

The Gift of the Mages

by spiderwort

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Poverty Sucks

Chapter 1 of 9

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1. POVERTY SUCKS

His pocket watch chimed a quarter to five as the lanky young man broke the seal on the last remaining scroll in the in-tray. It was in his nature to save the least-worst for last, and he already had the bills opened, flattened, and sorted into neat little piles the way his wife had shown him.

"Remember, Ron, we only need to pay the ones marked FINAL NOTICE because if we don't they'll send Howlers. The others will wait until work picks up again." Then she'd gathered her own paperwork, stuffed it into her backpack, grabbed a cracker from the breadbox, and trotted breezily out the door as if nothing could be surer than work picking up.

He wished he shared Hermione's viewpoint, but as the next-to-youngest child in a family full of optimists he felt the Potion of Hopefulness had run dry long before it reached him...his father and brothers having downed double doses before passing it on. What native optimism he did have was not stirred by the letterhead on the scroll in his hand:

Kickham, Waltherdown, and deWitt-Neatley, Solicitors

13 Sowerby Street

London, U.K.

Lawyers. Well, that could be good news or bad. Maybe this was the final payment for his enquiry into the Hopkirk matter. A small fee but welcome, though the case had cost him dearly in other ways. He ripped it open and scanned the first lines.

"Dear Master Weasley:

In re your letter the 5th of October 2000, concerning compensatory recognition from our client, Robert Raglan..."

He clasped the parchment to his chest. Merlin's Monkey! The Robert Raglan was finally writing back to him...well, sort of. His eyes misted with happiness.

As a kid, he'd bought, borrowed, or traded for every issue of Raglan's Mad Muggle comic books he could get his hands on. He had so wanted to be like Raglan back then...writer, artist, humorist or...why not?...all three. But George...and Fred, rest him--had already cornered the market on funny, and Ron's drawing skills had never progressed much beyond stick-figures. So, he decided to be a writer. But first he read and re-read the comics, scribbling editorial comments and new plot threads in the

margins as they came to him.

From there it was a short leap to actual composition. He made up all kinds of stories with Martin Miggs as the bumbling Muggle hero, accidentally running up against the magical world everywhere he went. Ron's first efforts came out of personal experiences with spiders ("The Acromantula Invasion"), hang-gliders ("The Mysterious Collision over Surrey"), gardening ("The Gnomes of Otterbottom Hill"), and the twins ("The Two Wicked Step-Brothers"). Other ideas he got listening to his father's stories from work: "The Enchanted Tea Set", "The Car from Outer Space", and "The Wacky Toilets of Bethnal Green", to name but a few. Most recently, he'd started writing stories tied to his years at Hogwarts. It wasn't easy to figure out ways to get a Muggle onto the school grounds, but he'd managed it three times in "The Floo Powder Accident", "The Reluctant Prefect", and "Caught in the Quidditch Crossfire" with, he thought, rather hilarious results.

Thinking back, he was amazed at how many he had written, but no more amazed than his teachers would have been to learn of his prodigious output. They had long since despaired of ever getting him to do his homework essays completely and on time, Hermione's help notwithstanding. They'd have been even more amazed...nay, flabbergasted...to hear that he had mustered the courage to send some of his better efforts to a published writer. In return, Robert Raglan sent him signed glossies and an occasional cheery note. Ron even thought he saw glimpses of his own plotlines in the series, but the famous cartoonist never flagrantly exploited his material...until this year.

Ron might never have discovered this sorry fact. After he took on the responsibilities of husband and breadwinner, he had gradually let go of his childhood, even going so far as to put his beloved comics collection in George's hands to sell at the shop, although he continued to write for a while. Then George gave him and Hermione a set of self-sharpening knives for their first anniversary...and a copy of Robert Raglan's first novel: "Martin Miggs the Mad Muggle and the Quidditch-Playing Prefect of Piggimple Academy". To his surprise, the book featured no less than three of his plot-arcs; in fact, the last three he had written. (He thought a good bit of the dialog looked familiar too.)

This was both the best and the worst present ever. Granted, it was the only one George had given him to date that didn't end up inflicting pain and/or humiliation. Also, he was proud to know his stories were good enough to print. However, it showed Raglan up as a thief, a plagiarist, and a scoundrel. Ron couldn't believe that of his hero. There was probably some mistake, some reason why no one had asked his permission to use his stories. His address had been mislaid, or the owl that delivered the letter had collapsed and died. Or some evil wizard had taken over Raglan's mind and was forcing him to steal other people's ideas. The Imperius curse had explained far worse crimes than this.

So, wanting to believe only the best, he wrote Raglan a request for recognition and waited patiently and naively for a cheque, however small, which would acknowledge his part in what had turned into a best-seller. Now finally, here in his hand was a reply. He took a breath and read further:

"...we hereby inform you that Mr. Raglan has no recollection of any contribution you may have made to his novel. Unless you have some witnessed or dated evidence to the contrary, we advise you not to speak of this matter to anyone else as it would constitute slander and be, thereby, actionable."

It was not signed by Raglan, but by one of the deWitt-Neatleys, Junior. Ron was impressed by the lawyerly language...for about two seconds. Then he began taking the apartment apart looking for any scrap of proof that he had written those stories. He thought he'd made a copy of at least one of them before sending in the original...Hermione was always after him to do things like that...but if he had, he could find it precisely nowhere.

Now he slumped over the paper-laden desk and pushed at his unruly mop of red hair. "Hermione'll be home soon," he thought. "Best have tea ready." Also, best get away from that depressing pile of bills...and his forever-lost opportunity. Oh, well, at least they'd got the last of the wedding debts settled.

Now here it was, two weeks before Christmas, and not a Knut in the till for gifts. Ron sighed, remembering Christmases past...especially at Hogwarts. What a little prat he'd been back then. There was his sweetie, carefully choosing gifts for him and Harry every year, and neither of them with so much as a chocolate frog for her. It had taken him years to learn to reciprocate...he just hadn't liked her that much back then. No, that wasn't the whole reason. A gift from a boy to a girl meant something quite different than the reverse. Girls could give guys all the presents they wanted, and it could be explained away as part of their motherly instinct. But if a boy gave a girl a gift, it meant he was serious about her, and that always started the old school gossip mills turning. With brothers like his leading the taunts, life would have become unbearable.

None of that mattered now. Hermione was his...all his...and he didn't care who knew it. He felt a sudden ache in his chest, which rose slowly in the direction of his Adam's-apple. He always got this way when he thought of his responsibilities as a husband. Here they were, a year married and poor as Muggle church-mice in their tiny bed-sit flat. True, his private agency, AURORS 'R' US, had worked out well for a while. With his friend Harry as partner, newly triumphant from their defeat of a certain major evildoer, they were able to entice lots of business to their little office in the East End. Then Harry and Ginny got married and took a well-deserved, year-long honeymoon...a trip around the world, donated by a grateful public. Ron's had been the most generous contribution: most of their funds from the agency, though he didn't tell Harry that. He'd managed for once to quell his natural aversion to poverty and reminded himself daily that it had been worth it to see their happy faces...Ginny's especially. He'd never realized how much his little sister had suffered during the Voldemort years until then.

It was probably because of Harry's absence that Ron had made a botch of his most recent case. Tailing the philandering husband of Ministry official Mafalda Hopkirk late one night, he was able to take an incriminating picture of Magus Hopkirk at a wild party while balancing on his broomstick outside a third-storey window. He presented it triumphantly to Mafalda, and she, equally triumphantly...and boasting of a very lucrative divorce settlement...showed it to her friends while they were all having their nails done. As the lurid magical photo made the rounds in the beauty shop, several people in it moved aside to reveal Ludo Bagman, cured of his gambling addiction and relegated to an assistant's post in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, whooping it up in a hot tub with a witch who was emphatically not Madam Bagman. If Harry had been involved, the picture would surely have revealed all its contents to him immediately, not taken its good old time...Harry was clever, or lucky, that way. Needless to say, Madam Bagman heard about it, her husband took up residence in the family doghouse, and Ron abruptly stopped getting work from Ministry personnel, who made up the bulk of his clientele.

Just about that same time, Hermione's private agency, dedicated to negotiating jobs and basic rights for disenfranchised beasts and beings, lost its government funding. A spokeswitch from DRACOMC insisted that cutbacks were being made all over. Still, thought Ron, it was a bit of a coincidence that the department's economies started right after he'd made an enemy of the Bagmans.

Ron sighed. Hermione had to put up with a lot in this marriage. He wondered at times like these what she saw in him. She was smart, witty, compassionate...and yes, bossy...but so beautiful. He remembered just when it was that the beauty had neutralized the bossiness in his mind. It was at that Yule Ball in fourth year when she went as the date of Quidditch-star Viktor Krum. Ron hadn't even recognised her at first, her white neck rising like a Sugar Quill, delicately curving, out of the collar of that filmy blue robe, the smooth mass of her dark toffee-colored hair piled up on her head and held in place as if charmed.

This effect, he found out later, had come courtesy of fellow Gryffindor, Angelina Johnson, but was in fact only partly due to sorcery. The hair itself, normally frizzy and a bit unkempt, had been straightened and styled by Angelina, aided by slathers of an expensive magical pomade. A set of ornate Spanish combs, a Johnson family heirloom, had been stuck strategically in Hermione's hair, sculpting it into glistening waves and tendrils. They sparkled as she moved about, walking with Krum, dancing with Krum, sipping pumpkin punch with Krum, holding hands with...but he wouldn't think about that.

That wasn't when he had fallen for his sweetie, though. It was later that night in the Gryffindor common room. He'd made a tactless comment about her hair coming down in the back and made a motion to show her where. She had whirled around to face him, just as his hand got tangled in the unruly strand and pulled it out completely. For an instant, he felt the hair run, satiny smooth, through his fingers, and he suddenly felt the urge to pull it all down, until it covered her shoulders like a great shiny cascade of caramel and milk chocolate.

As it was, he never got within ten feet of her after that. She had pulled roughly away from him and started one of her endless tirades, attacking his appearance, his intelligence, his social skills, his magical skills, his motor skills, and by association, his budding manhood. This of course triggered all his defensive mechanisms, and they were going at it hammer and wands when Harry walked in and broke it up.

He never thought of her after that without being intensely conscious of her hair. He dreamed of it, slithering under his chin, tangling around his ears, tickling his nose. Now he had a sudden powerful urge to revive that perfect beauty which she hid from the world as she hunched over massive legal tomes, squinting at tiny print in her efforts to better the lives of ungrateful house-elves and leprechauns. And he knew how to do it...how to reveal her beauty, affirm his love, and arouse her bit of feminine vanity all at the same time.

In a little shop in the Muggle village of Ottery St. Catchpole, he'd seen them: a set of hair combs, even prettier than Angelina's...filigreed silver inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Ron wasn't much on style, but he knew instinctively, just looking at them, that they would look wonderful, nestled in his sweetie's rich dark hair...especially if he could afford some of that pomade too. Sadly, the price...he'd got his father to help him work out the exchange rate...was insurmountable, and his own pride wouldn't allow him to ask his parents for a loan.

The watch chimed again. Five o'clock. He took it out of his vest pocket. It was a wedding gift from his father: an early twentieth century platinum timepiece...Muggle-made, of course...that Mr. Weasley had tricked out with all kinds of awesome spells. It could not only tell the time, the day of the week and date, and the phase of the moon, but also the next-nearest holiday and how many days until it came round. It could locate your nearest and dearest for you, just like the big grandfather clock in his parents' house, and--this was the biggie--it made a little tinkling sound whenever it passed a sweet shop. It was his father's pride and joy and undoubtedly valuable. He'd presented it to Ron with swimming eyes just before the ceremony. The bezel was engraved:

TO RON, ON THE HAPPIEST DAY OF YOUR LIFE, FROM THE SECOND-HAPPIEST MAN IN THE WORLD, LOVE, DAD.

Ron glanced at the watch. That knot started forming in his chest again. The locator showed Hermione "at home". He walked to the kitchen alcove to brew the tea. He'd failed her in so many ways. He'd lost all chance of getting some money out of Robert Raglan, screwed up his job, and had almost certainly lost Hermione hers. He heard her step, her hand on the latch, saw that face with its adorable moue of concentration framed in the doorway. Yes, he'd get the money...in the only way left to him.

2. Girl Talk

Chapter 2 of 9

Angelina and Hermione have a heart-to-heart.

The next morning, Angelina Johnson-Weasley opened her shop with a wave of her wand. The lock, developed by her clever husband, answered only to her voice speaking her own personal cant, "*Angelohomora!*" She stepped inside, reveling in the familiar odours: the waving and straightening, shortening and lengthening, tinting and bleaching, shrinking and enlarging potions for which she was becoming justly famous. She managed to be an hour early, even with that late-running game last night. One of her best customers had an early appointment, and Angelina would greet her personally, make some small-talk, turn her over to a more-than-capable assistant then go home and crash.

As she was laying out the tools of her trade, she heard the door-bell tinkle.

"Hello, Angelina, nice game last night."

"Hermione, how you doing? How's Ron?"

"Fine. He's home again today, organizing things."

"It never was a strong point as I remember."

"He's getting better with practice. How're you and George?"

Angelina returned to her sorting. "Mmm never better. I seem to have garnered a very well-to-do clientele over the past year. *Angelina's* is now the 'in' place to have your nails done. All the Ministry witches think so. And the Wheeze is so popular! George's a genius. I tell you, that man everything he touches turns to gold. And with Dennis helping him..."

There was a noise behind her, like a sob. She turned around. Hermione's face had taken on an odd crumpled look.

"What is it, baby?" Angelina put an arm around her shoulders and led her into the back room. Her preparations could wait. Hermione never, ever cried, but she was on the verge of floods just now. She gently settled her distraught sister-in-law on a comfortable couch and sat next to her.

"Angelina...I have made the biggest mess of things... and Ron thinks... it's all his fault. Now I have to sell my hair and " The floods came and Angelina conjured up a quick cup of chamomile tea, a tray of biscuits, and a fresh handkerchief. Hermione took a big swig of tea, refused the biscuits pleading a tummy-ache, and swiped her face with the hankie. These minor rites helped to calm her, and she was soon pouring out the story, laying out their economic difficulties, their problems with Ministry funding, and the letter from Raglan's solicitors.

Then she got to the heart of her problem: "Ron didn't even want to tell me about it, but I saw the refusal on the desk, and and Angelina, it's all because of me, him not getting some compensation for that story. I lost him his proof!"

Angelina looked skeptical. Hermione had never lost a thing in her life.

Hermione's lip quivered, but she took a deep breath and continued more calmly. "You see, I have to use invisible ink to write my clients' notes in. For confidentiality, you know. Well, I left one of the ink-bottles on our desk overnight and I think I'm sure Ron made a copy of one of his stories with it. The ink takes a couple of hours to fade, so he didn't notice, and next day I mistook it for blank scrap and cut it up and used it for shopping lists and such. See?" She took some pieces of parchment out of her bag. "I sprayed every piece of parchment in the place with the revealing agent, and that's how I found these though I'm sure I've thrown most of them away."

Angelina looked closely at the pages. It reminded her a little of felted paper that had been used over and over again to blot wet ink. There were obviously several sets of writing criss-crossing the parchment, but except for a few words, there was no telling what they said.

Angelina looked at her for a minute. "Now you know, Hermione, if Ron had filed these away right away, you never would have taken them for scrap." Hermione hiccupped and took a sip of tea. "Oh, baby, I'm not trying to blame Ron, but you know he is awfully Muggle-headed sometimes."

"Yes, it's one of the reasons I love him so. It keeps me from being homesick." She stifled a sob.

"How are your parents, by the way?"

"Fine, I guess. We don't get to visit much what with work and looking-for-work and...I dread having them see me like this. I'm just not myself lately."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, generally out-of-sorts. Take my job for example...I always thought I liked working with the underprivileged. But now it's making me sort of sick. I mean, it all started when this mountain troll...well, he's only half-troll actually...and quite civilized...relatively speaking...came into the office. He needed help relocating. But...I don't know if it was his looks or the smell or what. Five minutes into the interview I had to excuse myself and run to the loo. He literally turned my stomach."

"Well, that is a natural reaction, given your experience with trolls."

"But now I can't seem to get out of bed mornings without worrying that it's going to happen all over again. And it does. Everything comes up. It's like a vicious circle, you know?"

"Have you told Ron about it?"

"He's got enough to worry about. Augh! And I feel so fat...like all my clothes are shrinking...and I'm tired all the time..."

"You need a vacation, sounds like."

"But we can't afford..."

"I know." She patted Hermione's hand. "So how's about I keep these scraps of Ron's story? I'd like to show them to George. Maybe he can erase just your writing and leave us with Ron's. Then he can get some royalties from that shyster, Raglan, and afford a nice trip to your parents'...and maybe the Med?"

Hermione gratefully handed her the lot.

"Now what's this about you having to sell your hair?"

"Oh that. That's what I came to ask you about. I really want to get Ron a nice present for Christmas a silver chain for his pocket watch. He's always leaving it around you know on the wash stand, the kitchen table, his desk at work. I'm so afraid he's going to lose it somewhere, and a chain would look soooo classy, hanging across the front of his vest sort of Dickensian, I think. Anyway, when I went in to make the last payment on my wedding robes, I saw a nice chain in the window. Coincidentally, the proprietor asked me if I'd like to sell my hair to her wig department. It seems frizzy 'dos are coming back into style. She'll pay fifty Galleons for the lot."

"And you'd like me to grow it back for you afterwards."

"Oh, Hair-Growing Charms and potions don't work on me. The new hair is all brittle, and it just breaks off."

"Mmm that's interesting. Some of my other clients have that problem as well. Are you by any chance a Virgo?"

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"I don't know, but every Virgo I ever met has trouble with speeding-up potions and the like. It's as if their bodies rebel against anything that's not strictly natural and above-board." She lowered her voice confidentially. "They are my some of my toughest customers."

"Well, I am a Virgo. And gosh," she blushed, "it took me forever to convince myself to do a *Minusculum* on my teeth. So... what do you recommend?"

"A wig." Angelina grinned, and she was gratified to see the corners of Hermione's lips turn up just a trifle at her lame joke. "But seriously, I'd be happy to style it for you afterwards."

"Yes, I'd trust you to give me a hairdo that Ron could live with so so he doesn't want to hex me first."

"He does like your hair long, doesn't he?"

"Yes. You know, it's funny. He's always playing with it almost like a little child."

"That's not surprising...George's the same way...though he won't admit it. He just loves to do things with my hair. He especially likes to stick things in it when I'm sleeping."

"Like what?"

"Oh, teaspoons, feathers, knitting needles, slices of pizza..."

"He does not!" Hermione was giggling now.

"No lie. And once he charmed it to change colour, through all the colours of the rainbow, gradually, you know? I mean one minute my hair's black, then a kind of deep purple, then dark blue, then seven shades of green...each one ickier than the next...then yellow, orange, and then red then darkening to brown. Then it started all over again. I couldn't go out for days because the fool didn't know the counterspell."

"Hermione grinned and said shyly, "Ron says mine's the colour of dark chocolate...and honey...and caramel...all rolled into one."

"Well, he's right. You have a lot of natural highlights there. No wonder someone wants to buy it."

"Yes, but it's so frizzy. I can't do a thing with it. And we can't afford treatments..."

"I know, baby, and Ron would have a conniption if I gave you a charity-makeover."

"Yes. Well all that's moot anyway, since I'm going to have it cut."

"You really are?"

Yes, Angelina, I think this watch chain is much more important. Ron needs something to make him feel important...mature...respected..."

"A bit of a man about town?"

Hermione giggled and her eyes shone. "Something like that. It'll take his mind off our troubles, don't you think?"

I'm not so sure, thought Angelina later as she watched Hermione stride out the door and off down the street to her office.

Guy Gossip

Chapter 3 of 9

Dennis Creevey makes a discomfiting discovery about George's 'little' brother.

3. GUY GOSSIP

Dennis Creevey strode into the Leaky Cauldron. "A pint of your best, Tom. And join me if you will."

Tom smiled his toothless grin as he drew two foaming tankards of Fester-Addams Home-Brew. That Master Creevey was acting more like a Weasley every day. He remembered when Molly had taken the poor boy in after his brother Colin died in the Great Battle, and his parents were too appalled and grief-stricken themselves to offer him comfort. Thin as a rail, he'd been, and all but beaten, but her cooking and hugs aplenty had filled him out and bucked him up soon enough. Now Dennis was just like one of the family. Tom had even heard George call him "bro" once, though that was probably just the familiar way young people talked these days.

Now, as an assistant in George's shop, Weasley's Wizarding Wheezes, Dennis had earned enough to start wearing stylish clothes too. No more raggedy tees and too-large trousers for him. Tom blinked and admired his green suit, sparkling with dragon scales in the light of the pub fireplace. It made him look almost a man.

"Nice threads," he murmured.

"Thanks," said Dennis, "it was a present...from my...from George."

Tom took a long pull on his tankard and reminisced silently, smacking his lips over the tart beverage. It had been a great idea to get the little shrimp to help out at the Wheeze. After Fred died, George had been almost unable to go on, what with the pain and all. But this child, with his huge eyes and a million questions behind them, proved to be just what the Healer ordered in Tom's opinion. He'd never be another Fred, but he was a hard worker and a cheery sort and seemed to be developing a flair for salesmanship.

Tom thought maybe Dennis and George had the kind of mutual empathy that only boys who'd lost a brother could. But there was more to it than that. The first time the Creeveys had ever walked into the Cauldron, years ago, goggle-eyed and excited and dragging their frightened Muggle parents, Tom had sensed that Dennis and Colin had an unusually close relationship, even for brothers. After all, they'd shared the secret knowledge of their magical gifts for a long time. Tom thought it must be rather like starting life in the womb together, like twins.

There was one way Dennis was definitely like George: he was a great one with the stories, especially from his days at Hogwarts, starting with that one where he fell in the lake his first night there and made the acquaintance of the Giant Squid. But Tom had a capper for him today, if he could get in a word edge-ways. (It was well known that Den Creevey had the gift of the gab.) The canny bartender would let him run his mouth for a bit, then hit him with the news.

"Say, Master Creevey, how's it going?" Tom asked.

"Right well, Tom, we're just tearing up the airways with our ads for the shop. Can't keep those new Dungbombs in stock. Got five flavours now." He ticked them off on his fingers. "There's Cow-Patties. They're rather mild actually, the kind you'd leave on the doorstep of the Home for Retired Warlocks...to liven up their mornings, you know. Then there's Goat-Droppings. They're ever so skanky. And Boar-Fewmets, bane of hunting enthusiasts. I like the Pixie Poop the best. It's great for aerial assaults. And then there's George's personal favorite, Dragon-Spoor. Like he says, 'It's for when you care enough to send the very worst'."

Tom was not to be deterred from dropping his own little Dungbomb. "I only ask about business, Master Dennis, because George's brother was in here earlier asking how he could go about selling something on the Dark Market. Sounded like he was having money problems."

"George's brother? Which one? Not Bill."

"Nope. The skinny one...the one they call Ronnie-kins. He had on what he thought was a disguise, a great balaclava wrapped clean around his head, but I seen his hair sticking out. Weasley-red, thinks I. You can't fool old Tom."

"Hmm... that's weird. Did he say what he wanted to pawn, or why?"

"Nope, played his cards close to his robes, as you might say. But I got the feeling it was something very valoooble."

Dennis covered his amazement with a long pull at his drink. He knew Ron least well of all the Weasleys. What did Ron own that was worth selling? Nothing he could think of...except maybe Hermione. "He didn't give you any clue as to what...or why?"

"Well, he might have said more, but just then, Mundungus Fletcher walked in. Methinks Ron don't trust old Dung much, although I suspicion Dung could give him better advice on the fencing of valoooble commodiddies than I could."

That was certainly true, thought Dennis, finishing his drink. The old sot knew all the shady dealers in Knockturn Alley. But it would have been more like him to pick Ron's pocket of the item, then try to sell it back to him later.

Dennis thanked Tom for the tip and headed for the back door, the shortest way to the shop...and Verity Periwinkle. Thinking of George's pretty, blonde assistant, her amazing blue eyes, and the faint scent of roses that pervaded her wake made him check his suit sleeves briefly for wrinkles or the odd spill. Then he got a whiff of a far less pleasant odor, a unique blend of pipe grunge, stale whiskey, and cabbage gas. Out of the corner of his eye, he spotted Dung Fletcher keeping a very low profile in a corner booth. He decided to pay his respects...and see if he could pump Dung about George's brother.

"Mr. Fletch...um...Mundungus, my man, how's tricks?" Dennis meant this literally. According to George, Dung Fletcher was a very tricky sort.

The mass of rags stirred in the gloom. Eyes red and bright with rheum signaled that the old thief was awake and aware, for the time being at least. "Whoozat?" he croaked. "It's a mort dark in 'ere. Can't see yer 'and in front of yer face, yer can't."

"It's Dennis Creevey. George Weasley's assistant."

"Oi, right. Seen you in the Wheeze, ain't I?"

"That's it." Dennis remembered. They'd been giving out free samples one day, and Dung had snuck back for seconds and thirds.

Dung scratched his head. "Them spinach-flavored breath mints was a big hit wiv the boys."

"Glad you liked them. Say, have you seen Ron Weasley around lately? You know: tall...freckles...um..."

"...vacant expression?" Dung finished with a chuckle. He grabbed Dennis's arm and yanked him into the booth. He was very strong for an old fellow. "I mighta, Denny, I just mighta. What's it worth to yeh?"

Dennis tried to imitate George's casual style. "Oh...heh...c'mon, um...Dung, what's a little gossip between...um...friends?"

Dung coughed brew-breath into his face. "Can't say, I'm sure, but times is hard, young fella, 'specially since You-Know-Who went you-know-where."

Dennis choked, but kept a smile on his face. "What do you mean? Business has never been better at the Wheeze."

"Well, you know, as long as they was hunting Death-Eaters, the Ministry didn't pay no attention to the likes of yours-truly. We're just small pertaters out there on the East End. 'Ardly worth bothering with. But now that Voldie's gone for good, them Aurors got nothing better to do than 'arass us little fellers...the Nation of Shoplifters...the foundation of sass-eye-uh-tee..." He drew out the last word deliberately, his hand over his heart. A tear formed in one eye...or was that just blear?"

The last words offended Dennis. His brother had died for the Magicosm and the likes of Mundungus Fletcher. He pushed the old man away. "Get off it, Mister. The soap-box, I mean. And it's shopkeepers not shoplifters."

"I was just sayin'..."

"Look, I just want to know if Ron Weasley approached you with any...ah... business transactions is all."

"Naw, I ain't seen 'im since our days with the Order." Dung rubbed his hands together. "Fighting side-by-side with Albus Dumbledore. Great man, 'e was...a real saint...out to rid the world of evil..."

More like Dumbledore doing all the fighting and you skulking in the shadows, you great coward, thought Dennis.

"Say that reminds me," said Dung. "Spot us a drink, Denny, and I'll tell you a great shtory."

Dennis started to say he was sorry but...

"It involves one Ludovic Bagman." He laid a finger to the side of his nose and winked in the time-honored tradition of thieves and scoundrels.

Dennis remembered Ludo Bagman with bitterness. The fellow had once been Head of the Department of Magical Games and Sports, but resigned under a cloud for taking illegal bets at the Quidditch World Cup. Colin had been there with his camera and had been conned by Ludo into making a bet on Team Irish with money he was saving for some new equipment. After the game, Bagman had absconded, leaving Colin and many other young wizards the poorer for it. But now Bagman was back at the Ministry, forgiven by all, though it was rumored that his new, wealthy wife had had a hand in his promotion.

Dennis shrugged. "Long's it's quick. I gotta get to work."

He settled in and called for a pint of small ale...just the one. Dung took a long pull, cleared his throat and started. "M'friend Rascal Raglan, you know, he comes from a good family, educated at Hogwarts an' all. Most of the family made it big, one way er 'nother. Anyway, his younger brother's in the printing business er sumpin, and 'e juss 'ad a really big score. So Rascal persuades him to celebrate in a big way, but not with the Missus...if you get what I mean. Calls up his friends, some business ass-o-see-its, some Ministry brass...the family's got connections, right? And...get this...Rascal arranges for some luscious young witches from my neck of the woods to attend. That's how I hear about it. And I asks m'friend if they can maybe use a mater-dee or a broom-val-ay er sumpin. He gets little bro' Robert to hire me, and I have m'self a great night...a little bartending, free booze, a bit of cadging on the side, nothing serious, you get me. But the real kicker is this. Some Auror...private agency, on an unrelated divorce case...gets pix of the party, and our Ludo is in one of the pix, frolicking about with a bunch of these bounteous beauties. Missus B. finds out about it some'ow, and...last I 'ear...is Nibs is sleeping out back o' the mansion with the Crups and the Kneazles."

Dennis allowed himself a chuckle. "Say, that's pretty good, Dung." Serves the blighter right... if it's true.

"It gets better. I got some pix of the party m'self. And I can let you have 'em for, oh say, a Sickle apiece. Ain't no good to me now... 'cept as soo-veneers...now the cat's outta the bag..."

Dennis was no blackmailer, but he loved the thought of having something to remind him that Bagman was nothing more than a ferrety, cheating scoundrel. If they were good enough, he might even frame some and hang them in his flat. He took the lot and paid up.

"Now just for the record, Dung, are you dead sure you haven't seen Ron Weasley in here today?"

"Well, come to think of it I may have. I thought I saw a tallish feller talking to Tom this morning as I come in, but when he saw me, he lit out quick. Thought at first he mighta owed me sumpin, but...naw...ain't nobody owes old Dung nothin' these days." He drained the last of his drink and looked hopefully at Dennis.

"Did you see which way he was headed?"

"Went out back...the Alley."

"Here," said Dennis. He tipped Dung a Sickle and, now with one more good reason to do it, headed for the back door.

Intimacy Interrupted

Chapter 4 of 9

Angie and George are happily married, and they share many a happy evening...

4. INTIMACY INTERRUPTED

When George Weasley got to his door that night, he found the house uncharacteristically dark. Usually Angelina was home by this time unless she had a game, and he knew her schedule by heart. This was an off night, he was sure. Maybe she had been kept late at the shop. At this time of year with all the Yuletide parties going on, there were plenty of last-minute pleas by important clients to be fitted into the appointment book, and sometimes the boss had to help out in the trenches, painting hair, faces, and fingernails, with the occasional request for a Thigh-, Bum-, or Foot-Shrink. He knew how that was: Dennis and Verity had got all their orders for holiday fireworks out weeks ago, but just yesterday, there had come a desperate call from the Ministry. Could they *please* have some Whizzlers, Floating Snakes, and Catherine Wheels to liven up their Christmas luncheon?

Thank heavens for Dennis. He'd taken care of that rush order so George could watch Angie's team clobber Chudley. He felt sorry for brother Ron, who was a big fan of the Cannons, but only a little. Angie got to play the whole game, and she was spectacular. George showed her just how spectacular in lots of ways later that night. *Poor*

Dennis, he thought. *He's so shy around girls. He doesn't know what he's missing.*

Once inside, George realised the house was occupied. There was light flickering in the dining room and a tantalising aroma of cilantro and curry coming from the kitchen beyond. And the decor had changed...drastically. Gone were the high-backed chairs and trestle table they used for state occasions and Exploding-Snap tournaments. In their place a polished low table rested on a Persian rug of the type his father frequently confiscated in Ministry raids of flying-carpet smugglers. Instead of chairs, there were great cushions of satin and velvet all around. Scented votive candles in stained-glass cups hovered near the ceiling, scattering rainbows of light about the walls and perfuming the room with anise, vanilla, and frankincense. His senses were overloading...deliciously.

Oops, he thought in a sudden male panic, *have I forgotten something?* He fought down the romantic oblivion triggered by the colors, the smells, the thoughts. *Must stay alert. The last time you missed an important romantic milestone, old boy, you had to endure a burnt breakfast and a day of cold shoulders.*

While he was frantically thumbing through his datebook, trying to find out if it was serious enough to warrant conjuring a bouquet of flowers or a nice bit of jewelry, a voice started humming in the kitchen. Who could mistake that husky contralto? Now she was singing...a Weird Sisters' oldie: 'Conjure-Man'. *I've got it now. That was the song we danced to on our first date. But that was Christmas night, and it's almost two weeks away. So it couldn't be...*

Just then, out of the kitchen waltzed his wife, his stately, sexy wife, bearing a tray loaded with his favourite dishes, wearing the robe she'd worn the night of that first date. It was a little snug now around the chest area, he noticed, but that was just fine with him. She waved the tray to the low table.

"Happy anniversary-of-the-first-time-you-got-up-the-courage-to-ask-me-out, my husband," she murmured into his good ear with studied Caribbean formality. "I have prepared for you a culinary feast, and I shall be happy to feed it to you...my...own...self."

She drew him down with her onto the nearest cushion. All his favourite exotic foods were ranged about the table: jerk chicken, blackened catfish, soursop pudding, mango chutney, jambalaya, souse, pickled pigs' feet. And of course the *piece de resistance* was seated beside him, pouring drinks.

"To magic," she drawled throatily, touching his glass to hers.

He lifted it to his lips, a heady brew, probably Cruzan dark beer. She took a piece of the chicken, placed it delicately between his teeth, and sucked her fingers clean of the hot sauce. He wanted to tell her she had got a little of it on her cheek, right there by her dimple, but for some reason the words wouldn't come. Instead he decided it would be a good idea, just to... lick it off for her. He leaned across her slowly, brushing her cheek and chin with his lips as he sought that tantalizing red smear and planning a more thorough exploration of those satiny, sensitive places on his return...

Suddenly there was a banging and hallooing out front. George and Angelina remained locked in a tasty embrace for about five seconds, the first pleasurable, the last excruciating, hoping whoever it was would go away. But no, the noise only got louder and more insistent, as if the number of supplicants were multiplying by the second. In fact, it seemed that they would presently break the door down.

Then George had what can only be described as a heart attack...but not in the Muggle sense of the term. Rather, his ~~h~~heart started beating very fast. He grabbed his wand and leaped up, possessed of an implacable compulsion to *attack* whoever it was on the other side of his front door.

Yes, he thought savagely as he raced through the parlour, *first I'll hit you with a Crucio! Then that stupid curse of Ginny's...what's it called?...Flying Bat Bogeys all over your face. Then a couple of Levitations with sudden drops onto the asphalt, like a frigging...white...ferret. Next, Engorgio...ah, that one brings back memories. Then a Skinning Charm, like mom uses on potatoes...oh, I'll peel you like a grape! Gits! Buggers!...then finally...Avada Kedavra...*

Mad-Eye Moody, rest him, always said it took a deal of hatred to make the Death Curse work, but right now George felt he would have no trouble, no trouble at all mustering the necessary level of bile. He reached the door, wand at the ready, and yanked it open.

There stood Dennis with a look of such sadness on his face that all of George's anger just suddenly leaked out of him.

Angelina, who had crept up behind, cried out, "What is it, Den, what's wrong?"

But Dennis was speechless for once and allowed himself to be pulled inside.

"Don't tell me the store burned down!" cried George.

Dennis shook his head.

"Verity...she's all right?" asked Angelina.

"I guess," he mumbled.

"Voldie hasn't somehow come back, has he?"

Another shake.

"Your family...your parents... your crazy uncle?"

Shakes in each pause.

"Then what the blazes is it?" shouted George.

Angelina ran and got a tumbler full of Firewhisky. Dennis took a great gulp and found his voice. "Ron...your brother Ron is going to...pawn your dad's wedding gift!"

George sat stunned for about one second. Then he felt a sudden urge to do to Dennis all the awful things he had been planning earlier. This skinny kid, whom he'd come to love almost as a brother, had interrupted perhaps the most glorious evening since his wedding night...for this?!!

Angelina must have read his mind because she crooned in a conciliatory tone, "Let's have some dinner and discuss this, guys. Come on now." She coaxed her husband back into the dining room and gently, but firmly seated him on his cushion. Yes, this evening was ruined, but there would be lots of other nights...a lifetime of nights...

Dennis came wandering in, still dazed, but as he took in the scene, the lighting level, the smells, it slowly dawned on him just what it was he had interrupted.

"Oops," he said in a small voice, "guess I owe you one, bro."

"A big one...bro!" snapped George.

Angelina took this opportunity to jam another piece of chicken into George's mouth. Then she led Dennis to the table and sat between them, filling all their plates and cups repeatedly until she was sure that at least their stomachs were satisfied. No one spoke for quite a while.

"Gosh, Angelina, you sure can cook," said Dennis finally. "Or is this take-out?"

"Of course not, you ninny," retorted George. "Angelina's mother's from Barbados. All the family meals are like this."

"Wow, you got yourself a gold mine here, guys. Hey, what about adding a Caribbean restaurant onto the side of The Wheeze, George? The apothecary is moving to bigger quarters next month..."

"Shut up, will you? And tell us what's all this about Ron's watch. And why should you care anyway?"

"Aw, George, I remember you telling me that you helped your dad with all the gadgetry on that little sweetie...you know, the family-tracker and all. And how hard it was stuffing that many spells into such a small space. And that candy sniffing sensor...you worked for months on that." He sighed. "That watch is sort of like your baby...isn't it? I don't know about you, but the idea of letting it get into the hands of some ruddy shylock burns my butt big time."

George just stared at him. How could you hate a guy who had that kind of loyalty?

Angelina interrupted his thoughts. "Did you really do that, Georgie?"

He shrugged. "Yeah, Dad could never have managed all that himself. I mean that flying car of his would never have gotten off the ground if Fred and I hadn't snuck into the workshop and tweaked things a bit." He sniffed wistfully and took another pull of Cruzan Dark.

"Right," Dennis chimed in, "and how about that time you fixed your mum's knitting needles..."

"And her auto-peeler..."

"And her self-shaping corset..."

"George! Dennis! Can we please get back on the subject?" The twins looked up to see Angelina standing there, rolling her eyes at them. She had long since Banished the dishes to the kitchen sink.

"What was the subject, Ange?" asked George. "Oh, yeah, the watch. Go on, Den."

Dennis took a deep breath and related all he had heard from Dung Fletcher and Tom in the Leaky Cauldron that morning, as well as his foray into Diagon Alley.

"I got my biggest lead in Knockturn Alley," he said. "There's an old hag down there, has a hock shop. Says Ron came in and showed her the watch, but she wouldn't offer him enough for it, so he lit out."

"What's he need that much money for?" wondered George. "The watch must be worth at least fifty Galleons with all the spells we put on it."

"But that's just the point, don't you see? The spells...on a Muggle watch..." Dennis's mouth still hadn't caught up to his brain, and he paused, searching for the right words.

Angelina picked up the thread of his thought. "If Ron sells it to someone unscrupulous, they could use it to blackmail your father because...even if most of the actual work was yours...he was breaking the laws against charming Muggle artifacts."

"Laws he set up in the first place," said George. "Ironic, isn't it? Well, hell, it isn't like it hasn't happened before." He thought a minute. "Say, Ron brought me that old comic collection to sell in the shop. I thought he just finally grew out of the things and wanted to make space in the flat, so I took them on consignment. But I still don't get what he needs the money for."

Angelina replied, "I think I know." She related what she'd heard from Hermione that morning.

"So they're a little short," said George, "and Hermione wants to sell her hair and buy him a watch chain. Why does Ron need to sell the watch, which, as I hope we've all noticed, would be counterproductive in the extreme?"

Dennis seemed to come out of his stupor. "Because he wants to buy her something."

"What?" said George and Angelina.

"He was also in the apothecary pricing that hair stuff girls use. What's it called? Sleekeazy's? And hair ornaments...combs and such...in some other stores in the Alley. Believe me, I hit them all."

"What's that all about?" said George. "I can see spending it on clothes or food, or even that candy that Ron's always going on about, but hair ornaments?"

"I think I get it," said Angelina. "That's what Hermione wore to Yule Ball...my Spanish combs. And I used Sleekeazy's Hair Potion to smooth her hair that night. You remember how good she looked."

"Sexy," said George.

"Smashing," said Dennis.

"Definitely not her usual poker-up-the-arse self," said George.

"George!" said Angelina.

"Sorry," said George. "So you think Ron wants to recapture the glamorous Hermione, the girl he fell for. Is that it?"

"And make her feel good about herself," returned Angelina. "She's awfully down, you know. I think she's got a bun in the oven."

"A what?"

"She's pregnant. You know, she's going to have a..."

"I know what *that* means. But, Ange, how do you know?"

"Well, for one, she tosses her cookies in the morning, her jeans are tight, and she cries at the drop of a hat."

"Hermione...cries?" Dennis put in, trying to picture an impossibility.

"Oh, that's definitely a sign of something," put in George, "the end of the world maybe. So what do we do about it? Obviously we can't let Ron go and sell that watch."

"And we can't let Hermione cut her hair," said Angelina, and she explained about the problem Virgos had with Hair Growth Spells and potions.

"I have an idea," said George. "Here's what."

Sales Tactics

Chapter 5 of 9

The first prong in George's plan: Angelina has to score some points with the ministry for Hermione.

Euphemia Fudge-Bagman straightened in the comfortable salon chair to ease the kink in her back. Madam Angelina herself was finger-waving her gold-frosted locks, with the same expertise she used to thread her broomstick between defenders on the Quidditch pitch.

"And how is the team doing, my dear?" Madam Fudge-Bagman addressed Angelina's reflection in the mirror in her trademark queenly baritone. Euphemia couldn't ever be interested in Quidditch, no matter what her husband said. All that head-turning tended to mess with her carefully managed coiffure, and following the fast-paced loops and dives, passes and interceptions had given her whiplash more than once. But it paid to act interested in the constituents' little hobbies. It made her seem more generous and down-to-earth--and saved on tips too.

Angelina flashed her a dazzling smile. "We tied for first as of Thursday night, Miz E. We're in the thick of it now. I told you we'd be all right once Oliver Wood got off the injured reserves."

A squat, blonde shampoo girl next to her chimed in, "And it didn't hurt that you were dead-on in all your throws, Miss Angie. Three scores and ten assists. That's got to be your best showing yet."

"Yeh, that and a trick wand'll get me a cuppa coffee," returned Angelina, sceptically. "The coach still isn't convinced I can give him a full game, so when Pucey gets off probation for turning that ref into a bat, I'll be back on the bench. But it'll give me more time to keep your hair up to par, won't it, Miz E.?"

Euphemia chuckled indulgently. Angelina was a lovely witch, smarter than most, and ambitious. She'd go far. It was a shame she'd married that noxious Weasley boy. One of the twins, she'd heard. Her brother Cornelius had been most perturbed by their machinations their last year at Hogwarts. Oh well, Angelina Johnson was still the hottest stylist around, and as long as she was, Miz E. would burn no bridges that led to her shop, whatever her husband thought.

Now, ensconced under the magi-dryer, she stretched her rubesque body to pick up a copy of *Witch Weekly* and that convenient tin of chocoballs from the low table in front of her. Lately she was feeling the tiniest prickings of the boredom that often plagued politically savvy wives of Ministry officials. Bland rags like *Witch Weekly* and *Speller's Digest*, were an ideal outlet for her social conscience. Often she'd find a worthy cause highlighted in one of those magazines that was crying out for an influential sponsor or spokeswitch. She was on more Boards of Trustees than she could name, and her donations made for the best kind of publicity.

Merlin knew they needed it after that last scandal. She still winced reflexively, thinking about it. Her husband had made one gaffe after another since his return to the Ministry in the Department of Magical Games and Sports. The last Bundimun in the rafters was when he suggested Dolores Umbridge be appointed to help the vampires of eastern Europe to form their own Quidditch League. Euphemia could have told her husband what that would lead to, having herself been a classmate of the bigoted sow.

It was no wonder that soon afterwards, Minister Shackbolt threatened him with demotion to the Centaur Liaison Office. Euphemia had blanched under her perfectly applied make-up when she heard that. It was supposed to be the political kiss-of-death to be sent to the CLO. But Ludo, chastened, had apologized, kept his head down, and worked hard—they both had. She helped by using her family's influence, throwing parties, calling in a lot of old favours, and gulping down generous helpings of humble pie.

Only this year had her husband finally managed to work his way back to some sort of political legitimacy as first assistant to the head of the Being Division in the Department for the Regulation and Control of Magical Creatures, not that he knew anything about the subject. But that was what out-sourcing was for.

But he still didn't have much common sense. Look at the way he let himself get caught out at that party a few weeks ago! Euphemia forgave him of course; he just didn't know it yet. There were still a few perks to be squeezed out of her embarrassed and contrite husband. She'd already wangled a Christmas luncheon at the Ministry in her honour, complete with her favourite fireworks. But there was still that one-of-a-kind Nundu fur coat she'd seen in Gladrags... the Moke-skin purse... the Clabbert-pustule jewellery... that darling hat with the Fwooper plumes... and yes, the carpet cruise to Bali... Fireball hide pumps... oceans of Chocoballs...

She forced herself to focus on her magazine. This copy happened to be open to an article about the plight of werewolves in England. She'd never thought of them as needing help -- such fierce, dangerous beasts they were -- but the slant of the story intrigued her. Halfway through it, she sighed uneasily. This writer made a great case. Yes, lycanthropy could happen to anyone; yes, it was not their fault; yes, they were still humans -- most of the time. But really -- werewolves! The very thought of clasping one to her bosom -- even figuratively -- in the name of equality and friendship made her break out in hives.

She read the byline: Hermione Granger-Weasley. What? Another Weasley? She wondered aloud if Angelina knew her.

"Of course," said Angelina, who had appeared out of nowhere to check the temperature of Euphemia's coiffure under the dryer. She prattled on that everyone knew Hermione Granger, the top mage in her year at Hogwarts with more OWLs and NEWTs even than Percy Weasley.

Madam Fudge-Bagman knew that name, her brother's former assistant, an upstanding young man, though a tad ambitious for his caste.

"Are they cousins?" Euphemia queried.

"Oh no, Hermione married into the family. And since school, she's thrown all her energies into working for the down-trodden."

Madam Fudge-Bagman sighed again, sympathetically this time.

~*~

It was here that Angelina saw her opening.

Professional Quidditch players must have a sixth-sense for making the right moves to score a goal, and Angelina's was working overtime today. She moved right in to feed Madam Fudge-Bagman salient facts about Hermione's many projects. She steered Euphemia's thoughts away from the controversial topic of Lycanthrope rehabilitation to more obviously noble, cuddly, and pathetic subjects like Centaurs forced into quarantine, Puffskeins used as "the jack" in lawn bowling, and displaced house-elves driven to drink and dissipation. Then she blocked doubts concerning Hermione's inexperience and threw in an opinion that Hermione could save Bagman's department money every year, because she could be counted on to manage her caseload with energy, passion, and thrift. She dodged the issue of Ron's faux pas with the photographs and tackled the question of fair remuneration for outsourcing in general, all the while noting Madam Fudge-Bagman's reactions like a Chaser reads a Keeper's eyes as she closes in for a shot on goal.

After work, she ticked Madam Fudge-Bagman off her list of to-dos and headed for home. She had dodged, fainted, and chucked the ball quite neatly, she thought, with only a few minor fouls along the way. She could only hope for a score. And she wondered how the men were making out with their part of George's plan.

Scare Tactics

Chapter 6 of 9

George and Dennis tackle the major evil guy--well--he's not all that major actually... or all that evil....

Novelist Robert Raglan, creator of the Martin Miggs the Mad Muggle comics, scorned by book critics, but beloved of teenaged wizards everywhere, surveyed his gleaming new offices. He was early to work, he knew, but he just had to get out of the house and bask in his new-found legitimacy as an author. After all, cartoonists were barely tolerated by other artists and writers. Even in the Muggle world, they won no Pulitzers, appeared on no talk shows, held no signings for queues of devoted followers. Now he had the lot...well, not the Pulitzer or its wizarding equivalent, the Pittiman, but he wasn't greedy. He'd settle for fame, wealth, adulation. Take that, Gilderoy Lockhart, he crowded, wherever you are.

There was only one small snag. His publishing agent, Madam Plage, had mentioned to him the other day that there was actually someone out there accusing him of stealing their material. However, Madam Plage had assured him that there'd be no trouble. These kinds of things were de rigueur in the publishing world. A new talent burst on the scene, and everyone and his Hippogriff wanted in on the success story. She had installed a new secretary--dear, pretty Charlata--in his outer office with explicit orders to blast this particular fellow with a memory-wipe the moment he entered--if he was foolish enough to try such a thing. Robert bowed to her superior wisdom. Madam Plage had reams of experience in such matters.

Here in his citadel in a disused electrical plant overlooking the Thames, he could relax, untouchable. He made some small adjustments to his desk furnishings. He gently fiddled with his wand, which stood upright for all to see in a fancy bud-vase. The large, gold-framed photo of his wife was a tad off-centre. He angled it so that visitors would notice as they entered the office. Gladys had a sweet face and large, liquid eyes that belied her iron-fisted business savvy. She was a stunner--a real knock-out, and he paid a pretty Sickle to keep her that way. But she was worth it. After all, it was she who'd kept them going, building up her own small business after he quit cartooning to try his hand at a novel. A whole year it had taken him to find the right themes, the right words, but it had paid off...oh how it had paid off!

These thoughts touched off a small twinge of nostalgia for the old days when he was first struggling to make a name for himself as a cartoonist, bent night after night over his sketchbook in their little basement flat in Clapham Common. He'd always been good at drawing, and more than one teacher, exasperated at his inattention, had still grudgingly wished him luck with his talent even as they Banished his sketch pad into the classroom fireplace. His family was appalled--he seemed to be following in the degraded footsteps of his older brother Rapscoll...or 'Rascal' as they called him--but Gladys supported him staunchly, working days to support them in a little dress shop in town. At night, soft and warm next to him on the loveseat, having made them both coffee, she played secretary, writing his letters, editing his dialog, and later, when he'd "made it," reading his fan mail and putting out a newsletter for Miggs-addicts. Later on, as he grew popular, and demand for his Mad Muggle series moved it to the status of a weekly event, he sometimes found himself at a loss for plotlines. Even there Gladys was able to help out. She often gave him ideas, good ones that jump-started him into a frenzy of composition.

There was a sound in the outer office. Was it his secretary already? Maybe a fan or two looking for autographs? Or a journalist inquiring into his work-in-progress. He adjusted his collar, pulled at his cuffs.

Through the door walked two fellows, one comfortably-built like himself, the other much smaller, but both dressed stylishly in suits of dragon hide. The greenish scales glistened in the early morning light. The slighter of the two stood by the door staring at him with great concentration. The fellow probably never met a celebrity before. The other one, obviously more confident, approached him with a buoyant stride.

"Master Raglan, is it? We were so hoping to see you--my brother and I--before the morning rush. We know you're a busy man, but--"

Robert could not see how the two could be related. Besides the difference in bulk, the one shaking his hand had bright red hair, the other's was a dullish yellow.

Blondie squeaked from the doorway, "Yes, sir, we're very interested in your work, and we wondered if we might impose on your generosity."

"Well, all solicitations go through my secretary, Miss Swyndle, and if you want me to speak for your club or what-not, I'm sorry to say I'm booked solid at the moment."

"Oh, no, sir, we're not with any charity," said Red. "We just hoped you might autograph one of your earlier works for our brother who's--ah--indisposed. He's a great fan, you know. Has all your stuff in the original." He held out a much-thumbed comic book. It was a copy of the first cartoon Robert had ever published: A Mad Muggle Meets Magic.

This took him by surprise. "Well, all right," he said, getting out his quill, the nostalgia welling up once more. "What's the name?"

"Weasley--Ronald Weasley."

Robert smiled. He recognised the name. A boyhood fan who had written him a time or two.

"There you go." He signed it with a flourish, "To my friend and admirer, Ronald, Hope this finds you well, with sincerest regards, etc., etc. That okay?"

"Thank you ever so. May we also express our unabashed admiration of your latest coup--ah, your book--"

"Oh, have you read my book? What did you think of it?"

Blondie moved towards him. "We were intrigued--"

"Amused--" added Red.

"Amazed--"

"Horrified--"

"What was that?"

Red looked aghast. "Oh, did I say horrified? So sorry. I meant: angry, disgusted, sickened, bitter, resentful, repulsed, revolted, nauseated, and contemptuous--did I cover everything, Dennis?"

"You forgot 'vengeful,' George."

"Oh yes--vengeful!" The fellow named George licked his lips and grinned in a rather dragonish way, his teeth glinting like the scales of his jacket.

"But I don't understand--" Robert stammered.

"Surely you do. You took our brother Ron's ideas--stole them, and built your paltry, nasty, slimy excuse for good literature around them for your own selfish gain."

"Uh--there must be some error--" Robert slowly backed towards his desk. "I'm afraid I'll be tied up all day--I can hear my secretary--she's coming now--" If he could only reach his wand. "Erm--Lots of dictation--you'll have to speak to my solicitors--" But the one called Dennis moved in quickly and blocked his way.

"Oh no, Master Raglan, we'll speak to--you--or--nobody!" He punctuated each word with a prod of his own wand into Robert's stomach. During this exchange, the other fellow sneaked up behind him, wheeling the desk chair into the back of his legs, and gave a great shove. Needless to say, Robert sat down--abruptly. Blondie--Dennis--waved his wand about the office. "Now we'll have some privacy," he crowed. There was a maniacal gleam in his beady little eyes.

"A Locking Spell--how dare you?"

"And even better," said the one called George, "a Mass Apparition charm. We're going for a little ride." The room gave a sudden lurch, and several items on the desk slid off it. George laughed...a nasty laugh. "Now we're not in London anymore, chum. We're hovering over the Channel about a thousand feet up. Well, we're either there or the North Sea. We've never been that good with coordinates. Anyway you'll know in a minute--if your bum freezes to that chair--"

"What do you want?" Robert cried.

"Compensation for Ronald Weasley's contribution to your noble work--a minor cut--say five percent--"

"For what? Being a loyal subscriber? Sending me adoring fan mail? Anyway, I only get five--"

"Well, then five percent of your five. With the books going for three Galleons a pop, a hundred-thousand-plus copies sold--that comes to about--seven hundred and fifty G's."

"This is preposterous! You've no claim--no claim whatsoever. My publisher--my wife--"

"This the Missus?" Dennis had picked the portrait of Gladys off the floor and waved it at him.

George ogled it salaciously. Robert longed to hit him for that. "You got good taste, Robbie old man. Say what? Robbie--Rob--perfect name for a damned plagiarist!"

But Robert Raglan would not be drawn. Talk about his wife stiffened his backbone. He'd face a hundred burly thugs rather than expose her to humiliation. "I'm sorry. Do with me what you will. Without proof that will convince my publisher and my solicitors--and myself--your brother's not getting a Sickle out of me." He crossed his arms and legs and stared straight ahead in tight-lipped determination.

"How's about we provide the proof," said Dennis. "For instance, we have the copy Ron made before he sent you the original stories. Right here." He brandished some parchment in front of Robert's face and meant to pull it away, but was not quite quick enough. Robert snatched and scanned the page. It seemed to have been much overwritten. He could only make out a few words.

"This is rubbish," he said, tossing it back. "It'll never stand up in the Wizengamot." Raglan's mouth snapped shut. He had the satisfaction of seeing a hint of uncertainty in Dennis's eyes.

"And," whispered George in his ear. "Did you know that you can do *aPrior Incantato*, charm on a quill, the same as you can with a wand? All you need is to touch it to another quill from the same bird and you can get the first quill to regurgitate every word it's ever written. We have Ron's quill, Master Raglan, the one he used to write those stories."

"What about the other one?"

"What?"

"The other quill. From the same eagle. I demand to see it. In fact, I demand a demonstration, here and now!"

"Well, it's only a matter of time before we find one."

"But you don't have one yet, do you?"

He could see the dismay in their eyes. This obviously wasn't going at all the way they'd planned.

"You're right, Master Raglan," blurted Dennis. "We don't have any proof yet, but it's out there, and we'll get it eventually."

"But you know that, don't you?" added George much more forcefully. "And you fear it. You've been getting letters from Ron ever since he was just a little kid, pouring out his heart, giving you his ideas. I daresay they weren't much when he was little, but lately his stuff's been getting better and better. And you took advantage of his naivety--lifted his plots right off the page and into your dung heap of a book. And he's stuck in a nasty little bed-sit with mountains of bills, and his wife's got a--ah--a scone in the fire and..."

While he ranted, Robert could see the other brother--Dennis--out of the corner of his eye, pacing about, looking at a square of paper he had in his hand--it looked a bit like a photograph--and shaking his head and muttering. Suddenly, he rushed forward and stared right into Robert's face. Robert thought the fellow might punch him, but he just shook his head again and said, "C'mon, George, he's a real cold fish. We'll just have to get our proof and take him to court." He waved his wand again.

Moments later, they were walking out of the office. Robert Raglan breathed a sigh of relief, then ran over and locked the door behind them. It was then that he noticed that one of the brothers had dropped the comic book on the floor. He picked it up. It was much thumbed and written over. He'd have to show it to Gladys. She'd get a kick out of the childish scrawl, young Ronald's earnest attempt at improving on the text. He was sure it would bring back memories for her too. He wouldn't say anything about his two awful brothers.

A Confession

Chapter 7 of 9

Dennis' conscience is bothering him, and he just has to tell someone...

The next afternoon, Angelina was home, decorating for the holidays. Her impromptu anniversary celebration had knocked her off her schedule a bit, but if she could just get the soot marks off the ceiling and the splashes of jerk sauce out of the rug...

There was a knock at the door. It was Dennis. Funny, thought Angelina as she led him through the house, he's looking more like George every day. He's even parting his hair the same way. And is that a strawberry rinse? But—phew—he's still wearing the same cheap aftershave.

They sat in the lounge. Angelina didn't want to take Dennis into the kitchen, even though it was the cosiest place in the house, where friends and family could sit and jive and nibble apple cobbler or fungi or whatever else the couple had left over from breakfast. To get there, they would have had to go through the dining room, and that would have reminded Dennis painfully of the other night. He was still apologising to George every five minutes. Oh, they had to find him a good woman—maybe Alicia Spinnet, now that she was over Wood—no she'd eat him alive...

Angelina Accio-ed a fresh pot of coffee and the morning's leavings: fried plantains and mango-guava-kiwi salad to spoon over George's signature breadfruit pudding. She poured and passed, but Dennis didn't touch a thing, just stared at his knees, his hands clasped around them. This was very unlike Dennis, who, despite his diminutive frame, sported a massive appetite.

"Whuzzup, old boy?" she asked lightly.

"Angelina, I've got to talk to somebody about this. But I can't bring myself to tell George. He told you about our visit to old Robber Raglan, didn't he?"

"Yes. As he put it, butter wouldn't melt in the gentleman's mouth or any other orifice for that matter." He had also said some other things that were even less appropriate for mixed company.

"Well, he didn't tell you all of it--because he doesn't know all of it. Angie, I recognised Raglan--the git. He's in a picture I bought off Dung Fletcher. It shows him--ah--at a party--cuddling up to--someone other than his wife."

"And you want to use it to blackmail him."

"Right in one!" He seemed surprised that she could read his thoughts so easily. "And I almost did. As soon as I realised it-- there in his office--I started to make the pitch. I mean, it was right there on my lips..."

"So why didn't you follow through?" she asked, but she thought she knew the answer.

Dennis sighed. "He has a wife. I saw her picture on his desk. She looked so sweet, so innocent. I imagined what it would do to her if she found out about her rotter of a husband and that I might have to be the one to tell her and... I... just... couldn't." He blushed and hung his head.

She leaned over and kissed him on the cheek.

"What's that for?"

"Being a lovable softie, just like my husband, that's what."

He grinned and took a spoonful of the pudding, then cleared his throat. "You don't think she'd... want to know, do you?"

"Who? The wife?"

"Yeah--don't you think she'd want someone to tell her what her husband's up to?"

"It wouldn't do any good, Dennis."

"How's that?"

"There are really only two types of women: the type who already knows every move her husband makes and the type who doesn't want to know."

"Which type are you, Ange?"

"Can't you tell?"

Dennis grinned, then sighed and finished his pudding--and started on the plantains. "So where do we go from here?"

"Can we prove the ideas were Ron's?"

"We haven't had much luck with separating out the different writings. Augurey feathers are supposed to help remove ink, but it takes a lot of them to do even one page. We're going to have a lot of bald birds on our hands before this project is over."

"What about the other spell--the Prior Incantato--forcing Ron's quill to give up its secrets."

"Oh, that was just something we made up on the fly. Sounds neat, but it's probably bogus since eagle feathers aren't magical to begin with. George's going to look into it anyway. One thing we did do. Sent Dung Fletcher around to all the pawnshops and fences in the city. They're to let him know immediately if Ron should manage to sell the watch--so we can buy it back, of course. He's supposed to contact me if he hears anything."

"I'll bet that cost something."

"George said money was no object." Dennis spooned fruit salad onto more of the bread pudding.

"He--Ron--would never accept the watch back."

"I don't think so," said Dennis between mouthfuls, "but at least it'd be out of the hands of potential blackmailers. And someday--maybe in a year or ten--who knows--George might find a way of giving it back to him..." He trailed off into bleak silence, punctuated by muted burps.

"Oh, well, at least I managed to get Hermione some money," Angelina announced.

"How's that?"

"I spoke with Madam Bagman. I'm sure she's going to talk her husband into sending some of his department's contracts her way." Angelina stifled a sudden qualm. What if Miz E. didn't get around to it until after Christmas? If Hermione didn't have a way to pay for Ron's present, she might... she just might... get desperate.

"Well, that's comforting," said Dennis. "I still wish we could get 'Robber Raglan' to confess. I can only imagine what it'll be like when Hermione hands Ron his Christmas present and he has nothing in return."

"It'll be just like old times actually. You know--when they were at school."

"Yeh, George told me Ron always was a nose-wipe about that sort of thing. Um, Ange. Speaking of Ron. There is one other thing."

"What?"

"I--um--saw him last night. Wanted to check and see that he still had the watch, you know? So I asked for the time..."

"And so? He does still have it, right?"

"Yeh, I saw it... but..."

"But what?"

"I couldn't help it, Ange. I had to know."

Angelina sensed bad news of the foot-in-mouth variety coming. "Spit it out," she said.

"I asked him if... hewouldmindifHermionecutherhair."

Angie couldn't believe her ears. "And why, in the name of all that's magical, did you do that?"

"Well, we need to know, don't we? I mean, just how serious he is about it--the hair thing, I mean."

"And he said--"

"Um--he said--she wouldn't dare--"

"Oh, really. You're sure it wasn't more like 'SHE WOULDN'T DARE!!!!'"

"Well, yeah, I guess he did raise his voice a titch. Like he was maybe a little upset."

"Dennis, I could have told you that."

"Well, I did know... that he kind of has this thing... for her hair... but... how can a guy, any guy, be so nutsy? I mean... does love really do that to a person?"

Angelina just looked at him for a moment. She had to hook him up with someone. Maybe that Verity chick. She'd be perfect: warm, cuddly, a bit shy--with just enough sex-appeal to keep him interested and just enough smarts to keep him in his place. But back to damage control. "Maybe it's not so bad. You didn't tell him she was planning on selling her hair, did you?"

"No, no. I just said the styles seemed to be getting shorter and shorter and wondered if Hermione would be going with the trend."

Privately, Angelina thought that no one who knew Dennis could fail to note how out-of-character it was for him to be discussing current women's hair styles with another guy, his new pink locks notwithstanding. But she just nodded and smiled sweetly and poured them both some more coffee.

"Say, um, Angie, can I ask you a question?"

"Shoot."

He blushed to his blond roots, but forced it out. "Are there any more like you at home?"

"In Barbados? Sure. My mom. But she's already taken." Oh, yes. This young wizard was ready for a relationship and badly in need of one.

Debts and Doubts

Chapter 8 of 9

Ron has made his decision, but what about Hermione?

Ron entered the small shop on the outskirts of Ottery-Saint Catchpole. It was the kind of place he'd usually rather not be caught dead in, full of feminine frou-frou, but with a few men's furnishings: ties and chains and the like. But he'd do anything for his sweetie...even if it meant assuming the role of a weary last-minute shopper and haggling with a snooty salesgirl. And the words GRAND OPENING SALE in the window didn't hurt any.

He had done Cleaning and Pressing Charms on an outfit he'd borrowed from his dad in his attempts to look like the wizard-about-town, knowledgeable of Muggle dress habits. He pulled at the jacket, which was still a trifle small in the arms even though he'd done an Enlarging Charm on it.

He couldn't believe that he hadn't been able to hock his dad's watch at any of the pawnshops in the Alley. It was almost as if there was some kind of plot against him. He'd been tempted to write Harry to loan him the money, but he couldn't...he just couldn't. Now he had a plan...a rather desperate one...but if it worked...

He hadn't even decided on the hair ornaments...until today. All the comb sets in Diagon Alley were just too flash and gaudy...though cheap enough. One even had a row of blinking rhinestones proclaiming the wearer to be "too sexy for my robes". Not Hermione at all, no matter how tempting the price.

So he was going back to that new branch of Gladrags Wizards Wear in Ottery-Saint Catchpole where he'd seen the first set he liked, even though the price was way out of line. He did it after a chance reference his mother had made. Apparently, she had met the owner and liked her very much. Hermione had even bought her wedding robes at the Hogsmeade shop. So maybe, just maybe, with his mother's connection and the fact that Hermione had finished paying for the robes, he might get the proprietor to make a little deal.

An elaborately coiffed woman strode to meet him with a may-I-help-you look on her face. She was dressed in a sky-blue suit he thought his mother would look good in if she ever had the money for it, and had surprisingly warm, beautiful eyes to match.

He cut to the chase. No sense giving her a chance to flutter her eyelashes and try to talk him into an even more expensive purchase. "Miss, I'm interested in that set of combs you have in your front window."

She deferred to his excellent taste. "Mmm, yes, the tortoiseshell. Very chic. A holiday gift for the witch in your life?"

"My wife... um... but how did you know..."

"That you're a wizard? I have sixth sense for these things...and only a non-Muggle would wear a Nehru jacket, seersucker clamdiggers, and sandals in this weather."

"Oh."

She waltzed on by him and went to the window, bringing back the boxed set. The combs looked almost ethereally delicate, resting in their bed of cotton wool. Hermione would love them.

"Would you like to pay cash? Or do you have an account with us?"

"Um...can I open an account...right now?"

"Our policy is to ask for cash for the first purchases, then, once you've spent a certain amount, you become a Privileged Customer, and you can open an account on future purchases."

"Um...how much do you have to spend to become...erm--privileged?"

"Five hundred Galleons."

Ron gulped and tried another tack. "Well, it's possible my wife has an account already...at your Hogsmeade store. I mean, she bought her wedding robes there..."

The witch turned on her heel and walked behind a counter. She put the combs down and opened a small file box that was sitting there. "What's the name?"

"Weasley."

She thumbed through some squares of parchment. "Nothing here."

Ron frowned. "Hmm...I have a slight problem then. I don't have the money to pay for the combs right now. You see, I went on a bit of a spree today--you know--shopping for friends and family. It seems I didn't take quite enough Galleons out of my account at Gringotts, but they're closed now. With it being Christmas Eve and all...I wonder if I could make a trade?"

A slight frown sullied her smooth, made-up forehead as she surveyed his empty hands. He realized he should have brought along a few parcels to back up his story, but it was too late to retreat now.

He plunged on. "I have this watch, see? It's solid platinum...and has all kinds of great spells on it..." He handed it to her.

She ran her well-manicured hands over its lustrous surface. She was obviously impressed, murmuring, "Oh, lovely, and retro is in right now. But this inscription...To Ron', and so forth... that would have to be magically removed...to be saleable, of course."

Ron gulped but nodded, and he felt a tear forming in his eye, thinking of the loving sentiment his father had had engraved on the bezel.

"My dear boy..." she began, but then she became all business, "...but...I'm afraid we don't carry timepieces of any kind."

He had a wild thought that he might just snatch the combs off the counter top and run out the door with them. As if she read his thoughts, she casually gathered up the box and clasped it to her chest.

"Look, miss," he continued. "I'm Ron Weasley. I live...well, lived...just over the hill...at The Burrow, you know. Big house, garage, gardens, trees, a pond, lots of land." She looked blank. His attempt to describe the rundown family manse as an estate of considerable value was not going over well at all.

He tried the small-talk approach. "Oh, I reckon you're not from around here. Believe me, I was that surprised to find a branch of Gladrags here in a Muggle village." He found his voice was cracking. His brother Bill was so much better at this.

Her own voice was pleasant, even musical. "It's something new we're trying, an expansion into underserved areas. My husband's helping me finance it. We've had a sort of windfall, as you might say. But your name...Ron...is that short for Ronald? And Weasley...I know that name quite well..."

Ron saw a glimmer of hope. "Well, as I say, the Weasleys are known all over the area." He tried folding his arms and leaning a hip against the counter the way his brother Bill would do when chatting up a girl. He couldn't quite manage the arched eyebrow, but he smiled in what he hoped was a winsome way. "My father's with the Ministry...pretty high up. Muggle...er...relations, you know--"

"Yes, but that's not where I know the name Ronald Weasley from..."

Now Ron had a feeling of panic. Had there been an announcement in the Prophet about his detective agency going under? If she knew he was without funds, he'd never clinch this deal. "Look, if you've read anything...I mean...it's not as bad as it looks..."

A look came over her face as of a light dawning. Her great eyes glowed. "That's it. I read it somewhere... ohhh... you write, don't you?"

"Huh? Uh, well, yes, a little. How did you know?"

"I'm not psychic, if that's what you're thinking." She held up a hand to stifle his reply. "Bear with me, will you?" She paused a moment, thinking, remembering perhaps. Then she smiled. "Do you like comic books, Mr. Weasley?"

"Well...yes."

"And are you by any chance partial to the Mad Muggle series?"

"You mean, do I like it? Well, sure. Doesn't everybody?"

"And is it possible that you're the Ronald Weasley who's been writing to my husband all these years?"

"Your husband?"

"Robert Raglan."

"You mean..." Ron felt a bit faint at hearing his idol's name.

"My name is Gladys...Gladys Raglan. I own Gladrags." Her voice turned soft. "Yes, you're the right age and everything. You're the one. A real fan, aren't you?"

"Uh...yes, ma'am. And I did send him some stories in his style...kind of...and using his characters." He wasn't sure at first if it was a good idea admitting this. He watched as Madam Raglan's eyes misted over, as if she remembered his stories. Perhaps his hard work was finally paying off, if only in a minuscule way. Perhaps she would take the watch in trade for a 'real fan' of her husband's work. Ron had a dim sense of an irony in this, but he had no time to work it out, as the shop bell tinkled behind him.

"Oh, Miss Granger, very good," called Gladys Raglan past him. "The delivery broom was here just an hour ago. I have your gift ready...special order." She crossed the room to another counter and pulled a small paper-wrapped package out from behind it.

Ron turned and gulped. "Hermione, what are you doing here?" She looked different today. She was wearing that bulky old mac she'd picked up at a rummage sale. There were dark smudges under her eyes, and she had her hair tucked away under a black woollen cap. Her forehead shone whitely in the glare of the shop lights.

"You two know each other?" asked Madam Raglan.

"We're married," put in Hermione, but she did not answer Ron's question. He thought she looked worried or embarrassed about something. She crossed to the proprietor and fumbled with her purse. He heard the clink of coins...lots of coins.

Madam Raglan, apparently satisfied with the transaction, gave her the package. "I don't think we have your address for our Owling List." She brandished a quill and parchment. Hermione scribbled the requested information. Ron strained to catch a glimpse of stray hair curling out from under her cap. He could see none. What was it Dennis had said last night about new hairstyles? She wouldn't... She couldn't...

He watched as she slipped the package into her pocket. "What's that, Hon?"

She gave him a tight little smile. "Oh, just a last-minute gift. You know how these things are."

Ron goggled at her reply. They couldn't afford gifts, especially not careless ones of the 'last-minute' variety. She was staring at his chest now, at his carefully pressed jacket, his well-knotted, if ill-chosen, tie, as if she could not bring herself to look him in the eye. Why was she being so secretive?

Hermione cut into his thought with a tremulous "See you at The Burrow," and was gone before he could get another word out.

"Now, Master Weasley, we have to talk," said Madam Raglan.

But Ron was staring at the door in agony. He had more than half a mind to go after his wife...his darling, heretofore perfectly honest wife...who seemed to be very upset about something.

The Greatest Gift

Chapter 9 of 9

The three modern magi bring gifts to their loved ones and learn the results of their efforts on Ron's and Hermione's behalf.

On Christmas Eve, George, Angelina, and Dennis shuffled through the soft snow of Ottery St. Catchpole, on their way to the Weasley enclave. They'd Apparated on the farther side of the village just for the pleasure of observing the quaint Muggle holiday traditions. They heard carolling groups and shrieking children sledding on Stoatshead Hill, peered into houses at train gardens and fir trees decorated with 'eckeltrik' lights, smelled cookies baking, beef roasting, admired fancy displays in shop windows.

Each carried a package and dressed in traditional wizarding robes. They knew from experience that Muggles would explain away their eccentric finery as just one more expression of the season's happy madness.

George wore a great pancake of a hat made of violet satin with lime Fwooper plumes trailing down the back and violet robes with gold trim. He carried a gilt box of chocolate Galleons wrapped in gold foil for his sister Ginny and, in his pocket, a hip-flask filled with Old Snifter's Best Brandy for Ron.

Angelina's stylish white turban with a faux-sapphire like a third eye and silver-and-white robe set off her dark beauty. She had a delicate, cut-glass bottle of Algerian perfume for Mrs. Weasley and a canister of exotic teas for Hermione.

Dennis brought up the rear, toting a polished, sandalwood box he'd made himself with numerous small drawers full of Muggle hardware like pan-head screws, hooks-and-eyes, and triple-A batteries for Mr. Weasley. They'd spend happy hours discussing the uses of each, he was sure. He'd sent away specially for his outfit and was dressed to the nines in the Oriental tradition in crimson robes and skullcap. On his feet were green slippers embroidered with gold thread that sported pointed toes curled up at the ends.

"Look," he said, and he pulled them over to a shop window. "That looks a little like us." All three gazed at the painted-plaster miniatures in a scene so cherished by Muggles of a certain religious tradition.

"Christmas is really a Muggle holiday, isn't it?" asked George.

"Yes," said Angelina, "The ancient witching traditions called it Yule. They may celebrate different stories, but their themes...peace, joy, and hopefulness...are essentially the same."

George pointed to three richly dressed figures in Eastern garb, bearing lavish gifts, bent over a small child asleep in what looked like the feeding trough of a cattle byre.

"What's all that about?"

"He was a very special baby," answered Angelina softly, "a saviour promised to their race, the very essence of love. The Magi travelled a long way following a prophetic conjunction of Jupiter and Mars just to find him."

"Magi?" said George. "Wizards...like us?"

Angelina turned to answer and saw beyond her husband a man--Muggle--staring at them. He had apparently broken off from a small group of pub-crawlers who were standing across the street, trying to decide which pub to crawl to next.

"Evening, folks, where's the pageant?"

George screwed up his face at this. "Pageant?"

"It's a kind of Christmas play, George," said Angelina, catching his arm. She raised her voice. "Just come from there, sir. Next village over: Saint Lapidary-and-All-Angels. A fine time, that, but they've broken up for the night."

"Pity. Must have been a good show. Costumes look marvellous. Happy Christmas to you."

"Happy Christmas!" they all cried and waved after him.

"How do you know about all this stuff, Ange?" asked Dennis as they continued along towards The Burrow.

"Mum has a lot of Muggle relatives, and she's a great one for inclusion, so we exchange visits a lot. That's why I did so well in Muggle Studies."

They were nearing the edge of the village. Dennis was slowing them down a bit, fumbling for his wand while resting his gift against his hip and trying to remember a Foot-Warming Charm his brother had once shown him. Despite his pride in his appearance, he was starting to realize that the slippers were a tad impractical for walking in snow.

At the last shop, they saw a tall figure in the light of the show window. It was Ron, dressed in the oddest get-up the trio had ever seen.

"Hey, Bro," shouted George. "Whuzzup?"

"Oh... hi, George, Angelina. That you, Dennis? Look here. Aren't they beautiful?" He opened a longish box. Nestled in cotton wool were four delicate, tortoiseshell combs with mother-of-pearl butterflies chasing over them.

Dennis caught up to them and stared into the box, his mouth agape. He'd accidentally given himself a hotfoot trying to get that charm right. But suddenly all thoughts of frostbite and second degree burns were driven out of his brain. "F-for Herm-m-ione?" he stammered, not entirely due to the cold.

George pulled Dennis aside and muttered something under his breath that sounded like, "I'll kill Dung Fletcher..."

Angelina alone remained calm and bit back a comment about the imprudence of her brother-in-law wearing sandals and clam-diggers in the snow. "They're fabulous, Ron."

"And expensive-looking," Dennis started to say, but Angelina backed into his already throbbing toes.

"She'll be thrilled to pieces, I'm sure," Angelina continued loudly to cover his groans.

Ron pocketed the box, a dreamy look on his face. "Did you know? She's expecting."

"Who? Hermione? Expecting what?" said George.

Angelina cut in, "No, we didn't. Congratulations, Ron."

"She told us all, just a bit ago. Mum got all teary, of course, and made Hermione a cup of tea. So I slipped back out to pick up her present here."

"They must've cost you a pretty Sickle, Ronnie-kins." George had managed to get in under Angelina's guard. She glared at him as if she was about to launch a Cruzan Whammy at his sorry carcass.

Ron didn't notice the silent exchange or the dig at his minority, and for once, didn't seem to care. "It's weird how it all worked out. I didn't tell you before, but...Hermione and me...we hit some pretty hard times there for a while."

"Thanks to dear Ludo Bagman," said George.

"Oh, you heard about that. Well, all of a sudden, Madam Fudge-Bagman...his wife, you know...owls Hermione that she's heard all about the wonderful work she's doing and wants to sponsor a special project in the New Year."

"Probably rehabilitating wayward husbands..." smirked George.

"... or unfortunate young witches out on the East End," said Dennis.

Angelina sighed. Short of a blanket Silencio, there was little she could do once these two got on a roll. Besides, it didn't seem as if Ron was listening to them. It was as if he was in a little world of awe and contentment all his own, from which neither the slush besieging his toes nor the twins' gibes could touch him.

"Then...to cap it all...Robert Raglan...you know..."

"Yeah," said George, "the cartoonist with the Lockhart fixation."

Ron nodded. "I've sent him a lot of my own stories over the years, you know, to see what he thought of them. But he never replied, except for the odd autograph and fanzine. But then I recognized some of my own stuff in his new novel..."

"Mere coincidence, I'm sure," said George.

"He's nothing like his brother, I'm also sure," Dennis chimed in.

"What brother?" asked Ron.

"Didn't you know? The infamous Rascal Raglan. Dung Fletcher's partner in crime."

"Really?" said Ron. "Well, Robert Raglan's not like that...not at all. Anyway it turns out his wife was the one answering his mail all that time, and she read my stories too. Master Raglan never saw them at all. My plotlines must've gone into her subconscious. She remembered them, but she didn't remember where she remembered them from. Does that make sense?"

"Oh, sure," muttered George.

"So whenever Robert was stuck for an idea, she just threw something out off the top of her head, and more often than not, it was something I had written. But she didn't realise it."

"Right," added Dennis.

"They just tumbled to it a couple days ago. Raglan somehow got a hold of one of my comic books. Don't know how that happened... but, anyway, his wife recognised some of the ideas I wrote in the margins, and it made her remember the stories I sent. She still had the copies filed away. So now they know that I really did have a hand in the writing of Martin Miggs the Mad Muggle and the Quidditch-Playing Prefect of Piggimple Academy." He said this last reverently, as if Merlin himself had revealed it to him.

"The Augureys will be so glad to hear that," said George under his breath.

"And the eagles," Dennis chirped.

Ron's rising excitement rode right over their cynical tones. "So he's going to give me some money for it and a dedication in the next printing. Oh, and his wife...she owns this shop here...Gladrags. She gave Hermione a gift certificate...for baby clothes."

"Our little 'scone in the fire'," crooned George, making a face at Dennis.

"Best of all, Robert thinks I have a talent for writing, and he's going to help me get started in the New Year. Hermione was so happy. We're going to exchange gifts soon as I bring this back."

"So you didn't have to sell your watch?" asked Dennis.

"You knew about that? No, Madam Raglan gave me the combs...as partial payment."

"And Hermione didn't have to cut her hair," said Dennis, satisfied.

"So you did know about that..."

"Well, Hermione confided in Angelina, and she told us..."

"But she did cut her hair, Den," said Ron quite calmly.

"What? No, she couldn't...I mean...you got her the combs..."

"The combs are for... when it grows back."

Dennis blustered, "And you're not mad about it? But what about...? I mean...you told me...you said...no...you shouted, 'She wouldn't dare!' Right? I mean...you like her hair long... don't you?" he finished weakly.

Ron put a hand on the young man's arm. "It doesn't matter, Den."

"It doesn't?" said Dennis. He was thoroughly puzzled now, but George and Angelina looked at each other in perfect understanding.

"She wanted to buy me something really special," Ron said softly. "She loves me. That's all I care about." His voice dropped to a whisper. "And... we're going to have... a baby."

Dennis nodded finally, and they all linked arms and walked on to The Burrow with the snow falling softly, Muggle carols in their ears, and another bright star beaming down on them all.