face was wan, the beginnings of a bruise visible on his cheekbone even in the dim light. He shrugged. "My plan is to hope that Dad gets to Bill before Percy finds out." Younger by mere minutes, Fred's temper flared more quickly than George's. After placing a reassuring hand on George's shoulder, Fred strode to the door and started beating on it. "We don't know anything, you fucking soul-sucking, Death-Eating idiots! We have family in the Ministry! You can go to hellaaarrrrmmgggh."

His tirade had been stopped as George clamped a hand roughly over his mouth.

"Shut up!" he hissed. "Your other plan was better."

Fred roughly shouldered his twin behind him and loosed himself, anger raging across his face as he turned around. "Surely you don't think they are actually listening."

George put his hands to his waist under his robe, threading his thumbs through the beltloops of his jeans, then stared at his shoes. "No," he replied, beaten. "I don't." He turned and walked to the other side of the room, then began inspecting every inch of wall.

Muttering more epithets, Fred muttered started on the other side of the room.

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It was eleven o'clock when the feline-seeming Death Eater came into the room. The twins were ready for her, Fred in the corner behind the door and George catty-corner in the other. They both sprang, but mere moments and three hastily incanted spells later, George was writhing on the floor and Fred was following her against his will, trapped in an immobilus spell.

"Fred!" George rasped, his mind reeling in agony from the crutacious curse which had been uttered his way seemingly with no feeling whatsoever, but the effect belied the intent behind the steely voice.

Then he was alone.

Not until five in the morning was his brother returned to him. The Death Eater walked in, Fred shuffling before her, almost bowed in half.

"What have you done to him?" George yelled in shock as Fred staggered into his arms.

"Ask him, why don't you?" she replied icily. "Perhaps you could encourage him to answer questions more readily or we'll have to use more aggressive measures."

The door shut securely as George sank under Fred's weight. "Fred." He shuffled back to a wall and eased them both to the ground. "Fred." His twin shook his head slightly.

"Thank Merlin," George babbled. "Say something! Anything." He leaned in, smoothing the unruly mess of red hair, then sucked in his breath as Fred opened his eyes. They were the color of red wine, save the pupils and a vague aura of blue where the pupils would be.

"Can't see, George," Fred murmured, as though he were miles away. "Sleep. Gotta sleep."

He twisted sideways, nestling his head at the crook of George's thighs, then fell soundly asleep.

George wanted to vomit, but found instead that he sat unspeaking with Fred's head in his lap, heaving with sobs and feeling for the first time in his life, utterly alone.

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This went on for the next seventy-two unbearable hours; the same cycle, the same times of kidnapping and relinquishing. George now regretted having his watch, as it unfeelingly reminded him of the weight of every second that passed. He tried throwing it against the wall after his third unsuccessful attempt to get the Death Eater to take him instead of Fred. Even through the haze of pain from a doubly-issued curse, he tried chewing on the glass of his timepiece, and once he came to himself an hour or so later, he succumbed to beating it against the earthen wall.

He had never felt more helpless in his life. Some not utterly foul food and water had been sent in with Fred so they wouldn't starve, but George was weak with fear and broken down with anguish over Fred's torture. Each time Fred returned he was worse, usually making vague mutterings about being turned inside out and then falling straight to sleep.

At other times, George woke up, hearing Fred mumbling in words long lost to him, phrases that he had thought neither of them could remember. It was not uncommon for twins, identical twins in particular, whether Wizards or Muggle, to create their own languages, and in that sense Fred and George were absolutely unremarkable. During the one thousand and eighty minutes when he was left alone, George wracked his brain to remember any of it. His blue eyes bored through the ceiling, as he

lay on his back, forcing himself through every day they had shared; every memory, good or bad, the aching years of the mundane splintered with joys indescribable, so that he could relay them to Fred when he was returned to him.

But only Fred seemed able to remember the language from their babyhood.

The fourth morning Fred was shoved through the door and he collapsed on the floor in a half-clad heap.

George rushed to retrieve him and as he did, he felt the wandtip of the Death Eater on his throat.

"Useless," she spoke, calmly. "We're through with him. But perhaps what they say about identical twins is untrue."

George raised his gaze, anger coursing through him, though he remained mute.

"We'll be back for you tonight."

As she shut the door fear sank into his stomach, but he forced his attentions to Fred. He looked only half-alive, and his skin was an alarming shade of grey, the freckles standing out like a red connect-the-dots game gone horribly wrong.

"Fred," George whispered, curling up behind him as he discovered that his brother's skin was covered in a sheen of cold sweat. "Fred. Fred. Answer me!" he demanded, shaking his shoulder.

"Whazzit?" Fred replied, distant. "S'cold, George. So cold." He turned his head slightly, and George saw his sightless eyes, and held his breath. "You're warm," Fred exhaled, releasing his body backward into George's embrace. "Thank you."

George lay on the ground, sheltering Fred, talking quietly and nonstop about Quidditch, about the shop, about the girl he knew Fred fancied and what she would look like in a really short skirt, all while his tears ran into Fred's shirt, occasionally wiping his nose on his own filthy robe. He stopped after some time, shaking his brother to make sure he was still alive. "Stay awake, you bastard. Don't you dare leave me." He shook until Fred moaned something incomprehensible, then, reassured, George allowed himself to close his eyes.

\*\*\*

A crashing boom and shockingly bright light shook George into instant consciousness. Out of instinct, he buried his head into Fred's neck, his arm sheltering him. The next few minutes were chaos; voices shouting, figures rushing around the prison, but to George's surprise, no curses were hurled at his adrenaline-shaken and jaw-clenched body. Instead, strong and warm hands found a hold on his shoulder, and he sensed a benevolent force behind him, not-unfriendly knees curving into his unsheltered back.

"Fred?"

George was unwilling to let loose of his twin, the part of him truer than his own shadow, and so he turned his head, his eyes mere slits against the too-bright glow from the doorway. "No, Bill, you idiot," he croaked, his throat raw from crying the night before. "I'm George." He turned back to Fred, and laid his own terribly heavy head on the ground. His arms shaking with relief, he rubbed his hand at Fred's ribs while mumbling, "Wake up. Rescued."

There was no response. George found his senses suddenly taut, and he used his whole body to wriggle against Fred. "No, Fred, no," he whispered, feeling those unusually warm hands on his spine again. "No."

Somewhere in the back of his mind where a shred of lucidity lingered, he heard the unmistakable sound of Ron throwing up.

\*\*\*

He stood, oddly calm, silently thanking Remus Lupin, of all people, for having offered him a quick swig of something frighteningly potent from a flask which he just happened to have hidden under a rather shabby overcoat.

George cleared his throat, then looking down at his notes, began to speak, his voice a deadened shade of melancholy.

"And I moved forward, because you must live  
Forward, which is away from whatever  
It was that you had, though you think when you have it  
That it will stay with you forever."

Molly Weasley choked, the sound carrying through the unexpected sticky heat on the greensward. George clamped his mouth shut and set his jaw, turning only briefly to nod brusquely at someone who had not been a close friend to them, someone who they hadn't even really known well at all. But she knew, more than anyone else in attendance, what terrors he faced, why he would no longer look into mirrors, why he was so distant.

She was almost an anti-Weasley; creamy, blemish-free ivory skin, dark hair. Clad head to toe in black, she looked every bit the Ravenclaw returning prefect that she would be in mere weeks. All was perfect, save her bloodshot eyes. She turned to George as he stepped down from the podium then she mounted the stairs in his place, looking out at the small assembly.

"To have a twin is to be different, and yet, never to doubt oneself," she began, "because there is always a part of you with whom you can confide, and not have to explain."

Padma Patil looked worriedly for a moment at George, who nodded, then turned his gaze out somewhere above the heads of the people who sat in uncomfortable white chairs.

"Perhaps even more than husband and wife, sibling relations can be exceptionally intimate; the most dire of enemies, also the closest of friends. But the relationship of twins goes beyond speech, beyond self."

She paused for a moment, her manicured nails grasping the wooden structure before her. "Fred Weasley shall be forever remembered, and George and all of the Weasley family will pay most dearly for his loss. Do not forget," she continued, eyes lit like coals newly extracted from a fire, "that the Dark Lord is both fickle and uncaring, and this funeral could be for George instead of Fred."

A hush smothered the few comments which had been murmured after her outburst.

Suddenly deflated, Padma sighed, "That's all I have to say. I'm so sorry, George." She clomped as elegantly as possible down the three stairs in high heels, then was grasped in a suffocating hug by her twin sister Pavarti.

George continued to stare at the sun, which resolutely continued to set, and he was sure it would rise again, despite his decided disinterest in anything at all.

\*\*\*

August 30, 2000

They both leaned back in their chairs, absurdly cold, unkempt, and unshod feet propped on the metal railing despite the unseasonable chill wind which breezed across the porch of Ron's Glasgow flat.

"To Fred," Ron toasted, raising his glass to George's.

"To Fred," George replied.

They tossed back the peaty single malt which they had every year, though it was much less handsomely purchased in Scotland than back in London, where George had been living until recently.

"Shit, but that's ruddy good scotch!" George breathed out, the fumes from his mouth almost visible in the keening air.

Ron nodded his head and took another puff off of his cigarette. "There are a few advantages, mate, to living in Scotland." He looked meaningfully at his brother, and offered him part of his fag.

George shook his head, but smiled softly.

"I'm sure," he replied, then watched Ron take a deep drag. "That's quite a habit you have going there, Ron."

Ron shrugged. "Until Hermione leaves me, I won't be giving it up. There are worse things, y'know..." He winked, but dropped the cigarette to the cement and stared at it. "I would grind that out, but," he looked meaningfully at his bare foot.

George rolled his eyes. "Kick it over the side."

Red hair glistened in the dark as Ron did as he was bidden, and within moments the air was clear again, fraught with memory.

"More?" Ron eyed the bottle of Oban.

George nodded ruefully.

"I'm drinking for two."

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The poem that George Weasley quotes is from W. S. Merwin's poem, "Green With Beasts," 1956, found in *The Norton Anthology of Modern Poetry*, © 1973.

The opening quotation comes from the poem "Brother Fire" by Louis MacNeice.

### **Cartography of Fire**

*O delicate walker, babbler, dialectician Fire,  
O enemy and image of ourselves*

"Well." George shut the drawer to the till and looked dazedly around the empty shop. "I suppose that's it for this holiday. Thanks again, Zap, for all your help. Couldn't have survived the Christmas rush without you."

Zapateous Zonko, youngest son of the former joke-shop owner, smiled in return. "No worries, Mr. Weasley," he replied, tossing a stray Canary Creme into a plastic bin. "It brings back memories, y'know?"

"I do," George said, crossing his arms and leaning on the counter. "But for the love of Merlin, don't ever call me Mr. Weasley again. That's Dad. Arthur. Min-is-try." He intoned every syllable, making his sole employee grin.

"Right. Sorry," Zap said, aiming his wand at a stand in the corner, bringing his hat to him, which he then nestled on his head. "George. Happy Christmas."

"Happy Christmas to you!" The redhead had retrieved a few stray ton-tongue toffees and began juggling the lot. "Be sure to go by Gringott's before you go home; there's a bit something extra for you. It being the holidays and all."

Zap smiled all the wider, showing a few crooked teeth. "You're the best, George! All happy returns to your family from me, okay?"

George let the four toffees drop to their nadir in his palm. "Of course," he replied. "Now go on. It's getting late."

The door opened, letting in a blast of cold air, then banged shut. George took a few moments to look around, evaluating the chaos. Shelves of skiving snackboxes and truth-telling taffies in complete disarray; some charmed miniature carpets circling the enchanted mirrors; and a half-imbibed cup of tea with legs making its way across the floor back to the kitchen. He sighed, thinking of what awaited him after he closed up shop.

Mum. Dad. Ginny with Neville, the Wonder Boy. Ron and Hermione. Percy. Charlie, if they were lucky. And the usual post-War eulogies for Bill and Fred. He fumbled at a cabinet where he had a "For Emergencies Only" bottle of Bitter Banshee, got it open, then began looking for an appropriate container for the somewhat ominously green beverage.

The bell hanging above the door chimed just as George had gotten comfortable in the one chair in the shop.

"Oh, bloody hell," he swore under his breath. Before shouting out, "We're closed!" he spared a few seconds to tilt his head and see who it was shopping this late on Christmas Eve. He blinked a few times, took another swig of his beverage and looked once again for good measure before disengaging himself from his chair.

"Professor Lupin!" he said, rounding the counter to shake hands with his former instructor. "What brings you here? Now?"

"Shopping," Remus Lupin replied, looking apologetic. "I know it's late, but I need something for my first cousin, once removed. Around ten, I believe."

"No," George replied. "It's only seven-thirty."

"No," Lupin answered, smiling. "Ten. That's her age. Ten."

"Ah."

"Are you closed?" Lupin appeared as though he were going to leave. "The sign said..."

"We're open. I mean, I'm still open. No worries."

Lupin nodded, and George was struck by how little the man had changed from his year of teaching at Hogwarts. Disheveled, a bit nervous for someone who knew so much about the Dark Arts, and gracious to a fault. He smiled back.

"I'll help you find something."

They spent a good thirty minutes going through the store, looking at rainbow gobstoppers that caused the eater's skin to change colour with the candy; conniving knuts with repelling charms on them, making them impossible to be picked up by anyone but their owner; silencing suckers that rendered the recipient speechless. At least for a little while.

"I'm sorry about Fred," Lupin said, during a pause.

George shrugged in acquiescence. "Makes two of us," he acknowledged. "But you know about loss."

Lupin gazed keenly at him, as though he expected him to continue.

"Okay. So it's as though I'm an amputee. Or missing a tooth that'll never grow in, and all I can do is rub the spot, which only reminds me that it's not there." George strode across the small shop to his abandoned cup of spirits, which he downed. "Thank you for your sentiments. I do appreciate them, really. But Fred wouldn't have wanted anyone to be mopey about him."

Professor Lupin glanced around the store again and settled on a fake diary in lavender which squirted ink on anyone who tried to open it. "I think she'll like this," he said, retrieving one and bringing it to the counter. "Her older brother has been giving her grief, apparently." He fumbled in a pocket for the correct payment. "I'm sorry to have kept you. I'm sure Molly is wondering where you are," he added.

"I'll go by my flat first," George admitted, taking the other man's coins and dropping them into the drawer. "What about you?" he asked suddenly, remembering a few Christmases back spent at 12 Grimmauld Place. He and Fred had pieced together the true nature of his relationship with Sirius Black during their seventh year, which had been astonishing to them at the time.

"Oh, I'll be at my house. Probably visit Harry, then walk around some of the monoliths at Kilmartin."

George looked at him, puzzled. "Kilmartin?"

"In Argyll. Near Oban. After... well, you know. After James and Lily were killed, I spent a few years working in a library in muggle Glasgow. I heard about these ancient stones, laid out across several kilometers." His expression took on a wistful glow, and George was surprised at the change it made. Though Remus was, no doubt, in his early forties, he had a pleasant face. Handsome, even. And a very soothing voice. George shook himself out of the odd line of thought to listen to what Lupin was saying with such feeling.

"The Muggles have their own beliefs about the Neolithic cultures that made them, and how, but I have my own theories. The old standing stones are soothing, somehow. They're surrounded by farms and grazing sheep. It's always very peaceful." Lupin looked down at his present and ran his thumbs over the wrapping, chuckling low in his throat. "I must be boring you. I'm sure that you wish you had closed up at least an hour ago."

"No, it's alright." George shocked himself as he said, "Would you like some company when you go to the..." He struggled for the word Lupin had used. "Monoliths? A bloke needs a break from the family, as you probably remember."

Lupin focused his gaze on him and raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"And it's not the same without Fred around. And Bill. Mum gets all weepy, and I never was any good at making her feel better." He walked around the counter to face Lupin. "You should come over. Everyone'd love to see you."

Lupin smiled broadly. "That would be marvellous! Thank you so much for the invitation. And I'd be more than pleased to share the Kilmartin stones with you." George watched as Lupin's gaze travelled down his body to his feet. "Though I wouldn't advise wearing such extraordinary footwear. It can be a bit muddy."

George looked down and grinned. "Oh. 'Course, I'm pretty skilled at most cleaning spells, but you're right. I'd hate to ruin these." He had on his favorite shoes, a pair of snakeskin cowboy boots in luminous grey. They were an extravagant memento for himself, purchased when he'd travelled to the States with Ron and the fledgling Quidditch team he was assistant coaching, the Green Knights of Glasgow.

He brought his gaze up to Lupin's gold-brown eyes curiously. Had the man actually been sizing him up? Surely not. He stuck out his hand to shake Lupin's. "Well, I'll see you tomorrow then, at the Burrow."

A surprisingly firm and warm grip held his for a moment. "You have really become quite a success," Lupin said, taking an admiring look around the shop. "Maybe you'll be kind enough to tell me the inspiration for all of this!"

George began to feel embarrassed. "It's just a joke shop." He extracted his hand and turned to go back behind the counter. "It's not like the Daily Prophet is going to do a story on me because I'm the co-creator of the Puking Pastille." He took his wand from the side of the till, pointed it at the bottom drawer and uttered a complex locking spell.

"Perhaps they should," Lupin said, picking up the present. "Laughter is an extraordinarily powerful tool in wizardry. Disgracefully misunderstood."

George leaned back against the wall, scratching under his chin with his wand. "Never thought about that," he said. "Then again, Fred and I were not exactly Hogwarts' most model students."

"Well," Lupin said, tucking the package under his arm, a mischievous glint in his eye, "Neither was I. See you tomorrow."

The bell clanged again as the door opened, then slammed closed. George shook his head slowly as he raised his wand toward the door, flipped the "Open" sign to "You Must Be Joking," and cast another locking spell.

"Wait'll Fred hears about this!" he muttered to himself, striding to the back kitchen. After murmuring a hasty *lumos*, he yelled *nox* into the shop, then scooped some floo powder and tossed it into the small fireplace.

"The Cleansweep."

\*\*\*

Moments later, he stumbled out of an even smaller fireplace into his flat. Fred, always in pursuit of the next play on words, had decided on the name for their connection to the floo network. Their living

quarters, for the few months when they had both lived there, were always in a shambles, much like their room at the Burrow. Their shared affections for their beloved brooms, rescued in such a blaze of glory, provided the inspiration for the naming of their new mum-and-siblings-free home.

George dusted some soot off of his jumper and headed to the fridge to get a butterbeer. After popping off the top and taking a couple of swallows, he went back to his room. On one wall was an obligatory poster of the Green Knights, who all waved cheerfully at him as he turned on the light. He absentmindedly waved back, focused on what to pack for the next few days. En route to his closet he walked into a large potted plant, which hissed at him and snaked some nasty-looking tendrils toward his trousers.

"Piss off!" he said, glaring at the fuchsia leaves, which retreated back toward the soil.

"Maybe if you watered it, it wouldn't be so cranky," came a voice from a portrait above his chest of drawers.

"Oh. And so when did you become the expert in herbology?" George retorted, turning on his heel to reply.

"I **was** the expert in herbology," Fred replied from the painting, then made a 'tsk-tsk'ing sound. "Or have you already forgotten? They say the memory is the first thing to go."

"Right. I've no doubt I'm getting more daft by the day," George said amicably.

His mother, though she grumbled about it for weeks, had gone ahead and had the twins sit for a proper wizard's portrait, even though they hadn't technically graduated from Hogwarts. She had had portraits done for all of their brothers before them, and ever since Fred had been killed, George remained indebted to his mother for her grudging generosity, as it meant that he could at least still talk to his brother. Out of respect, or the sheer oddity of the situation, the George in the portrait was almost never there. George was not sure where he went, and he hadn't felt it appropriate to ask Fred, him being dead and all.

"You'll never guess who came by the shop tonight," George said, crouching by the bed, looking underneath it for his trunk.

"Dunno. All of Hogsmeade?"

George snorted, pulled the trunk out and onto the bed, then threw back the lid. "That'd be rich, but no. Remus Lupin. D'you remember him?"

"Do I remember him?" Fred exclaimed. "I'm not the one with the piss-poor memory. Surely you don't think a chap would so easily forget finding out one of his former professors is bugging a bad-tempered, bad-smelling escapee from Azkaban?" He leaned against the inside of the frame, one foot perched on a chair, arms crossed on his chest.

"Well. When you put it that way..." George chuckled, waving his wand at a couple of collared shirts, three pair of corduroy slacks, and a dark evergreen set of dress robes which flew across the room and arranged themselves on the bottom of the trunk.

"You think he fancies you?" Fred leered from the portrait.

George whirled around. "Do I what?"

"Are you going deaf now, too?" Fred paced the few steps from one side of the frame to the other, juggling three coins and appearing very amused. "Seems to me that since that incident with that girl-oh, what was her name?"

"Thalia," George muttered, taking the few steps to go into the bathroom, evaluating what to take to his parents'.

"That's right. Thalia. Well, maybe girls just aren't your type!"

George stared at the bottle of Humperdinck's Hair Tonic, muddling through Fred's crass remark. It was true; neither of them had been especially focused on anything or anyone except their plans for the joke shop, though they had experienced their share of exploratory snogging and unspoken-of wanking. Then he and Fred had been captured, Fred tortured and killed, and George had found himself on the frontlines of the War. He'd been more comfortable around the male wizards, easily understandable coming from a family which was almost exclusively male. But that didn't explain away some of the intimacies he had shared during dark nights, and even bleaker days. Fred was probably right. He always had been, damn him. He deflected the comment.

"Who needs types when I have you?" George called from the sink, grabbing an enchanted razor, the shampoo, and reaching into the tub to grab some special bar of soap Ginny had sent him from her travels to France. She'd be pleased to see he was using it.

"Oh shove off," Fred retaliated as George re-entered the room. "I'm not yours, for bollock's sake. I was only kidding." He shrugged. "Tell Mum I say hi."

"I will not!" George thundered, his patience frayed. "She really misses you. And don't go visiting Bill like last year- you'll absolutely unhinge her."

Fred rolled his eyes. "Fine." He looked disapprovingly down from the canvas. "When did you go getting so bloody serious?"

George looked around the room for his neglected bottle, strode to it and finished off most of the contents. "M not," he protested. "But things are different. It's just not the same without you, y'know."

Fred looked at him from the portrait. "Really?" he asked. "You miss me?"

"Course, you idiot," George replied, then raised the dregs of the butterbeer to his twin.

"Up your bum!" they toasted in unison, then George set to packing in earnest, half-listening to Fred's suggestions as he tossed items haphazardly into the trunk.

A half-hour later George stood in front of the portrait, wearing a long wool coat and green and white striped scarf, the Green Knight's colours.

Fred grinned at him. "Happy Christmas. Go on." He winked at George. "I have plans."

George groaned and put his fingers in his ears. "Not listening. Not listening."

"Get out. Mum'll be frantic. See you in a few."

George saluted his twin and hauled the trunk to the fireplace. He threw in some floo power.

"The Burrow."

\*\*\*

Molly had been frantic, though her admonitions were followed by rousing greetings by his siblings, their spouses or significant others, and his father. A couple of hours later, George and his mother were the last ones up. He had poured himself a splash of firewhiskey and was about to leave the kitchen when he realized he hadn't told her about their potential guest. Though he had invited Lupin, he was over half-sure that he wouldn't show, but he had already invoked his mother's wrath enough for several lifetimes.

"Mum?"

"Yes, what is it?" She had opened the oven door, and wand in hand, guided three pies over to the counter to cool.

"Well, I invited someone over for Christmas dinner. Professor Lupin came by the shop, and I suggested he drop by. I doubt he'll even-"

"Oh, that would be splendid!" his mother interrupted. "I had just been thinking about him today. Must've conjured him. Used to do that all the time, you know," she prattled on as George stared at her, stunned. "I even made a chocolate pie, the one he commented on a few years back, you remember."

George sipped his firewhiskey, looking somewhat frightened at his mother. "No," he admitted. "I don't. With Dad's attack and all, bit of a rough Christmas, that one. "

"Bit of a..." she began, then clucked her tongue as she walked toward him, raising her arms to rest them on his shoulders. "It's late. You've had a long day. I'll see you in the morning."

He leaned down and kissed her on the cheek. "In the morning, then." George took her left hand from his shoulder and kissed the back of it, then turned and went up the stairs to his old room.

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The next day was chill with heavy fog, but inside the Weasley home, candles blazed and every corner was filled with light and good cheer. Around two o'clock, the front door was flung open. Ron towered in the doorway.

"Ron?" Hermione said, interrupting her conversation with George about the latest advances she'd made in Septenology, the obscure branch of studies which focused on spells that drew on the powerful magical qualities of the number seven. "What are you doing outside? You haven't been smoking, have you?"

"No, 'course not!" he replied, though he was waving his elbows just slightly to air out his jacket. "Just getting a breather. And you'll never guess who's here!"

He walked into the entryway and Remus Lupin followed behind him, wearing, to George's surprise, a full length brown leather coat.

"Happy Christmas!" Lupin said, smiling at the assembly. The next few minutes were chaos as he was greeted, hugged, offered both a brandy and a cup of tea, and finally invited to sit on the couch. Percy took his coat to hang it up and then Lupin was hit by a barrage of congratulations about his new reinstatement to the faculty at Hogwarts. The ghostly Professor Binns had suddenly realized that he was dead and had immediately retired, though only after asking Dumbledore for several decades of back pay. At least in the interim, Lupin had been hired to take his place as History of Magic Professor. They asked him how Harry was, and engaged in the usual catching-up until Molly called them to supper. Before Lupin took a seat next to George, Molly came around and embraced him. "I just knew you were coming," she said, beaming.

"Really?" he replied, raising an eyebrow, then sat down into his chair. "Mother's magic." He shook his head. "I should have known."

"Good thing it didn't always work on me and Fred!" George said, grinning at his mum. "Or she'd have gone completely grey by now."

"Who says I haven't?" she shot back. "Maybe I learned a thing or two from Tonks and I chose not to tell you."

"What do you mean?" Ron asked, looking flabbergasted.

"Let's eat this lovely meal that Molly has prepared," Arthur suggested, and they all dug in.

After they had made a sizeable dent in both the main courses and deserts, Lupin turned to George. "Care to go for that walk now? I could stand to stretch my legs."

"Fair enough," George replied as he scooted his chair back from the table. He took in both of their plates, earning a grateful smile from Lupin, who was then pulled back into a conversation with Hermione while Ron and Ginny fought over the last piece of chocolate pie.

"Mum," George said, placing the plates on the cluttered counter, "Lupin and I are going to go for a walk. You don't mind, do you?"

His mother turned to look at him. "Do I mind?" She raised her arm and placed the back of her hand to his forehead as though to check his temperature. "Are you ill? Did you drink a polyjuice potion? Who are you, really?" She stepped back and stared at him. "My George would never ask permission, especially at his age."

"Very funny," George said. "All right then. I'm going out. Don't ask me where, or how long I'll be gone, because I won't tell you."

"That's better," she said, smiling. "So where are you going?"

George shrugged as he left the kitchen. "None of your business. I'm an adult wizard, remember."

"George! You'd better be back by dark!" she warned, but he was already striding past the table and headed up the stairs for his coat.

The two went outside moments later, having made a couple of discreet good-byes in the midst of the clanging of dishes being cleaned, and Ron and Neville hunkering down to a game of chess.

"Since you've never been to this location before, it'd be best if we apparate together," Lupin suggested.

"That's fine," George replied. "We did this all the time during the War." He walked up to Lupin so they were chest to chest and placed his hands underneath the leather coat, firmly clasping the other man's hips in his hands. Lupin looked a bit surprised, then pleased.

"One should never underestimate a Weasley," he mused. George found his face near Lupin's hair and breathed in the lingering scent of the Burrow, but also underlying traces of pine, and something he couldn't place.

They Apparated.

George found himself standing in a pasture still clutching the other man. Nearby, shaggy white sheep with smears of turquoise paint on their backs looked up absently at them, then returned to grazing. Feeling a bit daring, he took an instant to lean his head down just a bit to sniff at Lupin's neck. That mysterious odour was still there, but he was still just as unable to identify what it was.

"Is everything all right?" Lupin asked, turning his head but not stepping out from George's hold. "I do seem to remember taking a bath this morning..."

George somewhat unsteadily let go of Lupin and shuffled back. "No, it's nothing like that," he found himself saying. "You smell good. Didn't mean to be sniffing you like some mangy- "

"It's all right," Lupin interrupted. "Flattering, really." He shoved his hands into his pockets, but smiled warmly at George, who again felt as though the older man's gaze, while kind, also had a predatory

appraisal behind it. A flicker of heat stirred in his groin as George realized that he rather enjoyed being eyed by Lupin. Laid bare, almost, underneath his particularly focused attentions.

"... which is why I brought us to this particular cairn," Lupin was saying.

*Bollocks!* George swore to himself. He'd been so discombobulated by his over-active imagination that now he'd missed out on something important. *Pixie's piss.*

"Mmmmm," he replied, striding away from Lupin to go to the other side of the mound of large stones. He tried to look insightfully at the rocks while attempting to dredge up something coherent from his soggy mind as a potential reply. He decided on the safest mode of action: silence. He looked down at the piles of quarried grey spheres. They weren't that impressive, he decided, then he looked out across the field. There he saw the taller ones, unmoving stony sentinels huddled in circles, or fallen over, half buried in the ground. He watched as Lupin ambled toward a cluster of grey slabs, then stopped in front of one. He took his naked hand out of his pocket and pressed it against the monolith, then undulated his fingers against it, as though caressing the rock. George was both fascinated and made uncomfortable by the display. What had he been thinking? The man had been a Defense Against the Dark Arts professor, which meant that he probably knew all sorts of horrifying and very, very, very old curses. Which might include the obtaining of a lot of blood from a young, red-haired man of pure wizarding stock. He began to get rather creeped out.

"George!" Lupin called out. "Would you come here for a minute?"

George came to his senses. This was Lupin, for goodness' sake. Determined to keep his ridiculous thoughts to a minimum, he strode purposefully toward the older man until he stood next to him.

"Hold out your hand," Lupin demanded. George complied, and Lupin's pale fingers took him by the wrist and placed his hand against the frigid stone. George stood, palm pressed to the rock as a cold breeze blew his hair into his face, wondering why he was in the middle of nowhere at dusk on Christmas Day, with Remus Lupin holding his hand to a large chunk of granite. He'd never hear the end of it from Fred. If he told him.

He watched Lupin make a furtive glance around the field, take out his wand, and point it at the slab. "*Clipian Sunne,*" he murmured. The rock grew warm. George felt as though he were bathed in sunlight. He turned to look at Lupin, who seemed to be glowing. What was going on? He felt waves of heat pulse through him, some of it pooling in a rather inappropriate location in his trousers, but he found that he didn't care. Lupin's eyes were shining at him, his face lit from within. He was beautiful, George decided. No, striking was more like it. But definitely attractive. All of those scars gave him a rather battle-worn, but compelling face. He had a sudden vision of himself lying naked, basking under the other man's hungry gaze -

- and pulled his hand from the stone. The warmth fled from him, and he waited for the excitement he had felt for Lupin to vanish with it. But it didn't.

"Um," George began, "what was that?"

Lupin pulled his hand off of the stone as well, and released George's wrist. "A *solaris* spell, though for it to work in this area you have to speak the words in Anglo-Saxon. It's very old," he continued, leaning into the monolith and looking thoughtfully at George.

"*Solaris*? Never heard of it," George fumbled, putting his now-cold hand back into his pants pocket.

"You wouldn't," Lupin replied. "Centuries ago, wizards all over what is now the Muggle United Kingdom tried to find a way to trap the heat and light from the sun during the dark months of winter. They created spells to do so, essentially summoning the sun, and enchanted many of the more impressive standing stones with them. Powerful, very specialised magic."

George tried to look as though he were giving Lupin's comments serious thought, though he was really feeling both gratitude and a twinge of loss as his blood flow returned to normal. He nonchalantly

hitched up his corduroys, readjusting pants and posture as his more private bits loosened back to their usual and less obtrusive manner.

"It doesn't have any other effects?" George asked, taking his left hand back out of his pocket to pull his too-long hair out of his eyes. Ugh. He needed a haircut.

"None that I am aware of, and I've been visiting this area for years. And some monoliths in Wales." Lupin looked at him intently. "Why? Did something trouble you?"

George bit the inside of his cheek, wondering how to answer. Was he troubled that he found himself rather unexpectedly attracted to the man? Or was it more that he was sure that he had been misreading Lupin since he had given him a once-over in the shop? Lacking Fred's virtuosic spontaneity, but sharing his forthrightness, George replied, "No. Just had a flash of something naughty."

Lupin's mouth twitched into an intrigued smile, and George placed his hand reassuringly on the soft leather of the other man's coat sleeve.

"Don't worry," he continued. "I'll spare you any details. They're bound to be nauseating."

George watched Lupin's gaze travel from his freckled hand down to his pedestrian footwear, and back up to his face. He was already reliving the ridiculousness of his offhand proposition when he heard, "Naughty, hmmm? Sounds like something I might want to hear about in detail."

"Maybe I'll spill after you've had a couple of Skullsplitters," he went on, "but I'm sure you're busy with teaching and all that."

George mentally beat himself about the head. *Bloody hell! 'Maybe I'll spill after...'*

Lupin looked amused, even paternal.

*Sod it.* He was an idiot. The Village Idiot. His father's fascination with all things Muggle had managed to seep into his brain, despite his and Fred's decided disinterest in the non-wizarding world. The odd phrase pulsed behind his eyes, threatening to give him a headache.

"Gryffindor plays Ravenclaw in a few weeks. Seeing as how you usually come back to watch Ginny play, would you consider staying to have dinner in my quarters afterwards?"

George teetered on his reply. How did Lupin know that he came back to watch one of Gryffindor's most lauded Seekers, once Quidditch and Hogwarts classes had resumed some semblance of normalcy after the War? Of course Ginny was a natural; it ran in the family.

"Love to," he said. And he meant it.

"Right then," Lupin said. "Skullsplitters it is. They were a favourite of mine when I was in Glasgow."

"It's all Ron's influence," George admitted. "He's nothing but a magnet for bad habits." He chuckled. "As opposed to me and my absolutely saintly past."

"I'll owl you," Lupin said smiling, putting a hand on George's shoulder and running it down his arm. "And please thank Molly for her exquisite meal. I had a wonderful time."

Dusk was settling darkly around them. George took his right hand to clasp the one on his forearm. "Will do. I'm glad you came by the shop." After a pause, he said, "Til the match, then."

"Til the match."

\*\*\*

George Apparated to the Burrow, made his pleasantries through the rest of the evening, and went to bed. There seemed to be some lingering heat from the trip to Kilmartin trapped in his groin, however; some unfortunate reawakening that needed tending to. Not that he wasn't practised at taking care of himself by now, seeing as how having sex with anybody just hadn't been a real priority of late. Or the last couple of years, for that matter.

An image of Lupin, his silver-streaked hair curling above his shoulders as George held him from behind, jumped friskily to mind. He wasn't sure that Lupin wouldn't be horrified that George was thinking about him that way, but George decided it was as good as any as far as fantasies went. He closed his eyes, cast a hasty and often-uttered silencing charm, and imagined Lupin's husky voice egging him on.

It wasn't long at all before he was sated.

\*\*\*

Rather than several weeks, it was only a few days before George saw Lupin again. He came by Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes ostensibly to buy a birthday gift for yet another young and distant relative.

"I didn't know you came from a large family, too," George said, wrapping a box of double-headed coins, vaguely noticing Zap's admonishments to some unsupervised children in a corner of the shop.

"I didn't. But my father did. I have several cousins, and they have children now. I'm an only child." He seemed about to say something, then censored himself.

"D'you want to go get a coffee or something?" George asked, wishing that his mouth wouldn't insist on acting independently of his brain. "If you have time, that is."

Lupin looked pleased. "Seeing as how the term hasn't started, and I've actually made some progress on my syllabi, I'd be happy to."

"I'll just go tell Zap I'm going out." He stopped by the coat rack to get his coat and scarf before entrusting the store to Zap for a bit, then the two men went out into Hogsmeade.

"Bloody cold, it is," George said, blowing on his hands. Ever since his mother had charmed mittens onto Fred and him when they were young, he had had an aversion to any kind of handcovering, even in the dead of winter.

"Indeed," Lupin affirmed, pulling his scarf up his neck. They walked through the cobbled streets in a companionable silence, occasionally ducking to avoid the few charmed post-Christmas sales flyers that tried to divebomb their heads. They stopped at Tripe and Toadstools, a place where George grabbed sandwiches on occasion. It was also known for its coffee, strong enough to singe the eyebrows. After ordering, they sat at a table away from the windows, and talked about Hogwarts, brooms (Lupin was stupendously knowledgeable about the newest Skyrunner models, to George's surprise), wizard history, and socializing. Or lack thereof.

"Well," Lupin said, finishing his corned beef on rye, "I suspect that you have a rather full social calendar, being who you are."

"Who I am?" George coughed over the crumbly remnants of his tuna salad. "I may be self-made, but I must admit, aside from seeing Lee Jordan on occasion, bless him, and Towler, our old roommate, I spend most of my time at the shop. Or tinkering with prototypes."

"Nice looking young man like yourself?" Lupin said incredulously. "I'd have imagined there would be

witches lined up at your door." He took a sip of coffee.

"No, nothing like that," George said hastily. "Besides, it's Bill and Charlie who have the looks. Well, Bill did, anyway. And Ginny, I suppose- but she's my sister. She could be Witch Beauty of the year and I wouldn't recognize it."

George studied Lupin's face, judging his reaction. He thought he saw a flicker of intrigue, and decided that since they were in a secluded part of the café and he was tired of second-guessing Lupin's intents, he would go ahead and be completely honest. They had both finished their sandwiches; if things turned horribly awkward they had no reason to linger.

"And, well, I'm not sure that it's women I'd want lined up at my door anyway."

He picked up his coffee cup, realized it was empty, and put it down on its saucer with a clatter.

"Really." Lupin stretched out the syllables and gave George a provocative look, raising one eyebrow. "So are there wizards lining up at your door, then?"

"Not last time I checked," George said, admiring the other's man's long fingers as they held his cup. "Like I said, there doesn't seem to be a rush of ladies or gents interested in red-haired joke shop owners." *What the hell*, he thought. *Go out with gusto*. "Bit of a shame, really!"

"Yes, it is," Lupin agreed.

George thought back to his fantasy from a few nights prior and threw any remaining caution to the wind. Lupin had only been his instructor for one year, after all, and that was several years ago. They were now both adults. "Are you interested," he paused, and settled on the man's more personal name, "Remus?"

"Most certainly."

There was an undercurrent of a growl in the reply that made George's pulse race and his cock respond with enthusiasm. *Merlin's beard*.

"The term doesn't start until next week," Lupin went on. "Would you care to meet me at the Selkie's Swim for drinks tomorrow? That is," he smiled salaciously, "if you don't already have plans."

*Even if I did, I'd chuck them*, George thought to himself. The tightness in his groin increased. *Down, you impossible bastard*.

"That'd be brilliant."

"Eight o'clock, then? And you know where it is?"

"Yeah. Been there once or twice with Ron and his team."

Lupin nodded. "I should be getting back to Hogwarts, but I'm very much looking forward to tomorrow."

They both rose from their chairs. George was half a head shorter than Lupin; aside from Ginny, and their mum, he was the shortest Weasley in the line. Lupin extended his arms to clasp George's hand in a warm and lingering hold.

"Me too." He watched as Lupin gracefully put on his overcoat, gathered his briefcase and the gift, and went out into the cold afternoon.

*This has got to be one of the oddest winter holidays on record*, George contemplated. But potentially very pleasant. Oh, who did he think he was kidding? He hadn't had a shag in a couple of years, much less even a good snog. And now he was being pursued by an older man, and a handsome one at that.

And experienced, he was sure.

George willed his thoughts away to those of a far more mundane nature. He had the afternoon to get through, after all, and Zap would ask questions if he spent it with a ridiculous grin on his face. He was good-natured, but not *that* good-natured. He put a few coins on the table, shrugged on his wool jacket, and left the café.

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"Oh! This is a new, all-time low," Fred scowled from the portrait the next evening. "Lupin? Drinks? Are you mad?"

George pointedly ignored him as he entered the bathroom and cast a sharpening charm on his razor.

"Desperate, more likely," Fred went on, his voice carrying through the room. "Surely Lee could have set you up with someone more... more..."

"More what, exactly?" George smirked into the mirror, shaving around the cleft in his chin.

"More appropriate, you bastard," came from the bedroom. "He's as old as Dad. And what's wrong with girls, anyway?" Fred continued.

George methodically removed the coppery stubble from his face, imagining Fred pacing within the confines of the frame. If his twin hadn't badgered him so much about who he was getting dressed up for, he wouldn't be dealing with these questions now. Even beyond the grave, however, he and Fred kept no secrets. Would that they could.

"He's not that old!" George yelled from the sink, dabbing a bit more shaving cream on his neck, scraping the razor down his freckled flesh. "And there's nothing wrong with girls. Just don't fancy them. Like that. Much."

There was a disgusted sound from the bedroom as George took a washcloth and ran it under the enchanted hot tap. He held the steaming cloth to his face, inhaling the moisture, until he heard another oddly familiar voice enter the fray, and he stepped out of the bathroom, puzzled.

The portrait-George and portrait-Fred were arguing. George stood staring at the two with a warped fascination, seeing his picture-self defending whatever honour he might have had to his brother, who would have none of it. They were so busy telling each other off that he was able to get dressed and ready to leave without interacting with them.

"I'm leaving, lads," he said pointedly, pausing in front of the large frame.

"Don't do anything I wouldn't do. Really," Fred said sourly. "Or if you do, don't do it here."

"C'mon," George pleaded, moving in to rest his hands on the chest of drawers. "We never fought for long - just call me the list of names you have in mind and be done with it. And anyway, aren't you working on the answer spells for the fortune-telling frogs?"

"Yes," Fred mumbled, looking sullen, but the more usual devious glint in his eyes had returned.

"Oy! George! Get back here!"

George started, then realized that Fred was talking to his portrait-self. "You haven't let me down on those permutations using Lotho's Laws of Least-Likelihood, have you?"

"No," the portrait-George replied, and George knew that things would soon be back to normal, or at least as normal as they ever were.

"Right. Well, don't wait up," he said to the painting.

Fred rolled his eyes, but made a shooin' motion. "Go on, have fun, but do remember if you're found spewing your guts up in some alley somewhere, I can't come rescue you."

George winced, and felt a brief wave of melancholy wash over him. "I'll remember that," he replied.

\*\*\*

He was early. George sat at the bar, having finished around a quarter of his pint when Lupin arrived. The other man looked around the pub, then his gaze settled on George. The silver in his hair caught the light as he nodded his head in acknowledgement, a smile quirking at the corner of his mouth.

George smiled as Lupin approached.

"George," Lupin said fondly as he eyed George's glass. "Already started, I see."

"I was early, for once," George explained as Lupin pulled off his coat and rested it in the crook of his arm.

"Would you care to sit at a booth?"

"Sure." George slid off of his stool. "What'd you like? I'll shout the first round," he went on, trying not to stare at the hollow of Lupin's neck, framed by the rich chocolate brown collar of his shirt.

"No. This was my idea, I'll get it," Lupin insisted.

"I'm the successful businessman, remember?" George challenged, placing his hand on Lupin's upper arm. *Suede!* his brain registered. *Lupin obviously hasn't been doing too badly for himself, either.*

"All right," Lupin acquiesced, turning to the bartender and murmuring his order. George dropped three sickles on the bar to pay for his lager. The older man inclined his head toward a quieter part of the pub and George began walking in that direction. He found himself gently steered through the throng, a very warm hand on his upper back.

*Quite nice feeling, that,* George thought to himself, then wavered uncertainly at the table where they stopped. *Blast.* He didn't want to be across the table from those comforting fingers, but he didn't want to shove in next to Lupin - Remus - like a sodding schoolgirl, either. He opted for distance, hoping that there would be a chance to rectify that later.

A waiter showed up moments later with a tray and two small tumblers. George had just downed a bit more of his Skullsplitter and found himself under the expectant gaze of the server. "That'll be four galleons," he said.

George's eyes widened as he looked at Lupin, who rewarded him with a conniving smile. George paid, and the waiter left.

"What's in these?" he asked as Lupin chuckled. "Gold?"

Despite thinking that Lupin had bought the most expensive beverages in the pub because George had offered to pay, he was glad that the other man had had the balls enough to do so. George had come to look forward to hearing Lupin speak, or make those pleasant rumbly noises in his throat. There was something in Lupin's voice, especially when he laughed, that had a slight rasp to it that hinted at an element of the untamed which contradicted his orderly appearance. After growing up in a household of people who were earnest to a fault, except, perhaps, for Fred, George was intrigued by the element of carelessness to Lupin. Far more complicated emotions seemed to harbour beneath his composure, complexities that George was sure he had been far too sidetracked to notice in school.

"It's Laphroaig. Single malt scotch. If this doesn't warm you up, well, you're past saving."

George took his glass and raised it to Lupin.

"To new discoveries. And being warm," he toasted.

"To new discoveries," Lupin echoed. "And men of fire."

George almost blushed, but willed the heat of the attention he received further down his body. It settled rather unnecessarily between his legs, where it was not needed, but what the hell. He was too old to blush.

"Wow, that's..."

"Potent. Far more so than firewhiskey." Lupin took another sip. "Muggles may be woefully underserved in many aspects of life, but in the distillation of spirits, I believe they have the upper hand."

"Dad, as you know, is fascinated," George said, returning to his beer.

From there the conversation meandered from Muggle artifacts to some of the headlines in the Daily Prophet to the travels they had made. Over another couple of rounds they discussed the high and low points of Nova Scotia, where they had both visited at different times, then delved off into a philosophical analysis of some of the magical elements of laughter.

George was flushed and his thoughts were flying in a hundred directions when a lull in the conversation blanketed him. Lupin raised his arm to attract their server's attention.

"Two waters, please," George heard, and he smiled in gratitude. That scotch had been wicked. He watched Lupin absently lick his lower lip then bite down on it, and in that instant, he decided it was time to go. He was astonishingly comfortable with Remus, and wanted to know what it would feel like to run his tongue across those inviting lips.

After the waters were presented they drank in silence, George studying Lupin's throat as he swallowed.

"Well," Lupin said, leaning back into the cushion of his seat. "It's not so late. Care for a coffee at my place? The Laphroaig is rather strong."

"No kidding," George smiled, then he thought about traipsing around Hogwarts and the possibility of running into McGonagall, or Dumbledore, and his desire waned. "Where are you..."

"No, not at my school quarters. I should have specified - I meant my house. We'll have to Apparate together." Lupin seemed as ready as George to get out of the stuffy pub and to a more isolated location. "Again," he added, smiling.

"I think I'll manage."

George only hoped that he didn't sound as eager as he felt. He was no naive virgin, but he was definitely out of practice in everything. But *oh god!* he had just been given an open invitation to press up close to Lupin again. 'To men of fire,' he had said. George stretched an arm across the table and grasped Lupin's hand. He brought the elegant fingers to his mouth and kissed the pad of each digit, one by one, then released him. Without taking his eyes off of George, Lupin traced his mouth with his newly-kissed fingers. When his pink tongue darted out to lick between two of his fingers, looking pointedly at George, he knew definitely that it was really, truly time to leave.

As he followed the older man and they made their way outside, George appraised Lupin's narrow hips, the way the fabric of his trousers seemed to cling to his slightly squarish backside, and... Oh, bloody

hell. He'd show him a man of fire all right.

They walked a discreet distance around the corner of the Selkie's Swim and Lupin opened his coat, looking down slightly at George with a decidedly hungry gaze. George stepped closer, this time placing his hands firmly on Lupin's arse, and found a hardness that mirrored his own pressed up high into his hip and abdomen. He tried not to grind into him there in the alley, instead taking a deep sniff of Lupin's neck, closed his eyes, and they Apparated.

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George paused only long enough to make sure that they were on solid ground before pulling his hands somewhat reluctantly from Lupin's arse and out of his coat to nestle them in his wavy hair. Lupin must have had similar intentions because he leaned his head down while drawing his hands up George's back to splay them on his neck, cradling his chin with his thumbs.

"May I?" Lupin asked, the words breathed onto George's open mouth.

George's reply was moaned into Lupin's lips as they kissed. He held onto Lupin's head, his own shameless mouth not even bothering to close, his tongue seeking the other man's, surprised at the fervour with which Lupin plundered him. He tasted the lingering flavour of scotch as he ran his tongue behind Lupin's teeth, then licked at his bottom lip as Lupin himself had done in the pub, and nipped it with his own teeth for good measure. His mouth seemed to be directly linked to his aching cock. He'd never been this turned on by kissing before, and could only imagine what anything else would do to him. Probably spontaneously combust in a blaze of satisfied glory. One could hope.

Lupin abandoned his mouth and George made a disappointed noise, rubbing his very hard erection into Lupin's thigh. Hot breath filled his ear, and a deft tongue traced his earlobe, then forayed further. George tried not to, but he laughed, and saw a cloud of vapor fill the cold air.

"Something funny?" Lupin murmured, biting his earlobe.

"No," George said, running his hands down Lupin's back to pull him closer by the hips. "Just a bit ticklish, but you feel aaaahhhmmmmmm."

He lost the capability for speech as Lupin breathed into his ear again and insinuated his hand down George's torso to his groin, where he caressed the hard bulge there.

"Mmmmm," Lupin said, breathing into his ear again. "The house is far warmer than out here on the grass. Inside?"

George turned Lupin's face to him, fascinated by his prominent cheekbones and slightly swollen lips. He pressed his mouth to the other man's again, and it opened for him. George savoured the feeling of his tongue sliding on Lupin's as Lupin continued to stroke him, then he leaned back, catching his breath.

"Yes. Let's."

George hated to step away from Lupin, and did so only grudgingly. When he turned to look at the house, he exclaimed in shock, "Bloody hell! That's lot of wards."

Lupin turned back to George and pressed his hands on George's hips. "You do know what I am, don't you?"

George, still panting slightly, was surprised to see a flicker of worry in the other man's eyes.

"Werewolf, right?"

Lupin nodded, obviously relieved.

"It was pretty much common knowledge after fifth year. It's not..." his voice trailed off and he glanced upward. *Cloudy. Figures.*

"No. Four days past new moon, if you're worried," Lupin said, moving in closer. He pulled George's wayward hair back from his forehead and with his tongue traced a hot, slick line from his forehead down the side of his face and agonizingly, back to his sensitive ear. "I don't bite," he said, and George felt as much as heard the wanton lust in the words.

"I just might," he replied.

\*\*\*

Lupin had a thing for music.

George practically attacked him once they were inside, the two men having dropped their coats in an untidy heap by the door. Lupin had escaped for a few precious minutes to place some small silver, circular disc thing in some mechanism that George was sure his dad would have given at least one finger to see in action. George didn't care, as moments later, after shucking off his unique boots and socks, he was straddling the man, on a rather plain - but very comfortable - bed.

Ambient music that he had never heard, obviously Muggle, permeated the room. He tried not to stare at his own ridiculous freckled fingers as he unbuttoned Lupin's luxurious shirt so he could remove it as quickly as possible. Hair, exquisite tawny curls were everywhere. All over Lupin's chest. Down his thin abdomen, unlike George's own more muscled one. Encircling the taut nipples on which George lavished an inordinate amount of attention, enjoying nothing so much as the open-mouthed panting and whimpers that Lupin made when he bit at them, feeling Lupin's nails in his scalp where his fingers had taken hold. Then he saw the tattoo. With his tongue he laved at the faded, unobtrusive grey set of numbers below Lupin's collarbone, then raised himself up so he could breathe the question into the older man's mouth.

"What're the numbers for?" he asked.

Hooded golden eyes looked at him, and George suddenly felt very young.

"Werewolf registry."

"Oh."

George sat back, running his fingers down Lupin's ribs to his waist, surreptitiously rocking against the other man.

"If you play with fire, you should expect to get burned," George warned through shreds of his pride. Was he too young? *Bollocks.* He might not be the most experienced wizard around, but he was determined to make this an evening that Lupin did not soon forget.

"And if you run with the wolves, you should expect to howl."

Lupin gave him a scorching gaze, and George felt any inadequacies vanish like smoke. He breathed on Lupin's prominent erection through the cloth, then, after being momentarily satisfied with the noises that he heard, George pulled the pants down.

*Shite. Shoes.*

George scooted backward off of the bed to untie Lupin's shoes. He dropped them to the floor, tugged off Lupin's unexpectedly colourful argyle socks, then removed his pants and boxers. He glanced up at

Lupin's thick cock. *Mine*, he thought as he got back up on the bed, kissing the inside of Lupin's thighs as he slowly made his way up his lithe form.

Suddenly George found himself pulled up Remus's body and turned on his back. Lupin, though thin, had unexpected speed and strength. George groaned with pleasure while Remus covered his chest and abdomen with biting kisses and those tantalysing fingers - oh god - fingers that should surely be housed in some guarded cell - undid his shirt and then pulled open his pants, delving greedily for his cock, which surged in response.

"Merlin!" George exclaimed as Remus made an appreciative noise, leaning down to lick the head.

*I am going to die, tormented into a pile of blissful ash*, George thought, moaning as Lupin's talented tongue circled his prick, teasing it. His petulant cock twitched, greedy for the attention.

"You're wearing far too many clothes," Remus murmured, edging back just far enough to snake his fingers under the elastic of George's boxers. George was only too happy to help rid himself of his jeans, drawers and shirt, finally lying naked on the bed.

"Even more vibrant than I imagined," Remus said, his voice husky. "A living fire."

"You've imagined this?" George gasped as Remus rubbed their cocks together.

"Since Kilmartin."

Astonished, and almost painfully aroused, George whispered, "Me too."

With arms strong from Quidditch, he pulled Lupin to him then rolled him over, pinning him down to pillage his neck, to lick across a lifetime of scars. George grinned inwardly when Lupin growled, the other man's fingers raking down his back as George introduced his lips to new hipbones, to strong and narrow thighs, to an erection that begged without words to be ravaged, which George did with no mercy and all kindness. He registered hearing adulations and curses as he suckled and teased, again inhaling that inexplicable scent which wafted up now from between Remus's thighs, until all at once he sensed the other man was going to come. George's hair was grasped painfully, and using muscles long out of use, he kept his lips at their task as Lupin thrust into his mouth. Salty, otherwise inexplicably bland fluid coated George's tongue, and pulsed down his throat. He swallowed a few times, then crawled up Lupin's chest to kiss him deeply.

Remus clutched at George's shoulders, the younger man trying unsuccessfully not to writhe against him. George moved away from Remus's mouth, darting out his tongue to catch a stray drop of sweat which meandered into the hollow of his neck. Inspired, George sucked hard on the spot, then drew back to blow gently on the reddening skin.

"You. Are. Dangerously. Erotic." Remus's long fingers lauded George's heated skin, reverently running up through the sweaty hair sticking to George's neck. "And shamefully unsatisfied." George felt his breath hitch as Remus lifted the hair behind his ear. "You aren't howling yet," Remus admonished, licking his earlobe and reaching out his arm for something on a side table.

"Not yet," George admitted, though the ache in his cock was about to push him to such an unlikely outburst.

"Yet."

George was turned over and his body deliciously ransacked. Remus took one of George's nipples into his mouth and ground his teeth lightly around it at the same time that he grasped George's cock in his hand.

"Ahhhhh! Merlin! Fuck!" Incapable of regular speech, George incanted incoherent exultations of bliss into the room. His cock was plunged into a drenching, hot mouth, his balls massaged in a pliant caress. Trying not to explode right then and there, he concentrated on a new sensation. A slickened

finger slid across his fevered skin toward his arse, which was his undoing. George had only just felt himself tenderly invaded when he felt the unmistakable shudder of release and tried to warn the other man, but all he could do was jut his hips upward in primal gratitude.

"Remus!" he pleaded, surging under the relentless attention until he sagged back onto the covers, spent and exhausted.

Remus took his time cleaning George with his tongue, then drew himself up to join George on the pillows.

"You're amazing," George exhaled, running his thumb over the other man's lips. "Don't know why you've looked at me twice, but you're bloody incredible."

"You don't?" Lupin asked, the words barely a murmur. "You, a cheery, handsome gent, and irrepressibly clever?"

George grunted. "Sounds like me in school." He gave Lupin a hard look. "You didn't fancy me in school, did you?"

Lupin chuckled, running a hand down George's back. "No. You and Fred were striking, but I certainly never thought of you like this," he leaned over and kissed George tenderly, "back then. I must admit to succumbing to your adult charms only very recently. You obviously don't realize how attractive you are."

George certainly didn't. Stocky, covered head to toe in freckles, well-endowed, as far as those things went, but otherwise just George: joke shop owner, occasional pick-up Quidditch player, dutiful son and brother, loyal friend. But attractive?

"Don't reckon so," he answered.

"Will you still come to the game next month?"

George shifted, beginning to feel awkward. This was obviously his clue to leave. "Definitely. Wouldn't miss watching Ginny for anything." He started to pull away from Lupin, but found he was held in the muscled arm.

"Where are you going?" Remus looked slightly insulted. "Do you have other plans for the evening?"

"Oh. No." George contentedly slid back down, placing his head on the furred chest, his left hand reaching up to trace the faded numbers below Remus's clavicle. "Thought you were being diplomatic about asking me to go."

"Only if you're uncomfortable about staying."

George turned his face toward Remus, evaluating the scars, the small creases around his eyes. "No. But I should warn you; Fred always said that I snored. You may be kicking yourself for asking me over when you haven't gotten a wink of sleep."

Remus smiled, his teeth gleaming in the dim room. "I'll take that risk."

"Brave man." George kissed the side of his neck where he had left a mark. "Don't say you weren't warned. Um, toilet?"

"There's a bathroom down the hall on the left," Remus said, running his fingers through George's mussed red hair.

George got up and rummaged through the chaotic pile of clothes on the floor until he found his boxers and pulled them on. There was another appreciative "hmmmm"ing sound from the bed.

"You really are a vision," Remus said, as George sensed the other man's gaze taking him in from head to foot. "For a Gryffindor, you look extraordinary in what is almost Slytherin green."

George looked at his cotton boxers, then affected a Quidditch calendar pin-up pose. "Well, there's no accounting for taste, but I was approached by Witch's Weekly a year ago. Seems as though I'd made it to the top 50 Most Eligible Bachelors under 30."

Remus quirked an eyebrow. "Really?"

"Yes," George leaned back down over the clothes to retrieve his shirt. Away from Remus's body heat, the house was quite cold. "Must try to find those poor deluded sods who voted for me. There must have been money involved."

He winked at Remus then went off to the toilet. Once there he realized he was missing an integral and dearly-needed item: a toothbrush. He walked back through the kitchen to retrieve his wand out of his coat, which was now inexplicably hanging up on a chair, then returned to the bathroom. It was fairly austere, but he was able to find a comb that looked fairly clean, and after a few seconds of thought, he aimed his wand. *Dentia lava*. He was brushing with gusto when Remus appeared in the doorway a few minutes later.

"Do you need a- Oh. That's quite. Colourful."

George rinsed his mouth and the temporarily transfigured toothbrush.

"May I see it?"

"Sure." He handed the toothbrush to Remus, who turned it around in his hand, smiling.

"G.K. Shouldn't it be G.W.? And this fascination with the colour green. I'm really beginning to wonder."

George shrugged, leaning across the sink. "Green Knights. The team Ron's the assistant coach of. I was always really good at Transfigurations; McGonagall has never forgiven me for leaving before taking my N.E.W.T. in it."

"I believe you." He placed the toothbrush into a small stand, then pulled George to him. "Come to bed. You must be freezing."

"Not any more," George sighed in satisfaction as they went back to Remus's bedroom.

\*\*\*

Fred was cross the next day when George didn't return to the Cleansweep until after lunchtime. "I don't understand!" he said for the dozenth time, pacing across the portrait.

"You don't have to," George replied, also for the dozenth time, catching a glimpse of the portrait-George giving him a hasty thumbs-up behind Fred's back.

"What if you get lovesick and don't realize it's the full moon and he tries to eat you because you're being an idiot?" Fred scowled from the near edge of the frame.

"I'm not stupid, you wanker," George retorted. "Merlin! First you go and die on me, and now you're prejudiced. Besides, if what you used to tell me about Angelina is true, Lupin gives far more spectacular blow jobs than you ever experienced."

The portrait-George looked very interested in this bit of information, but in a show of loyalty, followed Fred as he stomped out of the painting.

Fred returned a couple of days later, back to his normal self.

George and Lupin exchanged a few owled pieces of correspondence, but not of a particularly intimate nature, rather to George's disappointment. Lupin wrote that he was busy with his classes, and George had plenty to do at the joke shop. He did keep hoping that another of Lupin's second cousins, or cousins once removed, whatever they were, would have a birthday and need another gift, but to no avail. He and Zap had plenty to do restocking Weasleys' Wizarding Wheezes after the Christmas holidays, and he spent several late nights in the kitchen-cum-workshop where he worked on perfecting the fortune-telling frogs. He relived the night with Lupin several times, and found that he was really looking forward to seeing the older man again, and hearing his voice. Among other things.

Two days before the Gryffindor/Ravenclaw match, as George was getting ready for bed, he heard an owl tapping at his kitchen window. He let it in and went rummaging for some bits of leftover ham to assuage it, since it seemed that the poor bird was underfed. It had a small package attached to its leg, with the initials R.J.L. stamped in the left hand corner. George untied the twine from around the box, wondering what Remus had sent, trying not to get his hopes up about his upcoming trip to the school.

Inside the box was dark green tissue paper. He pushed it aside to see a pair of equally dark green silk boxers. A small, neatly folded piece of parchment was nestled in the middle. Very interesting, George thought, petting the back of his fingers against the decadent fabric before picking up the note.

*"Dear George,*

*Can't stop thinking about you. I've become obsessed with the colours red and green. Wanted to send you something that I hope you'll be wearing on Friday. At least for a little while.*

*Shamelessly,*

*Remus"*

George reread the four sentences several times until he noticed the owl nibbling at his sleeve.

"Oy! What is it? Oh. You're not supposed to go back without a reply."

George pondered what to write back, trying to will away an unfortunate burgeoning excitement moving in his rather bland y-fronts.

*Dear Remus,*

*Thank you for the boxers. I hope that you haven't cast some kind of Dark Arts spell on them, unless it involves shagging a red-haired wizard.*

*Hopeless,*

*George*

No. That was ridiculous.

*Dear Remus,*

*Will now commence wanking for two days straight. Consider the joke shop closed through the weekend.*

*Until Friday,*

*George*

No. Even more ridiculous.

"Fuck. How am I supposed to write back to that?" he asked the rhetorical question to the owl, which alternated preening behind its left wing and rather unsettlingly turning its head in an almost 360 degree circle, looking around the small kitchenette with its unblinking eyes.

"You're no help," he complained, going to the fridge and taking out a butterbeer. The owl only hooted and readdressed its attentions to the bits of ham.

*Dear Remus,*

*I've never received a gift like this before, and am incredibly flattered. To be perfectly honest, I've been thinking a lot about you too, and am hoping you'll want to fuck me so thoroughly that I'll be sore from here to Thursday.*

Whoops. Too brazen.

*Dear Remus,*

*I've never received a gift like this before, and am incredibly flattered. To be perfectly honest, I've been thinking about you as well, and am looking forward to seeing you again.*

*Reckon I'll be wearing green.*

*At least for a little while.*

*Equally shameless,*

*George*

He managed to write the message in a relatively legible scrawl, then attached it to the owl's leg.

"Back to Hogwarts with you," he said affectionately, scratching the owl behind its head. It hooted in pleasure, then looked at the window.

"Oh. Sorry." George hauled up the window to give the owl more room to spread its wings, and then it was gone. He sank down into a chair and stared at the present, wondering exactly how he was going to act like he had for the other Quidditch matches, as though he were really only there to see his sister play.

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Another wretchedly cold and overcast day. He tightened the red and gold scarf around his neck and tucked it into his dragonskin coat, a vestige of the past. But green. And very warm. George kicked off from the ground and flew to the Hogwarts Quidditch field, savouring the feeling of his old but reliable broom underneath him. He landed near the grounds with a good twenty minutes to spare before the match, taking in the ridiculously small figures of current students hurrying toward the stands. Surely he and Fred had never been so short.

He looked for the usual parade of professors in their uniform black robes, and found himself grinning when he saw one with longish silver-streaked hair walking toward the pitch. George decided to take his usual spot in the upper level of the Gryffindor section, near the faculty box. No use calling attention to himself. The current seventh-years were the last ones to remember Fred's and his memorable exit from Hogwarts under Umbridge's brief rule, but even four years was enough to have gone by that their exploits had become the stuff of myth and legend. Now he was practically invisible, recognised only by the remaining seventh-years and some faculty members who had survived the War.

He caught Lupin's eye only briefly, and saw the other man's gaze alight on his coat. He approved. George nodded almost imperceptibly then continued climbing the stairs to the last row.

The game, while short, was superbly played. Ravenclaw and Gryffindor were evenly matched, to a fault. The Gryffindors threw in some exotic manoeuvres, no doubt the influence of their current captain, but the Ravenclaw team flew and threw seamlessly, and George could only shake his head in admiration. They were absolutely flawless, obviously well practised. But Ginny managed to outshine their Seeker, and after a daring spin, was on the ground with the snitch in her hand. The Gryffindor and Hufflepuff stands roared. Though he knew better, George was still disappointed when he didn't hear Lee Jordan's voice announce the victory. Some things would never change.

He clomped down the stairs behind the students and ran out on the pitch to pick up Ginny and twirl her in a victory spin, an indignity she suffered only because it was him. She was practically his height now, but more slight.

"Excellent moves, Gin!"

"Thanks, George," she replied, her cheeks red from the cold. "Thanks for coming."

"Wouldn't miss it. You're brilliant."

She smiled, reached up her hand to pull at his cheek in a manner reminiscent of their Aunt Dromeda, then began unstrapping her vambraces. "You always say that."

"And I always mean it. Go on; your public awaits you."

George acknowledged a few greetings from her teammates as they made their way back to the castle.

"See you!" she called.

He made a theatrical bow in response, then walked toward two very familiar figures in official teaching robes.

"George," Lupin said, looking pleased.

"Weasley." The sneer in his voice was as prominent as it had ever been.

"Malfoy."

"You should come by before dinner," Draco continued on, as though George weren't there. "I know it's a little early, but I have been unexpectedly called away for the next few days. In fact, now would be best."

"Care to accompany us to the dungeons?" Lupin asked, only glancing briefly toward George's front after Draco turned away from him.

"Staying after the match?" Draco sounded intrigued. "Why would any Weasley find the need to spend time around Hogwarts professorial staff, especially our current History of Magic instructor?" He shook his head, tapping the front of his right shoulder with his wand. "History is boring. No offense, Lupin," Draco said hastily, keeping his gaze on George.

"None taken."

"But Potions under my tutelage is very different than it was in the past. Come on then." He smiled, and George was shocked as it appeared genuine. The last time he had paid any attention to Draco Malfoy, and granted, it was years ago, all he remembered was a smirk.

"Draco graciously took over the making of my Wolfsbane potion after Severus was killed," Lupin

explained as the trio walked back to Hogwarts.

"When is the full moon?" George asked, his inner calendar much more in tune to the shopping seasons than anything else.

"Two nights from now," Draco answered as they began up the front steps, his cape billowing behind him as threateningly as Snape's ever had. "I'm sure you remember the way," he said smugly, opening one of the large doors.

"Who could forget?" George answered, feeling Lupin's hand quickly run down his back.

"That's a beautiful coat, I forgot to mention," Draco drawled as they crossed the wide stone floor. "Slytherin green, of all colours. Dragonhide?"

"Correct, of course," George replied. "You have an eye for detail, Malfoy."

Draco spun on his heels. "I have an eye for beauty, Weasley," he said, then turned and strode down a corridor that led to the former Potions Master's laboratory and study area.

"Is he always this chatty?" George whispered over his shoulder to Lupin, who seemed amused.

"No." Lupin brushed an invisible speck from his robe, then adjusted his collar as they walked swiftly downstairs. "I think he fancies you."

"You rotten perv," George hissed. "He doesn't. I had to clean his bathroom, once."

"Weasley?" Draco's voice carried in the perfect acoustics of the enclosed stone. "Do you remember when you and Fred were sent to clean the prefect's bathroom?"

Lupin choked on a laugh.

"Only too well, Malfoy. Only too well."

They were soon in Severus Snape's former classroom, which reeked of putrid organic... something. But there was an oddly familiar scent as well.

"Oy! It smells like - " George began.

"Lupine," Draco cut him off. "Unsurprisingly, Severus kept copious notes, otherwise my potion would not be as effective as it is. But the element of crushed lupine seed was my addition." He looked rather proud as he crossed the room, pulling a green vial and stopper from a high shelf. With a delicate, practiced motion, he placed a thin glass tube in a cauldron and sucked on it, drawing up a disturbing sanguine fluid. He covered the top with his finger, moved the glass over the vial, then moved his finger. The potion flowed into the container, then Draco placed the stopper securely before handing it to Lupin.

"You'll let me know of any effects," Draco said, turning and making his way to an imposing mahogany desk covered in scrolls.

"Yes. And thank you," Lupin said, raising the vial.

"Cheers," Malfoy intoned without turning around. "Pleasure to see you too, Weasley." He sat down in a black leather high-backed chair, swinging his robes behind him as though he were a tow-headed raven. Bright grey eyes gazed piercingly at them. "You'll have visit again sometime."

"Right," George said, nodding, then followed Lupin toward the door. "I'll do that."

A few strides later the two men stood outside the solid oak.

"Wolfsbane?" George asked, glancing apprehensively at the golden liquid swirling in the glass.

"Makes the transformations less... memorable." Lupin attempted a smile.

"Ah." George didn't mind the serious turn to the conversation, but he was sure that he would prefer to discuss such topics - or any topics - back in Remus' private rooms. Wherever they were. "The glass is a lovely colour, though," he said, pressing Lupin against the stone and breathing into his ear. "Not as shiny as some other green items not visible to the naked eye, though," he went on, flicking his tongue against an earlobe haloed in silver-brown curls, feeling Lupin's hips rise to meet his.

Just then the noise of a pack of Slytherins travelled toward them. "I think we should get to my room as quickly as possible," Lupin said hotly, "and without facing the suspicious eyes of the students in Draco's house."

"There's a hidden passageway just behind that fountain," George exclaimed, then snapped his mouth shut, thunderstruck, having heard Lupin say the same words at the same time. "What did you say?"

"There's a hidden passageway just behind that fountain," Lupin replied, evaluating George as they both walked quickly around the corner.

George tapped the left eye of a winking serpent, water flowing out of its open mouth. "*Dissendium*," he said, and the snake shut its mouth, slithered into a semi-circle, and the outline of a low doorway appeared. George pushed it open and the two men ducked down to fit through, then hurriedly closed it again behind them. The corridor was pitch black, and cold. George felt a warm hand reach out and take him by the shoulder, pressing him against the rough stone. Lupin's hand slid down George's pants front, rubbing over his growing erection.

A hot tongue traced his lips and George moaned, opening his mouth, reaching into the inky silence to grasp the back of Lupin's head. George thrust his tongue into that warm, inviting mouth, his cock hardening as desire coursed through him. Deprived of his visual senses, George was overwhelmed by all others; the slight tang of cinnamon on Lupin's tongue; the sound of their heavy breathing when they broke apart; the delicious friction as Lupin swayed his hips slowly but forcefully, grinding his thick bulge into George's.

Lupin kissed him hungrily, their teeth clacking as his deft tongue swiped across George's, then Lupin bit his way down George's neck. "I'll lead," Lupin said after one last provocative hip thrust. "Not that I need to tell you where it goes. *Lumos*," he muttered, and suddenly George found himself blinking against the dim light.

Lupin's robe was half undone from George's greedy fingers, his lips very satisfyingly and thoroughly kissed, George decided, looking at him.

"You're a sight," George murmured, his heart racing.

"You too, my fiery one," Lupin replied, running the lit wand down the side of George's neck. "Whoops. Too much teeth."

He didn't look very sorry.

"Your rooms," George repeated, adjusting the waist of his trousers, "before I end up spoiling the gift you sent before you even see them on me."

Lupin made an appreciative grumbling sound in his throat. "I can't tell you how difficult it was to teach today. All I could think of was you, wanting to taste every freckle..." He ran a hand across the front of George's chest, making George's pulse race as Lupin flicked his finger over a hard nipple.

"Rooms?" George said weakly, surrendering to the wall, sure he really would come right there, hidden just a few stone inches away from scores of current Slytherins. Maybe that wasn't so bad.

"Indeed." With a last ravenous look, Lupin turned and began up the corridor. "How did you find out about this passageway?" he asked. "I know that you and Fred were legendary in your knowledge of Hogwarts."

"Legendary enough to get Fred killed," George sighed. "But we didn't figure it out completely on our own. There are four extraordinary gentlemen that I wish I could thank for having made a brilliant map, one Fred and I used to as many devious purposes as we could, until we handed it off to Harry."

"Mmmhmmm." Lupin's pace increased, and George wondered if he had somehow insulted the other man.

"Ah. The portrait." Lupin pushed the oval painting outward, and stepped into the silent first-floor hallway. "My chamber is just down the way, near my classroom."

George picked up the conversation, trying not to dwell too much on the fact that he was, in all likelihood, about to have sex for the first time in awhile. Too long, for certain. "The blokes who made the map called themselves Moony, Padfoot, Wormtail and Prongs. Masters, they were. Owe them heaps."

Lupin looked over at him, clasping the bottle of Wolfsbane to his chest. "I know a little something about them," he said, then stopped in front of a wooden door with a bronze plaque in the middle which read

*Remus J. Lupin*  
*Professor, History of Magic*

He raised his wand at the lock and said something in a language George didn't recognise before sliding his wand up his sleeve, then opened the door.

The room was cozy, if a bit under-decorated, but George didn't take a lot of time to analyze the surroundings. Lupin had let George walk in, then followed, shutting and locking the door behind them. George glanced around and saw shelves hopelessly crammed with books of all colours and widths, precarious stacks of even more texts that appeared to be on the verge of toppling over, and a wide wooden bed with an ornately carved headboard.

"Welcome to the room of Remus J. Lupin," George heard, tilting his head to see Lupin carefully place the bottle of Wolfsbane in the middle of an otherwise scroll-littered desk. "Hopeful debaucher of exquisitely-formed men named George Weasley, and known by certain individuals in his school days as Moony due to his unfortunate condition."

George let the words sink in as Lupin came around and stood in front of him, unzipping his coat and helping George out of it. Once divested of that layer, George watched Lupin spread his long fingers on George's chest, the older man rubbing his thumbs across both sensitive nipples. George's whole body throbbed under Lupin's searing gaze, but he felt he owed Remus at least one coherent sentence before his clothes were ripped off and he was ravaged by Lupin. He hoped.

"So not only are you good company, handsome, an unbelievable kisser, and sexy as hell... "

"Do, go on," Lupin purred, pulling George's tight navy shirt over his head. George couldn't stop the torrent of words, though his hands were busy unfastening Lupin's robe before clumsily unbuttoning the oxford underneath.

"You made that map! You've been one of my heroes since my first year at Hogwarts. Y'know Fred and I spent ages in the library trying to see how old the chaps were who made it."

"Hmmm. Terribly old. Ancient," Lupin murmured into George's ear as he pressed his chest against him, his soft layer of hair rubbing against George's more sparse red curls. "But I'm still going to fuck you, after you're so hard and wanting that you'll be begging for me, older man or no."

"God. Fuck. Yes," was all George could say in response. "Want you. In me. Saying my name in that voice, like you're... Oh, shite. Sorry."

Two things had happened at once to stop his babbling. First, George's stomach made a huge growling noise. At the same time, Lupin had gotten George to step out of his cords and there, on the front of the silk boxers, was a rather large wet spot.

"Remus. Bollocks." George reflexively adjusted the elastic, which only added to his embarrassment as it allowed the head of his cock to pop into view.

Remus made a decidedly pleased noise, his eyes raking over George, who stood in the middle of the room clad solely in the bit of silk.

"You have no idea how gratifying it is to know that I have that effect on you," Lupin said, his voice husky. He offered his hand. "Now. Thank you for modeling for me, but I want you to come to bed."

George didn't need to be invited twice. Away went the boxers. He pulled down the other man's underthings, then took his time making sure that Remus' cock and his mouth were very satisfyingly re-acquainted. The two were getting on splendidly, George feeling his own member twitch in empathy with Remus' noises of pleasure and occasional, "George. That's so good," until George felt a gentle pull on his hair. He looked up.

"I don't want to come yet. Not until I'm holding you, so deep inside you, your cock in my hand..." Lupin went on in some detail as George practically flung himself up the bed. Remus's ability to talk dirty was surprising, and something George had never experienced prior to his other evening at Remus's house. It was an incredible turn-on, not that he needed it.

"Turn around. You can put your hands on the headboard," Lupin commanded softly. George didn't mind, especially since after he gave the command, Remus took the opportunity to slide down and away from George, but only after taking his red-furred balls in his mouth, nuzzling them with his tongue.

George had just formed the gasp to accompany such ministrations when Remus was gone. Rising to his knees, he grasped at the oak of the bed, and looked down at his cock. "Thank Merlin it doesn't have freckles too," he thought, idly shifting his weight so it dipped slightly from left to right, kind of like a Muggle artifact that his dad had been taken with for a good few weeks. *Metrophone? No, that wasn't it...*

George instinctively spread his legs when he felt fingers caressing the sensitive skin behind his cock, a loving nip on his right cheek, and then -

"Guhn," George sighed as he felt himself probed by Remus's perfect tongue. His sensitive entrance was flickered around, tentatively entered, then enthusiastically plundered.

"Remus," he whined, wanting more. Needing more. "S'brilliant. But. You. Want you." He panted the words even as he heard Remus utter a soft spell and a small bottle flew behind him. There were a few moments of breathing while he heard Remus coat himself, then... "Fuck. Yes. Ow, hell! Merlin, it's been... don't you. Dare. Pull. Out."

Just as Remus had threatened - or promised, it was all fuzzy in George's mind, which had shut down rather of its own accord - George was thickly and wrenchingly filled, Remus leaning over him and growling, biting, thrusting; showering words of adulation like rain on thirsty earth.

"George. Love fucking you. So tight. So hot. Arse. Perfect. Should be illegal."

Once Remus took his cock in his oiled hand, pumping in rhythm with his thrusts, George knew he wouldn't last for long. His cock pistoned against the strong fingers several times and then he felt it, the telltale tightening in his sacs, the heartstop second before falling.

George surged over Remus, back arched forward, head down, mouth wide open as he desperately breathed, otherwise silent. He continued rocking into the slick hand, fluid coursing down Remus's fingers like a milky fountain. The waves of orgasm were still shuddering through him when Remus came, George distantly recognizing the sensation of liquid somewhere far inside him. Remus nudged George's prostate repeatedly as he made his last few thrusts, making George feel that his already overstimulated body would give out completely. He leaned against the top of the bed for purchase as his thighs shook.

Remus kissed a trail of panted wet kisses up George's spine, his hand still holding George in a very messy embrace.

"Remus?" George said faintly. "You're incredible. Gonna fall over now." He felt Remus pull gently out of him and release his softening, sticky cock.

"You're a beautiful mess," Remus said into George's ear, then licked a wet path across his neck.

George sat back somewhat gingerly, finally releasing the headboard and slumping on his side in a puddle of boneless limbs. Remus had padded over to retrieve his wand and cast a cleaning spell on himself, then turned and did the same to George and the bed.

"Oh, thanks," George said as Remus returned to the bed and lay down next to him. "You didn't have to be quite so hasty, though." George ran his thumb down the middle of Remus's narrow chest. "I liked that smell. That bloody brilliant sex smell."

Remus chuckled low in his throat. "I hadn't realized how much you're moved by scents, George. But I'll remember it next time."

George nodded, pleased. "I like how that sounds. 'Next time.'"

Remus ran his fingers down George's side, stopping to caress his hip, then playfully grabbed his arse.

"Surely you didn't think that having had you once would be enough?"

"Yeah," George joked. "You can never have enough Weasley arse around."

"No. I'm pretty sure I can't."

## **Epilogue**

George had just flushed the toilet and walked back into his bedroom when he glanced up at the portrait. Startled, he said, "Oh! Hi, Perce."

Portrait-Percy was sitting in a chair amicably talking with portrait-Fred.

"Don't mind us - and finish packing," Fred commanded.

"Yes sir," George replied, tossing one of his mum's less-awful jumpers and a heavy wool cardigan into his trunk. There was a thudding sound from the living room, and George smiled. He went back to the bathroom to retrieve a few toiletries which he juggled for a moment before lobbing them on top of the clothes.

"Shouldn't Lupin be here by now?" Fred asked from the wall.

"Hasn't George gotten over that yet?" Percy asked, disapproval dripping in the question.

"I certainly hope not," a resonant baritone voice said from the doorway.

"Oh. Professor Lupin," Percy stammered. "Nice to see you. Better be off." He gave a last, slightly pained look, clapped Fred on the shoulder and walked out of the portrait.

George got his wand, pointed it at the trunk, cast a shrinking spell on it, and shoved it into his jeans' pocket.

"Where are you off to this time?" Fred asked. "Stonehenge?"

"Been there, done that," George replied, grinning.

"The Isle of Man," Lupin answered.

"Well, mum's pleased that you're learning so much. She told Bill how she just knew you'd use that brain of yours, and spending time with a scholar is the perfect way to do so."

Fred's imitation of Molly Weasley was uncanny.

"She doesn't really know, does she?" George asked. "Not that I don't think she'll figure it out, but maybe she needs some time to adjust."

"No. Too busy with wedding plans for Ginny and Neville to be overly concerned about one of her sons visiting big hunks of rock around the U.K."

"Right! Well, guess I'll shove off." George said, nodding to Fred and following Lupin into the living room.

They had been doing this when they could for months, and it was a pleasantly familiar routine, with a dash of lust that always made George slightly hard when he thought about their trips.

"We'll Apparate, yes?" Lupin said, already pulling the redhead toward him. George leaned in under Lupin's leather coat, hands firmly on the other man's arse. "Is that a trunk in your pocket, or are you glad to see me?" Lupin breathed into George's ear.

George pressed provocatively up into Lupin. "Both."

They Apparated.

When George looked around next, they were in a small clearing with several toppled monoliths. It was drizzling, and after planting a deep kiss on Lupin, George moved away from the other man and pulled up his collar. Lupin used his wand to make a quick check of the area for lingering magic, making sure that there were no other wizards in the vicinity. Remus and George did tend to visit rather isolated locations, and not during the Muggle tourist season. It made things easier. Lupin's satisfied nod indicated there was no evidence that the stones had been recently visited by anybody, whether Wizard or Muggle.

"Weather's miserable," George offered, drawing his wand from his sleeve.

"Did I tell you that my paper proposal has been accepted by the journal for the ASWA, their 'From the Field' section?"

"No!" George answered with enthusiasm. "Ruddy brilliant, Remus!"

He strode back over to the older man, running his hand under the silver-streaked waves of hair to massage his neck. "Not to sound stupid, but who's the ASWA?"

"The Anglo-Saxon Wizarding Association," Remus replied. "Preservation of spells and charms that only work in the original ancient languages."

"Hmmm," George replied. "You didn't mention, um, everything that we've done 'from the field,' have

you?"

"Most certainly," Remus said, bringing George's hand from his neck to draw two fingers into his mouth. He thoughtfully sucked on them, then ran his tongue down to the join between the calloused digits, then released George's hand into his own, intertwining their fingers. "You'll feature prominently in my endnotes. 'My eternal gratitude to George Weasley, intrepid traveller and intelligent shining company during dismal weather. A brilliant Wizard in his own right, he has helped me find an astounding number of stones still enchanted with the *Solaris* spell, though I think his wand must have some special divining aspect as he keeps finding the spell-cast stones so readily.' "

George rubbed his burgeoning erection into the cleft of Remus's backside during the other man's exchange.

"Should we go then, oh scholarly one?" George breathed onto Remus's neck.

"Yes - as you said, the weather's miserable. Good thing the company isn't." Remus kissed the back of George's hand and they split up.

"Where are we again, exactly?" George asked.

"Meayll Circle."

George took out his wand and walked toward one of the outer stones which had fallen over centuries ago and looked rather pitiful. It was true - he did have an uncanny ability to find the charmed rocks.

"*Symney grian*," he uttered in Manx, his wand pointed at the broken monolith, his right hand poised on the stone.

Nothing.

He moved away and found a slab still mostly upright, and sidled up to it after moving an overhang of damp fringe out of his eyes. His left hand pointed at the rock, his right hand inching around the uneven surface like a caterpillar exploring a leaf. "*Symney grian*."

And there it was - heat pouring into him from lichen-covered, mossy rock. "Found one!" he cried triumphantly.

Lupin made his way across the damp ground, waves from the nearby shore crashing noisily behind him.

"I don't know how you've done it, but I *know* you must've enchanted your wand," Lupin said, half-scowling.

"Haven't!" George protested, then walked around Lupin so he could take the impossibly elegant fingers in his right hand, pressing the palm of Lupin's hand against the stone. George uttered the summoning spell again in Manx, and warmth flowed from the monolith into them. "But you see," he said hungrily, "I did find one." And then he quit talking.

He leaned over to lick at Lupin's lips, asking without words for entry, which was heatedly granted. After a few moments they both removed their hands from the stone and broke the kiss, George looking expectantly at his lover. This had been their game, and George was a bit surprised at how often he was the winner. Whoever first found an enchanted standing-stone got to get a blow job, right then and there. They felt it was only appropriate as a way to honour the ancient ritualistic bent of the spell, and the fact that it was at one of such slabs when George had first realized that he was taken with Lupin. Shame that George seemed to have much more talent in finding the spell stones, at least for Remus.

Remus shook his head, then cast a hasty drying spell on the wet ground at his feet and kneeled in front of George, pulling down his zipper and freeing George's already hard cock.

"I think I'm rather suited to the academic life!" George said, sagging backward into the now-chill stone.

Remus looked up at him, his tongue swirling around the pink head, mist settling on his prominent eyebrows. "You're a lucky bastard," he said, then encased George in wet heat so exquisitely contradictory to the weather.

"Too right," George moaned, running his freckled fingers across the crown of Remus's head, absently listening to the ocean as it surged against the shore. "I get to be with you."

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My eternal gratitude to romanticalgirl for her extraordinary beta of this story.

## All Men Make Faults

"Hmngrhph."

*Heavy breath in, heavy breath out, panting, panting...*

"Phrmphgh. Hmhfrnghyesmorelikethatyesyessojustlikethat."

The intoxicating sound of skin slapping against skin; feeling sweaty hair against sweaty hair; tactile, musky lust in his every needed lungful of air... it made him want to fuck the other man from here to Thursday.

Even though it was Thursday. Already.

"Harder! Ohyestherethereohmerlinyofirebrandarghhhhahhhh..."

The already inarticulate commentary was swallowed into George's shoulder in a particularly painful, but erotic, and understandable full-on bite.

"Remus!" George wailed, though he didn't stop pummeling his lover.

Words far beyond curse or blessing in any language spouted from Lupin's lips, uttered heatedly into a barrage of freckled skin. George rode him out, shuddering against him in silence. Lupin was the verbal one; his dirty talk could make George hard even in the least promising conditions. Chatty otherwise, George was almost silent in bed.

Almost.

"Sunshine," he growled, thrusting a last time.

It was their joke. They had discovered their attraction to each other Christmas Day a year ago wandering through ancient standing stones. The only sun to be had was that which could be invoked by a wizard interested enough in arcana to be able to summon it from the rock, infused there centuries ago by ancient magic folk. Kilmartin. Stonehenge. Even some inexplicable walls in Tintern Abbey. Lovely, cold, isolated pillars; and since the pair didn't wish for company, the times of year when George and Lupin travelled usually found their quarry surrounded by mist or some other permutation of chilling rain. But no other people. And certainly no sun.

"You're incredible," Remus incanted against the abused tendons, sinking back into his bed and pulling George with him.

"Flattery always gets you bugged. D'you mind moving your bloody skinny knees a bit further down?" George asked, affectionately shaking the older man's legs so that they splayed a bit and he could collapse on his side. Lupin was taller and wiry, but George hadn't lost his strength gained by Quidditch and, more recently, attention to his own physique thanks to Lupin's directed affections toward him.

"Werewolf metabolism," Lupin said, shrugging as though in apology.

"You always say that, you furry beanpole," George replied, then leaned his head in to nip at one of Remus' still-hard nipples.

Lupin rumbled low in this throat, which made George grin through his teeth, still clenched on their prize. He ran his tongue over the hard nub for good measure, then lounged back against the bedcovering, cradling his head in a hand.

"You won't believe this," George began, giving Remus his most skeptical look.

"Dumbledore accepted your teaching proposal," Lupin finished.

George attempted a scowl, but it was terribly hard to retain when Remus was running a set of his long fingers through his dense thatch of red pubic hair.

"Oh, sod it. Why do I bother? For somebody who's had such a hard-luck life, you're terribly optimistic. Yes. Accepted for the upcoming spring term."

Lupin's talented hand moved up and over George's solid stomach, across his ribs and finally up to his lips, where they lingered for a brief moment, tapping a few times for emphasis.

"Traditional Hogwarts schooling made a most underwhelming impact on you and Fred. But your innate skill and intelligence were always there. It's only fair that you're now able to inflict some of that back to the next generation. As I've said before, the power of laughter is terribly undervalued in current magical studies."

George snaked out his tongue to lick the finger crossing his mouth. Lupin's golden eyes focused on his wet finger. He gave George a rather heated look, then reconciled his hand to settle further down George's body on his hip. His mouth freed, George said, "Can't wait to tell Fred. He really won't believe me." His left hand traced familiar patterns on Lupin's scar-laden skin. "George Weasley. Assistant Professor."

Remus shook his head. "Selkies save us."

"Pity Malfoy won't let me use his potions lab."

A snort made George turn his head toward his lover. "He may be young, but he's not daft."

"Oy!" George shifted away from Remus. "And just what exactly is that supposed to mean? You've even seen my lab at the joke shop."

"Exactly."

George shrugged Remus' head off of his bruised shoulder. "Pompous, over-scholarly know-it-all."

He didn't mean it, of course, though he would have loved to have access to some of the current Potions Professor's more delicate measuring devices.

"Hedonistic, shaggable, overly-sensitive-"

"I'll show you over sensitive," George warned, rolling Lupin over and pinning him, lowering himself to lick his way through Lupin's mouth.

He did.

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"You know that something must be horribly wrong in the universe for this to be happening."

Fred sat in one of the two chairs in the portrait, bouncing something against the frame, again and again. And again. And again.

"Yup," George agreed, cheerful. He adjusted his tie. "Same bloody forces that took you away. I don't understand a bollocky bit of it, Fred. How d'I look?"

He walked away from the mirror to face the painting, putting on his most serious and scholarly face.

Fred pocketed his projectile and stood to give his twin a once-over. He stood in silence for several long minutes, rather unlike him. "You won't fool a soul, I must say," he finally admitted. "Cept maybe

some innocent first-years. We're not meant for teaching, George. Why are you doing this, again? Please remind me."

George wilted. "Oh, bloody hell." He stomped off to the kitchen, found a dusty bottle of scotch and poured a healthy splash into a glass, then returned to his bedroom.

"Right." He tossed back a mouthful, winced, and put the glass on his chest of drawers. "Are you being honest, or are you just ruddy toying with me because you're dead and I'm not, and you're sick of being stuck with me and Bill and Perce and Charlie..."

"I'm not stuck with anybody, you disloyal, pretentious, poufter--"

"Oh! So we're back to that, are we?" George paced in front of the portrait, then glared over at his Green Knights' Quidditch team poster. All of the players had clustered in the corner closest to the dresser, listening avidly to the argument. "You lot! Go on- you need the practise." They resumed their more common flying patterns and George readdressed his attentions to his brother.

Fred was sulking. It didn't suit him. He slouched malevolently in a chair, rolling a coin over his left knuckles.

"Look, Fred," George began. "Things change. The shop means more to me than anybody, except you. You know that."

There was a disgruntled sound from the portrait.

"We made Wizarding Wheezes what it is. I'm only teaching in the afternoons, and only then to some poor defenseless third and fifth years. Zap is great with customers, and I trust him with everything."

Fred perked up a bit. "How're those shrinking socks selling?"

"They're brilliant!" George enthused. "One of your best ideas. Can barely keep them in stock."

"Maybe you need some new designs," Fred offered. "I could draw up a few..."

"Only if you're not busy," George said to the painting, but Fred was already up and wandering halfway out of the portrait, doodling on a piece of parchment, his tongue clenched between his teeth. The portrait-George, who had discreetly stayed out of the way for the duration of the row, now joined Fred and nodded in approval at whatever it was that Fred was putting on paper.

George shook his head, still amazed at Fred's ingenuity and his inability to stay angry at anything - or anyone - for very long.

"I'll let you know how my first day goes," he said, fastening his newly-issued Hogwarts professorial robe. "Assistant Professor Weasley," he muttered to himself.

Fred and portrait-George were still huddled over the parchment as he left the room.

"See you in a couple of days!" Fred shouted from the portrait.

George stopped in his tracks, turned around, and strode back, leaning in on the doorframe. "What?"

"Full moon is tonight, or had you forgotten?" Fred asked pointedly, the portrait-George looking almost as shocked as George felt.

"I... well... I..." George stammered.

Fred rolled his eyes. "Some boyfriend you are." He went back to his drawing.

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Amber liquid swirled around the glass as George circled the tumbler Lupin had foisted on him. Remus enjoyed having a post-dinner bourbon, and preferred that George have one too, even though he wasn't really fond of the stuff. It was one of many attributes that George had discovered in the months they had been together.

Except that now George couldn't say that. In fact, he couldn't really say anything. He had lost his voice for the fifth time in five weeks.

"You should go see Malfoy," Lupin said, starting to tackle a pile of scrolls.

"Malfoy?" George mouthed, a susurrant, barely audible sound coming from his lips. "Why not Pomfrey?"

"She's in Bath. Visiting her goddaughter."

George nodded, indicating that he'd heard. "It's nothing," he attempted. "It'll go away, always does."

"Yes, but you shouldn't still be going through this. You aren't even teaching a full load."

"Not used to speaking so much."

Lupin looked up from the parchment he had begun marking. "All the more reason to go get something from Malfoy."

George took in his lover's gaze, saw an unaccustomed tightness in his forehead, recognised his reservation.

"What is it?" he rasped, then took a drink as comprehension swung at him like a Bludger. "Oh. Bollocks. Sorry. Anniversary coming up."

Remus looked at him, his eyes shining in apologetic loss.

George sighed. "I'm no Sirius." *And thank Merlin for that*, he mused privately, recognising that Remus was about to be swept off into memories. Neither he nor Fred had been very fond of the moody man during their time at 12 Grimmauld Place. Since he and Remus had been - together? shagging each other senseless? - he had tried to figure out the appeal and had decided that Sirius Black must have been very different when he and Remus had been in school. He shrugged. "Just be off to the dungeons, then," he forced out through his exhausted larynx.

"He'll be a big help," Lupin offered.

Clasping to his injured pride like a faulty but beloved broom, George left Lupin's chamber. He took the secretive route that led him right outside of the Slytherin Common Room. He was a staff member and allowed to roam the castle as he pleased, but it would be rather suspicious for him to be there this late. He was not, after all, part of the faculty in residence. Included on George's list of things he preferred never to have to experience was sitting in front of Dumbledore with a cup of tea, explaining the reasons why he was spending several nights a month with another professor. And not just at the full moon.

He was in front of Draco's office. It was late; there were hundreds of reasons for him not to be there. He raised his hand to knock when he heard the unmistakable crisp sound of Malfoy's voice.

"Come in, Weasley."

The door opened.

"How did you know..." George started, before remembering that he had lost his voice and Draco probably couldn't hear him.

"Professor Snape put some clever premonition wards on the door, and I was rather unwilling to change them once I inherited these rooms," Draco replied. "I knew it was you in the corridor."

He looked George up and down, then sniffed at him. "You've been with Lupin. I can tell." He backed away and focused his attentions to a secluded cabinet. "You smell of that swill he drinks. I'll find a decent merlot."

George shook his head, wondering just how much contraband alcohol was in Hogwarts, and why people kept forcing it on him. He had only recently appreciated the social isolation of the professors, all of them probably driven to drink by their charges. For a quick moment he thought of Filch, taken only a few days after he and Fred - well, he - had been rescued from the Death Eaters the summer after they left school. George had no soft spot in his heart for the caretaker, but he could guess what he had suffered, his mind plundered for information about all of the intricacies of Hogwarts, before he was abandoned to the front steps of his beloved keep, a raving, blinded lunatic. He had died shortly thereafter. *Damn unlucky chap*, George thought, remembering the grief he and Fred had put him through. *He probably had his own distillery hidden somewhere in the castle.*

Draco was back, a glass of wine proffered in his hand. "Please," he waved at a rather plush chair. "Have a seat."

They sat down across from each other.

"So what brings you here at this hour?" He looked at George with an invasive gaze. "It's a bit late for you to still be in Hogwarts, isn't it?" He quirked an eyebrow. "Was our resident werewolf in need of some cheering up?"

George scrambled for a decent-sounding story since he had just had three pointed questions in a row piled on him. He opted to answer only part of the trio of queries. "Lupin was helping me decide on an obscure Wizarding name for a new product," he croaked. Even to George the comment sounded flat and ridiculous. Since when had he lost his talent at telling lies? He coughed, then drank some of the wine. It was obviously very select and went down his abused throat like velvet. "He suggested I come see you since Madame Pomfrey is out."

"Lost your voice again, I hear," Draco said dryly. "Or don't. And lying doesn't suit you, Weasley. I know why you're here after hours. Your family must be shocked to have someone of your ilk in the family. Fred surely is turning in his grave."

"Don't you ever mention him like that again," George fumed, willing his voice to an audible level. He cleared his throat, managing a gravelly-sounding sentence. "And he knows."

Draco gazed heavy-lidded at him, taking a languid swallow of wine. "How? And not that I'll let anyone know; you've been astonishingly discreet. As the saying goes, it takes one to know one. It's a lonely life. For some of us."

George gaped.

"Weasley, Weasley," Draco said, shaking his head. "If there were any, you'd catch flies."

George had the presence of mind to shut his mouth as Draco gracefully stood up and placed his glass on a counter.

"My apologies about the earlier comment. Sometimes I'm a bastard without actually intending to be. Let me help you with your condition." He walked over to a glass-paned pantry and opened it, taking out a tall flask filled with an ochre-colored liquid. He paced over to his workbench and flicked his wrists as though he were fluffing a sheet on a bed, making his black robes race back to his elbows. George was unsurprised to see the muted Dark Mark on his arm.

"Dash of crushed mugwort should do the trick," George attempted.

Some of the bottled contents were mixed with a few hastily ground red seeds, then poured into a glass.

"Cheers," Draco said, handing the potion to George, letting their fingers touch as he did so.

George drank the bitter concoction, following it up with another swig of the far more pleasant wine. *Much better.*

"Thank you," he muttered, his voice returning. "Portrait."

"Come again?" the potions master said, running his fingers through his long pale hair as he again took a seat across from George.

"Portrait," George repeated. "Mum had them done for each of us after we graduated. Or, in Fred's and my case, when we left school. So I have ours in my flat."

Draco looked surprised. "Ah. But doesn't it become a bit... odd? You get older, you have experiences, he doesn't." Piercing grey eyes stared at George. "And what about you?"

George shifted a bit. "Well, yes, I'm there too, but not very often. I mean, not when I'm around." He snorted. "Yeah, it gets a bit weird. But we're all used to it by now."

"Isn't he a bit old?"

"Fred? We're the same age!" George was confused by the question.

"No, Weasley. Not Fred. Lupin."

Malfoy's legs were disturbingly close to his. Hadn't Draco once said something about an eye for beauty while looking at him? Bloody hell. This was sodding Malfoy. Pretentious. Arrogant. Intriguingly handsome. *Where'd that thought come from?* George was shocked. *He must've put some kind of Dark Arts something in the wine.*

"Well, yes, he's older," George began.

"And you're his assistant, so I've read," Draco went on, slinking backward to lounge in the tall-backed black leather chair across from him. "Mentioned in the Anglo-Saxon Wizarding Association? That's rather an unlikely career change."

"My main job is still at the shop," George interrupted. "Always will be. This other stuff is temporary. But I do enjoy teaching."

"You're making quite the impression on your students," Draco said, twirling his glass in his hand. "I'm afraid that were they to find out about your...preferences, you would break the hearts of at least three Ravenclaws."

George looked at his wine. Was there any subtle way to tell what Draco had done to his drink?

"I should drop by sometime," Draco went on, brushing an invisible speck from his immaculate robe. "I don't believe I ever went to Zonko's, so I wouldn't be able to compare, but Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes does have a stellar reputation."

"Well, it's pretty bloody brilliant, if I do say so." George smiled. "It was last Christmas when Remus came by the shop that started..." he fidgeted. "Everything."

Draco let his gaze wander purposefully over George. "How is he?"

"Moody." George couldn't believe his own honesty. *Malfoy, the sneaky bastard. He must have put veritaserum in the potion.*

Draco looked interested.

"Can't say I blame him, of course. It was five years ago when Black died."

"Ah. So they were... involved."

"You could say that."

A thoughtful 'hmmming' sound came from Draco.

"He casts a bit of a shadow, actually." *Shut up, George*, he threatened himself. Perhaps his feelings had been more hurt than he had acknowledged. Or the heady novelty of another good-looking man being interested in him was going straight to his... *Wait a minute. That's not supposed to be happening. Loyalty, George, loyalty. Remus will snap out of whatever it is he's in.*

"Well, I would never care to come between," Draco paused, "companions, but should you find that you are lacking for company, know that you are welcome to the dungeons anytime."

George finished his drink and drew himself out of the chair. "Thanks, Malfoy, for the wine and the potion." He put the glass on the counter, next to a piece of parchment covered in tidy handwriting. "Looks like quite a project, that," he said after glancing quickly at it.

"Yes," Draco replied, also getting up and coming to stand very close behind George. Somehow George hadn't noticed that he was shorter than the younger man. Or that Draco smelled - surely not - of broom polish.

"Doing some research into memory-retrieval potions. Rather complex," he continued, his voice near George's ear. "But I've always enjoyed a challenge."

The comment garnered an instant reaction in George's groin. *Time to go. Now.*

"Right!" George said a little too enthusiastically. "Guess I'll be leaving. Remus will think you've poisoned me or something." *If he noticed how long I was gone. Pixie's piss. Shut up!* He moved away, then turned and thrust out his hand. "Thanks again." He shook Draco's hand firmly.

Draco gave him a sly smile. "You have a lab in your shop, correct?"

George shrugged his shoulders. "Yeah, but it's tiny, really. Almost had more of one in our room in school!" He let go of Draco's hand. "When I expand Wheezes I'll double the size, though."

Draco nodded, looking intently at him. "You had your own potions lab in your room?" He crossed his arms. "Professor Snape would have been very interested to know that."

"Snape would have been disappointed to know that we did and hadn't managed to destroy Gryffindor tower!" George laughed. "He hated us. We hated him. Things were simpler then."

"Simpler, perhaps," Draco replied, then weighed his words. "But complication also has its advantages. Good-night, Weasley. Don't let the werewolves bite."

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*Don't let the werewolves bite.* Malfoy's parting words traipsed through George's head as he returned to Remus' room. *Too late for that*, he thought. He opened the door and was confronted with an almost lightless room. Remus was asleep on his bed, a lone candle hovering near one of the bookcases. George toed off his shoes with every intention of spending the night. After pulling off one sock and tossing it to the side, he tugged at his second sock, hopping frog-like, and lost his balance. He

managed to catch himself on the desk, and found himself face to face with a resurrected photo of Lupin and Black, two young men, smiling and pointing at a flat. George looked at it for awhile, then *accio*'ed the candle near him so he could see to retrieve his jettisoned sock.

He couldn't apparate within school grounds, so after leaving a vague note of "much better, but didn't want to wake you," George made his silent way through Hogwarts, using a hidden causeway to get to the Quidditch changing rooms, then walked across the vast lawn and into the Forbidden Forest.

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Fred accosted George as he entered the bedroom, his wand *lumos*-primed for illumination. He didn't want to run into anything else unexpected.

"But I thought you were-" he started.

"Don't. Want. To. Talk. About. It."

Fred looked concerned. "You're the one who's been telling me Lupin..."

"Fine!" George shouted. "You want me to talk? I'll talk! Remus misses Black. Heaps. Makes me jealous. Draco ruddy Malfoy, of all people, has figured out that I'm shagging Lupin. Who, as I said, is all caught up lamenting his lost youth and Sirius. Then Malfoy started making vague moves on me. Shockingly, I liked it. Then I almost bashed my head into Sunshine's shrine and I just didn't feel like staying. And I'm sick and tired of seeing dead people."

His twin stared at him from the portrait. "Well. Fuck me for not living." He stalked violently out of the frame.

Silence rang in the room, deafening him. George went into the kitchen after slamming down his wand on the chest of drawers. Bottle of scotch. Glass. Shite. Why bother with a glass? He drank from the bottle, hating the burn, then, disgusted with himself, put it on the counter. He stomped back into his bedroom, hoping beyond hope that Fred would be there.

The portrait was empty.

George undressed as though everything were fine, and got into bed. For the first time since Fred's funeral, tears made salty tracks down his cheeks as he quietly cried himself to sleep.

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He had seen Remus several times, and they'd shagged at least once or twice, but George still felt like an exile. Lupin was withdrawn, though not uncaring. George did notice that the picture he had almost head-butted was nowhere to be found the next time he was in Lupin's private quarters. It also didn't help that Fred had taken his time in returning, though George feigned nonchalance as was their way. It wasn't really Fred after all, was it? Their easy banter returned quickly, but George felt as though his whole being was bruised from the inside out.

He was working on a sketch in a sequestered area near Hogwarts when he heard a delicate noise behind him.

"Weasley," said the voice that reminded him of dark wine. "Didn't expect to find you here."

George turned around to look at Malfoy, dressed in his finest. Then again, he always was.

"Or I you."

They focused their gazes on the memorial slabs. The conclusion of the War was still new enough that most graves had flowers and were well-tended. Animated birds, plants, and, nauseatingly, things that

looked like stuffed animals made their merry way around the grounds. George didn't visit very often. It made his skin crawl, even if his brother was in attendance. Brothers.

"Didn't realize you were left handed."

The quill stopped. "Yes, Malfoy. Not only am I a half-arsed professor and occasional sentimental sap, to top it all off, I use the wrong hand."

A soft chuckle as knees cracked, then Draco was squatting behind him, looking over his shoulder. "Your drawing's quite good," he murmured. "And I'm left handed too."

George decided he was sick of being there, and ready to be the focus of someone's attentions. Forcing away rogue feelings of being a traitor to Lupin, he leaned back just enough that his hair touched Draco's jaw. "Care to see the joke shop? Technically it's closed, but I happen to know the owner."

"Sounds intriguing."

They Apparated. Separately.

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Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes was indeed closed, as indicated by the sign which hung inside the door, flashing "You Must Be Joking." George pointed his wand at the door and uttered an unlocking spell, opened the door, and waved Draco through the entrance. He locked the door behind him.

They stood in the dim shop, shelves crammed from knee-height to ceiling. The more expensive items were further up, as Fred and George had figured out it made more sense to have lesser-priced items within the grasp of younger children, making them wince less as they heard various items shatter, or bounce around the floor.

Draco took his time looking around the room, wandering over to a bin of neck-strangling neckties and picking one up in his refined fingers. "I'll be a dragon's druid," he said admiringly. "I would have loved things like this." He looked over at George, who stared back, shocked.

"Didn't you ever play any pranks?"

Draco smiled ruefully. "On who? My mother? The house-elves? Lucius? You met him."

"Point taken."

Draco continued his tour. "And you were working on some of these in school?"

"Yeah," George replied, turning his back to his guest to shift around some boxes of fireworks. "Wasn't exactly focused on school, back then. Makes it a bit funny to be teaching now."

The broom polish scent was very near to him. *Damn, but Malfoy could walk quietly.* George felt long fingers traverse his shoulders, then caress down his back like shower water at perfect pressure, so that he wanted to lean into it, into them. The fingers hesitated for a moment, then one arm reached around to pull George in, the hand moving with surety over his chest. There was a row of tiny buttons on Draco's robe; George would not have noticed except that they were now pressed into his back. And he didn't care for long because one skilled hand had snuck underneath his shirt, the other aggressively running over the blooming bulge in George's trousers.

It was nothing like the half-mad groping he had known during the War, and somehow equally unfamiliar as Remus' enthusiastic plundering. As much as George was enjoying the attention, and Merlin knew he did, he was still suspicious. This was Malfoy, after all. He pulled away far enough to turn around, but before he could utter a word, mint-tasting lips were on his. Draco kissed him soundly, possessively. The strong hands now massaged George's arse, a warm and inquisitive tongue sought entrance to his mouth. George allowed it, instinctively putting his hands on Draco's shoulders.

It was all so... different. He was acutely aware that their hips were pressed together, and the back of Draco's hands must be forced against a bunch of Wildfire Whiz-Bangs, and he was kissing Draco Malfoy. *Why?*

George drew back, breathing heavily. "Malfoy. Why me?"

Draco stilled his hands, though he kept them clenched on George's backside. Dilated pupils dominated his grey eyes, and he licked his lips before answering. "You really don't know?"

George let his fingers play on Draco's shoulders. "No. I really don't."

Draco leaned in, breathing into the sensitive skin of George's ear. "You're attractive, Weasley. Comfortable company without being doltish, and though it may shock you to hear such a thing from me, you wearing your trademark leather trousers is definitely wank-worthy." He moved a hand up and ran it through George's hair which hung at his shoulders, having needed a trim for about two years. "To a discerning eye, you are very desirable. And you seem to be, well, that you would be quite a handful."

George's mind was spinning with the information that Malfoy had thought any of those things, and his body didn't care what the blonde man said as long as he kept rubbing his erection against him in a very deliberate way.

"Thinking of Lupin?" Draco asked, pulling his thumb from the back of George's neck and tracking it down to his collarbone.

"No," George admitted. "Should be, I suppose."

Draco nibbled on his earlobe. "He's been involved with other people. And I thought wolves mated for life, anyway."

George didn't know what to say to that. "Look, Malfoy," he began, trying to think with his brain and not his cock, which wanted him to quit speaking. Immediately. And get out of his pants, which were seeming more and more troublesome and rather a bother.

"Weasley." Draco's tongue traced a slick path to his lips. "George." He kissed him, his tongue as deft and refined as his speech. "I'm not asking to be the love of your life." The other hand snaked downward through the cleft of his trousers, enough to push up toward his balls. "You've indicated that Lupin has been neglecting you, and I am simply offering to remedy that."

*Flawless logic, that is,* George decided.

"Okay then," George said, running his hands down Malfoy's back. He had wide shoulders that tapered to a narrow waist and - "hmm," he sighed with his eyes closed, hands cupping Malfoy's unexpectedly round arsecheeks, pulling the taller man into him. Draco's hands slithered up George's torso. The sensations of Draco's arousal on his sent sparks through George, making his nipples harden.

George opened his eyes as he reached up to pull some of Draco's silky hair out of the way of his pale neck. He glanced toward the window as he did, and saw a pair of witches passing on the street. Malfoy was kissing down his neck, using his fingernails to grip George's sensitive nubs under his shirt.

"Malfoy?" George panted as one of Draco's hands again began wandering southward. "Think I should cast a concealment charm on the windows."

"Agreed," Draco mouthed into George's clavicle. "Last thing either of us need is to have our Most Eligible Bachelor status questioned."

George laughed, then gasped as Malfoy gave his cock a tight squeeze through his courderoys.

"Oy!"

Draco gazed purposefully at him, giving him a closed-lipped smile. "Take care of the windows. And then I'm going to put that impressive-feeling cock in my mouth, run my tongue all over it and suck you until you see stars."

George fumbled for his wand which he'd thrust indelicately up his sleeve arm. He managed the *obscurio* charm, though he could barely focus. How was it that his lovers, as few and as unanticipated as they were, knew immediately what to do to him? Was there some aura of "gay bloke- gets hard as a rock at dirty talk" that hung around him he couldn't see?

Then he didn't care, because Draco did as he promised.

Then there was more. George should not have been surprised that the potions professor had brought his own lubricant, but he was surprised at how good it felt. Warm, and tingly, and -

"Broom polish!" he gasped as Draco coated George's cock with it, fisting him as he thrust determinedly into George's spread cheeks.

"It's my own creation, but it has alder tree oil in it," Draco contradicted, breathing heavily into George's shoulder. "It's the distinctive smell in broom polish. I'm very fond of it."

George was holding onto the till counter for dear life, his prostate hit again and again by Draco's slick, slender cock, the other man's thumb rubbing his sensitive head. *Merlinfuck!* George's body was going to explode. *How could Draco form complete sentences when he was making him feel like- ohohohohoh.*

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"Come by the dungeons anytime," Draco said before he Apparated from the shop. "Especially if you're in those leather trousers." He gave George a last mintkiss, then was gone. The smell of broom polish - or alder tree oil, whatever - still hung in the air.

"Hags hounds, but I need a drink," George muttered to himself. He'd just been very satisfyingly bugged by Draco Malfoy, in his own shop. *Was he mad? No, he rationalized, just a bit resentful and needy.* Reclothed and taking a last nosefull of scent, he left the shop, heading to the Leaky Cauldron.

It was busy, as always. He scanned the room, just in case he saw anyone he knew. "Jordan?!" he shouted. He hadn't seen his old best friend in several months, as the announcer was quite busy, it being Quidditch season.

"George!" His voice, unsurprisingly, carried across the room. "Get over here, you old dodger!"

George was grinning ear to ear by the time he got over to Lee, who was motioning toward a back table.

"How are you, mate?" George asked, pulling Lee to him in a full-body embrace, thumping him on the back.

"Excellent!" Lee replied, pushing back just a bit to look George in the face. "You're looking pretty brilliant too." He smiled, his teeth shining against his dark skin. "Been busy this afternoon?" he asked, giving George a provocative look. "You look a bit flushed."

George shook his head. He had never told Lee about his inclinations. He felt guilty on one hand, but he didn't really think that Lee would understand, even as far back as their friendship went. He glossed over the question.

"Bollocks, but it's been awhile!"

"Too long, George, too long." Lee sniffed around George's hair which he had pulled back in a band. "You been playing quidditch or something? Smell like polish."

George coughed. "No. Just working on a prototype."

Lee accepted the lie unquestioningly. They quickly settled into a conversation over a pint of butterbeer, George hearing about some of Lee's conquests and his continued disbelief that George was teaching part-time at Hogwarts.

"And the ladies, George?"

George fabricated an exasperated sigh. "McGonagall never did it for me in school, and still doesn't."

Lee shuddered.

"There's no-one on staff, really, that are even remotely appealing, and out of the women who come into Wheezes, they're either students- too young - or they're mums." He shrugged. "I figure I'll know when I'm missing out."

Lee snorted into his pint. "You'd think that you'd have figured out that you're missing out now, mate!" He put his hand out to tap it forcefully on George's hand. "Nice looking bloke like yourself? You need to get out more."

George nodded, then took a swig of butterbeer. "I know I do," he agreed.

"Owl me anytime. Honest," Lee said. "I can set you up. Got plenty of birds who'd love to meet you."

"Let me get through exams," George pleaded. "Then I swear on Merlin's beard I'll take you up on your offer."

"That's the spirit!"

From far within his conscience, George berated himself for lying to Lee. *I'll tell him. Later*, he promised.

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A week later, rather against his own better judgment, George found himself in Malfoy's office, wearing one of his pair of leather pants. Black. He hadn't really intended to see the other man again, but Lupin had been testy, almost snappish, when George had asked him about his weekend plans. He still felt a bit guilty, but he knew that Malfoy wouldn't, and in the moment, that was enough.

"Weasley." Malfoy looked very pleased, like a cat setting its eye on a flightless bird. His gaze raked over George's trousers. "How nice of you to stop by."

Silencing and locking spells were cast. A while later George found himself still in his leather. One of Draco's coated hands was running up and down George's erection, which had been freed from his open pants; Draco's other hand was holding a moving silver snake.

"You're not putting **that** near **that**!" George exclaimed, pointing at the snake and then himself.

"Ever heard of a cock ring, Weasley?"

*Merlin! How could Draco be so articulate while being so talented with his fingers?* George squinted apprehensively at the sinuous movements of the charmed object. "Malfoy, I should level with you. You know what it was like during the War."

Draco nodded, choosing just that moment to run an oiled finger toward George's entrance.

"Hmngnrhph," George choked. "Well, aside from that, which quite honestly I'd rather forget, and Remus, who's bloody fabulous, and, um, last week in the shop with you, which, well, was also bloody fabulous, I haven't been with anyone else."

Draco made a 'tsk-tsk'ing noise, letting the snake curl around his fingers as he leaned over and breathed on the head of George's twitching cock. "Your life has been plain, George. Apparently it is my current task to teach you about the glories of variety."

The lesson went on for quite some time through the afternoon.

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The next full moon took a heavy toll on Lupin. George wasn't sure what was different with the wolfsbane, but Remus looked awful in the morning when George opened the warded door.

"You look like utter shite," George said, letting the older man lean into him.

"Thank you, I think," Remus answered with a wan smile.

George led him to his bed, preparing to tuck him in when Remus held his hand. "Do you mind staying with me, for a little while?"

"Course not," George said. "But I am going to go to Malfoy and ask why he's messing around with your potion. You shouldn't be like this."

"I can do that," Remus said as he sank into the bed, pulling the sheets down, indicating that he wanted George to lie down next to him.

George untied and shed his shoes and pulled off his jumper. And his trousers. Even after his transformations when he was at his weakest, lying next to Remus was like being next to a furnace. He laid an arm across Remus' chest, his fingers tracing the familiar numbers under his collarbone.

"I want to apologise," Remus said, running a hand slowly through George's hair. "I've been caught up in the past, and trying to protect you from my own despair." He was quiet for a moment. "But you've seen your share of horrors, and you actually live with a constant reminder of what's been taken from you. I want you to know that you mean more to me than just extraordinary sex, and your inexplicable ability to work with me on the *Solaris* spell."

"I never thought that," George said, then decided he may as well be honest. He might not have been forthcoming with Lee, but he had become very fond of Remus, and he didn't want to fuck things up. "I have been jealous, though."

"Jealous?" Remus turned to look at him, and George almost immediately began to regret his comment. Remus seemed so tired, and troubled.

"It's nothing," George said, backing off.

"No. Tell me."

George planted a chaste kiss on the front of Remus' shoulder. "I know what you had with Black. I don't ever expect that, but he obviously meant so much to you, and even though he's gone, he's not, y'know?"

Remus looked at him for a long time, George feeling more and more ridiculous under his gaze.

*Bloody hell, you've made an arse of yourself before,* George thought. "Do werewolves mate for life? Not plain shagging, obviously, but, you know."

Remus smiled. "I wondered when you'd get wind of that legend. Legend it is. Only."

"Oh. Good." George snuggled into Remus' side, enjoying his scent. Malfoy included an infusion of the lupin plant in the wolfsbane potion which then could be smelled on Remus' skin, especially in the first day after he had taken it. Though he was tired, having woken up several times in the night as the wolf howled angrily in the next room, George's cock stiffened just a bit being so comfortable next to his lover.

Remus noticed, and made a contented sound. "George?" he asked.

"No, I'm tired. Really!" he protested as Remus let out a low chuckle. "Just glad to be next to you. There's time for that," he wriggled his slight arousal provocatively against Lupin's thigh, "later."

The two fell asleep within minutes.

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Several weeks later he finished up a diagram on the chalkboard, then traced the tangled elements of the one-word spell with his wand.

"So, you see, even though it takes only three syllables and a focused wand-flick to counteract a depression hex, there are dozens of ways to get it wrong. At least. And you don't want to get it wrong." He pointed at a cluster in the drawing, then turned back to his class. "The spell, one last time, with gusto!"

"*Contrennui*," they chorused.

"Right! Bravo! Nice to know that the French can get some things right."

George had been waiting all term to say his next phrase.

"Laughter can be, in fact, the best medicine."

The class responses had been quite varied. When he made the pronouncement to the third year Gryffindors, lightning cracked outside before it began pouring down rain, adding further drama to his sentence, yet it was still met with a wave of groans. Third year Slytherins: smothered silence, until one of the girls skeptically asked if he was really one of "the" Weasleys whose name was on the small placard outside of the swamp memorial. Third year Ravenclaws: unsure that he was finished, lots of quill scratching. Third year Hufflepuffs: a few suppressed chuckles until the whole class erupted.

After his last class was gone and the charmed eraser cleaned the board, George thought back to his own Sorting. Delving through the roar at the Gryffindor table, he had plopped down next to Fred. "Did you get choices, too?" he had asked.

"What? Are you barking? All Weasleys are Gryffindors!" Fred had said before grabbing George around the shoulder as Charlie and Percy had grinned down the table at them.

Apparently George's experience had been different from his brother's. The sorting hat had been leaning toward Hufflepuff, which had both scared George to death, since he wouldn't have shared a room with his brother for the first time in his life; but also felt liberating, since he wouldn't have shared a room with his brother for the first time in his life. After wavering for what seemed like forever, but was probably only a few seconds, the hat had settled on Gryffindor. "Loyalty like yours is as infrequent as dropped Phoenix feathers," the voice echoed in George's head. "But the mischief outweighs all. GRYFFINDOR!"

He had been oddly reassured that he hadn't imagined it two years later when another set of identical twins appeared at Hogwarts and were divided into two different Houses. He hadn't cared to think of what the separation was like for them, though. He had learned much more about that later.

"Professor Weasley." The smooth voice carried through the doorway.

"Assistant Professor to you, Malfoy." George shook his head, smiling ruefully and pocketing his wand. "At least for the next few minutes. I think I've horrified all of my students. Dumbledore's note to sack me is well on its way, I'm sure."

"You can't be sacked. You're only part-time." He lounged meaningfully in the doorway. "May I speak to you? In private?" His voice belied things very non-professorial.

"Sure," George replied, though he his conscience was conflicted. His body was already trying to wrestle dominance over his brain, much less anything else.

Draco cast a silencing spell throughout the room. "Didn't know if you might be interested in a celebratory 'I survived my first term teaching' shag. Or..." His voice trailed off as he walked up to George, breathing hotly into his ear. "Something along those lines."

"I think I've got things right with Lupin," George said, though he couldn't resist putting his hand on Draco's chest, enjoying the baritone purring noise Draco made when he did so.

"One last time then. And then I'll stay out of your sexy leather trousers."

George tried very hard to say that he really wasn't interested, though the last time they had been together his fingers and toes and other parts of his anatomy had tingled for hours afterwards. Somehow he ended up murmuring, "Last time then. End of term," before pressing his lips into Draco's.

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"Why does your office smell like broom polish?"

Lupin was helping George clean out his few shelves of texts and laughter-oriented artifacts that he had placed around the room. George couldn't even smell it, and he thought he had a sensitive nose. Malfoy had left several hours ago.

"Malfoy came by. Earlier today," George said, regret beginning to churn unpleasantly in his chest.

"I see," Remus said, then put down the box he had been packing. "George, may I ask you a question?"

George felt his heart sink. This was worse even than being confronted by his mother. *Bollocks. I finally had something really great and I've managed to piss on it. Grade A wanker.*

"Yes," he said, turning to face the other man. "Of course. Anytime."

*The man's not bloody stupid. Just tell him and get it over with. Then you can go home and let Fred ream you over the coals too.*

George walked over to Remus and sat down on a desk. He took a deep breath. "I didn't mean to mess things up. You were always thinking about Sirius, and Malfoy was persuasive, and we hadn't said that we couldn't, but I'm really sorry now. Fuck. I'm atrocious at this. I told him we wouldn't do it again because I thought I'd finally got things right with you."

Remus kept looking at him, his expression guarded.

"I'm a bastard," George moaned into his hands. "I'm really, really fond of you and you listen to all of my crackpot ideas without telling me they're for crap and I was just jealous and Malfoy--"

"I never asked you to be monogamous." Lupin's voice was measured, but a warm hand reached out to tilt George's chin so that he was looking at the golden eyes. "I had hoped you would want to be, but I know that I've been a bit difficult. Being with a werewolf is a challenge at the best of times, much less

being with me in particular." He sighed and leaned back against the bookshelf, placing his hands behind him. "I'm not going to lie and say that I'm not jealous, nor am I surprised."

That came as a kick to the gut.

"Do you want to have rules, George?"

"No. Just want you."

"Hmmm."

George splayed his fingers against each other.

"I saw Lee Jordan a while back. Felt badly because he's still trying to set me up with girls. Should be honest with him, of all people."

"That's up to you." Remus leaned over to push some hair back over George's ear. "You're still new to this. All of this." With a fluid motion he waved his hand around the room. "I'm not going to make you feel worse than you apparently do." He got up and began putting more texts back into the box. "I also don't feel like punishing myself. Would you care to come over for dinner tonight?"

George smiled, grateful. "Course. As long as you save room for dessert."

Remus looked up. "Should I get something special?"

"No. I'll bring it." George ran his tongue inside his teeth as he thought about how he could put his recently-learned skills to his advantage.

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Later, much later, after they had almost turned to prunes in Lupin's bathtub and Remus was three orgasms to George's two, they lay next to each other in front of the living room fire. It was early summer, but chill during the late hours. Remus swirled his brandy in a snifter.

"Where'd you find this?"

George took half a mouthful, let it sit for a moment, and leaned over to Lupin, who looked at him with a sated, smoky expression. Turning Remus so that his head was back comfortably against the couch, George kissed him open mouthed, letting the small amount of liquid traverse from his mouth to Remus'. Lupin swallowed, licked across George's tongue, then drew back.

"I have my sources," George said. "And I'm celebrating. First successful term as an instructor, and you're still willing to put up with me."

"All men make mistakes, George." Remus put his thumb in his mouth, then drew a wet, somewhat sticky line from the hollow of George's throat across his pectoral, circling the pink peak surrounded by freckles and burnished hair.

"Right. Shag some sense into me. Reckon I need it."

"Shameless," Remus growled into his ear.

"Yours."

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### **Author's Notes:**

Title taken from Shakespeare's Sonnet XXXV, midway through:

All men make faults, and even I in this,  
Authorizing thy trespass with compare,  
Myself corrupting, salving thy amiss,  
Excusing thy sins more than thy sins are.



~ **Interlude** ~  
*a glimpse into Remus' POV*

"Wouldn't you agree, Remus? Nothing against you, of course," she says, hastily.

In contradiction to her personality, her fiery hair has faded, the grey noticeably beginning its inevitable annexation of decades of red locks. Molly looks to me for support about this issue, obviously unaware of her son's nature. I place my cup of tea on its saucer, feeling more and more as though she knows me less and less. The time we all spent together at Sirius' family home was many years ago now. She's always seen me as an Order member, but not really as a man. This won't be pretty.

"Well, Molly, George has come into his own, and I think-

"Yes, Mum, I am a success, and thank you for noticing." George interrupts. He is wearing the same resolutely determined expression I've seen when he stays up late, grading assignments. "But as for spending less time gallivanting with Remus, as you put it, and more time with girls my age, well, that's not going to happen."

He takes a swig of butterbeer, then turns to look directly at her. "I'm not interested in girls. I mean, they're great, but not in a settle down kind of way. Not for me. I've settled down with Remus."

Her blue eyes widen as she stares at him, then purses her lips and turns her attentions to me. She jerks her gaze back to George. "If this is some kind of joke, George Xanadu Weasley, it is absolutely the worst that you have ever come up with."

My parents died before really knowing about me. I wonder if my mother would have been as traumatised as Molly seems to be?

"Not a joke." He drums his freckled fingers on the table, those strong, wide fingers that have caressed my body, inside and out.

She pales. "All these times you've visited - together - and you've never told me? You could have owled, even, you know. I am your mother."

"Exactly."

I open my mouth to say something, but Molly raises her hand. "Remus. Don't say anything. Yet." She shakes her head, myriad expressions on it, most of which I knew well at one time: shock, confusion, hurt, anger. "It was one thing for you to be involved like that with Black. I didn't understand it, but at least you two were the same age."

"Age has nothing to do with attraction," George interjects.

I wonder what images have leapt to her mind. She looks decidedly uncomfortable, even more so when George takes my hand. "I'm not doing this to hurt you, but I thought you should know. Even Fred came around after a while."

"Fred is dead."

"You know what I mean."

Molly sighs, then looks at me, then George, at our intertwined fingers. "This is a bit of a shock, you do realise," she says, resolving herself to something, though I'm not sure what. Even if she does accept it, doing so this quickly would not be like her. "I'll need to tell your father, George."

"I can do it," he insists, but she shakes her head forcefully. "You don't understand. If it's possible, he wants grandchildren even more than I do."

George laughs, a barking sound. "That's what's bothering you?" His expression is incredulous. "You've got Charlie, Percy, Ron *and* Ginny for that. And you've already got three as it is!"

"This is not funny," she fumes. "Each of you is unique. Even you and Fred."

"Well, I've always failed in your eyes anyway."

"Never," she says, eyes flashing. "You disappointed me sometimes, but that was ages ago. Surely you don't still hold that against me, after all our family has been through."

Dour silence hangs in the air, tangy on my silenced tongue.

"No, Mum, I don't," George acquiesces, letting go of my hand as he gets up from the table to go and stand behind her. He enfolds her in his arms and she grasps them to her. George closes his eyes, breathing in the scent of his mother's hair. "But if you love me, you need to accept this."

Molly's eyes shut. This is too personal. I shouldn't be here, but George had asked me to join him.

"I do love you, George," she whispers.

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"Well! That wasn't too bad, now was it?" George has his arms clasped around my waist, back in his flat.

I roll my eyes. "If that wasn't bad, what is?"

"Ron will be horrified. Won't want to talk about it, but Hermione will make him, and she'll drag both of them over here in a matter of hours. Now *that* will be awkward."

He disengages himself and pads off to the kitchen. "Pint?" he offers from the other room. "And then a celebratory shag is in order. No more hiding about stuff."

He comes back with two ales, hands one to me and clinks the bottlenecks together. "Here's to us," he says. We both take deep swallows, then he pulls me by the hand to his bedroom.

"I never told my parents," I tell him, and he turns around, steps close to me, sniffs at my neck and closes his eyes, smiling.

"I know."

I look down slightly at his face, expressive eyes, and talented lips, which are forming some of my favourite words: "Want you. Now."

My body is already responding to him when from behind me I hear a sound coming from the fireplace.

"Oh, bloody hell!" George exclaims. "Um, Remus, there'll have to be a raincheck."

"Calm down, Ron!" Hermione's voice carries from the corner.

"Welcome to the family," George says and kisses me.

## Love's An Anarchist

### I.

*I'd crawl to you baby and I'd fall at your feet.*

George stretched out his arms and legs, basking in the warm Mediterranean sun. It was a glorious mid-afternoon, the sharp clarity of the sky smudged lightly by white wisps of cloud.

"Isn't this is the life?" Ron asked.

George sat up to look into the pool. Ron was floating on an inflated chair, slowly paddling with his feet and taking an occasional drag off of his cigarette. A can of beer floated in the air near him within easy reach. George shielded his eyes with his hand. "Brilliant," George agreed, then collapsed onto his back, sinking into his chaise. "Nice of Hermione to invite Remus and me to join you both. I could get used to this."

"Too right. Pity I've got to go back this evening."

George lowered his left arm to the ground, feeling around for his glass.

"You two don't mind keeping Hermione company tonight, do you?" Ron asked, beer to his lips.

"Course not," George said, taking a sip of his drink. "But I'm not playing any more of those stupid word games she's forced us into this week. I've got shite vocabulary and she knows it."

"Ugh." Ron pulled a face as he took his wand out of the cupholder and waved the beer to the side of the pool. "French beer is for crap."

"Good thing we got plenty of wine, then!" Remus' voice carried from the top of the dozen stairs leading from the house down to the pool. He hoisted a bottle in each hand in a salute, then returned back to the shade of the chalet.

"Fuck! They're back!" Ron hissed under his breath, his languid paddling turning to violent thrashing. He traversed the small pool, crushed out his cigarette, frantically brushed at the ashes and tossed the offending item into the nearby plants.

George snickered. "Why bother, Ron? Surely you know that she knows you're out here smoking."

Ron scowled as he made his way back across the pool, kicking frog-legged. "Yeah. She said since I was on holiday she didn't mind if I had a few. But she gave me a bloody quota."

George laughed so much he spilled some of his drink on his chest. "Pardon my French, but she's got you by the balls."

"Not funny, asshole!" Ron tried to be indignant, but a hint of a smile twitched in his mouth. "She puts up with you, and Perce, and Mum loves her."

"Course she does," George replied, looking over his left shoulder for the bottle of cognac that had been his poolside companion.

"And her tongue's great for more than talking. She might have me by the balls, but she does some amazing things--"

"Too much information!" George said, pouring a splash of liquor in his glass. "Don't need to know. Don't want to know." He shook his head. "You are my brother, after all. If I thought too much about what you two do I would probably have nightmares."

"Ron!" Hermione waved from up the hill. "Just going to have a lie-down." She blew him a kiss from under her voluminous wide-brimmed hat.

He saluted in return, focused on her until she vanished into the house. "What've you got there?" He cocked an eyebrow at George.

"Cognac."

"Got any to spare?"

"I reckon. As long as you're not going to make me spew by telling me anything else about your love life."

"Deal."

They succumbed to the lazy heat of the afternoon. George fell asleep on his lounge, Ron on the inflated pallet.

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"Ronald Bilius Weasley, I told you to cast that blocking spell, now look at you!"

Ron and George were both impossibly covered with freckles, their skin bright red underneath. Sunburned.

"I forgot!" he moaned, rolling his shoulders forward and wincing. "It's George. Bad influence. Always was."

"You liar!" George growled. "Don't blame me for this."

"I've got to go back to bloody Glasgow looking like a bloody idiot. Ow!" He swatted at Hermione, who was trying to apply some lotion to his shoulders.

"Ow!" George echoed as Remus attempted to rub some salve into his neck.

"Look. You two are the cleverest people we know. Surely there's some spell to fix this," Ron reasoned.

"No. But I could do something for the pain," Hermione offered.

"Please, my clever, sweet, lovely..."

"Stop while you're ahead," she said, cutting him off, but planting a chaste kiss on his collarbone.

"If you lot are going to do anything, warn me so I close my eyes," Ron said, looking pointedly at George and Remus.

"Close your eyes, then," Remus said, taking out his wand.

Ron shuddered, squinching his eyes together.

"How can you be so naive?" George laughed. "As though we'd do anything in front of you."

Remus breathed a spell into George's ear, then nibbled on his earlobe while wriggling his hips provocatively behind George. Ron had opened one eye during the exchange and appeared to regret it.

"Right. I'm off now. Now!" Ron exclaimed, striding from the room to pack his belongings.

"There's a wicked streak to you, Remus," Hermione said, looking thoughtfully at him.

"Why do you think Dumbledore had me teach about the Dark Arts?" Remus asked, stepping back and scratching across his exposed hairy chest with his wand.

"I'll ask you about that later," she promised. "And no word games," she said pointedly, looking at George. "I know you're here as some sort of babysitter. Though I don't need it. I'm perfectly capable..."

While she had been speaking, Ron had made his way into the living room and pulled Hermione to him, dipped her slightly, and kissed her thoroughly on the lips, silencing her indignant sentence. After righting her, he walked over to George and spoke into his ear.

"Take care of her, alright?"

"Right as rain," George agreed. "I'm sure not interested."

Ron nodded. "That's what I reckoned." He walked over to his portkey, a rabbit's foot keychain. Muggle. Or had been.

"I'll see you tomorrow at the game, Ron."

Ron grinned at Hermione. "Watch out for these two."

Then he was gone.

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The trio made a delicious dinner of fresh fish and crusty bread and ate it on the terrace, the lush blaze of sunset providing a perfect background to the evening, their last night on holiday. Then they got smashed. That hadn't been the intention, really, and Remus with his infamous metabolism was by far the most articulate after a while, but they were all feeling astoundingly good, and Hermione and Remus had bought an astonishing amount of really tasty, and really cheap, local wine.

They lounged outside, Remus and George sitting across from Hermione, enjoying the mild climate. The conversation topics ranged wildly through the evening, eventually settling on Lupin's legs.

"Too skinny," Remus said, shrugging. "I can't believe I let you talk me into buying a pair of shorts," he went on, pointing an accusatory finger at Hermione. "Now an appalling number of the population in Monaco have been exposed to my white, knobby-kneed legs."

"I love them," George said, reaching over to run his hand meaningfully up over Remus' knee and down under the hem of the shorts, which were actually rather long. Remus made a pleased rumbly sound, then he looked over at Hermione. "Oh. Sorry," George muttered, withdrawing his hand.

The greater Weasley family, including those who had joined by marriage or nearly so, had accepted that George and Remus were a couple. The pair were very restrained, however, in expressing physical affection in front of anyone. By nature, George had never been one to be particularly demonstrative, but at the moment, he had a lovely warm buzz flowing through him. And sod it, he really liked Remus' legs. They weren't that white anymore anyway, as he'd spent a lot of time at the pool, and he didn't freckle like George did.

"Oh George, it's fine. I don't mind, really!" Hermione's tanned face was lit by a nearby torch, and George recognised the playful look on it. "You know," she said, leaning in, her voice breathy, "I've never seen two men kiss. You could do that in front of me. You're both frightfully careful, it seems," she went on, taking a sip of wine. "Like we'd find it disgusting or something."

"Aw, Hermione, it's not like we're performing monkeys at the zoo, you perv!" George exclaimed, even as Remus took back his hand and placed it where it had been on his thigh.

"I didn't mean it like that," she said, flustered, brushing a stray curl off of her forehead.

"Hermione Granger. A voyeur," Lupin said, amused and, George could tell, intrigued.

Even in the relatively dim light, George could tell she was blushing. *What the hell.* They'd all had a lot of wine, and he'd missed being able to give Lupin even familiar kisses since they were almost never alone.

"I just thought if you wanted to," she said. "You could pretend I'm not here."

George thought this was one of the most bizarre evenings he'd had in ages. Just then Remus ran his hand up George's thigh and leaned over to breathe in his ear, "I don't mind. Do you?"

George answered by putting his wine glass on the ground, getting up a bit unsteadily from his chaise, and straddled Lupin, facing him. He held Remus' face in his hands, stroking the prominent cheekbones, admiring the golden eyes, then leaned in to kiss him. His mouth was warm, his tongue familiar, but it still sent shocks of pleasure straight to George's groin. George made contented sounds as he sucked on Remus' lower lip, then continued to kiss him savagely, feeling Remus' enthusiasm in return. He rocked a little into the other man's hips, running his hands to the front of Remus' shirt.

There was a distinctly feminine gasp behind him. *Bollocks, but he really had forgotten about Hermione.* George drew back, breathing heavily, feeling Remus' fingers begin to unbutton his shirt. "Whoops. Sorry. Got carried away," he apologised, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

"No. Keep going. It's... it's..." Hermione's eyes were shining, and she licked her lips, "quite a turn-on," she admitted. "Did I really just say that?" she giggled, drawing up a leg underneath her.

"My, my, my," Remus said, his voice husky. He had undone George's shirt and his fingers clasped onto George's nipples, making the younger man moan. George held onto the armrests of the chair, grinding slowly into the erection he could feel through Remus' shorts. The skilled fingers left George's chest, went into Remus' mouth, then two wet thumbs caressed George's taut and sensitive nubs.

"So you like to watch, Hermione?" Remus asked before raising up his head to take one of George's nipples in his mouth, teeth grazing, then his tongue circling around it.

"Sunshine, oh god. You're incredible," George babbled, his cock positively aching. He drew Remus up from his chest to kiss him; deep, ferocious, and needy. "Want you. Buried in me. Oh Merlin."

"Um, I think I need to be alone now," Hermione said, breathing heavily and levering out of her chair. She ran into the torch which wobbled precipitously, then she steadied it. "G'night. See you in the morning." She took one last look at them, George moving slowly but steadily against Remus, the older man flicking a finger over George's chest. "Goodness," she whispered. Coming to herself a bit, she said, "You know, you don't look anything like Ron."

"That's reassuring," George replied.

"Sweet dreams," Remus said before pushing George's shirt off of his shoulders and helping him out of it. Hermione gazed at them, open-mouthed, as Remus unbuttoned the top of George's jeans, then she turned and practically ran up the steps to the chateau.

"Where was I?" Remus asked, pulling down the zip on George's pants.

"There. Right there," George moaned, clutching to Remus' shoulders. "Oh. There," he went on as his lover's fingers pulled his cock out through the fly of his boxers.

"You've become quite the hedonist here in this climate," Remus chuckled, stroking George's shaft.

"I always want you. Climate doesn't matter."

"Stand up for a minute so I can get out from under you," Remus commanded, his voice heated. "Then I want you to lie down on your back and put your hands together."

"You going to tie me up?" George asked, using the armrests to push himself up and out of the way.

"The thought had crossed my mind," Remus replied, rising up from the chair. He stood next to George and pulled his head to him, cradling the back of George's neck to kiss him hungrily, resuming his fisting of George's cock.

George made a suffocated, pleased sound into Remus' mouth. Remus pulled back, rubbed his own arousal through his shorts and pointed to the chair, breathing shallowly. George squatted behind the chair, changed the back setting so that it lay mostly horizontal, then lay back down. Remus had turned and was looking around his chair and through a cluster of empty bottles.

"What are you doing?" George asked.

"Looking for my wand. I must have left it inside. Where's yours?"

George thought for a moment. While his body seemed unaffected by the wine, thinking about something as specific as the location of his wand proved a sluggish challenge. "Think it's inside too." He raised his hips to tug at his jeans and boxers, wrenching them down his thighs.

"Holidays have made us soft," Remus said, returning to help George out of his pants which he then dropped on the ground. "Well, not really," he continued, looking possessively at George's cock which was now very exposed.

George was in heaven. Remus had him in his mouth, his talented tongue knowing exactly what to do to make him writhe in pleasure. He felt his lover's finger move toward his entrance, then withdraw. "No, don't stop, please, don't," he gibbered as Remus sat up.

"I've just realized something else we're missing," Remus said, wrinkling his forehead.

"Just *accio* it from our room. The window's open," George said, feeling helpful, wanting to do anything to get Remus back to him.

"No wands, remember?"

"Bloody hell," George sighed. "What kind of Wizards are we?"

"Horny ones. With no sense."

A flash of brilliance struck George. "Wait- you had a bottle of olive oil down here while cooking the fish. 'S'it still around?"

"George, George," Remus' voice rumbled as he shed his already-unbuttoned shirt. "How the innocent have fallen." He walked over to the small grill to retrieve the oil.

"Who's innocent?" George asked as he drank in the sight of Remus' lithe form padding back over to him, the grey chest hairs catching the light of the torch, his erection straining against his Bermuda shorts. The waning moon seemed impossibly distant in the sky; miniscule and unthreatening. As he basked in Remus' devouring gaze, George dimly recognised that there was a time before Remus, time when he had been unaware of the moon's phases. Time when he had fumbled, confused and unfeeling after Fred had been killed; time alone. "You've taught me all I know," he said, grateful.

"Or close enough," Remus corrected, not unkindly. "Now turn that astonishingly freckled body of yours over so I can have my sordid way with you."

George hastily and enthusiastically complied. He was soon on hands and knees, fingers grasping around the sides of the chair. Remus' oiled fingers pressed steadily into him, stretching him in a

maddeningly intimate gesture, fueling George's desire. "Now," he breathed, thrusting backward. "Ready for you."

Remus growled, a lusty, primal noise George loved. George lowered his head for a moment while mourning his momentary emptiness, hearing Remus divest himself of his remaining clothes. Then there was an almost indecently erotic slithering noise as Remus coated himself with the oil.

"Merlin. Sunshine," George incanted, feeling his lover breach him, overcoming the initial discomfort that was always there, still amazed at how two men's bodies could fit just so. It defied imagination. Remus didn't reply with words, instead using remarkable restraint to languidly sheathe himself while insinuating his fingers between George's sacs and grasping the base of his cock. George bucked with pleasure as Remus began fisting him, moving behind him in a way that sent sparks shooting from far within himself as his prostate was nudged.

"Liquid velvet. Oh. So deep. Love feeling you around me." Remus, who was fairly talkative when they were intimate, at last began a deep-throated litany of phrases of how George felt, how he loved fucking him. George rocked back into him with enthusiasm, raising up a bit on the balls of his feet to make the angles less awkward for Remus, who was also kneeling on the chair. He was so enthralled in his lover's frenzied ministrations and the unmistakable imminent release barbing through him that he felt, more than heard, the unmistakable sound of something capsizing.

"Remus, yes, Remus," he moaned as the intense orgasm flowed out of him and he came over his lover's hand. Milliseconds later, the front of the chair collapsed, sending the pair crashing against the tiled flooring. "Oh, fuck!" George yelled as Remus came with a shout, releasing George and grabbing the armrests of the chair. "Annnngggguh!" George bellowed in agonized rapture, seeing red sparks of painpleasure, blissful aftershocks mingled with severe discomfort.

"Owowowowbloody hell. My knees," George whimpered, writhing under Remus' weight, suddenly very grateful that his hands hadn't been any further up the chair or he probably would've suffered several broken fingers. "Not so fast!" he yelped at Remus, who was jerking out of him.

"Are you okay?" Remus asked, his voice heavy with concern. He pulled himself slowly from George's body, both hands grasping the armrests.

"Think so," he said, wincing as he hand-walked himself upright. "Bruised my knees up, for sure," George went on as Remus began looking for a cloth.

"What happen... Oh!" Hermione squeaked from the top landing, dressed in a nightshift. She covered her eyes with her hands. "Are you two alright?" she asked.

George threw his hands down to cover himself.

"Um. We might have broken one of your parent's chairs," George called up the stairs, trying to sound nonchalant while looking frantically at Remus for assistance.

"I'll repair it in the morning," Remus said and Hermione nodded, her face still covered.

"I'll just go back to bed then," she said, turning and walking back into the house.

"D'you think she's been watching the whole time?" George asked, rubbing his knees before leaning back into Remus' chest as he was pulled into a tight embrace.

"Well," Remus said, after placing several kisses on George's earlobe and neck, "if she did, I suspect she got more than she bargained for."

"So did I," George grumbled, but he clasped Remus' hands in his.

"Let's get you inside so I can look at your knees," Remus murmured into his ear. "I'm sorry about the chair. But I must say that what we had before that was incredible."

George rested his shoulders against Remus' furry upper chest. "Yeah. Glad you're not tired of my freckled fanny yet."

"Never."

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## II.

*Things which cast no shadow.*

The flush on George's skin from their holiday in France had long faded. It was hard to believe they were almost at mid-term already. Dumbledore had not, to George's surprise, sacked him after his first attempt at teaching an elective course on the magical qualities of laughter and the many counterspells and counter-hexes which incorporated levity and mirth in their effectiveness. In fact, his two courses had proven to be so popular that he had been asked to teach them again, as well as an additional lower level study hall for students who found themselves especially unskilled at Transfigurations.

George had tried to explain both to Dumbledore and McGonagall that it would be too much to add the study hall on top of the other classes, all while making sure that the shop was doing as well as it could, but McGonagall simply would not back down.

"It will make up for the fact that you never took your N.E.W.T. in Transfigurations, Mr. Weasley," she said firmly.

"We all know and appreciate the price your family paid during the War," Dumbledore said sympathetically, "and how much has happened from your school days to now. But Minerva has told me repeatedly of your superior abilities in this field. As you well know, while Voldemort has been defeated, some of those who fought on his side are still around, and still causing trouble. Our current students need to be prepared."

"It would make more sense for me to teach an economics elective," George said, shaking his head. "If it weren't for Fred's head with numbers, and his patience, I don't think I would ever have learned how to keep the shop's books balanced." He turned to look at his former Head of House. "But all right. Poor sods will be wishing they were in Malfoy's Potions Club after a fortnight with me, I can guarantee it. Or even the Wizarding Chess Club."

Dumbledore laughed and offered him a pistachio pastille, which George declined with a shudder. As he stood to leave, McGonagall got up from her chair and took his hand. "Thank you, George," she said, her hair ghostly white under her hat due to curses she had sustained during the fighting.

"I always meant to do right by you," he offered. "It was just with Umbridge around, and then we'd gotten rights to the shop..." his voice trailed off. "To be honest, we were done with Hogwarts. And I wouldn't trade those few months with Fred for anything. Full marks in any of my courses are meaningless compared with that."

"I've always understood," she said in her lilting voice, and squeezed his hand.

"Wizarding economics," George heard Dumbledore say as he left the office. "Very interesting."

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"George? George!"

"Yes? What is it?" George came tripping into his living room with the grace of a drunken hippogriff, still pulling his pants up his thighs as he did.

"Oh. So sorry." Remus' face was in the fireplace of The Cleansweep, the affectionate name for George's flat and his connection to the Floo network, but from the bit of background George could see, Remus was obviously still in his office at Hogwarts.

"S'okay," George replied, giving Remus a provocative look as he took his time to leisurely button up the front of his corduroys. "You on your way over?" he asked as he knelt down so he was more eye to eye with the other man.

They had another of their trips planned, part of their ongoing *Solaris* spell adventuring. This time they were off to Drombeg, a stone circle in southern Ireland, known even by Muggles as the 'Druid's Altar.' The two had found the sun-spell-enchanted stones all over the U.K., but now they were in search of other old magic beyond the one spell that Remus had initially tapped into at Kilmartin. Research still was not of great interest to George, but he did enjoy the ancient rocks and the thought of the ancestral magic that was imbued in them, and the trees and ground nearby. What he had noticed after spending a lot of time around Remus was that his own magic wasn't nearly as strong, a fact that didn't bother him all the time, but it was yet another inequality to their relationship. Remus didn't seem to mind, insisting that George's magic was probably much more focused. George was highly skeptical.

"Yes, but not immediately. I'm still speaking with Larkspur. Why don't you go on ahead, and I'll meet you there in an hour, tops."

The redhead tried not to be jealous. "Brilliant. I'll just go ahead and find all of the good ones and let you write them all down this time. And if you're over an hour late, you're buying me a Guinness. Or two, depending on how cold it is."

Remus smiled. "Thanks for understanding. See you in a little while."

George got up, his knees cracking.

"Oh- and George?"

"Yes?" George squatted back down in front of the fireplace.

"I checked with Ministry weather; you'll probably want to wear an anorak, unless you've brushed up on your *repello* spells."

"You mean we're going to the southern coast of Ireland in October and they haven't predicted blue skies with a light wind?" George leaned back to pull his well-worn, drab, water-repellant-spelled parka off of the couch and draped it over his knees. "Covered. Thanks for the confirmation, though."

"You're amazing," Remus said, the slightest hint of an appreciative growl slipping through.

"You're just saying that because you're hoping I'll shag-"

Remus coughed loudly.

"Oh. Shite. Student in the office. Um, gotta go. Meet you at Drombeg."

"Ta."

Then the fireplace was empty.

George walked the few steps back to his bedroom to finish packing.

"Have you given Zap a title?" Fred asked from the portrait above George's chest of drawers.

"What do you mean, a title?" George replied, confused.

"Well, you do keep leaving him in charge of the shop. You seem to be gone a lot." Fred's voice belied his obvious displeasure in George's non-Weasley's Wizarding Wheeze's pursuits. "Assistant Manager, maybe."

"Oh. That kind of title." George ran his fingers through his close-trimmed goatee. "Good idea." He looked at his twin. "We're still doing really well, you know."

Fred gave him a hard look. "We'd be doing better if I were there."

George sighed. "Of course we would. Look, I'm off. Got another ring of rocks to prod."

"Lupin meeting you? I heard him in the next room."

"Yeah, but he's going to be late." George sat heavily on the bed next to his trunk.

"Larkspur?"

"Yes." George rolled his eyes. "I know I shouldn't be ungrateful, but-"

"But he spends heaps of time with her. I know. You've got to admit, though, he must feel like he's really helping someone else."

Larkspur Beauchamp was a werewolf, a second year who had transferred from Beauxbatons at her mother's insistence. Remus had been beside himself when he found out that he could help someone else like him; that he could help her avoid all of the agonies he had suffered as a young student when he had tried to keep his condition a secret. Thanks to the wolfsbane, which was currently being further modified by Malfoy, current Potions Professor at Hogwarts after Snape was killed in the War, the repercussions of being a werewolf weren't nearly as dire as they had been. It was still incredibly isolating, however, or so Remus had said. He did spend a lot of time with her, and they shared a common understanding that George never would. Not that he was jealous.

"He does. I've gotta go." George shrank his trunk, shoved it in his corduroys pocket, and nodded briskly at Fred.

"When're you back?" Fred queried, reaching to a point beyond the frame and retrieving a book.

"Dunno. Reckon this'll be a short trip. As always, the weather's atrocious." He snorted. "I wish I were back on holiday. I quite liked lounging poolside, even with Ron as company. Much better than freezing my arse off. Especially by myself."

Fred put his book down and mimed playing a violin. "Oh, such a sad, sad tale of George the intrepid traveller."

"Tosser."

"I beg to differ! You're the bloody pouf."

"Right. See yous."

Fred grinned and returned to his book, propping his feet up on the frame and leaning back in his chair. George went into the living room, shrugged on his anorak, willing the magical coordinates of Drombeg into his mind before Apparating.

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The rain-drenched wind smacked his face as brutally as though it had fingers. George reeled backward, running painfully into an obdurate monolith.

"Fuck!" he exclaimed, rubbing his shoulder. He took a moment to absorb his surroundings. It was a pretty small circle of stones, actually; around thirteen that were sizeable and a few others scattered nearby. He pulled up his hood against the whipping wet and got out his wand.

As he stepped between two of the sandstone pillars into the circle he felt a sudden wave of nausea. He leaned over for a second, breathing heavily, then as quickly as it had come over him, it vanished. He stood back up, vaguely rubbed his stomach, and shook his head. Just dismal weather, and thirteen stones to test. *Must've imagined it*, he decided, shrugging it off. He and Remus had been to dozens of sites and they'd all had their own aura to them; this one must just be different. He shivered for a second and zipped up the top of his parka, hoping that Remus wouldn't be too late. Then again, Remus shouting a couple of rounds of Guinness wouldn't be such a bad thing either. He retrieved a charmed scroll and drew a quick sketch of the stones, then walked to the closest one. *Sumain súil*, he invoked, his hand on the slick surface of the monolith.

Nothing. In fact, it almost seemed to take heat from his hand and deflect his wand.

*I'm barking*, he thought, disgusted. *There's enough wind to practically take the wand out of my hand. It's not the bloody stone.* He wrote a few comments, then went to the next.

Nothing. And the next. Nothing.

He made it halfway around the circle before stopping for a moment, taking a handkerchief from an inner pocket to wipe the water from his face. Perhaps this circle hadn't been near a Wizarding community, though that would be highly uncommon. The reliable references that Remus had been able to find about the stone circles indicated that while Muggles had used them, and in all likelihood built them, there was almost always a Magical infusion in the area.

*Remus wouldn't have had us come here if he didn't think it had something*, George reckoned, turning to face the bitter wind blowing up from the ocean. Between the slick of pelting rain and a ferocious blast, George's quill was snatched from his hand.

"Bloody hell," he swore, following his writing instrument with his eyes. It flew across the ground of the circle with George in fast pursuit, until it was plastered against the bottom of one of the broken pillars, trapped by the wind. His left hand was scrabbling across the surface, clutching desperately at it when he noticed the top of a smooth disc mostly buried in the ground. He pocketed the errant quill, squatting down to brush at the lichen on the dark stone. As soon as he touched it, George felt searing pain wrack his body, as a malevolent magical force coursed through him, worse than any hexes he had sustained from the Death Eaters after Hogwarts, more primal than the curses he had taken during the War. He yelled in agony, then passed out.

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George came to, raising his left arm to cover his face which was getting pelted by rain. Memories of how he came to be lying on very uncomfortable, graveled ground rose slowly through the fog in his mind like bubbles in a particularly viscous potion. He was at Drombeg. None of the stones had any of the *Solaris* infused in them. He'd touched something, felt a wave of bitter pain, and now he felt fine, but he was absolutely soaked through. And still alone. He turned his arm and pushed back a sleeve to look at his watch. He'd only been unconscious for a little while, a quarter of an hour at the most.

Gingerly he sat up, expecting some kind of lingering soreness or evidence of what had happened to him, but aside from the unpleasantness of being dressed in now-soggy trousers, he seemed to be none the worse for wear. He got to his feet, pulled out his wand and cast a drying spell on the lower half of his body. Much more carefully this time, he returned to the stone where he'd retrieved his quill to look at the disruptive rock at its base. After pulling his wet fringe out of his eyes, he stared at it, and at the jagged crack which now split it open.

"George! Merlin's beard! Get out of there!"

Remus' voice barely carried over the wind, but it was startling after the relative silence. George stood up and turned, seeing Remus outside of the circle, beckoning him with exaggerated arm gestures. George made a pacifying shrug of his shoulders, and walked across the gravel to the other side.

"What is it?" George asked a bit peevishly. He had no intention of telling Remus what had happened, as though he weren't twenty-five years old and perfectly capable of taking care of himself.

"Are you okay? How do you feel?" Remus pulled George to him in a crushing embrace, then stood back and got out his wand. "Let me do a quick auralic, if you don't mind."

George stood, his hands jammed into his pockets. "Are you a medi-wizard too?" Truth be told, he felt heaps better outside of the standing stones, and was a bit worried about what had afflicted him. But he didn't appreciate being babied, especially by his lover.

Remus completed his hasty scan of George's magic, which left a residual sparkling hum in his body for a few seconds. Seeming satisfied, Remus pocketed his wand and put his hands on George's shoulders. "You don't ever need to put yourself in that kind of danger for our research," he said, his expression a mixture of relief and worry.

"Danger?"

Remus looked shocked. "Do you mean to tell me you didn't scan the area at all?"

*Fuck.* No, he hadn't. He'd run smack into the bloody monolith and had gone straight into the circle without checking for evidence of other wizards first. "No. Fine. So I'm a bloody idiot," George said, angry at himself. He shrugged Remus' hands off of his shoulders. "Go ahead- tell me. I deserve it."

"No, it's not that," Remus said, pulling George back to him and placing his narrow fingers at the base of George's back. The wind shifted so the rain now hit them sideways. "Well, no, that wasn't bright, but even without checking, given how much residual dark magic is in there, you must have felt something was wrong."

George thought about how to answer while wiping some water out of his eyes.

"George," Remus said softly, his concerned voice barely audible above the elements. "I should let you know that I'm able to tell if you're not honest."

"What, does being a werewolf make you a mind reader as well?" George had never lied to Remus, but this ability was rather disconcerting, no matter how much he cared for the other man.

"No. It's a heightened sense of smell. It was nightmarish when I was younger, but I figured out ways to tune it down, as it were."

"Remus?" George suddenly felt drained and somehow faded, as he had for several months after Fred had been killed. "Can we talk about this over a pint, maybe? I'm sick of being in the rain."

"Of course." Remus paused. "Selkie's Swim?"

"Sounds brilliant." George eked out a tentative smile.

With nearly simultaneous *crackling* sounds, they Apparated.

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Once manifested in the alleyway behind the pub, George shook out his waterlogged coat. Remus took his chilled hands and placed them against George's cheekbones, his thumbs cradling the younger man's jaw, and kissed him soundly. They stood for a few moments as George allowed himself to enjoy the quiet intimacy of Remus' lips on his, the gesture unexpected. George loved the way Remus kissed, the multitude of ways he was affected depending on what Remus did with lips, teeth and tongue; from

a casual brushing of lips conveying greeting, to languorous explorations in heated mouths that seemed to turn his blood to fire and settle aching in his cock. This particular kiss was one of satisfying completion, of being home. It was warming, but George still yearned to be inside and sheltered.

They drew apart.

"Thank you," George said as they walked around to the front of the building and went into the pub. "Y'know," he hesitated in the doorway, leaning back slightly into Remus' chest and speaking so that only Remus could hear, "you're a brilliant kisser."

The sound of Remus' contented rumbling behind him made George grin.

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"I am very, very fond of you, you know," Remus said a while later as they sat in their favourite booth in the back of the pub. It was the place where George had first dared to show Remus that he was attracted to the older man.

George took a pull on his pint. "Must say I'd hate not having you around as well," he said, smiling, rubbing his hand briefly over Remus'. "Now. About this smelling skill you have. What exactly are you on about?"

"It started in my adolescence. Puberty." Remus winced. "I don't want to bore you with all that, but it became apparent that I was much more sensitive to other students' moods, and feelings. Different emotions smelled differently. Albus helped me to manage it, especially when I realised how invasive it was."

George looked confused. "Invasive? You couldn't ruddy help it, sounds like."

"At first. But once it was manageable, I could choose whether or not to smell how someone was feeling."

"Like knowing Legilimency," George said, impressed.

"No, not nearly so sophisticated as that. The point is that I could choose to sniff around you and I would have a pretty clear idea of your emotional state, and you wouldn't know. And you wouldn't have given me permission to do so."

George took another deep swig of ale, then placed the glass on the table. "So you're saying that if I had come out of that standing circle and told you I'd never felt better, you could've turned on this sensing ability and known that I was lying through my teeth."

"Something like that," Remus said, then polished off his pint.

"Have you done that to me before?" George's mind was whirling.

"Yes," Remus admitted, his expression chagrined. "And I'm sorry I hadn't told you until now. We'd been together over a year, though that doesn't make it right."

"It was that last day of term, wasn't it?" George pieced together the heaviness of that particular afternoon when Remus had been helping him pack up his classroom. "When Malfoy--"

"Precisely." Remus cut him off. "I couldn't help myself; the mixture of sexual pleasure and guilt were radiating from you, but I forced myself to act as though I didn't know. Which was why I was so grateful when you were honest."

"I've never lied to you," George said, plainly. "I'm a jokester, but bald-faced lying has never been my strong point. Well, unless I'm talking to Mum. But Fred was always more convincing." He quirked his

mouth. "All right. Try this." He finished his pint as Remus raised an eyebrow. "I want us to go back to the Cleansweep and for you to shag me til I'm sore. True or false?"

Remus choked, then coughed a few times. Imposing a pseudo-serious look, he closed his eyes and took in a deep breath.

"Well?" George demanded. He did, of course, want that to happen, and then to sleep for at least a day. And maybe take a hot bath. Hopefully with Remus there as well.

"I sense that you're very tired, but there is a bit of desire mixed in," Remus said, as a look of gratitude crossed his face. "Most of all, you want to be with me," he continued, his voice warm with emotion. From across the table, Remus took George's hand and caressed his fingers. "I know you've been through your share of tragedy, but you're still young yet. And don't argue with me until I'm finished, please," he went on as George choked back the contradiction that had already leapt to his lips. "You can't begin to imagine what it's like to be me, to be one of my kind, and be found desirable." Remus spoke carefully to George's chewed fingernails, focused on them as though they somehow held mysterious profundity in their brittle, teeth-bitten edges. "That it happened once defied imagination. Twice is, dare I say it, miraculous."

George began to feel uncomfortably close to tears. "Well!" he said, enthusiastically, attempting to cover his deeper feelings. "Let's go and get naked, shall we?"

"Let's."

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### **III.**

*To live with wolves, howl like wolves.*

George didn't notice anything odd until a Saturday afternoon a couple of weeks after the Drombeg Incident, as he now thought of it to himself. He had arrived in Remus' rooms in his school robes, having attended a prior meeting with the few hardy souls comprising the Enterprising Witches and Wizards Enclave, all with ideas for new shops and business pursuits. After shucking his robe, he'd taken a short nap in his oxford and trousers.

Once he woke up, he made a cup of tea and sat on the bed, trying valiantly to convince Remus to leave off of grading parchments. As a beginning exercise, Remus had each student create their own wizarding family trees. This assignment was an anticipated exercise in the class, and, in fact, fast becoming a favourite for young History of Magic students, especially those of mixed Muggle and wizarding backgrounds.

"C'mon, Remus," George pleaded from the other professor's bed. "If they make even a half-arsed effort you give them full marks, so why spend so much time on them?"

"Because they're fascinating," Remus replied from the small study whose doorway was opposite the bed.

"I'm fascinating," George said provocatively, making sure his voice carried into the next room. "And I'm getting hard, just thinking about you. Thinking about how hot your mouth is, especially when you've had one of your post-dinner drinks, and it's like fire on my tongue, then you breathe in my ear..."

George surprised himself at his monologue of what Remus' touch did to him. He usually let Remus do the dirty talk, but George found that he really was getting turned on as he spoke in no uncertain terms how Remus made him feel.

As George spoke about Remus' teeth gripping his nipples, he felt the urge to touch them himself. He undid his shirt and wet his fingers, then clasped the hard nubs, pulling on the darker skin all while telling his lover how it felt when Remus was there. Then he undid his pants, freeing his hard cock,

pushing his trousers down past his knees. After fishing about in his pockets, he took out a small vial of potent lubrication, sent to him by Charlie from the Dragon Preserve where he had returned after the War. "Not that I'd know anything about its other uses," his older brother had written, "but a couple of the chaps here are like you- you know, that way - and they recommend it. Anyway, Happy Anniversary." Eyes closed, he spread some of the tingly substance on his fingers then began slowly fisting himself, still speaking aloud what it felt like when Remus was touching him, though his commentary was more to himself than anything else. There hadn't been any noise from the study for some time, and George had given up on Remus joining him.

"Your fingers, oh pixies and paradise, when they're so slick and you know just how to tease and stroke, and you put me in that brilliant mouth of yours, and I'm just a goner. 'Specially when you run your tongue all down me and then pull back, tugging on the top, and you put a couple of fingers in me and it's all I can do not to come right then, but I want to wait, 'cause then you'll be inside me and it's the best feeling ever, so thick and fuck, just unbelievable, you're a man and still we can do that and-MERLIN!"

George's eyes flew open.

Apparently Remus had been listening, because he had crawled naked onto the bed. The heavy cock that George had been lauding was now dangling precipitously near his mouth and Remus had a possessive look in his eyes.

"You were saying?" Remus said, his husky voice making George's heart skip several beats.

"Fuck," George murmured before sending out his tongue to swipe across the head of Remus' cock.

"I hope so, after listening to all you just said."

"Hmmmphphight."

"Pardon?" Remus asked, withdrawing from George's mouth, an amused expression on his face. "Didn't quite catch that."

"Light," George panted. "Seems like the bloody sun is in my eyes."

"It's fairly overcast, but let me take care of the curtains."

George appreciatively watched Remus' slender frame as he closed the heavy drapes. Remus really did have a most fabulous arse. George felt immediately better, and even more horny than he had been before, if that were possible.

"Come and fuck me. Please. Oh. Gods."

A throaty chuckle rumbled from Remus. "Just a werewolf. But your command is my wish."

Everything that George had mentioned came to pass. After yelling Remus' name so loudly he was sure that McGonagall had heard him and he just didn't fucking care, George surrendered to a deep, sex-sated sleep while Remus cleaned them both up and went back to the family trees.

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The problems with light became worse. George found that he kept his curtains closed at his flat, and he became irritable in class when the sun was particularly bright. Given the time of year and their geography, it didn't happen that often, but George didn't understand what prompted his mood swings. Not only that, but he discovered he had an inexplicable fascination with, and desire for, red wine. Remus was more than happy to placate him, and Malfoy as well, who had a veritable cellar down in the dungeons. Oddly, George felt very comfortable in the Potions Master's rooms, with the chilled stone and torchlight. He rarely went without Remus, given his few interludes with Draco last year, but he always came away feeling soothed and calm. George was also never entirely sure that Malfoy

wasn't modifying the wine somehow, though he was especially careful to watch him open the bottle and pour the contents.

And then there was the fact that he was always cold.

He would sleep next to Remus, draped over him. Even though he had assumed that he had adapted to Remus' higher body temperature, now he craved the body heat; he needed it. Sleeping alone at the Cleansweep became an exercise in retrieving as many of his Mum's and Hermione's knitted afghans so he could stay warm. Fred gave him no shortage of grief from the portrait, but George tuned him out.

About a month after they had been to Ireland, when George was clasped to Remus as though he were his very shadow, Remus ran his hand through George's hair.

"Not that I mind, but what's going on?" he asked.

"Dunno," George replied. "I'm just cold. Bloody stone castle and all."

"Yes, but that's never bothered you before."

George traced his fingers across a raised scar on Remus' back.

"Bloody hell," he said, his body stiffening. "Remus. Bollocks. It's from the Drombeg Incident."

"The what?" Remus snorted.

"Don't scoff, no, really. That bloody day in Ireland. I'd meant to tell you, but there was the whole emotion-smelling thing and then the shagging and then we got busy and since I didn't feel poorly I never told you that- "

"That what?" Remus pulled back from him, the look in his amber eyes suddenly very serious.

"While I was in the circle, the wind snatched my quill. When I got it from across the way, I noticed this mostly-buried stone and touched it. And then there was a lot of pain, and I passed out. I wasn't out for that long, though," he said hurriedly. "I was fine by the time you showed up."

"Why haven't you said anything until now?" It was obvious that Remus was on the verge of livid.

"I told you. I felt fine. Nothing happened, I didn't think. And we were busy."

"Not so busy that you couldn't have bothered to tell me that you had been knocked out by something while in an area so drenched in dark magic that I could barely see you in it!"

"You're yelling," George seethed through clenched teeth. "Remus, you're yelling at me. Bloody hell- I'm sorry. Honest to Merlin, I thought whatever it was had passed. I've felt just fine, up until recently."

"We have to go back," Remus said, his voice measured. "And I didn't mean to yell. It's just that Merlin only knows what struck you. A hex, heaven forbid, a curse? It could be anything, and now it's been several weeks and whatever it was is probably ancient and it'll take some time to figure out how to counter it." He rubbed his long fingers into George's upper back. "You could have been killed," Remus said, quietly.

"Then let's go." George felt a bit sick to his stomach, his lackluster ability to get things right churning through him. "I'm sorry I always disappoint you. Look, you can get rid of me once we know whatever it was that's made me so clingy..."

The remainder of his comment was swallowed in a searing kiss. When Remus pulled away, his expression was still severe, but it was obvious that it was because he was worried. "Not getting rid of

you, and I don't ever need to hear you say that again. But George, use that common sense that you have in spades. Please."

George nodded, somewhat reassured. "Well, I've been hit by jinxes and hexes since Fred first learned to cast them. The War taught me about curses. I know what they can do."

"Which is why I'm so flabbergasted that you hadn't said anything!" Remus' mood had tilted back to exasperated.

"I just did. Here, leave it, okay? I'm sorry for being such a bloody idiot and for making you look like one when you have to explain to the Ministry that you want the stones unwarded so we can go back." George turned over so his back was to Remus, pulling the covers with him.

"I won't look bad in front of the Ministry, not any more than I already do," Remus said, rubbing George's back gently.

George grunted, thoroughly disgusted with himself and wishing he could get his hands on one of the few legal time-turners to have that afternoon to do over again.

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Remus was already halfway through his breakfast when George made it to the Great Hall the next morning. Thankfully it was raining, but even that much light made George feel achy all over. He didn't usually take breakfast at the school, but Dumbledore had generously given him a small room off of the first-floor hallway, so his presence wasn't immediately suspicious to anyone on the staff, much less the students. He took a seat across from Remus, who wished him a subdued 'good morning,' then looked along the table for the tea.

"Tea, Mr. Weasley?" McGonagall held the kettle and motioned for his cup.

"Ah. Great. Thanks." George passed over the cup then took it back, holding the steaming contents to his face.

In a voice so quiet that George had to lean in to hear him, Remus asked, "Do you remember what you were dreaming about last night? You were moaning, but I hesitated to wake you."

George took a sip of tea, then busied himself slathering a piece of toast with butter. He chewed for a minute, studying the other food items available, then was assaulted by forgotten images from the night before. He swallowed as he looked over at Remus, who seemed unusually contemplative.

"Yeah. Nightmares. Fred." George tried to concentrate on them, the details fleeing his conscious thought as surely as students rushing off after exams. "Say," he went on, spearing some bacon off of a nearby platter, "why don't you go to Drombeg and I'll poke around the library to see if there's something that happened there that wasn't already in your summary."

Remus nodded, and George tucked into his breakfast. A few minutes later one of the students in the Enclave, Sebastian Langford, enthusiastically tapped him on the shoulder and asked if he could show George the first draft of a business plan he had come up with the night before.

"As long as you don't mind risking getting egg on your parchment, the space is yours," George said, gesturing at the empty space next to him.

The Ravenclaw gave him a wide-eyed look. "I wouldn't presume to sit at the faculty table. Here," he said, shoving the plan at him. "If you don't mind, just look over it and I'll see you on Wednesday."

Langford beat a hasty retreat back to his classmates while George shook his head and placed the scroll carefully on the table next to his plate.

"You're really something," Remus said, looking admiringly at him.

George tried desperately not to let the goofy smile that he felt actually get to his mouth. "Not so much," he replied, and glanced up at McGonagall, who had an eyebrow raised looking at the two of them. "Fred and I certainly weren't the only students to enter Hogwarts intent on learning how to make a mound of galleons." He gave Remus a knowing look. "And some were busy with other incredibly important, but non-schoolwork oriented activities, from what I hear."

Remus quirked his mouth. "Students, up to no good? I wouldn't possibly know anything about that." He eased himself off of the bench and away from the table. "I hope that your research with Madame Pince is illuminating."

"Me too," George said. "Be careful."

\*\*\*

Even with Madame Pince's assistance, George couldn't find anything in the annals of Wizarding history at Hogwarts' library that had anything to do with Drombeg. Remus returned with the now-innocuous stone, placing it in a warded box for good measure.

George's symptoms got worse. After a few more weeks he went to Dumbledore and told him what had happened and grudgingly asked to have someone else take over his Laughter in Magic course. He could no longer risk teaching during the day after he gestured through a weak sunbeam one day only to suffer a red burn on his hand. He became nocturnal by necessity, as sunlight became unbearable. George and Remus researched vampiric curses, as it was increasingly obvious that was what had affected him, and even Hermione got clearance to various restricted sections of the Ministry to find out what she could- which was nothing they didn't already know. He did spend a few evenings with Lee Jordan, who was a regular at several clubs and didn't mind George's eccentric waking and sleeping habits, but the crush of people overloaded his senses after a while.

Remus was wary of trying the known counter-curses since the dark magic in the area had been so strong, but George was getting desperate.

"I can't live the rest of my life like this, like some bloody half-vampire," he said, huddled next to the fire in Remus' room. "I can't teach, can't work the shop during the day, I'm sodding useless." He jabbed at the burning logs with a poker. "May as well try and be a Muggle, as pathetic as that is."

There was a sharp intake of breath from the opposite side of the room.

"Of course," Remus said, slowly exhaling.

"Of course what?" George said irritably, turning around to see Remus shaking his head.

"I should have thought of this weeks ago!" He slammed his hand down on his desk. "Muggles, that's it! I'm going to the Bodleian library in Oxford. Tonight."

"I don't follow," George said. He pulled the afghan around his shoulders.

"I suspect the reason why we haven't found anything is because whatever happened at the stone ring was witnessed by Muggles, not wizards."

George rolled his eyes. "C'mon, Remus. If there's so much residual dark energy there surely some wizard would have written something about it. And besides, what could a Muggle write that would possibly help? They don't even believe in magic. Most of them."

"But some do. It's worth trying."

At this point, George was ready to engage in any kind of magic, whether dark, blood-oriented, sexual or mind-invasive to get rid of the curse. "Right. You're simply going to Apparate into some part of the library?"

"No." Remus strode over to him and leaned down his hand. "We're simply going to Apparate into some part of the library." He pulled George to his feet, shoving the blanket off of him. George was still wearing an undershirt, button-down, and two oversized jumpers his mother had knitted. Remus looked strangely at the garish maroon 'F' emblazoned on the front. "Are you having personality confusion as well?"

"Piss off," George growled, snuggling into Remus. "It was what I pulled out of the chest. I was cold. Fred, George, what's the difference?"

"Well." Remus ran his hands behind George and grabbed his buttocks. "For one, as charming as Mr. Fred Weasley's personality is, he does seem resolutely confined to a world of portraits. And the George Weasley clenched in my hands is not."

George sucked on the side of Remus' neck. "We'd better go before I get ideas, then," he said, rubbing his hips against the older man's.

"And you need to eat more. There's not much of that gorgeous freckled flesh for me to hold onto anymore."

"Like you can talk."

Remus swatted him on the arse. "Let's get to the Forest."

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After Apparating from the Forbidden Forest, George stepped away from Remus in the near pitch-black. The library was, rightly, empty. Except for the ghosts. Several phantasms wandered through the stacks of books while two sat across from each other at a reading table, caressing each other's translucent fingers.

"Hag's hounds," George breathed. "What are they all doing here? Don't the Muggles see them?"

"Well, I put much more stock in Muggle-wizarding interaction than you do, but I suspect that most of them don't," Remus replied, his voice quiet and tinged with melancholy. Or so it seemed to George, who was simply unused to seeing ghosts of any kind outside of the Hogwarts castle. Poltergeists, well, there had been Peeves, and the one at the Burrow. Outside of school, however, he had never run across other figures that haunted particular locales dear to their corporeal hearts.

"We're on the wrong floor. Follow me."

George did, noticing the broad swaths of tarnished moonlight illuminating high shelves and row after row of books. Thanks to his curse he was even more attuned to the moon's cycles and knew that the full moon was in three nights.

They made their way through several descending staircases until Remus stopped. "Wizard," he muttered under his breath. "Can't imagine who else would be here this time of night."

George shrugged. "Guess we'll find out," he said as they readied their wands.

Both George and Remus incanted *lumos* spells on their wands as dimly as they could make them, then entered an area that even to George's unschooled eye was obviously not visited by many people. There, at a reading table with thick tomes hovering around her, was Hermione Granger.

"Hermione?" George spluttered as she jumped up from her stool and jutted her wand unwaveringly at the two interlopers.

"Who's there? I knew you were coming, y'know," she said in an authoritative voice.

"Remus Lupin."

"And George."

"Thank Merlin," she said as she watched their approach from the gloom, then pocketed her wand. "If I get caught doing any more *oblivate* spells on the cleaning staff the Ministry is going to get after me."

"What're you doing here?" George asked, still taking in their surroundings.

"What do you think?" she asked, incredulously. "I'm trying to figure out what in blazes happened at that spot in Ireland and what it will take to find the correct counter-curse for your..." she hesitated, "condition."

"Mum put you up to this," George stated, looking around the room. "I should've known."

"No," she replied, waving Remus over to her. "Well, I mean, she did owl me a couple of times about what was happening and that you were drawing more and more away from everyone, and Ron--"

"Have you found anything?" Remus interjected, leaning sideways to look at the book titles. "I feel twice the fool now, thinking that my idea to go to a Muggle library was such a clever idea. Apparently you've already been here a few times."

Hermione smiled and twisted a rogue curl of hair into the orderly plait running down the back of her head. "Guilty. But I may have finally found something."

After stowing their wands, Remus and George clustered over her shoulders as she pointed to some mid-1700's writings about a mysterious angel and his unfortunate demise at the Druid's Altar.

"I need to do a bit more research, but I'm almost absolutely certain that there was a vampire coven and this Angel figure was a wizard. He was a rector at the parish church- might've been mad, I'm not sure. But it seems that the people in the village saw him as a sort of God-blessed deity, and so he decided to fulfill that role."

"Sweet Merlin," Remus said, his fingers brushing the brittle page with its unmoving text. "A wizard priest?"

"I suppose," Hermione answered. She continued in a subdued, storytelling voice. "And he took it upon himself to be the saviour of the village, even though there were more than just vampires." She pointed at a paragraph.

"Priest?" George asked, feeling oddly distanced from the discussion. Remus and Hermione had extensive Muggle roots, but compared to them, his interaction with the complexities of the non-wizarding world was woefully limited.

"Religious figure," Remus said, his eyes still focused on the text, though he did rub his fingers into George's shoulder.

"There were dark wizards who preyed on the seeming infallibility of the vampires," Hermione said excitedly. "All of them gathered together and Angel went out to try and defeat them and save the parish from whatever dark magic they would have inflicted 300 years ago."

"So all we need to is find out how to counter a vampiric curse spelled into a stone by dark wizards in Ireland in the 1700s," George said, wrapping his arms around his chest and feeling dismal. "No worries."

"Actually, having the time period can make all the difference," Remus said consolingly, running his fingers on the bump at the bottom of George's skull.

George almost allowed himself some hope, his head leaning on Remus' shoulder, relaxing into the strong fingers kneading under his hair into his scalp. "D'you have some bright idea?"

"He wasn't Defense Against the Dark Arts professor for nothing, George," Hermione reminded him, waving the books back to their usual shelved- and in one case, glass-encased- locales. She stood up and looked at the two men, hands on her hips. "I would never have thought so, but you two do make a very handsome couple."

George rolled his head on Remus' bony shoulder blade. "Hermione, I think you're just saying that because we're the only gay couple you know. And besides." He turned to Remus so he could encircle Remus' middle with his arms, and looked into the amused expression on his lover's face. "We all know that Remus is the catch in this pairing. Dangerous, sexy, and indecently good-looking for a man his age."

Remus snorted, but gave George a look that he knew very well. An appreciative, lusty, 'you're going to be holding onto that headboard for dear life while I fuck you from here to Thursday and you're going to love it' look. "You'd better be careful. Aren't you the one that said flattery will get you bugged?"

Hermione looked incredulously at them. "I don't believe you lot! How can you want to have sex so much? Ron and I don't. I mean, well, we do sometimes, but it's not like-"

"Don't want to know, Hermione," George interrupted, turning his head to look at her. "For all I know, Ron likes to be tied up and have you use a riding crop on him. But he's still my brother, and you're going to be my sister-in-law at some point, and I just don't. Want. To. Know."

She blushed an extraordinary beet-red colour.

"Oh, bloody hell," George said. "You don't really use a riding crop on him, do you?"

Hermione clasped her hands to her mouth as Remus gave a rare, throaty laugh.

"Thank you, Hermione, for all the work you've done here on George's behalf," Remus said after he regained his composure. "I think we should all get home."

She nodded dumbly, mouth still covered.

Remus was chuckling as they Apparated back to the Forbidden Forest.

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#### **IV.**

*If you want a partner, take my hand.*

It was Christmas Eve. Hogwarts was empty, save a few professors and even fewer students. Mid-afternoon found George in the dungeons, watching Malfoy hand Larkspur and Remus their wolfsbane for the month, in the same stoppered green beakers he always used.

"Happy Christmas," Malfoy said, raising the vials in a toast. "Sorry to leave you out Weasley," he continued. "Except, I won't. A Malfoy could never be so rude as to leave out one of his guests."

While Draco strode across the room toward a cupboard, Beauchamp turned to Remus, blushed, gave him a fierce hug, then bid a hasty retreat from the dungeons.

"Full moon at Christmas. That's dismal," George said, watching as Remus kept his eyes fixed on the door where she had exited.

"Indeed."

"It's really great that she has you here."

"Yes. I was, of course, fortunate in my friends, but knowing someone else like me would've made a world of difference. Perhaps."

"Ah, the happy couple," Malfoy said, appraising George exclusively. "Cheers." He handed George a dusty bottle of red wine.

"Malfoy, this is ancient! You can't give me this." George turned the bottle in his hands.

"I can and I will. Now go on. I need to pack my trunk and get home to the Manor. Besides." Draco reached out his arms and rested his hands on the other men's arms. "If what it takes to lift your curse is what I think it is, you'll need it afterwards." Malfoy was looking at Remus, but he gently ran his thumb along George's bicep, then squeezed it lightly.

"Happy Christmas. See you next term," Malfoy said, stepping back and crossing his arms.

"Thank you, Malfoy," Remus replied, nodding briefly and turning to leave.

"Cheers," George said, hefting the bottle, then followed Remus out of the laboratory.

"Good luck."

The door shut firmly behind them.

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They made their way through the quiet halls back up to the first floor, the near-silence broken only by two Slytherins protecting the back of their heads as Peeves chucked chestnuts at them. The poltergeist waved at George, who waved back.

"Say!" George exclaimed as they approached Remus' door. "I could try and learn how to become an animagus, too. Bollocks. I should have thought of that ages ago."

Remus pointed his wand at the door to undo the locks, then he looked at George and shook his head. "It's not like it used to be, George, and I truly appreciate your sentiment." He opened the door and waved George through. "The transformations, thankfully, are virtually painless. And there's enough to deal with ridding you of this curse. You don't need to spend extraneous energy learning how to transform yourself."

George placed the wine bottle carefully on a table near the doorway to Remus' study, knocking some parchments over in the process. He squatted down to retrieve them. "Not like I can do much of anything else right now," he muttered to himself. "At least that would be something useful." Standing, he glanced over at Remus as he shoved the scrolls into as tidy of a pile as possible.

Remus had knocked back his wolfsbane, grimacing at the taste, then put the beaker on his nightstand. He shook his head a few times, silver-streaked hair flying around his face. "Awful," he growled.

"Isn't it always?"

"Yes, but I half-expected Malfoy to give it some festive flavour."

"I wouldn't have put it past him."

"Drink? There's a few hours yet."

"Sure."

George waved his wand at the fireplace, murmured *incendio*, and soon they were both seated next to the cheery flames. He was sitting on the floor, sheltered within the confines of Remus' legs, nursing a

glass of wine and luxuriating in the other man's touch as Remus ran his fingers through George's hair. Then the fingers moved down, running across George's chest, and he felt his lover's growing erection nudging into his back.

"Mmmmm," George said, tired but wanting to do something for Remus before his change, especially on Christmas Eve. He disengaged himself from Remus' legs and turned around, kneeling in front of the older man. The room was very dark, an attempt to keep George as comfortable as possible. It meant that the firelight playing on Remus' face set his features in sharp relief, his expectant expression captured in flickering illumination. George ran his hands up Remus' legs to the bulge tenting his wool trousers, letting his fingers rub against the hardening shaft. He looked up at Remus to gauge his reaction, but Remus' eyes were closed. His legs opened wider, however, and George smiled to himself.

He undid Remus' belt and waist buttons and unzipped the placket. The tempting, musky smell of *remusex* was there as George shamelessly rubbed his face in Remus' groin, inhaling the other man's scent and powerful lupine smell from the wolfsbane potion. "Think I need to get you out of these," he breathed into Remus' boxers.

"Another brilliant thought from that mind of yours," Remus said, lifting up from the chair so George could pull down all of the clothes until the fabric clustered around Remus' ankles. George took care of removing the obstructing shoes and socks, then tugged off Remus' trousers and underthings, throwing the garments out of the way. George knelt again, closing his eyes and running his tongue up the inside of a hairy knee and inner thigh. He rubbed the trimmed hair of his goatee against the sensitive soft skin of Remus' balls, a gesture he knew Remus loved. George sent out his tongue, deftly tracing a familiar and scent-driven trail of skin, pulling one of the soft sacs into his mouth and running his tongue all around the lightly furred surface, grazing his teeth a bit when he heard Remus' appreciative growl above him. Eyes still closed, George suckled the sac, then suddenly stopped. His nose had run into something hard. Something at the base of his lover's cock. George sat back on his heels, gasping.

"What's that?" he asked, then abandoning any decorum, leaned back into Remus' crotch and stared.

"Happy Christmas, George," Remus panted, placing his own fingers around the device, turning it in a slow circle. George felt his own cock jump in a frisson of hedonistic need. In front of him was a magical cock ring. Glowing in the dim light, the words 'Property of George X. Weasley' pulsed on the surface. "Do you like it?"

George responded with dangerous enthusiasm.

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A few hours later, George was curled up on the floor, huddled in several blankets, a few feet away from where the wolf lay, looking back at him with disconcertingly familiar gold-flecked eyes. George had finally convinced Remus to let him spend the night with him after his transformation, though it had taken ages to get there.

"We've been together almost two years!" he'd insisted. "It's Christmas. Bloody hell. You've even been officially accepted into the family, for bollock's sake."

Remus had tried to stare him down with his most severe glare, but it was rather unconvincing when he had been unable to resist the siren call of the hand-knitted maroon jumper with a large silver R in the middle, Molly's white flag of truce. "All right," Remus conceded. "But only after. Not during. And go ahead and put some clothing of yours in the room. If Malfoy hasn't tinkered with the wolfsbane, I should be able to recognise you without any problem, but bring your wand with you regardless."

Now the two gazed at each other until George couldn't stand it. "I'm cold," he apologised, then got up to his knees and shuffled toward the wolf. He pulled back his lips at first until George put out his hands in front of the wolf's nose. He was sniffed, then licked. *Accepted*. George didn't dare pet Remus in this form- truth be told, he had never quite realised nor appreciated what it must be like to turn into an animal, especially one as large as the full-sized grey wolf in front of him. Every movement George made was done in a gesture of submissiveness; Remus had stressed that while it was certainly

him in the room, and ultimately he inhabited the mind of the creature George would confront, Remus the person would be untenable and unaccessible on any profound level.

But George was freezing, and he knew it was Remus there, and honestly, he was suffering no small bit of apprehension about what had to be done the next night to be rid of his curse. He missed his lover; he missed Remus' body heat and furry chest.

"I'm going to lie down in front of you," he said to the wolf, which raised its head and held out its tongue, breathing open-mouthed for a bit. "I'll take it that's okay."

The wolf - Remus - yawned, jaw unhinging as only can be done by a canine. George smiled, then slowly lowered his body down, facing the wolf, and then turning his back to it. He scooted back until his prone figure was next to the more rapidly breathing animal, not wanting to rush things, but needing to be near Remus, regardless of his temporary form. After awhile, George relaxed enough not to jerk away when the large head behind him leaned over and licked the exposed skin above his ear, then rested behind him on a bony paw. A heavy foreleg draped over George's shoulder, and he nestled into the heat of the prominent ribcage behind him.

"I love you, Remus," George said quietly, quite sure that the wolf couldn't hear him. "I know I've never said that to you before, and it's pretty cowardly to do it while you're not really who you are. I mean, aside from Mum, and maybe Ginny, I've never said it to anyone. Not even Fred, but I guess that went without saying." He rubbed at his nose, willing away the tears that pricked behind his closed eyelids. "I must sound like a lovesick git or something, but you do mean the world to me, and I really do want to do right by you, no matter what. Just can't believe you still put up with me, and that cock ring..." he grinned, rubbing his shoulder blades against the wolf's fur, surprised when a loud huffing noise blew into George's ear. "Oy! Can you hear me? Do you understand what I'm saying?"

George turned his head around only to have a large wet wolf nose nuzzle him on the sensitive spot on his neck, behind his ear. "You're tricky, Remus Lupin," he said, settling down and curling up his arm so he could lay his head on it as a cushion. "I do love you. Happy Christmas."

The wolf made a low whining sound, then licked George's neck two more times for good measure. George was asleep within minutes.

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"Hermione, I'm bloody freezing!"

"I know, I know. And I'm sorry," she said, pity in her expression. "This is the only way, though, and even I'm not sure it's going to work."

"Let's get it over with then," George replied through blue lips. Remus, in wolf-form, wouldn't leave his side, rubbing up against him. The moon was full for two consecutive nights, which made Remus miserable, but had been responsible for the opportunity to perform the ritual that would hopefully rid George of the vampiric curse. The trio had stood at the ocean's edge, a mile from the Drombeg circle, where Hermione had made two braided circlets of seaweed, incanting something in Middle Irish and fastening them around George's wrists. He was naked, and shivering; feet in the ocean, almost falling in with the slick stones and the fact that he could barely feel his feet. *Súanem suthainn*. It sounded like Parseltongue to him, but Hermione insisted that it would allow him to be bound to Remus. It was only blood-binding with another dark creature that would expel the vampiric curse which could then be, in theory, infused into the earth where it would be too diluted to be harmful. Or so Hermione thought.

George and Hermione Apparated from the sea to the circle, and Remus followed, panting, a few minutes later.

"Bollocks, bollocks, bollocks, bollocks, bollocks!" George was shaking. "You're not going to be able to get any blood out of me. It's all vanished."

"George, I am so sorry--"

"Just go on. I'm sure seeing me like this is no picnic for you either. Thank you for giving up your Christmas night to be blinded by my glow in the dark body and having to do dark magic. I swear I'll get you something nice once this is all over."

She enfolded him in a full-body hug, garnering a low growl from Remus.

"Just being friendly," she said as the wolf nosed at her legs. "You have the stone?"

George nodded. He stood in the center of the circle, all too aware of how he must look in the moonlight, knees knocking together, and his private bits shrunken with cold, trying desperately to curl up into himself.

Hermione took her wand and began speaking the counter-curse very carefully. She invoked the powers of earth and stone, blood and water, then took out a small knife. George knew she had memorized the pattern of the cracked rock that had housed the curse, but he held it in his hands with the spiral turned outward so she could see it.

"I'm sorry," she whispered, placing the knife to his chest. With a deliberate hand, she cut him, making a replica of the spiral on his body. The magic she had called around him made the pain far more bearable, but Remus was whimpering nearby, making it seem worse.

Once the pattern was done, George lay down on his back on the pebbled ground. The wolf came over and licked his abdomen, licking away the blood and then letting some of it fall onto the stone in George's hands. George felt as though the wind had been knocked out of him as his breath seemed to rush out of his fingers. He dropped the stone at the same time that the seaweed ties sizzled and smoked; it had felt like a burning coal, and he rubbed his hands in the damp ground in an effort to cool them off. Remus lapped at the circular trail until there was no blood, just a slightly oozing welt in a spiral.

"Did it work?" Hermione was breathless, and looked apprehensive.

"Dunno. Something happened, though," George managed to say through chattering teeth. "Can we get the bloody hell out of here now?"

"Most certainly."

George allowed himself to be pulled up from the ground and gratefully wrapped the bathrobe around him that Hermione had brought. "Ready to Apparate back?" George asked the wolf, squatting down beside the large grey body. Remus had insisted that he could Apparate while in wolf form as long as he knew exactly where he was going, but it had made George very uncomfortable. It was one thing to be clutching Remus the person and travel magically, but it was quite another to try and hold onto a dangerous-looking wolf, even if George rationally knew it was Remus. The wolf licked the side of George's neck. "I guess that's yes."

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## **V.**

*Here I stand- I'm your man.*

"So I wondered how daft he must've thought I was not to notice that he didn't care for all the birds I tried to set him up with, and I tried not to get too sodding cranky with him, 'cause it's George, y'know, and I just can't stay angry at him for long, and so anyway, here's to George and Remus!"

Lee Jordan raised his pint, already at least two sheets, if not three, to the wind.

"To the oddest handfasting, wedding, whatever, I've ever attended, but it's George, and he's happy and that's all I've ever bloody cared about. You're the best, mate."

George about spewed his beer all over the table. Molly was in tears, his father's face continued to have a blushing tinge to it, Hermione saluted and then grabbed Ron's glass and swallowed a hefty amount of the contents as Ron began to curse a blue streak. Charlie and Percy's children ran around the table while their parents each had slices of cake, and Ginny clutched George's arm.

"I just wish Fred and Bill were here," she said, her eyes red. "But I'm happy for you too."

"Oh, I told Fred. You should have heard him, after he quit swearing. He was more than happy not to have to cope with Mum being a faucet."

Ginny sniffled. "Sounds just like him."

"Because it is," George replied, moving his arm to drape around her shoulder. "Chin up, Gin."

She nodded, then wiped her eyes and allowed herself to be eased from him back to Neville's side.

"You didn't have to do this, y'know," George said to Remus, who appeared to be surprisingly comfortable being the center of attention, even with the gaggle of Weasley clan all around him. His voice took on a serious tone. "We're really a nightmarish lot. You'll probably regret this."

Remus shook his head and with his thumb, ran over the trail hidden under George's shirt and robes. "I'm done with regrets. Life's too short, and there are far worse ways to spend my life than with a handsome man who can make me laugh and who's only just hitting his sexual prime. Especially now that I can enjoy seeing you in daylight again."

"You're barking," George said, his heart fit to burst, still reeling that they were publicly joined and that they were accepted. "You should be with somebody better."

"You are better, George. You're marked. For me."

"You're a hopeless romantic."

"Yes." Remus leaned over and kissed him lightly, the gesture mostly unnoticed in the cacophony of the revelry going on around them. "You are too, you just haven't realised it yet."

"Bloody sentimental pouf." George grinned.

"Takes one to know one."

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### **Author's Notes**

~"Love's An Anarchist" comes from a poem by Kurt Brobeck and is used with permission.

~ "I'd crawl to you baby and I'd fall at your feet," "If you want a partner, take my hand" and "I'm your man" are all from the fabulous song **I'm Your Man** by Leonard Cohen.

~"To live with wolves, howl like wolves" is from a 2002 Russian Proverb calendar a friend gave me a couple of years ago.

~"Things which cast no shadow" is from the poem **Poen** by Leonard Cohen.

~ *Sumain súil* should roughly translate to "summon sun" in Middle Irish; *Súanem suthainn* should roughly translate to "(rope) twisting eternal." My thought was that the binding spell would be braided into the seaweed armbands that Hermione places on George.

### **Acknowledgements-**

~The idea and multi-use lubricant from the Dragon Preserve comes directly (but within a different context) from Minx's great story, "Here There Be Dragons."

~Remus' ability to sense people's emotions is fanon within many communities, and I would acknowledge multiple authors if I could only remember who they all are. One, for sure, is Minx.  
~The idea of an 'angel' having been killed at the Drombeg standing stones came from one line of a song by Beth Patterson, "Steer By the Stars." The inspirational phrases are:

*Now we all take our chances on what we regain  
But only fools would rush in where an angel's been slain*

## Till Shadowed Days Are Done

"Stop running, Xave!"

The rust-haired boy paid no attention to his father's admonitions as he rushed past the table.

"Can't! Maniacal Masked Marauder'll get me!" he panted as George followed in hot pursuit, a red cape billowing behind him.

"Gotcha!" George yelled as he swooped down on his prey and grabbed Xavier by the waist, then swung him up in the air. The boy screamed in delighted fear as George lowered him in his arms, then dropped to the ground, pulling Xavier with him.

"George!" Percy's voice, charged with parental worry, carried across to where George was now tickling his nephew mercilessly.

"He won't break, Perce!" George shouted above the writhing, giggling mass of boy.

"He's really wonderful with children, isn't he?" Remus said, the wistful look on his face belying the neutrality of his question.

"I'd sure hope so, given that he and Fred were still acting like children themselves up until, well, you know." Percy pushed his glasses up his nose and glanced at Remus, who was sitting next to him. "Never thought I'd say this, but you seem to be really good for each other."

Remus cocked an eyebrow and gave him a 'well, go on then' look while licking some icing off of his finger, taken from the top of one of Molly's pastries. Percy blanched under the scrutiny. "I mean, not that that's odd, but you're successful and a published scholar, and then there's George."

Remus put the rest of his fingers in his mouth in turn, sucking off more stray sugary fluff. Percy began to backpedal.

"Not that George hasn't done well financially, of course, but he and Fred were already doing that after school, and I just can't fathom what you see in--"

"In a sexy entrepreneur who also teaches one of Hogwarts' most popular electives?"

Percy gulped.

"Oy!" George was striding toward the table, Xavier clasped under one arm, the boy's face red from laughing. "Stop flirting with my brother."

"What?!" Percy exclaimed, a blush beginning in his cheeks. "He's most certainly not--"

"Remus, you know better than to do things like that, thinking I'm not watching."

Percy's gaze moved quickly from George to Remus and back, staring as George plopped his nephew on the ground, then trailed his index and middle fingers through a glop of icing and waved them in front of Remus' mouth.

"Care to suck a little more?" he asked, wriggling the fingers right in front of Remus' lips.

Percy began to look nauseated. "I think Xavier and I are going to go talk to Hermione," he said hurriedly. He got up from the picnic table, took his son by the hand, and walked quickly to another part of the yard, pulling the boy behind him.

"You're cruel," Remus said around a mouthful of George's fingers and icing, swiping his tongue between the sweetened digits.

"He deserves it," George replied maliciously, leaning toward Remus. "Needs to get used to us."

Remus kissed the pads of George's sticky fingers then sat back a bit, looking up at George. "You're in black again."

George took the back of his unlicked hand and wiped a stray tear of sweat from his eyebrow while regarding his clothes. "So I am." Remus patted the seat next to him and George straddled the bench. "Is that supposed to mean something?" he went on, sitting so his right knee was next to his partner's.

George found his hand held in Remus', and after a furtive glance around the yard: Charlie talking to their Dad and Mum; Percy regaling Hermione with some terribly important something or other; Ron throwing an enchanted miniature broom with Xavier; pulled the long fingers and placed them provocatively on his crotch. "Nice day for a shag, don't you think?" He rubbed against Remus' hand, eliciting a husky sigh from the older man.

"Yes. Very nice," Remus replied, running his thumb up the slight hardness in George's trousers. "But there're other things to tend to first. Let's go." He removed his hand and affectionately stroked the red hair of George's goatee with the back of his fingers. "I'm almost used to this," he said, a smile flitting across his mouth.

"I've had it for over a year!" George huffed, indignant.

Remus chuckled, scooting away from the table to stand up and brush stray crumbs of cake off of his vest.

"If you didn't like it, you should've said something before now." George pulled a nearby plate to him, then picked up a fork in his left hand and began making a pattern across the neglected slab of congealed salad, quivering in the mid-afternoon sunlight.

"I do like it. The way it scratches..." Remus let his voice trail off as he tugged gently on George's shoulder. "It's very erotic. Bit surprising, actually."

George grinned and abandoned his burgeoning food art.

"Let's go give our regards to your family."

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Half an hour later they were walking in the specially sanctioned graveyard on the periphery of Hogwarts' school grounds. George looked over at Remus' almost empty glass and came to a halt. "Top up?" he asked.

Remus shook his head, then, changing his mind, said, "Well, I suppose so."

"That's the spirit." George poured him a very healthy serving of scotch, and followed it with even more into his own before screwing the lid back on the bottle. When he finished, he saw Remus looking thoughtfully at him.

"You've become quite the drinker," he mused.

"Oy, it's your fault," George said, poking Remus in the shoulder, then drinking a good third of the contents in his tumbler with a satisfying swallow. "You're the one who started foisting this stuff on me. Bad influence, you are."

"I drink bourbon mostly. You know that." Remus studied his glass, then the monument they had paused beside. "There's only one person I knew who was as fond of drinking it in the quantities that you do, rather suddenly, it seems."

George took another swig. "Ron?" he offered, then contradicted himself. "No, he's more a beer'n chips bloke, despite the time in Glasgow."

"Severus Snape."

"Snape?" George exclaimed incredulously, backing up to the stone memorial behind him and assuming a slouch. "Ugh. Couldn't stand him in school, and being partnered with him during reconnaissance didn't exactly make us friends either." He grimaced. "Can't imagine what he would've thought about my mini-lab up in our room seventh year."

"Good thing he can't hear you," Remus said drily, "seeing as how you're right next to his marker."

"Am bloody not!" George retorted. "I'm sure we're at Fred's. That's where we always stop." He thrust his arm back over his shoulder, expecting to feel familiar rock. "Oh, fuck," George hissed, his fingers not meeting the Weasley name, but rather that of Snape. He whipped around, looking menacingly at the marker, gesticulating with his glass of liquor. "Where's Fred? What'd you do to him?"

The memorial resisted George's plea for information and stood resolutely mute.

"C'mon George," Remus said, walking the few steps to be at George's side and placing his arm reassuringly on George's shoulder. "Let's go over to Fred's memorial."

*There's something else going on*, George thought, the verve of scotch and his inner troublemaker deciding that he'd have nothing to do with Remus' attempt at coddling.

"How do you know about Snape's drinking habits? I didn't think you were close in school or while you were teaching."

There was a pause, as the unexpected balm of late afternoon drifted through the graveyard. Various animated stones made their way amid the bright flowers and other gifts that had been placed that day in memoriam of the end of the war with Voldemort.

"We shagged."

A bit more time passed as George noticed the clouds beginning to accept their sunset colours of lilac and betrayal.

"What?" he asked disbelievingly. He slumped against the tombstone, then remembering whose it was, jerked himself upright from it.

"Shagged. Had sex. Only a few times. At Severus' initiation, actually."

George turned to glare at his lover, astounded into shocked anger. "Why?"

Remus swirled the amber liquid, then drank a goodly amount before answering. "Does it matter? We were two men with similarly dismal and familiar pasts. It wasn't as though people were clamouring to be with a werewolf trying desperately to keep that knowledge a secret. I'm not proud, George, but neither can I honestly say that I regret it."

George drank the rest of the contents of his glass, then poured himself some more. "Merlin, Remus. It's not like I thought you were chaste after Sirius or anything, or, well, maybe I guess I did. I don't think I'm making sense anymore. But knowing that you, and he, it makes me ill. Snape." He shuddered.

"There was more than just Severus. I couldn't tell you the names of all of the men I had sex with in Halifax when I was trying to be a Muggle," Remus murmured, running his hand down to George's hip. "It was a dark time in my life. Consider yourself lucky so far that you haven't-"

"If you say anything about my age I swear to Merlin I will Apparate out of here before you can say 'younger man,'" George growled. Despite himself, George leaned his head against Remus' vest-clad shoulder, desperate to draw Remus' attention back to him and away from Remus' past. "And bloody hell, would it kill you to say you love me, especially after what you just told me? Tell me you're different now than back then. We're handfasted, you and me, and I'm bloody bound to you, and you've never said so." The liquor was positively singing in his veins now, willing his speech and body forward, fast and furious, and definitely not filtered through his head. He straightened up, placed his glass on Snape's marker, then opened his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt so the scar on his chest was plainly visible under his red chest hair. He pulled Remus' hand to his skin, clutching the warm palm against his breastbone. "Bound to you," he said again for emphasis, staring at his partner's eyes, then stepped closer so he was leaning into Remus, hip to hip. "I'm a Weasley. We do have our pride, y'know. We're nobody's second best. Never second best."

George stood for a few moments, waiting for reassurance that he knew was coming. Surely Remus loved him, even if he hadn't said so in words.

"You know I do," Remus said, his voice husky.

George was assaulted by a completely irrational desire to fall to Remus' feet, but his stubborn streak held him in sway. Why he'd had to fall in love with an often-distant werewolf whose past got more convoluted and inaccessible by the minute, he didn't know. He was George ridiculous-jokeshop-owner-Weasley, for heaven's sake. Sod it all, he'd been pursued by this complicated man and he'd liked it.

Liked Remus.

Loved Remus.

Remus, who had apparently fucked half of Halifax and Snape as well. Maybe even before George was ruddy born, because he was always going to be seen as some youngling, though George had been the one to try and console Fred after his daily sessions of Death Eater torture, who had seen his share of death and dealt it during the War, there would always be Remus' past and Sirius...

George dropped to his knees, then rested his head against the beloved thin legs he knew so well. "If you'd just say so, just once," he pleaded into the wool trousers.

Long fingers threaded in his hair. "Something's come over you since your curse-breaking," Remus' calming voice said above him. "I think it has to do with what happened to you at the end of the War."

George snapped. "I think I'm leaving." He wrenched himself away from his bondmate, hastily refastening shirt buttons and grabbing his tumbler to finish his drink, but not before toasting the granite behind Remus. "Sorry for the irony, Snape," he said bitterly. "Guess we shared all kinds of things we didn't know." George looked balefully at Remus. "Talented at potions, mutual loathing, knowing what it's like to be shagged by Remus I'll-never-get-over-Black-but-you'll-do-instead Lupin." He paused. "Cheers." He tossed back the scotch then hurled the glass the short distance so that it shattered satisfyingly against Snape's memorial.

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George was still miserable in his half-asleep fog later that night when he felt Remus join him under the covers and heard Remus whisper something he couldn't understand in his ear. In the morning, after abandoning Remus in their bed to salve his raging headache by making an individual batch of his Hogwarts-perfected pepper-up potion, he thought he remembered hearing something when Remus had climbed in, but then decided it'd been his overactive imagination.

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He was sitting at the table in Remus' house - their house - wearing his usual tracksuit and cradling his cup of tea when Remus entered, yawning. The full moon had been only two nights ago, and while his

transformations were now usually unremarkable, George knew Remus would be more tired than usual until the moon waned a bit.

"Morning," George said froggily, then cleared his throat. "I mean, morning."

Remus shuffled over and kissed him on the top of the head. "Morning. Sleep well?"

George watched Remus pad about the kitchen, fetching a cup and saucer of his own, tightening the sash on his bathrobe, and returning to the table.

"Mmph," George grunted, shrugging his shoulders as Remus pulled out a chair and sat next to him, then poured a cup of tea. "I've been doing some thinking."

Remus raised an eyebrow while blowing away steam from the cup.

"Yes, and that's not such a bloody unlikely occurrence, s'don't start."

"I didn't say anything," Remus replied, smiling into his cup.

"Hang on, you did say something," George said, pouring more milk into his tea. "But before that, I want to say I'm sorry about bolting yesterday. And for other inappropriate behaviour and commentary. Absolutely uncalled for."

Remus transferred his cup to his right hand so he could place his left on George's right. There was a slight clink as their handfasting bands touched. "I told you some unpleasant things about me. You'd every right to your outburst."

George smiled weakly, enjoying the familiar feeling of Remus stroking his fingers.

"A *ghaoil*," Remus said, voice raspy with early morning disuse, and George dimly recognised the unfamiliar words as what he'd heard last night.

"Pardon? That's not English." He felt Remus squeeze his fingers.

"No. Gaelic. Means 'my dear,' or 'my love.'"

George felt the strange puddling notion he'd had from yesterday, quickly followed by a flash of guilt. "You're not just doing this because I was begging you, are you? Since obviously that bit about Weasley pride was bollocks."

Remus shook his head. "I should've said so before now. I do adore words, and books, but a few sentiments I've felt were better expressed without them, with actions."

George clenched his bondmate's fingers so tightly his own began to ache. "You're brilliant, Remus. Merlin, you're just bloody perfect." He willed the tremours from his voice.

"Hardly." Remus leaned over, caressed the hair of George's goatee, and kissed him. George loosened his grip on Remus' hand as he closed his eyes and kissed back.

Soon George sent out his tongue, pushing Remus' lips apart, tasting sugary tea and somewhat stale flavour of morning mouth. At that moment he didn't care.

Remus did, however, as he responded with less enthusiasm and pulled back. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I'd rather brush my teeth before doing much more of that."

George smiled, leaning away but lifting a hand to caress Remus' collarbone. "S'alright. I understand." He played with the handle of his teacup. "Can't imagine post-pepper-up and tea mixture is so delightful either."

A little while later George was tucking into breakfast- a hot one, shockingly, and made without magic. Remus had decided after all of their imbibing at the graveyard that a hearty breakfast would do them good. "It's practically brunch anyway," Remus had sighed, looking at the clock.

After swallowing a mouthful of beans on toast, George asked, "How d'you know Gaelic? Are you holding out on me on some secret spell thing for ASWA?"

Remus cut into a grilled tomato. "Not at all. The Anglo-Saxon Wizarding Association is hardly a group focused on intrigue. Before I was bitten, I spent some summers with a great-aunt in Calanais in the wilds of the Outer Hebrides. That's probably where I first developed an interest in standing stones, as there's an impressive set there, but I also picked up some of the language. Not much; a few phrases, maybe." He added some egg to the tomato and speared it with his fork. "I saw her a few times after that as I was growing up, but it was a challenge." He ate the mouthful and chewed thoughtfully. "I'm not sure why that phrase came to me like that."

"Doesn't matter. I was just curious." George spooned an inordinate amount of preserves onto a triangle of toast. "So, like I said before you made this gorgeous meal," he chomped down on the bread, "I've been thinking."

Remus shook his head and focused his attentions to some bacon.

George went on, chewing and speaking. "No, honestly. This morning, I was making that potion and thinking about what you'd said about the War. I thought I'd tell you a bit about what it was like for me. At least until the Snape part."

A troubled expression crossed Remus' face. "Are you sure?"

"Yeah. Might as well, though I'm no hero or anything."

Remus trailed some toast through a golden smear of egg yolk. "I do want us to talk about it -"

"Least I can do," George interrupted. "D'you remember it was you who had that flask handy at Fred's funeral? I couldn't have gotten a bloody word out if you hadn't found me. Barely got the words out anyway." He went to take a sip of tea, then saw his cup was empty, so he pulled out his wand and tapped the kettle.

"But not right this minute," Remus continued, despite the interruption. He began screwing the lids back onto the jars of preserves. "Mind if I get a shower first? I'd really like to get cleaned up before discussing some of the business that went on."

"Suits me," George replied, pouring himself some steaming tea, then adding milk and sugar.

"Back in a few." Remus headed toward their toilet.

Upon listening to the water of the shower for several minutes, George was hit with inspiration. Gratitude. Lust. Something along those lines. After retrieving two key items from their room, he shed his track suit and went into the warm bathroom, thick with steam.

"George? I'm almost finished," Remus called from the large claw-footed tub.

George could imagine what Remus looked like, mostly-silver hair clinging wetly on his shoulders, his scarred back turned pink with hot water; he would be doing his last ablutions, soaping himself up between his legs before rinsing and cutting off the tap.

Which George decided he mustn't do. Yet.

George surreptitiously stepped into the bathtub, the noise covered by the old and noisy piping.

"Take your time," George said meaningfully into Remus' ear, sidling up behind him, his growing erection nudging under Remus' arsecheeks, inflamed from the pounding water.

"George! What are you doing?" Remus exclaimed, spraying the words as he tried to step back from the showerhead. George held him by the waist, looking down to see his cock grazing the underside of Remus' slightly squarish backside.

"What does it feel like?" George asked, provocatively rubbing into Remus as he attached his Christmas present on his lover. The magical cock ring flashed 'Property of George X. Weasley,' though its brightness was dimmed by the mist and soapy bubbles that had been on George's hand as he'd fastened it.

"Merlin!" Remus moaned, leaning back into George's chest. George began pulling tenderly on Remus' flaccid cock, smiling to himself as he worked it into a more aroused state. He was going to take Remus this morning. Something unexpected- plus, he'd never had a shag in the shower. It was one of the few fantasies George had entertained that he'd not acted on before, as it seemed awkward and potentially dangerous. But also sexy as hell.

He switched hands so his dominant left hand was on himself, not that George needed much assistance now, but he also wanted to apply some lubricant and he got all sloppy using his right hand, with or without running water being involved.

"Is this okay?" George asked Remus' earlobe, then ran his tongue over it as he let his ring finger slide up Remus' cleft.

"Very. Okay," Remus panted into the air, tolerating George's more-clumsy clutchings on his cock, which now throbbled despite being constricted at its base.

George slicked the lubricant on himself, admiring Remus' body. As he situated himself, he realised that while they weren't unmanageably different in height, Remus was all legs. And George was all torso. And he was not getting a bloody footstool.

"Remus, would you mind turning just a bit and holding the shower pole?"

It was awkward. And dangerous. And sexy as hell. George pushed the head of his cock through the tight entrance; gently, gently as he could manage until he couldn't do gently anymore. Remus' hands were clasped to the sturdy pipes, a washcloth placed over the metal as they weren't well-insulated, shoving back in time with George's thrusts. Hot water showered down on them; George had poured more of the vial's contents on his hand and was fisting Remus with his left hand while he'd wrapped his right arm around Remus' solid hipbones.

"Oh Remus. Remus, Remus, Remus... Merlin. Always wanted to do this."

"You've. Never. Said. So," Remus admirably managed, one word per delicious wet slap of naked skin.

"Still some surprises, I've got," George said into Remus' upper back. He adjusted his angle so his cock would hit that spot deep within Remus' body that Remus could ply so easily when making love to George. George twisted a bit to the left, then right -

"Oh, fuck, George!"

*Found it!* Rather proud of himself, as he was usually quite content to let Remus shag him, George took Remus fiercely, going for that spot, hearing the brilliant good-fuck sounds Remus was making, again and again. Then he slid his fingers down the base of Remus' cock and snapped off the ring.

With an eruption of gasped intimate profanity and creamy splotches like a Pollock painting, Remus came all over the shower curtain.

Not long after, George did as well, both hands holding Remus' hips for dear life. It was so different, being accepted in the clenching, tight heat- as he held the wet skin, feeling his orgasm subside wavelike, in short shudders, George splayed his fingers further in to feel the edges of Remus' curly hair.

*Pretty brilliant, he decided. But not for every day.*

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After their memorable shower, Remus went off to make tea. George took his time getting dressed, remembering the day he'd told Molly he was going into the army. Organising of witches and wizards into discreet, particular fighting enclaves against Voldemort, Death Eaters, and any other creatures allied with the Dark Lord had begun prior to the attack on the joke shop, but he and Fred hadn't paid too much attention. Until they were taken hostage, that is, and Fred tortured and killed. After that, it was only a matter of weeks before he'd made contacts with some of the Order members and had enlisted.

*"No, George, I can't allow it!"*

*"You can't stop me. I'm of age, for Merlin's sake! I can't just put the shop back together as though nothing happened. They killed Fred. They fucking killed Fred!"*

*"Don't you use that language around me, George Weasley! Nobody is more aware of Fred's loss than me. That's why I can't let you do this. Bill and Charlie are already involved, your father's attack last Christmas-"*

*"They need everybody. Even someone like me. I've enough anger now to cast an arsenal of unforgiveables."*

*"George, please." She grabbed his hands, holding them tightly on the table. "I can't bear to lose you, too."*

*He shook his head. "I'm only half a person anyway."*

*"Oh George, you mustn't say things like that." George could see tears in her eyes, but she held herself in check. "You know you don't mean it."*

*"Actually, Mum, most of the time I do. My heart's not into anything, least of all Wheezes. Selling gags doesn't seem right with all that's going on."*

*They sat in silence for a few minutes, then George spoke quietly. "I'm leaving this afternoon. One of the reconnaissance units, but I'm not allowed to tell you which one."*

*"This afternoon?" Molly looked stricken. "But there's no time!"*

*"Exactly." George gently disengaged his hands from his mother's clutch as he stood from the table, then pulled her up, holding her to him. "There's no more time," he whispered, burying his face in her red hair. "I love you, y'know. I'll owl or get news to you somehow. I promise."*

*"You be careful, George," she said sternly, almost crushing him in her hold, then released him. "You'd better come back to me, you hear?" Her voice was rough with emotion.*

*"Course, Mum."*

*An hour or so later, George willed himself not to look back when he Apparated from the Burrow.*

*"George? Care to come out on the porch?" Remus' voice carried from the kitchen, bringing George back to the present.*

"Sure." In stocking feet he walked down the corridor and met up with Remus, who had opened the door to the front veranda and was levitating the tea kettle and two cups and saucers through it. George felt the outside breeze and shivered. "It's a bit brisk to be outside, don't you think?" George asked, rubbing his arms.

"I've got the fire going in the stove, not to worry." Remus smiled. "For being English, you're not very tolerant of the cold."

The door shut behind them as they walked over to two chairs near an old wood-burning stove Remus said had come from some distant relative.

"Compared to your inner temperature, it wouldn't matter if I were an Eskimo." Remus smacked him on the arse. "Oy!" George said, turning around. "No need for discipline." He gave Remus a heavy-lidded look. "Or maybe there is," he continued, sticking out his backside and wiggling it.

"You're quite keen today, aren't you?" Remus said, grabbing at one of George's arsecheeks. "Maybe later. If you're still in the mood."

George dropped into a chair then looked for something to prop his feet on. "Can I borrow your wand?" he asked, and Remus handed it over. George and Fred both had taught themselves some rudimentary wandless magic when their Mum had begun taking their wands away for periods in the summer, but transfiguration was much easier with a conduit, even if it wasn't his own wand. He focused, and the empty flowerpot became a cushioned ottoman. "Cheers," he said, returning the wand.

They sipped tea in silence for a couple of minutes, then George burst out, "Were you with Harry at the end? I hadn't really understood what all went on, but last we'd heard before Snape and I were ambushed was that you and Moody and Dumbledore had figured out a last assault. And I was out for a while, never really known what happened and was so glad to be alive and not missing any important bits that I hadn't bothered to find out the details."

Remus nodded. "I was. There are still some aspects to it all that I don't understand. Why were you paired with Severus? I thought that your division- you were in Malfoy territory, right?"

"Yeah. I would never've believed how many houses, and companies, and spies the man had until we started mapping them all out." George shook his head at the memory.

"But reconns were supposed to be in groups of three."

"I know. We had been up until a few days before that. We'd lost MacLeod and there wasn't anyone else to spare." George stared into the flames of the stove. "That was a really bad loss, MacLeod." He looked over at Remus, who was nodding, encouraging him to continue. George focused on the golden eyes, crinkles in the corners, wondering briefly to himself how he'd gone from barely paying attention to Professor Lupin in class several years ago to the man being his life partner, with all of the disasters and some high points in between. Then he was looking at MacLeod in his mind's eye, before he'd had to bury him and send notice to his mother. "Life's a bastard at times," he said.

Remus lounged in his chair, propping his head against his hand. "Now there's an understatement," he said wryly.

George stared into his tea.

*"Ye're who? Weasley? Right. MacLeod. Jon MacLeod."*

*A wizard around George's age with wide shoulders and short brown hair introduced himself. "Glad to have another mate with us. We're taking out Malfoy's spies and all that. Bit brutal, so I'm grateful ye've got some muscle on ye."*

*It'd taken George a few days to get used to his highland brogue, but it began to become comforting, especially when he found out the third person in their group was to be none other than Severus Snape.*

*"Rest assured, I find this no more pleasant than you do, Weasley," the former Potions Master had said the first time the three of them gathered at the central Apparation point, having the arrival coordinates handed to them on parchment which spontaneously combusted after a few seconds. "I cannot believe I'm supposed to find my way into one of Malfoy's prisons with an ex-sheepherder and a Hogwarts' dropout," Snape fumed, his brows so furrowed George thought he must have a headache.*

*"Pleasure being with your sunny company too," George tossed back. "Better with us than dead, eh?"*

*Snape glared at him. "I'm not so sure."*

*"George? Hello?"*

*George snapped out of his reverie. "Oh, sorry. Just thinking about...Well, I met MacLeod and put up with Snape and it wasn't too bad, at first."*

*Remus nodded, pulling hair behind his ear. "Go on."*

*"Sure," George sighed, and gave an overview of the couple of months he spent with Reconnaissance Four.*

*\*\*\**

*The missions went on and on, even though they were able to find less and less. Somehow Lucius or someone near him must have figured out that people were getting through into his euphemistically called detention centres, as they stopped finding hostages and began discovering only corpses.*

*Then came the afternoon when one of the key wards to their hideout was blasted away. George rushed into the fray, MacLeod at his heels, faced with a barrage of Death Eaters, some brazenly attacking on brooms, others on foot. Deadly curses and vile green light shot everywhere. It was all over in minutes, but not before George had narrowly missed a killing curse while pummeling a man who'd launched himself at George, who was protecting MacLeod. Jon had taken out two Death Eaters while desperately trying to reinforce some of the warding, but then was struck in the face with a cruciatus and fell writhing to the ground. George kned the Death Eater in the groin and stomped viciously on his wand hand, feeling the sickening sensation of crunching bone.*

*As the haze of spent magic slowly lifted from the scene, it became apparent they'd lost two people, their Arithmancy expert and an overly-polite but excellent magic tracker who'd just finished school at Durmstrang. Their small group of fifteen was now thirteen, and they had to move their headquarters. Everyone was sleep-deprived and the news about how to get Harry close enough and prepared enough to defeat Voldemort that trickled to them was less than inspiring. But they had to keep on; survival and removing the underpinnings from Malfoy so he would crumble were all that mattered. For George, it was all revenge for Fred's death, but killing left him drained, and ill.*

*Owling anything was strictly forbidden, though George had had the foresight to pack a couple of charmed boomerang kites. If his spells were worth anything, and he hoped to Merlin they were, they would home to the Burrow, and his Mum would know how to disenchant the cloth to read his messages. They all kept their magic use to an absolute minimum since it could be traced and clusters of it would give away their location.*

*There was a small stream flowing nearby, but it was coming into autumn in earnest and the water was frigid. Bathing was done sparingly. Everybody looked dirty, yet no one fretted about it. Alive was good. Clean would be a bonus, but it was rather low on the list compared to still breathing.*

*One night George couldn't sleep, the juxtaposing images of dead witches and wizards with Fred and their shop, the shelves full to bursting, crowded his mind, keeping him awake. Maybe Fred's better off,*

*he thought, teeth beginning to chatter as he pulled his blanket over his face. War's bollocks. It's all going to come to a crashing end before long and I don't even have an inheritor- oh fuck, should've put something on that last kite to Mum that Ginny should get the shop if I don't come back, oh fucking, fucking hell.*

*There was a tentative, warm hand on his shoulder.*

*"Weasley," he heard whispered in a heavy accent, "s'bloody freezing. D'ye mind?"*

*"Fuck, no," George hissed back, grateful for the body heat as MacLeod situated himself rather gracelessly next to George, knees bumping his legs, a forehead knocking into his neck. But oh, the heat! George wedged back into Jon as tightly as possible, positively grasping at the arm that insinuated itself over his chest. He lay there for a while, relishing the warmth spread out behind him. Then he felt guilty. He wasn't doing anything for MacLeod, just absorbing warmth from him like a bloody leech. Then he felt... he felt a hardness. And he was growing hard as well.*

*Bloody hell, what was all this? He wasn't a shirtlifter. He'd had fancies for all kinds of girls. Well, one. That had gone nowhere. But that didn't mean -*

*The hand, familiar enough in George's mind's eye from write-ups he'd seen MacLeod scratch out with quill on parchment, fingers rough from crofting, was making its way down his chest and stomach, pausing at the button on George's pants. They all slept in their uniforms, as any other niceties were long gone, used up during their weeks on the deadly quiet front lines of a war whose unmarked boundaries changed by the minute.*

*"Weasley?" the voice was in his ear, entreating.*

*"Dunno," George mumbled, confused. "Well, okay, I s'pose."*

*Prickly hair rubbed against his neck as MacLeod nodded in response. Once the hand had found George's rigid cock, his body was on fire. There wasn't even any kissing but he knew this was right, though he was shocked by it. Fred would never understand, but George decided after he was dead, he'd have forever to try and explain since Mum'd had a portrait done of the two of them, and he could enjoy watching Fred have fits after whenever he was killed and found himself in Fred's company again.*

*George put his hand on MacLeod's, stilling it, then turned his head over his shoulder. "Can I turn over?" he whispered. "D'you mind? Like to see you," he offered.*

*"Aye," MacLeod replied.*

*They couldn't risk the cleaning spell when it was over, but George knew they were all existing in degrees of filthy and it wouldn't matter that they used a bit of cloth from his bed. He'd never felt anything as brilliant as that, shafts rubbing together, held in MacLeod's talented hand; brooding, silent masculine kisses that went straight to his pulsing cock.*

*Blokes. Or bloke. He fancied a bloody bloke.*

*Definitely will not be telling Mum this, he decided, his chest to MacLeod's back, not caring who found them. Unless it was Snape.*

*\*\*\**

*They'd slept next to each other every night following that. No one seemed to care, or they were all too exhausted to notice. George thought he might have heard a liaison between two others in their unit, but he turned a deaf ear. Only Snape resolutely kept to himself, always taking the last watch, always curled up in his corner of the warded tent that served as their shelter. George tried talking to him once or twice when there was a lull, even dragging out a tattered fabric chessboard with tiny pieces to lure him into a game.*

*"Isn't it enough to be a pawn, Weasley? Why do you think I'd bloody well be interested in engaging in even more strategy?" Snape had snapped, then turned back to his maps, studying them.*

*"Well. Fuck me for trying to be civil," George replied, then shoved the chess bits into his bedroll and went looking for Jon. The Scot was about to go on patrol with Lewis, but George couldn't stand the thought of being stuck in that bloody tent for another minute, so he switched times and took Lewis' place. She shrugged as she agreed to the change.*

*"Nap sounds delightful," she said, then began a coughing fit that was still going on as the two began to walk the perimeter of their camp. Half of their force was sick on top of everything else, and with such restricted use of magic and limited ingredients for potions, most people simply suffered through.*

*They were around two-thirds of the way through their perimeter walk when MacLeod stopped. George leaned into him. "What is it?" he asked, keeping his voice down. It was one of the woodiest areas, sheltered but also a likely locale for a breach, were there to be one.*

*"D'ye want me, George?"*

*George stood for a minute, absolutely transfixed by the vague question. "Do I what?" he asked. "Want you how? Are you getting ill too? Bollocks." He placed his hand on MacLeod's forehead, but Jon pulled it down and took George's face in his hands and kissed him, roughly and possessively. George responded in kind, feeling himself become aroused despite the danger.*

*Breathing heavily, MacLeod murmured into George's ear, "Ye feel s'bloody good. D'ye want me like that, canna have you like that?" He ran his hands down George's back to his arse, pulling their hips in so George could feel their erections rubbing together. He felt like an idiot, but decided he was so far beyond shame that it didn't matter.*

*"I reckon, but you're dealing with a bloody virgin, so I don't really know what you're asking. But if it feels like the other things we've done, then yeah."*

*MacLeod suckled on his neck for a moment, drawing his wide fingers from the small of George's back down his cleft, pushing against his opening through the layers of fabric. "There," he said, his voice ragged with need. "S'where it goes."*

*A million thoughts raced through George's mind, and they all ended with, 'But how can that work?'*

*"We can't take too long, but I'll be gentle with ye, at least for the first bit," MacLeod said, grinning.*

*That was how he'd lost his virginity, extraordinary discomfort and pain giving way to stunning sensations he could never have imagined. MacLeod had snuck some cooking oil as a lubricant, seemingly with no small amount of foresight or hopefulness. George clutched at a boulder as he was breached, a stream of "oh fuck"s chanted quietly through gritted teeth. Then there was unbelievable fullness and MacLeod was in him. He gasped as something was terribly right and he was rocking back and back and MacLeod was pumping his cock and he thought he started to feel rain on his face and shite he was going to explode. And he did, in fact, his orgasm spurting all over the surprisingly tender fingers as MacLeod continued to pound into him, then came moments later uttering George's name.*

*"Just this once," MacLeod whispered after he'd gingerly pulled out of George. He murmured something George couldn't hear, but he felt the effects immediately. George instinctively knew that he would be very sore, but whatever spell MacLeod had cast at cost to their safety would make it easier.*

*"What happened to him?" Remus asked as George shivered against the cold, wishing he had on a jumper. "You can tell me and then we'll go inside."*

*George scratched at his nose. "Died. Can we go inside now?"*

*Remus nodded solemnly.*

"He caught something a week or so after that," George went on, pulling his feet from the ottoman and up into his chair. "Everybody was sick, but he got struck down with something awful and Snape was still pretending to play both sides, gone for days at a time. I'm good with potions, but not like he is. I tried everything I knew but he got worse and worse with fever and Snape didn't come back for ages. It was near the end of the War, but we couldn't have known at the time."

George studied his hands holding his teacup and long-neglected tea. "Bloody awful, it was," he said, staring at his freckles. "He was a really great bloke, clever as anything, and he did right by me. I just wasn't ready to wake up with somebody else dead in my arms, y'know? It made me a bit reckless. Everything seemed so sodding pointless."

Remus unfurled from his chair and knelt by George's legs. "You did what you could."

"Right. But me doing what I could never seemed to be enough. I couldn't save Fred, MacLeod, even Snape, though I didn't care nearly so much about him. Please tell me you're not planning some stunning exit too. Couldn't fucking bear it." George looked out across the small apple orchard near the house, the sun hanging low in the sky and casting warped shadows through the trees.

"Not if I can help it," Remus rumbled into George's lap. "C'mon, let's go and have a lie-down."

George allowed himself to be pulled from the chair and followed Remus into the house. Despite the early afternoon hour, Remus poured them both a brandy. "Prevents bad dreams," he said with a small smile.

A few minutes later, George was ensconced in their large four-poster, stripped down to his boxers due to Remus' body heat, lying on his back, a hand behind his head. Remus sprawled next to him, one arm across George's chest.

"Thanks for telling me all of that," Remus said, his breath tickling into George's ear as Remus pulled him closer. "Means a lot to me."

George stared at the ceiling. "Guess there's still this Snape-obsessive bit, though, eh?"

Familiar fingers moved up from George's ribs to his face, turning it toward Remus, who leaned in to kiss him. "Later."

George drifted off to the soothing warmth of Remus' chest rising and falling next to him.

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As George made his way down the Hogwarts corridors to his room a few weeks later, he marvelled at the students in his entrepreneurial enclave, their parchments from their biweekly meeting carefully labelled and in his knapsack. Their ideas were clever, their plans well thought out and researched, for the most part, anyway. It was reassuring to George to know that there was a new generation of youths at the school intent on pursuing their dreams to their presumably lucrative ends, as he and Fred had done. He raised his wand as he reached his door, turning the sign below 'The Wizard Weasley Is' from **Out** to **In**, then entered his small study and adjoining bedroom. He pulled out the scrolls and put them in a large wooden cubbyhole above a shelf functioning as his desk, noting that none of his protégés were interested in opening yet another jokeshop. George could hardly blame them; as much as he still loved doing what he did at Wheezes, the gag-selling market was still a pretty small one.

The rest of his afternoon was spent uneventfully, making comments on his second-years' outlines for upcoming research papers on a series of charms that all had a tickling element to them. His room was cozy with a fire lit in the grate, a glass of scotch at his hand as he marked pointers and suggestions. He didn't have any visitors through the afternoon, so he managed to get loads accomplished. By seven he stood at his fireplace, powder in his hand, about to go to the shop when he heard a knock at the door.

"S'open!" he yelled, stepping back from the grate and realising he hadn't turned the sign in the corridor back around. It was a bit late for a student, though, especially since it was a Friday.

"You are in! I thought you'd just forgotten to turn your sign around. Again."

Remus lounged in the doorframe.

George gave him an insulted look. "Oy. You're just about in my office. No insulting the professor unless you want detention." He tried discreetly to pour the floo powder back into the bowl.

Remus noticed. "I'll risk it. You *were* on your way out." He flipped the sign from **In** to **Out**. "Going to Wheezes?"

George nodded in the affirmative as Remus walked in, shutting and locking the door behind him. "Mind if I join you? I haven't sent anything to Oleana in a while, and I think you've come up with a couple of items she might fancy to torture her brother with."

"Sure," George said, grinning. He'd finally met Remus' second cousin once removed a year or so ago and likened her to a much-younger Ginny. "I'm working all day tomorrow - need to give Zap a break."

"Such a busy man," Remus said as he watched George adjust his shirt over the waist of his pants. "Still favouring black, are we?"

George rolled his eyes, then walked the few steps to Remus, pulled him in by the coat lapels, and kissed him vigorously. "I've gotten a few compliments on these pants, I'll have you know."

Remus appraised him, placing his hands on George's hips. "I've noticed you seem quite content to keep wearing those practically indecent leathers posing as trousers despite the fact that they've driven students and faculty to distraction, even under your robes." His long fingers looped through the belt loops on both sides, tugging near George's hipbones. "Should I be worried? I'm not getting any younger, after all, unless Malfoy has slipped something I don't know about into my wolfsbane."

"I'd know if he did," George replied, leaning in and giving Remus a thorough sniffing at his neck. "You'd smell different." He nibbled on Remus' earlobe, eliciting a pleased low rumble from the older man. George gently moved out of Remus' hold and went to the fireplace. "C'mon. And don't think you're being subtle. I know you still want to do that- that memory thing."

"Guilty. But it's a bit complicated. Nothing like that binding spell, but it can wait until tomorrow evening after you've closed up. I'd like to be at your place, at the Cleansweep, if that's right by you."

"Sure," George shrugged. "Though I suppose I should get serious about hauling the rest of my rubbish to the house. Even after a growing up in the Burrow, I'm not so desperate for privacy that I need three places to call home." He snorted.

"Two's probably plenty, you're right. Has Fred decided where he wants to be?" Remus asked, scooping up a handful of floo powder.

A pained expression crossed George's freckled face. "Let's talk about it after we go by the shop. He's being a bleeding arse about it, not that I blame him." He stepped in front of Remus, grasped some green granules and threw them into the fireplace. "Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes."

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The store had been busy most of the day, though it wasn't enough when there was a lull in customer activity to keep George's mind from wandering to the spell Remus was going to cast on him. At six o'clock he flipped the storefront sign to "You Must Be Joking," locked the door, extinguished the lights with a *nox*, put on his coat and made his way to the fireplace in the back. He stood for a moment,

wavering between using the floo network or simply flying home. For the sake of time, he used the former.

"The Cleansweep."

As he brushed himself off, he stared open-mouthed at the living room.

"You've tidied up- and moved the furniture!" George exclaimed as Remus looked out from the kitchen.

"Yes I did. Thought it would be good to have the open space." Remus disappeared, and George heard the sound of a glass being taken from a cupboard and something being poured.

"Fred? You there?" George called, walking to his bedroom. There was no answer. He tugged off his coat and dropped it on the bed. George looked at the portrait above his chest of drawers, the chair empty save a note propped on the seat.

*Visiting Bill. Lupin said the word Snape too much for my liking. Back later.*

George started when he felt his shoulder tapped and whirled around.

"Sorry to startle you," Remus said, handing him a tumbler of scotch, neat. "I hope you don't mind, both this," he gestured at the glass, "and that." He pointed to the portrait. "I just felt Fred might want to be warned."

George took a mouthful and swallowed slowly, focusing on the burn as the alcohol went down his throat. "You're not making me feel any more at ease about this," he complained, then coughed as Remus stepped in to run a hand across George's groin. "Oy! You're a bit forward," George spluttered. "I just walked in the door."

"I know," Remus replied, placing his hand less provocatively at the small of George's back. "But you should be as relaxed as possible. I've had a couple of ideas."

The glow of the liquor had already made its way to George's belly, and he nodded. "Tell me."

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About fifteen minutes later George was lying naked on his back, cushioned by a long, transfigured blanket, wrists bound a few inches apart and over his head. George closed his eyes, absorbing the heat from the nearby fire, drowning in the sensation of his cock jutting into his lifemate's mouth, the fine line of pain and pleasure wrought with tongue and teeth, barely able to stand the tension building far between his legs as Remus deftly thrust into him with well-oiled fingers.

"Oh, bloody fuck!" An unexpected, and decidedly shocked voice exploded from the fireplace. "Sorry! Back later!"

George's eyelids flew open in horror. "Ron?!" his voice cracked in embarrassment and overwhelming passion as Remus ministered George's body to an intense orgasm. George shuddered, his cock pulsing against Remus' throat, arse clenching even as the waves of pleasure ebbed, prolonged slightly as Remus' talented fingers nestled inside him and one of his nipples was plucked by Remus' other hand.

"Oh Merlin, Remus," George said finally. He heard Remus incant the spell to unbind his hands, and George pulled his lover to him, wrenching a deep kiss from Remus, his tongue licking all through Remus' mouth, tasting his own unique bitter tang and faint echo of chocolate from the biscuits they'd eaten earlier.

When Remus pulled back, George kept his hands on the other man's wiry arms. "That was incredible," he breathed, boneless against the cushion. "I'd do anything you'd ask, now," he went on, his thumbs tracing one of Remus' old white scars like a cartographer marking a beloved trail.

"That was part of the point," Remus murmured, his gaze taking in George's form.

"Piss-poor timing, Ron has," George said, wincing at the memory. *Merlin, but I never want to see him in any situation like that*, he thought quickly. *He's probably traumatised for life.*

"I invited him."

George squirmed, dredging himself up to lean on an elbow. "You what?"

"I invited him. I thought someone should keep notes, and Hermione is otherwise involved, and you saw Fred's opinion."

"So you—"

"I asked Ron. Please don't make me say it again." Remus pinched one of George's nipples, then got up from the floor as George made a profane grunting sound.

"Poor bloke," George started, but Remus leaned over him, extending his hand.

"Why don't you finish your drink and take a quick hot shower? I'll apologise to Ron when he shows up again."

Sure enough, Ron was sitting on the couch with a beer in hand when George walked back into the room a while later, his hair still dripping onto the collar of his tracksuit.

"Merlin, Ron. Sorry 'bout that," George said immediately. "I know you'd never want—"

"Don't want to think about it again, thanks, and Lupin's already fixed things." He waved the bottle toward Remus, poised between the kitchen and living room. "Besides, I've seen worse." He gave a small belch. "Don't want to think about that either. Now what exactly are you going to do to George?" Ron drank some of his beer as George walked toward Remus, who had another tumbler of scotch.

"You trying to get me drunk?" George asked, reaching for the glass. "Last time it was ugly, you remember."

Remus shook his head. "No, just making sure that you aren't keeping guards up." He walked across the floor to sit on a threadbare but surprisingly comfortable chair Fred had had swiped from the Burrow years ago. "Intentional or otherwise."

George went to sit by Ron, who patted the spot next to him. George sank gratefully into the seat cushion, still finding it disconcerting how long Ron's legs were as they stretched out in a v-shape, the heels of his younger brother's shoes anchored on the floor rug.

"Ron, in answer to your question, I have another. Have you two ever thought about the qualities we possess that make us wizards?" Remus asked. "Or what it is at our essence that makes us different from Muggles?"

After a brief pause, Ron and George said, "No," at the same time, then looked at each other and grinned, sharing a dual, familial spark of immediate understanding.

"Hermione's always getting onto me about it, but I just don't see the point, really," Ron went on, shrugging and picking at the label on his ale bottle with his thumb.

"It's never seemed relevant," George added. "I mean, I've had some doings in Muggle life. I'm not a complete dolt, thanks all the same. I went with Ron and the Green Knights to Canada and we weren't always around other wizards, but what does that have to do with this?"

"We are magical."

Ron looked at George, his expression one of 'Why is he being so obvious?' to which George raised his eyebrows in reply with an unspoken 'Dunno.'

"Oh, wait," Ron said animatedly, leaning up from the back of the couch. "You're going to say this has something to do with you being a werewolf, aren't you?"

"No. I'm not." Remus replied, looking amused.

"Oh." Ron collapsed back against the couch, deflated.

"Remus, what are you getting at?" George asked. "We're wizards. We're not Muggles. So what? They have automobiles and telephones and all kinds of amazing things but all it takes is an *Obliviate* spell and they'll forget they saw anything to do with us. I thought you had some issue with me and the end of the War and... Snape."

"Precisely."

"So what's with the random questions? I'm going to need more relaxing if you keep this up." George started to lounge meaningfully with his legs open in invitation, then knocked his knee against Ron's and suddenly remembered they had company. "Just get on with it. Please," he pleaded, sitting upright and downing his drink. "And if it's going to be worse than me being naked in the ocean with Hermione draping seaweed on my arms, don't bother to tell me. I don't want to know."

"I didn't want to know that!" Ron exclaimed, giving George a disturbed look. "She had to... see you..."

"Yes. Horrifying. She's a good one, Hermione." George patted Ron on the thigh. "Better marry her before she really thinks about what she's gotten into. Though if she didn't run screaming after the binding spell, and she's still putting up with your shite after all these years, she must be a keeper."

Ron began to blush. "Well, I was going to ask on our anniversary," he said sheepishly, tearing off more bits of damp paper.

"Really?" George raised his empty glass and knocked it against Ron's bottle. "That's bloody good of you," he said, smiling. "Hear that, Remus?"

Remus nodded. "Even I was beginning to wonder. I'll look forward to hearing her exact response." His eyes crinkled as he smiled. "If it's acceptable for mixed company, that is"

A deep crimson crept down from Ron's cheeks to his neck. "Bugger off, you two," he mumbled.

"Right. Well, as wonderful as Ron's news is, that's not why he's here," Remus said, his voice much more focused. George looked at him, struck as he often was at how commanding a presence he had despite his slight frame and deceptively reticent demeanour. Aside from Larkspur, the student werewolf, George hadn't ever met any other changelings, and he was never sure whether the demanding qualities to Remus' voice had to do with his volatile physicality or if it was simply Remus. But he knew he wouldn't dare not to pay attention when Remus spoke like that.

"George was the last person to see Severus Snape alive." Remus spoke as though reading from a report, his gaze focused intently on George. "I've known Severus since our school days at Hogwarts, and in multiple capacities, some less pleasant than others."

George looked down into the slight pool of liquid in his glass, unwilling to think of his bondmate with Snape, something that made him physically ill. Ron shifted next to him, glancing at George with a raised eyebrow, but George only shook his head.

"All witches and wizards, at least all that I can tell from my research, possess individual auralic patterns indicative of their magic, in the same way that Muggles have unique whorled patterns on the pads of their fingers."

Quite despite themselves, both George and Ron immediately placed their respective glasses between their knees and stared at their fingertips.

"Never paid any attention to that," Ron said, his right hand mere inches from his face, one eye shut to stare at the possible mysteries held in his fingers. "Does it matter? It's too dark in here. Can't tell what he's talking about."

"Muggles, he said," George replied under his breath, squinting at the second, third, and fourth fingers of his left hand, unsure exactly what the word 'whorl' meant.

"George. Ron." Remus sounded a bit annoyed. "I'm sure that you have unique fingerprints. That's not the point; it was an illustration."

"Fred's right," Ron attempted to whisper. "Lupin's a walking dictionary."

"When'd you see Fred?" George began to pry. "And why's he talking to you about Remus?"

"GEORGEANDRON." The voice demanded attention; George and Ron grew quiet and lowered their hands. "Ron, please stand in the middle of the carpet."

"What?" Ron bellowed. "I'm here to take notes, that's what you said."

"And you will. This is just a demonstration."

Ron looked menacingly at George. "Wasn't it enough punishment to see you, doing... that? With him? I know, I know," he continued as George made apologetic noises to his right. "It was an accident. What's this all about?"

"I don't know!" George said, frustrated. "Remus, never mind the demonstration. Let's just get on with it."

"As you wish."

George placed his glass on the floor, grabbed the armrest on the couch and pulled himself up, then walked to the middle of the carpet. He heard Ron shuffle around behind him, fetching his paper and quill. "What do I do now?"

"Nothing quite yet." Remus spoke far more soothingly than before. "First I'll ward the room with three particular barriers, and also temporarily block the Cleansweep from the floo network."

"Should do that any time you're going to be doing randy business in here," Ron grumbled.

"Merlin!" George sighed. "You've got your kinks, little Ronniekins who likes riding crops, so just give it a rest."

"What?!" If Ron had been blushing before, now he was scarlet. "How long has Hermione been talking to you about our sex life?" Ron's eyes blazed.

"It was knowledge accidentally acquired," Remus said in his most pacifying voice. "I can charm a quill to take notes if you and George won't stop with inside family jabs and goading each other. But I trust you'll rise to the occasion."

Ron turned to look at George. "Right. One last question, since this all seems so bloody serious. Of anybody in our family, until you starting seeing him," he pointed at Remus, "you'd've been the last person I'd have thought to have to go through these odd curses and binding and now Remus seems to be trying to channel Snape from beyond the grave, and through you! George, why him?"

George stood in shocked silence, slowly comprehending that Ron really hadn't expected his relationship with Remus to last, and how little Ron trusted the older man. He gathered his thoughts, feeling Remus' gaze on him.

"Look, Ron," he said eventually. "I know you took Fred's death hard, and Bill's too, but you can't know what it's been like for me to lose Fred. Yes, Remus is older, but we're not as different as it seems to you. That Marauder's Map that he helped make was probably the most precious item in our lives for several years. If you'd bother to ask him, I'm sure Remus would tell you about some of the stuff he got up to in school. Far more outrageous than anything Fred and I ever dreamed of." He patted his chest above the location of his spiral scar. "I got the curse because I was being an idiot, and I'm just thankful to Hermione for being able to get rid of it. And I'm even more grateful that it bound me to Remus. I've been through a lot over the past few years, and Remus has been someone I knew I could count on. He's... well, he's a bloody fabulous kisser for starters, and he's even helped to come up with ideas at the shop and oh, hell, I'm not good at explaining things." George ran his fingers through his hair, uncomfortable under his brother's scrutiny, but wanting to express why he loved Remus without sounding completely stupid. "I can tell he's happy when I come into a room. He actually enjoys being in my company. Even I don't quite understand it, but he thinks I'm attractive, and he—"

"I would never intentionally hurt George," Remus said quietly. "If anything, I'm overprotective. His acceptance and love of me is the most precious gift I've known in recent years, and I intend to do everything in my power to continue to be worthy of it, and worthy of his affections."

Ron looked from Remus to George, who was clinging desperately to the thought of '*don't you dare cry in front of Ron*' as he bit hard on the inside of his cheek. Hearing Remus state his commitment so plainly in front of Ron had made George suddenly tearful, much to his chagrin. Slowly Ron nodded his head, and George was more than a little surprised to see Ron rub at one of his eyes, a sure sign that he, too, was trying to keep his emotions in check.

"This is probably hard for you to hear, but I do love your brother," Remus said. "I know I'm not who you would have picked for family."

Ron cleared his throat. "No, it's good. If it had to be a bloke, anyway. You're as loyal as Jordan."

"High praise indeed," Remus said, walking the few steps to Ron and gently squeezing his shoulder. "Thank you."

Ron nodded with a slight jerking motion. "Just keep doing right by George and you're right by me. He and Fred may've been awful to me growing up, but I'm past all that."

"Just wait'll you get a designer sexy whip for Christmas and you'll hate me all over again," George said, trying very hard to lighten the mood. He was determined not to fall apart; despite their several years together, George rarely cried in front of Remus, and he'd die first before doing so around Ron. He wouldn't be ashamed, necessarily, but he already felt vulnerable enough, and this bridge of truce between Ron and Remus was too new to be tested by George becoming a blubbing, grateful mess.

"You wouldn't dare," Ron threatened, though a smile had snuck to the corners of his mouth. "I'd make sure to get you back; maybe sneak some porny poufter mag into your laundry that Mum'd find. She'd pitch an absolute fit."

"You don't have the balls to buy one," George countered, smirking. "Bit hard to get dirty pictures if you couldn't even walk through the door of the shop."

"I'll have you know there's one at my flat!" Ron said, a self-satisfied look of challenge in his expression.

"Let me guess. Hermione's the one who bought it."

Remus' face blossomed with a smile as Ron grudgingly admitted that to be the case.

"She's amazingly open-minded, Hermione." Remus patted Ron on the back then stepped over to George. "Now that everything seems to be back to normal, I suggest that we get on with it. First though, George, I'm going to rub some salve on you." He leaned in and mouthed the words *'Trust me, a ghaoil'* into George's lips before sealing the plea with a brief kiss which was over before George could even respond. George pressed his lips together, trying to taste the message left there.

Ron began to look uncomfortable again, his focus on anything except the two men. "You're not going to tie him up again, are you?" he asked.

"No, nothing like that." Remus retrieved a small tin from a velvet bag near the sofa, then waved George over. "This is a mixture of yew-sap paste and mothdust. It's both a memory enhancer and a calefacient."

"Cale-what?" George questioned, following Remus who sat in the comfortable chair. George sank to a cushion and sat cross-legged, resting between Remus' legs.

"A substance that, when applied to the skin, creates a warming sensation. There are varying theories, but I personally believe that magic works more effectively via a warm conduit than a cold one."

"Hmmm," George replied, eyes closing as Remus rubbed the woody smelling gel onto his temples, then long fingers applied it to his throat with special attention given to the hollow between his collarbones.

"Tell me about the last field mission you and Severus went on," Remus said, his voice as tender as the hands now kneading into George's forehead.

The images whirled clearly in George's memory.

*"Weasley. We've got to leave. Immediately."*

*Snape discharged the command from his bedroll where, with ruthless efficiency, he readied his travel arsenal.*

*"Where're we going?" George began packing his small bag, suppressing his instinctual urge to look at MacLeod and share a look of mutual understanding of what it was like to be part of a three-person recon unit that included Severus Snape. Jon was dead, and now it was only George and Snape.*

*"Isle of Lewis. They've left Malfoy's body."*

*George gave Snape an incredulous stare. "They've what?"*

*Snape glowered in response. "They've abandoned Malfoy. The younger. At the last meeting I had with Lucius and Voldemort they indicated that they thought Draco might be weakening and must be dealt with immediately. Apparently they decided to kill him, or the equivalent." Snape swung the pack over his shoulders and glared at George with his piercing black eyes. "Intelligence from this side noted a surge of magical activity in a remote section of beach in the Outer Hebrides. They are almost certain that it's Draco. You and I have the unpleasant task of retrieving him, or his body."*

*George shoved his wand into a slender holster buckled at his waist, pulled on his bag and walked over to the tent flap where they would receive their Apparating coordinates. "Merlin," he said under his breath. "I get to rescue Malfoy with Snape. This is bollocks. Can't believe Fred's missing out on this. Fucking war."*

*"I beg your pardon?" Snape's voice could have frozen a raging river.*

*"Nothing. Let's go."*

*They were assaulted by wind and driving rain as soon as they manifested on the beach. The ocean slapped agsint the sand, waves frothy and roiling. True to the information given, Draco Malfoy lay*

naked near the water, wrists and ankles bound. George paced over to him, head bowed against the relentless elements.

"Fucking Merlin!" he yelled after lowering his ear over Malfoy's mouth. "He's alive, Snape. Pixie's piss. What do we do now?"

Snape collapsed to his knees and drew out his wand, running it above the prone figure as he muttered to himself. "Exposure," he spat. "Open his mouth. Make sure he's not drowning in his own blood."

George obliged, prying open Draco's clenched jaws with his fingers. The front teeth were loose, and cracked, but otherwise his mouth cavity was empty. "We've got to get him back," George shouted over the sound of crashing surf. "I'll carry him. Are we cleared to Apparate to base?"

"No!" Snape snarled. "Malfoy was left here for dead. We can't just go traipsing back to our tidy bit of order with the son of the highest-ranking Death Eater. We'll have to go somewhere else. Nearby, but not traceable. We'll need to clear a trail. Do you know the tri-phase co-ordinates?"

George nodded, cradling his right arm under Draco's back, attempting to hold up the dangerously bobbing head. With his left arm, he scooped sand and Draco's backside up from the ground. Once in his arms, the slight figure dropped, so George clapped the back of Malfoy's knees and clutched at Malfoy's heavy white-haired head. "Bloody hell," he thought, willing the locations in his mind as his fingers grasped at clammy, cold skin. "I wonder what they've done to him?"

He'd always hated Malfoy after the incident at the Quidditch match that had gotten he and Fred banned from the Gryffindor team, and Fred's death at the hands of Death Eaters certainly didn't improve things. But this was war, which turned alliances and relationships inside-out, and telling the difference between one's true friends and enemies sometimes seemed as reliable as reading tea leaves.

"Are you ready?" Snape bellowed above the cacophany, the words whipping into George's ears before being whisked down the strand.

"Yes!" George adjusted Malfoy in his arms. Before he Apparated to the first of the three locations, for a split second he wished he had a blanket to drape on the man in his arms, then he focused on their first locale.

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After the volume at the beachhead, their first point was eerily quiet, though not for long. Another recon group jumped out, wands aimed straight at Snape's and George's hearts.

"Oh fuck," one of them swore as he saw Malfoy's body held to George's chest.

"No shite. Still alive. You take him," George added with a bit of distaste. "We're probably being traced."

"Take Malfoy to the old Headquarters and for Merlin's sake, be gentle!" Snape seethed as George awkwardly began to hand off the man. "If we are at all lucky, though that has yet to be the case in this miserable war, he'll still be sane and we can question him. But not if you kill him first, you inept, hebetudinous oaf."

"Go to hell," George said once Malfoy was carried away, his voice cracking with anger that sought for the tiniest release so it could burst out of him. He wasn't as tall as Snape, but his shoulders were wider and he rammed one into Snape's chest as he stormed past him to their Apparating point. "Just fucking go to hell, you pompous, self-serving nightmare."

Snape rubbed at his collarbone as he took his spot next to George, the grimmest sliver of a smile on his lips. "Weasley," he crooned, pocketing his wand. "I'd no idea you knew me so well."

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"We had been traced," George said, lying on his back in front of the warm fire at the Cleansweep, Remus massaging his skull. "When we got to the second location it wasn't our people there, and they were on us before we even knew what was happening. Instinct kicked in and I will say that though Snape was a bastard, he was also brutal. And quick. He killed two of them in the time it took me to figure out what was going on, but once I did we made a pretty decent team. Hadn't realised how much fighting I had done next to him, but I sortof knew how to predict what he would do and could focus on protecting his back."

"Is that all you remember?" Remus asked, his fingers smoothing out the skin above George's eyebrows.

"That's it for details," George sighed. "There was a blur of hexes and spells, and I thought we'd taken care of the lot but then I took a curse in the back and I couldn't breathe. I remembered hitting the ground and figured I'd be dead in a minute, but then I heard Snape screaming something and then he'd fallen next to me and was grabbing at my chest. The next thing I knew I was at our camp's infirmary and Snape was in the morgue." He looked up at Remus' subdued face. "Sorry I'm not more help."

"It's okay," Remus said. "Ron, would you go into the kitchen and get the ceramic bowl off of the counter?"

"Sure."

"George, I'm going to say a spell that will make your magical energies visible, at least for a little while."

"You sound like a healer," George said contentedly.

"He sounds like a professor," Ron said from the kitchen doorway.

"I need you both to be quiet," Remus admonished, taking out his wand.

It wasn't a spell that George had heard before, but he had long ago realised that Remus' knowledge of magic and its powers and manipulations far outstripped his own. Remus murmured some unfamiliar words over him, and as George cracked open an eye, he saw Remus running his hands just above his clothes, as though smoothing the way for his wand.

"That's wicked!" Ron said appreciatively as he sat down on the couch. "Can you see it, George?"

"See what?"

"You've got a light, kindof, around you."

"Really?" George picked his head up from the floor and looked down his torso to his feet where Remus sat, pensive. "I don't see anything."

"Most wizards can't see their own magic," Remus replied. He pointed his wand at George's chest. "*Illuminous.*"

"Bloody hell!" Ron stared at George. "There's a line of the stuff going from your chest over to Lupin. What's that all about?"

"It's George's binding," Remus replied. "The magic used was strong, so it's much more visible than some others. I was curious to see how it would manifest itself."

George got up on his elbow and gazed into the air above his body. "I still don't see anything."

"You won't. Now lie back down. I want to check another spot more closely."

George obliged, relaxing into the floor.

*"Revelatorium."*

George's eyes were closed, sensing the crackle of energy as Remus' wand circled over his upper body, then hovered over his left temple. He felt an odd tugging, and raised his dominant hand to brush away at the sensations there.

"George. Please leave it be. Just for a moment."

George obliged, grinding his teeth together slightly as he lowered his arm and heard Ron say in an apprehensive voice, "What is that?"

Even though he had been told not to, George couldn't help it and he ran the back of his knuckles against the side of his head.

"I'm almost completely sure that they're Snape's memories, entrusted to George, though Severus didn't ask, and George wouldn't have known what was happening. Snape was a desperate, dying man. And then he cleared away the memory of it ever happening. That's what I don't understand."

With a grimace, George took the pads of his fingers and rubbed the skin on his skull, trying to rub out anything, memories or otherwise, that had anything to do whatsoever with the bitter hook-nosed man. "I don't understand," he sulked. "I wear black, and you say it's Snape. I drink scotch, thanks to Ron's time in Glasgow, and you say it's Snape."

Ron toasted him with an imaginary glass from the couch.

"He was a brilliant master of potions, somebody you'd want at your back in a fight, but Merlin, he was a cutting, snide arsehole. No offense, of course," George continued, willing the words toward Remus, "but your taste has improved." George quailed in the ensuing silence, Remus' intent gaze splicing open George's reserve.

"What'd you mean by that?" Ron asked, rubbing his own forehead. "On second thought, I don't want to know." He rested less comfortably against the couch.

"I'm sure that some of the stories I could tell would turn even your red hair white in shock," Remus deadpanned. "But they'd probably also turn your stomach. Do you mind handing over the bowl?"

Ron shook his head as he gave the large piece of china to Remus. The basin was placed carefully on the floor near George's head. "I've charmed this to act like a large pensieve. George, if you'll allow me, I want to retrieve all of your memories and distill them a bit. If Severus' are there, I can draw them out and then give you yours back."

A flash of panic coursed through George. "I'd trust you with anything, you know that." He rested his hand on Remus' knee. "But Merlin, be quick about it, if you can. The idea of having, well, me in a bowl that could be broken or the wind could blow too strongly or the spell could go wrong, or--"

"I'll be as quick as I can, and Ron is here too."

"Why am I here, exactly?" Ron asked a bit peevishly.

"To write down any messages that we see. I closed off the Cleansweep because this particular spell while not an Unforgivable, is illegal. I'd prefer not to have to defend myself in front of the Wizarding Council. But you're here. You know I'm not doing this to harm George, I'm doing it to liberate Severus' thoughts from him. Though quite honestly I'm not sure how I'll explain being in possession of his memories. I'm sure they are incredibly valuable."

Ron looked skeptical. "Valuable."

"Since you are fortunate enough not to suffer from lycanthropy you probably don't appreciate the wealth of information to do with wolfsbane that Severus' memories would contain. Much less any other potions he was working on before that one cabinet of his notes was bombed."

"Okay. Point taken." He said, resigned, and settled back, putting his foot on his knee.

"Go ahead, Remus," George said quietly. "Just put them all back, even the bad ones. Promise?"

Remus nodded. "I would say 'I solemnly swear,' but I think that would make all of us nervous."

A small huff of a laugh escaped from George. "I especially want to remember when I found out you'd made that map, so be careful."

"I will."

George gazed up at Remus' familiar face, drinking in the security of his lover's unflinching gaze. As George closed his eyes, a solitary word reverberated through his mind.

"Mandatum."

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*Consciousness seeped into his agony filled brain. Every cell in his body was ringing with adrenaline soaked fear, demanding that he get up, get up, get up. Despite the desperate admonitions, the only muscles willing to respond were his eyelids, and the effort involved in forcing them to open was almost his undoing.*

*Severus opened his eyes to a sea of freckles. He quickly shut them as a wave of tortuous pain wracked his body. Helpless, he experienced a seizure which, as a side effect, rolled him off of George Weasley. He panted for a while after it passed, knowing with grim surety that he was going to die, and soon. "Fucking war," he rasped and heard a low moan from the prone form near him.*

*If he'd had any spare energy, Severus would have rolled his eyes. Merlin, he thought. Weasley had to go and live on me. Now he had to figure out how to Apparate both of them. Slowly, the most logical plan of action manifested itself. It was, therefore, the solution that would churn his self-preservation instincts into a paroxysm of denial. He forced himself to try and see if he had the use of his arms. His muscles screamed with the effort, but dutifully obeyed his command to make two fists, a process by which Severus gratefully discovered he did still have his wand in his right hand. Now all he had to do was discover if it was broken.*

*Through a series of equally wretched and anguished tasks, Severus managed to manoeuvre himself over to Weasley, with his wand at the younger man's head. Memory modification beyond the Obliviate spell was tricky business at the best of times, much less after fighting what was to be one's final skirmish with eight Death Eaters, but he had to make it work. He used what amounted to a partitioning of his mind, a skill well-honed by time serving both Voldemort and the Order. It wasn't so much that he would mind vanishing entirely from the world, and Merlin knew that there would be no wailing at any memorial held for him, but even as he was dying, his pride manifested itself to a degree. He would never know if Weasley would survive, and if he did, if anyone would discover the memories Severus had entrusted to him. He knew it would be highly ironic for him to go to this trouble to save the red haired future breeder and his life's work to remain undiscovered.*

*Then again, Severus found all of life ironic.*

*He channelled all of his remaining magical energies to the forefront of any other demands his body was making of him. On a profound level, Severus could feel the dimness of death encroaching, and one by one, he forced out the spells.*

Mandatum.

Obliviate. *Modified for just these last moments, in case Weasley had been semi-conscious.*

Apparate.

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George's world was upside-down, literally and figuratively as he hung by knees in one of the trees in the nearby orchard to Remus' house. Remus had restored his memories and while George had felt rather discombobulated by the whole process, he didn't think he'd suffered any other ill effects from the *Mantadum* spell until he found out that Snape had saved him.

The whole evening had been uncomfortably emotional, so he'd begged off from Remus and Ron at the Cleansweep and Apparated to the grounds by Remus' secluded home. The moon was waxing, but full enough that George could see as he wandered among the gnarled trunks. In a fit of willful childishness, he climbed one of the trees and then decided to dangle from one of the branches. 'My little monkeys,' his mother had affectionately called them when they were younger, he and Fred.

"George?"

The voice in this setting was unexpected. So much so that George's recently-plundered mind had trouble placing it as he scanned his inverted night world, twisting his body corkscrew-like before reaching his hands up beside his knees. He dropped to the ground, pulling his pretzeled body through his arms, then righted himself, crashing back into the branch he'd just been hanging from.

"That hurt," he whimpered, rubbing his now-throbbing head. "Dad?"

"George! Remus said I might find you here."

George watched his father approach through the rows of trees. "I'm here. What're you doing?"

"Oh! Just checking in." His father's kind but worried face fully materialized in the shadowed orchard. "Seems you'd had a bit of a shock."

"That's a nice way of putting it," George grumbled. "It's not enough to find out I've been functioning like some pensieve for Snape, but that he basically, well, sacrificed himself? I couldn't stand him! Makes my stomach churn." He gave his father a hard look. "Wait a minute. How'd you know about it? Remus said what he did was illegal. It hardly makes sense to tell you, being in the Ministry and all."

"Well, casting a *Mandatum* spell without the permission of the other wizard is illegal, but I think that, all things considered, what Remus did is within the bounds of wizarding law."

"Still. Why would you need to know?" They took a path between the rows of apple trees, slowly meandering toward the house. "I'm an adult. And handfasted, for goodness' sake."

"That's all very true, but I'm still your father, and I still worry."

"He's not going to harm me, dad. Ever."

"He's still a werewolf, George."

"I'm bound to him."

"I know."

There didn't seem to be a whole lot to say after that, so George and his father ambled along the dirt row, leisurely nearing the front porch cast in the cheery light.

"Was there something I did wrong, somewhere?" Arthur blustered, rounding on George. "I thought you'd fancied girls in school."

George stood, exhausted and indignant. "I did, dad. It just didn't work out. I like men. Well, I've liked only a few. And I love one. But it does mean there won't be any little anklebiters running around our house." He stared down at his boots. "Look," he began, then raised his gaze to look at his father. "If you want thoughtful, and sensitive, you need to talk to Charlie, or Ginny." He shook his head. "Maybe even Percy. Selkies save you if you're desperate enough to consult Ron. I'm not your bloke. I'm just your one jokeshop-owning, twin-missing, shirtlifting son. If that's not enough, just go."

He ground his heel into a moonlit shadow, turned and headed to the house. Several satisfying gravel-crunching footsteps passed before his father's voice caught him.

"I'm trying, you know."

George stopped. "Not hard enough," he said, wheeling around. "Even Ron respects him now. But take your time. War's over. We've nothing but time." He tasted the bitterness of the words and swallowed, taking off again for the lights on the porch. "Well, I do," he mumbled. "Bugger, but I wish Fred were here."

"George!"

George stopped again, his left foot on the bottom step.

"Have I ever told you how proud I am of you?"

"Not in so many words, dad. I'm going to think you've been possessed if you keep this up."

The screen door opened and warming light poured out onto the stairs. George looked up to see Remus standing invitingly in the doorway.

"Arthur! Wonderful to see you." Remus' voice carried into the still night, hospitality and homecoming infused in each syllable. George had never heard anything so welcoming in his life.

"Remus. Lovely grounds you have."

"Oh, they aren't mine. But my family has had this property as long as the neighbours. They don't mind if, on occasion, people wander through the orchard, especially this time of year. Quite honestly I think they've gone to Majorca. It's where they winter."

"They sound like birds," George said, briefly wrapping his arm around Remus' waist and leaning his head against his partner's neck. George closed his eyes, breathing in Remus' soothing, musky scent. It was ridiculous, but George was easily undone by smelling Remus. The potent combination of latent power, bitter bloodbinding and tangy possession always manifested itself in an unfortunate ache in his groin. "Mind if I go inside?"

"Not at all. Is it all right with you if I stay out with your father for a bit?"

"No." George grudgingly loosed himself. "How long have you been listening?"

"I haven't."

"Oh."

"Arthur, could I have a word?"

George heard his father acquiesce pleasantly to the request, then there was a quietly rumbled *incendio* as Remus lit a fire in the stove. The door shut behind him. He went to the kitchen, poured himself a drink, cast a chilling charm on it, and walked to their bedroom. After placing the glass on the

bedside table, he plopped down on the bed, stretching out from boot-clad toes to his fingers, which scraped comfortingly against the wooden headboard. Moments later, George draped an arm over his face. "Really would just like to be shagged senseless right now," he muttered into his elbow. "S'all I'm good for."

After a few minutes he sat up, took a sip, and with his wand shut the door. Remus and his father notwithstanding, he could always take matters into his own hands.

Then again, he could wait. It was always worth it.

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George woke up when Remus climbed into bed next to him.

"Remus," he said through a yawn. "How long have I been asleep?"

"About an hour," Remus said, stretching his long legs alongside George's.

"Oh." George rubbed his eyes. The room was dark, and a small fire burned in the fireplace. "What were you and Dad talking about?"

"We'll discuss it in the morning," Remus said gently, placing the palm of his hand in the middle of George's chest and fingering his swath of hair.

With a start George noticed he was under the covers, and he was -

"I'm naked, aren't I?"

The warm hand slowly traced down his abdomen, then fanned out to disentangle the wiry hair at his groin.

"Well, unless I did my spell incorrectly and you're still in shoes and socks, you don't appear to be wearing any clothes," Remus said, his voice low in George's ear. "Do you mind? You didn't look terribly comfortable on the bed, fully dressed," Remus continued, allowing his fingers to travel further down, stroking the inside of George's thighs.

"Mind?" George said. "Don't reckon, especially if you're doing things like that."

"I should let you sleep," Remus apologised, drawing his hand away from George's cock, which had just started to respond to the attention it was getting. "You've had a long evening."

"And I will sleep," George replied, turning on his side to face his bondmate. "But I guarantee I'll sleep better if you go back to doing what you were doing." He leaned in to take a deep breath near Remus' collarbone, then kissed the faded tattoo of the werewolf registry numbers he knew were there.

"Come up here, you," Remus growled, pulling George to him and claiming his mouth with a passionate kiss. "I'm going to satisfy you so that you'll be able to sleep until next week," he said, breathing hotly into George's ear. It was one of George's many erogenous spots, and he found he was quickly becoming aroused.

"Merlin, yes," George gasped as their legs intertwined, hands on each other's cocks. George wanted to get out of his head, and Remus knew effectively and intimately how to do that. He let Remus dominate, writhing languorously under the exquisite friction of his lover's body. Remus tortured his imagination, his husky voice never leaving his ear, telling him what he was going to do in the most explicit terms imaginable. After a while George was no longer George; he was merely one slick, throbbing ache, expertly stroked and kneaded and suckled until he was almost begging for release. Remus came back up to his ear.

"You remember our first time?" he asked, and George panted in the affirmative. "I'm going to take you that way now," he said, the words drenched in desire. A few moments later George let out a panted sob as Remus eased into him, then began slow thrusts. "Love being inside you, feeling you so tight around me," he murmured. "My fiery lover. Mine." George arched back, wanting to feel Remus far within him, long-unshed tears dripping down his cheeks. "Bound to me," Remus said, enfolding George's cock with an oiled hand.

"Remus, god, love you so fucking much," George choked out, then he was engulfed in a pulsing universe of pleasure, tiny stars dancing behind his clenched eyes as he heard Remus chant George's name over and over. George grasped the headboard with his hands until the waves of release had emptied from him. He felt almost dizzy as Remus kissed his way up George's vertebrae while he gently uncoupled them.

George covertly wiped the tears from his cheeks as they lay down. Remus leaned over to retrieve his wand but George stopped him. "Let's just use a cloth, if you don't mind."

"Good sex smell?" Remus chuckled as he did get his wand to *accio* a washcloth from the bathroom.

"Mind-blowing sex smell," George said, his head still turned. He was a bit embarrassed at wiping his arse, but it was worth it to keep the musky scent in the air. "Never-had-sex-like-that-before smell."

"Never? I think I should be insulted."

They lay quietly for a few minutes, letting their bodies cool down a bit before getting ensconced in the sheets again.

"You're amazing," George said finally.

"And you're my love."

George fell back asleep contentedly inhaling Remuscent, his head nestled on Remus' bony shoulder.

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When George woke up the next day, weak light shone through the windows. He was alone in the bed, and the room smelled of tea. Confused, he sat up and saw there was a small table near the bed with a teapot that had obviously been tapped with a heating charm, a cup, and a note.

*Dear George,*

*Since I wasn't sure how long you would need to sleep to recover both from the Mandatum spell and our, as you put it, mind-blowing experience last night, I didn't wake you. I've gone to Hogwarts to take Severus' memories to Dumbledore. He'll know best what should be done with them, and he'll also be trustworthy in regards to how I came to have them in my possession. I'll probably mark some essays at my office for a bit, have a cup of tea with Flitwick (the poor man has really suffered since his wife died) and be home for dinner. There's tea for you- just take it easy today.*

*Yours,*

*R.L.*

*p.s. There's a stack of letters on the dining room table that I think you'll find very interesting.*

George yawned, stretched until his back cracked, then reluctantly got out of the warm bed to go to the bathroom to clean up. After a while he sat at the dining room table in stunned silence, the tea at his elbow growing cold as he read letter after letter written by his father. Remus had left another note next to the stack.

*Arthur gave me these last night. It seems that he's been writing letters to you and your siblings over the years. He intended for you to have them when he died, but after I told him that I planned to perform a Mandatum on you, he got yours together just in case something went wrong. I haven't read them, of course- they are private correspondence from father to son.*

*By the way, after our conversation last night I think he has a better appreciation of our relationship.*

*R.L.*

The letters began with one to he and Fred.

Dear Fred and George-

Well, what a surprise. Two of you were born today! Two more boys. Your mother and I are so pleased. Her reasons are different than mine, though. I'm almost sure she's happiest because we won't need to get new clothes. I'm happiest because you've arrived safe and sound, and we're five-sevenths the way to having our own Weasley Quidditch team!

Love,  
your dad

They continued on much in the same way over time at major events: first teeth, first spells cast, their first tricks and punishments. The day they got their Hogwarts letters. One written at St. Mungo's when they were around fourteen, when they'd spent a tense night because Percy had come down with a sudden and potentially fatal case of bloodcurdle.

Dear Fred and George-

I know Percy isn't your favourite brother, and that you'd rather be at home right now. But I want to thank you for keeping your mother occupied, and even laughing on occasion so she doesn't fret while the healers do what they can. You two have a rare gift in that regard.

A letter of praise after they passed their O.W.L.s. A letter of disapproval about how they were treating Ron and Percy. A letter of incredulity when he'd stumbled across them at Gringott's, having signed a lease for what would become Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes. A letter of heartbreak written the day of Fred's funeral. A letter of intense gratitude when George survived his last mission in the War. A letter of perplexed support at his handfasting to Lupin.

On and on they went, dozens in all. The most recent had been hastily written on the back of a tea-stained page of shopping list parchment, dated yesterday.

Dear George,

Lupin has just told me he intends to take your memories and distill them because he has some rather far-fetched theory to do with Snape. I'm not at all pleased, but I trust if you're at all uncertain, you won't go through with it. It's a complicated spell, not to mention illegal in almost all cases, and while I do trust him, messing with memory makes me nervous. I've already lost one of my beloved, though never trouble-free twins, and I would hate to lose the other due to meddling with his mind. If that happens, and you have to start over, these will give you a glimpse of what your life was like.

Know that I've always been proud of all you and Fred accomplished, and I probably should have told you more often. I'll try to be better about that in the future.

Love,  
your dad

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There seemed only one appropriate thing to do- he needed to write his father back. But what on Merlin's green earth could he say? George puzzled through several long replies that afternoon as he made his way to Hogwarts, deciding to use one of the school's owls since he and Remus didn't keep one of their own.

He went to Remus' office first to see if he was there, but after getting through the warded door, he discovered the room was empty. *Must be with Flitwick*, he mused, glancing at the almost-toppling stack of books and journals piled crazily on Remus' desk. The newest edition of the Anglo-Saxon Wizarding Association's publication was on top with a picture of Lupin smiling and receiving an award for his work on the *solaris* spell. He was gesturing to George, who had gotten flustered and begged off, letting Remus accept the plaque and give a brief speech.

Next to his academic texts there was a small book of poetry. George picked it up and flipped through it, figuring that W. H. Auden must be a Muggle writer as he'd never heard of him or her and he couldn't really understand the poems. The phrase "we till shadowed days are done" caught his eye, and he thought about the many dark days and nights he'd gone through since Fred had been killed. "I do kinda like the phrase, though," he said to himself, "and being Remus' 'till shadowed days are done.'" He rolled his eyes. "Bollocks," he moaned, putting the book back on the desk. "I'm turning into a bloody sentimental pouf."

Inspiration about writing his father finally struck. He opened a desk drawer in which he was pretty sure Remus kept parchment, found a piece of blank scroll, and took out the re-inking quill he usually carried.

*Dear Dad,*

*I'm proud of you, too.*

*Fred and I caused you a lot of grief, but we've always been grateful you were our dad. There's none better.*

*Love,  
George*

Satisfied, he rolled it up and stuck it in a pocket of his robes. He was about to leave and head to the owlery when a glass container filled with sinuously swirling silver caught his eye. Instinctively George knew what it was: Snape's memories. He stared at the container for a minute, both fascinated and repulsed. They were the memories Snape valued so much that he'd infused them into George. Remus had told him what it was like to be caught up in someone else's captured thoughts, and a niggling idea that he could pick a couple to look at drifted through his mind.

It would be invasive, but the man was dead. And hell, the last memory would have himself in it anyway. It would be pretty morbid, but if he could figure out how to take just a particular strand, George could see what happened after that last skirmish. He could also find the year Remus had taught and see if Snape had cared enough about Remus to save a memory of one of their interludes... George shuddered and his stomach lurched. Snape and Remus had only been using each other. Remus had sworn it was simply convenient sex, nothing more. The perverse idea refused to leave, though, as George continued to stand, mesmerized by the seething patterns in the glass.

He waited for Remus to return, to tell him not to do it. A few more minutes passed. "This is wrong. This is so wrong," he muttered, but insatiable curiosity had overridden his moral qualms and he raised his wand to tap at the container. *What's Snape going to do, haunt me?* he thought. Being haunted by Snape for the rest of his life was an exceedingly unpleasant concept. And yet- he *had* been unwittingly carrying the memories around for a few years anyway.

George wracked his brain for the correct spell to discern which memories were which, then pointed his wand and incanted the command. Transfixed, George regarded the years of visions, and found a time toward the end that pulsed with flickered brightness. Going on instinct, he closed his eyes, held his breath, and stuck in his finger.

The sensation of being pulled into the thoughts wasn't unlike using a portkey. George found himself standing across a potions bench from Snape, and the sudden proximity was so unnerving that he backed away, tripping over his own feet. Snape, of course, didn't react, since George wasn't really there, and continued his methodic, counterclockwise stirring, counting under his breath. He stopped, leaned over the cauldron, and after taking a deep whiff, nodded sagely and blew out the blue flame flickering underneath. With surprisingly elegant motions, Snape ladled some of the potion into a chalice located nearby, then paused. George stared, wondering what was so spectacular about this particular potion that the making of it seemed worthy of saving as a memory. The potions master placed his hands on the bench and his shoulders sagged as he leaned on the wood. George saw a look cross the other man's face that he had never seen in all the years he had known him; Snape's face was unguarded and weary, and he appeared to be struggling over something in his mind.

After a few moments, Snape came to a resolution, and with the efficiency of movement that George knew so well from their time in their reconnaissance unit, he strode across the room to a cabinet, brushing so close to George that he could have sworn he felt Snape's robe as he passed. With a practiced wrist flick, the cabinet opened and Snape sent in his pale, bony hand to retrieve a bottle on a back shelf. The doors were shut, the vial dropped into a hidden robe pocket, and the cup snatched from the board. George was practically running to follow the potions master out of his office, realisation dawning on him. Snape was taking the Wolfsbane to Remus, and some other potion. Had Snape poisoned Remus at some point?

Fury began to build in George's chest as he hurried behind the tall man's billowing robes. The route was familiar, of course, but why wasn't Snape heading for Remus' office? Of course- Remus was Defence Against the Dark Arts professor, not History. A few corridors further and Snape stopped in front of an oak door, raising his hand to knock. Again he waited, indecision in his gesture, but then he rapped soundly on the wood.

"Door's open!" Remus' familiar voice rang out.

Snape opened the door and walked resolutely through, George close behind.

Remus was sitting at a desk, wearing a threadbare dressing gown of sorts, and surrounded in a cloud of smoke. He smiled at Snape's entrance, but Snape only scowled.

"You're getting a bit brazen with your smoking, Lupin. What if it hadn't been me?"

"We're practically the only people left at Hogwarts." A sad smile formed on Remus' lips. "Even Dumbledore would probably forgive an indulgence at Christmas."

Snape's mouth turned down even more, then he sighed, placing the smoking chalice on the desk. Remus looked expectantly at him and Snape pulled the small vial from his pocket, setting it gently next to the cup. Remus' smile turned hungry.

"Opium is addictive, you know that, Lupin."

George looked incredulously at the scene unfolding in front of him. Remus had gotten up from his desk and rounded on Snape, running his hands through the limp black hair.

"Many things are addictive, Snape," Remus said in a low voice, causing Snape to close his eyes and lean his head to the side, exposing a long swath of pale skin. Remus' hands trailed down Snape's back until they came to his arse, at which point George watched, sickened, as the long fingers began caressing Snape through his robes.

*Oh Merlin, George thought. Bloody bollocky hell. And I don't know how to get out of a memory. He shouldn't have done this. It was his punishment for not just leaving the memories alone. Why, George, you fucking jealous idiot? Why didn't you just walk away?*

It was torture, seeing Remus, his Remus, undressing Snape. George retreated to a corner, trapped. He closed his eyes and covered his ears, only peeking occasionally to see if they were through yet, because they didn't speak to each other; there were only soft grunts and the unmistakable smell of sex.

Eventually George thought he heard the sweet sound of someone putting his clothes back on and he uncovered his eyes. The potions master was nearly dressed, but Remus merely sprawled naked on a couch. George bit down on his lip until he drew blood. When would this memory ever be over?

Snape arranged his robes into their usual meticulous order, stoppered the vial and sequestered it away again in some hidden pocket. He turned to leave the room.

"Happy Christmas," Remus said softly from the couch, looking all too sated to George's liking.

Snape didn't reply until he reached the door at which point he turned and gave Remus a curt nod. "Good evening, Lupin." He swept out the door and George felt the power of the memory pulling him along, though he stole a last quick glance at Remus, his then-less-grey hair matted to his forehead with sweat. Remus seemed to be thinking about something else, his gaze focused on a far wall.

George trailed behind Snape who was apparently returning to his office. *Wanker. Worse than the worst voyeur, he chastised himself. How are you ever going to tell Remus you did this? What if he's back in his office when you're finally released from this self-inflicted nightmare?*

Soon they were back in the potion master's office. Snape cast a locking charm on the door and leaned his back up against it, ensuring that if a stampede of anything came through, he would be squashed in the process. Both repulsed and intrigued, from a few steps away George watched the beak-nosed man undo a few of the top buttons on his robe and sniff at the inside, Snape's eyelids lowering as he inhaled deeply. After Snape's chest rose and fell twice, his eyes flashed open and he assumed his usual stony expression, walking to his desk where he fluffed his robes behind him before sitting straight-backed in his chair. Moments later he was writing on a piece of parchment.

George walked and stood behind Snape so he could read over the potions master's shoulder, deciding that he was too far into it already not to read Snape's private correspondence. George's mind had turned to porridge, and his damn curiosity was still running wild.

*Lupin,  
This must stop. Not because I wish it, for being with you reminds me that I have, contrary to all rumour, a heart. I am not allowed to become fond of you. I shall not bring my vial again.*

S.S.

Despite it being a memory, George was dumbfounded. Snape had actually cared for Remus? Inconceivable.

Parchment in hand, Snape pushed himself back from the desk and walked to an empty part of the potions classroom. With snail's speed, he pulled the small glass bottle from within the folds of his robes, looked carefully at it, and released his grip. It shattered on the floor, the viscous liquid making a small pool at his feet. Snape raised his gaze to the scroll grasped in his left hand, looking for all the world as though his black eyes could bore holes through it. George was astounded when, seconds later, the paper burst into flame at the corner. The potions master watched blandly as the flames licked down the page, gaining speed as more and more of the parchment was consumed. Just before it would have singed his fingers, Snape dropped the paper into the puddle at his feet, at which point the yellow flames turned to a vibrant green as the liquid caught fire. Snape and George stood transfixed, caught up in the dancing verdant flickering light.

It was quite a shock when George blinked twice because the flames had changed colour. He was standing in front of Remus' fireplace, in his current office. *Merlin's beard*. The memory was over. The room was still empty. Feeling completely out of sorts, he glanced at the clock on Remus' wall and saw that according to that timepiece, he'd only been gone for twenty-five minutes, even though it seemed like an eternity. A shiver coursed up his spine.

He left the office as quickly as possible, thankful that his feet knew where he needed to go even if his brain didn't. At the owlery, he stood confusedly for a moment, then remembered why he had gone to Hogwarts in the first place. He patted himself down, found the short letter to his father, and attached it to one of the school owls. After watching the tawny bird until it was a speck vanishing into the dense clouds, he turned and walked slowly down the steps until an idea formed in his mind. His pace quickened until he was practically racing through the stone corridors in as dignified a way as possible.

Using the hidden paths of Hogwarts that he knew so well, he covertly made his way to the Greenhouses, thankful that there were no students or professors around. When he was in school there had been a section of rather pedestrian Muggle plants that had been cultivated for lovesick students deciding that they wanted an authentic rose or daisy, but George was almost certain that another particular plant was also grown for two unique individuals. He paced down the steamy aisles twice before finding the lilac flowerets that he sought. He took a last, quick survey of the empty room before pulling out his wand and making a searing cut across the lower part of a stem. Clutching the stalk to his chest, he repocketed his wand and exited the glass room.

Years of doing mischief in school combined with his wartime subterfuge knowledge allowed George to reach the Hogwarts cemetery without being seen. He tread carefully through the stones, still uncomfortable despite the many all-too-familiar names on many of them. He'd been half drunk the last time he was here, and wasn't sure that he could find the marker he was looking for, but thankfully there weren't so many granite slabs as to be unmanageable.

George appraised the stone marker, the onyx giving off a sheen despite the grey rush overhead of rushing stormclouds. Twelve letters carved in plain block print dominated the otherwise blank surface. He took a hasty survey of the nearby memorials; almost all had flowers or other tokens of affection. Snape's, while tidily kept, was absent any evidence that anyone came to visit. George reached out his hand to touch it, but felt irrationally that the marker, like the man, would somehow react in a hostile manner to unasked-for attentions.

"Thank you for saving my life," George began. "Oh, this is stupid. Can't believe I've sunk so low as to be talking to Snape's tombstone."

He scratched behind his ear, looking at the empty space around the foot of the monument. Raising his gaze back to the words SEVERUS SNAPE, which seemed to be accusatory by their very chiseled permanence, he blurted out, "Okay. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry to have gone into your memories. But shite, you gave them to me anyway. I just didn't know you actually cared about Remus, once."

His tirade came to a screeching halt and he shifted his weight from foot to foot.

"I'm sorry."

He crouched at the base of the memorial, took the stem of lupine and placed it a bit apprehensively on the ground. There was no rush of ghosts, or chilled wind, so he felt that his gesture had been accepted. He stood up quickly and got out of the cemetery as fast as he could.

George needed to talk to someone as soon as possible; someone who wouldn't judge him, at least not too much. A person who knew him as well as himself. He surreptitiously made his way to his office, and went straight to his fireplace. He threw in some floo powder as he panted, "The Cleansweep." Moments later he was in the haven of his flat. He brushed himself off and walked quickly to his room, desperate to see his brother.

"Fred!" he yelled. "Merlin, I am such an idiot. You won't believe what I did. I went into Snape's..." his voice died down as he saw Fred and Percy in the frame, consulting with each other. "Oh. Hi, Perce. Um, d'you mind? I'd like to talk to Fred alone."

Percy looked remorsefully at him. He seemed more solid, somehow, but that didn't make sense. Unless...

"George, gotta tell you something," Fred said, unusually somber.

George heard his name being shouted from the fireplace. He wasn't sure who it was, but it sounded an awful lot like Ron.

"I think I already know," he said, unable to meet his brother's eyes as he sank down on the bed.

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## **Epilogue**

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"Arthur. Are you absolutely sure? You've been such a boon to the department, and to the Ministry as a whole."

George watched his father nod deliberately. It seemed odd that there would be ceremonies for leaving an institution, but there he and Remus were, attending his father's resignation from the Ministry of Magic.

"Arthur Weasley, your decision to resign from the Misuse of Muggle Artifacts Office is accepted with regret by the Ministry on this day, November 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2002. May you always be well."

Arthur flinched at the last sentence, and George hated to see the expression. Remus snuck out a hand and gave George's a quick squeeze, which prompted him to turn slightly and give Remus a mournful smile of gratitude. All too soon the official words would be over and they would return to the Burrow, where Molly would offer tea and biscuits and nobody would have an appetite.

It was hard to believe that a week had already passed since Percy and Primula had been killed. They'd been in Muggle London, shopping for a particular Muggle device that had captured Arthur's imagination for months. The tragic irony that they were hit by a Muggle automobile pushed their father over the edge, and he opted to leave the Ministry. The hushed debate now centered around Xavier, Percy's son, who had been with Molly and Ginny that devastating afternoon and was now an orphan.

"Ready, dad?"

Arthur sighed, turning to the two men. "Yes."

In silence the trio left the Ministry, George sneaking an occasional glance at his father. The quiet was unbroken until they reached the yard of the Burrow. Ron and Xavier were taking advantage of the brisk wind to fly a kite, the Chudley Cannons-burgandy ribbons flapping garishly against the gloom of the overcast clouds. The three men went immediately into the warmth of the kitchen where they were greeted by Molly, Hermione, Ginny and Neville.

"Tea, Arthur?" Molly asked, her wand poised above the kettle. George pretended not to notice how bloodshot her eyes were.

"Yes, please, dear," he replied, walking to her side and kissing her on the forehead.

The seconds ticked by, abnormally lengthened by the pall that pervaded the room. The sound of cups clinking against saucers and sipping of tea were the only noises that seemed appropriate.

*I hate this*, George thought miserably. "Think I may go have a lie-down," he said aloud, then he swallowed the last of his tea.

"You take naps?" Ginny asked, confounded.

"I'm practising for middle age, like Remus here," he said, attempting to add some levity to the mood.

"You should respect your elders," Remus said, raising an eyebrow and allowing a hint of a smile to settle on his lips. "Suppose I'll join you, though. Been a draining day."

George got up from the table, took his and Remus' dishes and put them in the sink. He stopped by his father's side on his way upstairs, but any words that could convey the acknowledgement of his dad's sense of loss were meaningless. Instead, he leaned down and in a spontaneous gesture, enfolded his father in a clumsy embrace.

"You've done really well, dad. Truly, there's none better," George said, trying to sound far more chipper than he felt.

Arthur patted George's arm, his freckled fingers curling against the dark green wool of George's jumper. "Thanks, George." Arthur turned backward, the gaze of his pale blue eyes skating across his son's face, glancing over at Remus, then resolutely resituating their focus onto his half-full cup of tea. "It was awfully good for the two of you to be there with me today. Meant a lot."

George had never wanted to sink into a hole more in his life. Or simply to get away from such an emotive situation that involved his father, especially when his mother and Ginny were beginning to sniffle again.

"We'll just be upstairs. Resting," George said pointedly, extricating himself from his father's loose clutches. "You'll get us up to help with dinner, Mum?" he asked, knowing the answer before he heard it.

"Of course, dear," Molly said, smiling tearfully at him. "You may want to check your bed for doxies, though, George- it's been ages since you stayed and I just haven't been able to keep ahead of the cleaning."

"Defence Against the Dark Arts instructor, 1993-94," Remus intoned solemnly. "I assure you that no naps will be taken with any mischievous creatures about."

"Except for that ghoul. Came with the Burrow," George muttered.

The pair walked up the stairs to what had been Fred and George's room. There were still two twin beds and a small assortment of posters on the walls, but the ambiance was one of disuse and undisturbed vacancy. Despite its uncharacteristic tidiness, George still felt his mood lift once he entered and walked over to his bed, throwing himself on it. Remus joined him with more grace of movement, though he did give George a slight shove so he'd make room.

"Will this day ever be over?" George grumbled.

"Well, unless something rather unexpected happens, I'd say so."

George gave Remus a swat on the backside. "Cheeky."

Remus looked thoughtfully at him. "Do you think we should adopt Xavier?"

George's expression became incredulous, as though Remus had asked if it were possible to teach blast-ended skrewts to rumba. "Us?" he stared.

"Yes. Us. You're so good with him, George. I hadn't always wanted a family, but after losing Sirius and then unexpectedly and gratefully being handfasted to you," he paused and placed his long fingers on George's chest above his scar, "and seeing how devoted your family is to each other, well, I've been doing a lot of thinking over the past week."

"Apparently." George found himself blinking curiously at his bondmate. He did love his nephew, of course, but he was pretty sure that given his parents' relatively grudging acceptance of his relationship to Remus that they would not approve. He could just imagine the conversation going on downstairs, the debate about which under-prepared sibling should take Xavier on: Ginny, six months pregnant with Neville's and her first child; Ron and Hermione, engaged but not yet married to their mother's continued consternation; or he and Remus, who Percy had always seen as basically two bachelors living together.

"I've already spoken to Arthur and Molly about it."

"Why am I not surprised?" George studied Remus' amber eyes. "Do you really want him? We both work full-time, y'know. And I have two bloody jobs. Not that we couldn't manage it, I reckon, but somehow I don't think we'd give him the kind of life he should get."

Remus gazed at him. "We could certainly manage. But if you're this hesitant, it's probably not a good idea."

"Hesitant? I didn't know until just now that you were even considering it!"

"Maybe a pet would be a better first step."

"A pet." George gave Remus a disbelieving look. "Um, Fred and I had a pretty poor track record with pets."

"Really."

"Really." George snorted, then grew serious. "Actually, maybe that's not such a bad idea. Wouldn't mind something furry and petable greeting me when I get home, especially when you're staying late at Hogwarts."

Remus raised his eyebrows. "Do you have a particular furry creature in mind?"

"Well, no, but we should probably take a few animals off the list. Nothing personal, but I think dogs and hippogriffs wouldn't be good."

Remus winced. "Yes, you're probably right. Bit too much history there."

"And I don't like tarantulas."

"Neither do I."

"Badgers shouldn't be in the running either, or frogs."

"You had a badger as a pet?" It was Remus' turn to snort.

"Not so much a pet, but yes, we did have a badger. For a little while."

Remus shook his head. "Are you to be trusted with any animals?"

The reply was out of George's mouth before he even considered it. "I've been entrusted with a werewolf, so I'd say yes. Oh. Dammit. That's not meant to mean anything. You know I didn't mean-" He was spared stumbling over any more apologies as the words were swallowed by a possessive kiss.

When they pulled apart, Remus said, "You're claimed by a werewolf, you're not my caretaker." The words were breathed into George's mouth. "I think we should get some fish. Pretty, tropical fish. And maybe a couple of small birds."

"Fish?"

Remus stuck out his tongue to lick across the chapped surface of George's lips. "Yes. Fish."

"But they're not petable," George insisted. "Or furry."

"You have me," Remus rumbled, pulling his dress shirt from his trousers and taking George's hand, unceremoniously drawing it up to his hair-covered chest.

George closed his eyes, relishing the feel of slightly coarse tendrils of hair under the pads of his fingers. "Thank Merlin for that," George sighed into Remus' jawbone. He lay still for a moment, aside from his fingers' slow exploration of Remus' pectorals. "Fish? Really?"

"Fish," Remus concurred. "And a few budgies."

"As long as I can still pet you," George said, allowing a fingernail to graze across one of Remus' hardening nipples.

There was an affirmative low growl in reply.

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My gratitude to Nancy for her beta of this story, as well as the comments of many others as it was being written, lyric and Amy in particular, who were kind enough to comment on it while it was being written across two continents.

This story is dedicated to Amy, without whose enthusiasm and support I would never have come this far as a writer. This Snape's for you, my dear.

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### **Author's Notes for the "Cartography" series**

This rather unlikely pairing happened when I participated in a LiveJournal community ("WeasleyWorship") ficathon. The person had requested 'Remus/twin(s) or Sirius/twin(s).' "Cartography of Fire" is what I wrote for that particular event, but I just kept going. In the end, I began writing "Cartography" in May of 2004 and finally finished "Through Doooms of Love," written both in the U.S. and a majority of it while on vacation alone in the Outer Hebrides of Scotland, in December. I've loved writing about post-War George and Remus once I got them together; their strengths, weaknesses, jealousies and deep-seated love and affection for each other. I hope you've also enjoyed- feedback of course is certainly welcome.

Thanks for reading! My email is [thevina33@gmail.com](mailto:thevina33@gmail.com). The website is [www.thrihyrne.net](http://www.thrihyrne.net), but to get to the NC-17 stuff, you'll need to go to [www.thrihyrne.net/adultHP.html](http://www.thrihyrne.net/adultHP.html).

