Percy Take the Wheel

by KittySmith

Summary

A freak accident with Arthur's enchanted Ford Anglia causes a minor explosion and a major change in the Weasley household. With Arthur in a coma and Molly having passed away, Bill and Charlie can't afford to quit their jobs and must support the family from afar. Thus, it falls to Percy to handle the day-to-day, even if he's not sure that he can.

Notes

Here's the first chapter of this monstrosity! I'll upload the rest as time and my ability to live life allows - the entirety of this WIP can be found under my Kitty Smith account on
fanfiction.net <3
Chapter 1

Everything was quiet. That was Percy's first thought in the hours after the funeral. He couldn't remember the number of times he'd once shouted, begged, cajoled for quiet before. Now, he felt like begging someone to speak.

Quiet was abnormal. Quiet meant there was something deeply wrong in the Burrow.

Fred and George were sitting dully on the couch, Ginny leaning into one of their sides without garnering a hint of a reaction. Ron was almost trembling, ensconced on Percy's lap, something he hadn't done with their parents for months now. Even Bill and Charlie were there, but somehow not.

Percy found himself glancing at the taller figures of his older brothers- for comfort, maybe, for direction, for what next what do we do- but they were in their own reality, murmuring quietly to each other, hopefully trying to figure something out.

Figure this out.

Mum was dead.

The thought brought a lump back to Percy's throat and he shut his eyes, curling tighter around Ron's warm form, almost too big to fit on his lap anymore.

Their dad had been tinkering in the shed on that Anglia again, that stupid illegal car, and their mother had gone in for a habitual scolding. Something, obviously, had gone wrong and the vehicle exploded.

The Aurors hadn't been clear on the specifics, but Percy figured how didn't matter. He'd seen the aftermath. When he'd run to the shed, he'd anticipated finding his parents sooty and annoyed, but whole, safe. They were talented, after all, they were magic, and who dies from a little explosion? Fred and George might have survived a hundred of them.

But Mum was in large, messy pieces, and Dad wasn't much better.

Percy had slammed the door shut, aware of his siblings just on his heels. As calmly as his shaking voice could manage, he'd told Fred, if he had been Fred, to floo St. Mungo's. The addressed twin hadn't mouthed off for once, maybe taking in Percy's tone, maybe just the mention of St. Mungo's, but whatever it was, Percy could only spare a silent flash of gratitude before ordering his other siblings out.

Out.

That had brought up the usual protests, but Percy did not have time to argue and one quiet, furious repetition of the demand had them turning tail.

Leaving him alone.

He'd broken the rules, then, whipping out his wand and running inside, trying not to look at the mess- at his Mum- and focused on his father. His still breathing father. He'd patched up Fred and George by hand after some of their stupider ideas, sometimes by wand after they'd joined the Quidditch team, but this was so far beyond-

Percy had squeezed his eyes shut for a moment and breathed in the sharp tang of blood and done
what he could.

His hands were shaking, and a part of him was furious rather than scared, and he clung to the anger, because at least the anger let him act.

*Your stupid obsession made you break the law and look what it's done,* Percy had thought, trying to stop the bleeding from what had once been a leg. *Why doesn't anyone in this family understand there are rules, laws for a reason? Why didn't you-* But even the anger was beginning to cloud, eyes blurring with unshed tears, and Percy angrily wiped them away on his arm, careful not to get blood in his eyes, and pushed on. *Just keep on,* he'd told himself then, pushing back fury and fear alike, *keep on.*

When the healers finally, *finally* made it, they'd praised his efforts, told him his father wouldn't have had a chance at all without him, promised to clear up the use of magic while underage just this once, and they were all so calm as they bustled around, a sort of tranquil chaos, that Percy had been able to let go of his father, settling back on his haunches among the mess, and try to breathe. The assistants cooed and soothed at him, but the words were meaningless. Eventually, they pulled him from the room and told him to go wash up.

Numbly, he'd obeyed, walking back to the house. He didn't see Ron, or Ginny- at least those two were kept away from it all- but Fred and George were lingering in the shadows at the top of the stairs, watching as their home was invaded with healers and Aurors, law and medical personnel moving purposefully through. Their eyes, flickering across the sea of activity, focused on Percy with a pleading, lost look they hadn't given him since they were little. Percy found himself shaking his head, firmly, and pointing back up the stairs, remembering belatedly that his arms were still covered in his daid's blood and lowering the arm, too late.

Still, the twins obeyed, vanishing back into the room they shared with Ron.

*Twice in as many hours,* Percy had thought dazedly, moving to the kitchen sink, *This must be the end of days.*

It felt like it.

The days that came after had been a surreal flurry of family members and well-wishers coming out of the woodwork, but Bill and Charlie had shown up, and Percy had gratefully passed control back into their hands. They were his big brothers, and they were here to take care of things, and part of Percy wanted to sob with relief, but he couldn't let go *that* much, not with Ron in his lap and the twins shooting him looks like he'd vanish from their lives next and Ginny so quiet and subdued.

His big brothers were here, but he was still a big brother himself.

So he watched them all, carefully, still holding Ron a little too tightly, though the twelve year old didn't seem to mind for once, returning the embrace with hands clutching the front of Percy's somber dress robes. It was awful and mind-boggling and heart-wrenching but it wasn't completely hopeless.

Mum was dead, but Dad might wake up.

Despite himself, Percy thought that was a little unfair. He could never choose between his parents, but he also couldn't help but feel flashes of the fury licking his insides when he knew it was *all Dad's fault.* Dad couldn't leave well enough alone, and had to go breaking the law and mucking about over some ridiculous obsession with *muggles,* of all things- the heat in his face and eyes snapped Percy out of it. He hadn't cried in front of the littler kids yet, and he wasn't going to.
"Percy," a hand landed on his shoulder, and Percy looked up and up at Bill's grave expression, "Can we talk?"

"Yeah," Percy replied, and was amazed at how steady his voice came out. He gently leveraged Ron off of himself and onto the twin not being leaned on by Ginny. Bill and Charlie watched quietly, and followed him into the kitchen.

"We've worked it out," were the first words out of Charlie's mouth, and Percy's heart leaped for just a second before the worried look on their faces registered, "And together we can keep you guys going to Hogwarts and fed- since our family at least owns the land here. But, we're going to have to," he winced, "pop in and out rather than be here all the time if we go that route. That would leave a lot of responsibility on your shoulders, Percy, and we'd really rather not do that. But the other option…" Charlie glanced at Bill nervously, and was plainly relieved when the oldest took over.

"Some of our aunts and uncles are willing to take you in, but," Bill lowered his already hushed voice, "they couldn't handle all of you. We spoke to them during the wake, and even if we sent them the money to take care of you, you'd still be split up."

"You'd be able to visit each other, of course," Charlie butted in, looking almost scared of Percy, and that fear made Percy unclench fists he didn't remember making and take a deep breath, "You just would be living separately."

His first instinct was a big, fat, solid No way in hell, but Percy forced himself to think it through. Great Aunt Muriel would likely be taking Ginny, she'd always been overly fond of the only daughter in this branch, and he could see Uncle Parsifal snatch up the twins. He'd probably end up with Aunt Sorrel, and he didn't know exactly who would take in Ron, but there were options there. He knew it'd be easier on him, and it might even benefit the others, to have some parental figure constantly there, but…

Ron had held onto his robes so tightly. The twins had pinned him with that look.

Ginny was so quiet.

Looked like his first instinct was winning out. "No," Percy said, firmly, feeling a sliver of fear slide and set into his heart even as he set himself on this path, "We're staying together. I can handle it." Can I? Some part of him whispered dryly, I didn't know I was so certain. "I've kept house before when-" he stumbled over his sentence, coming to a faltering end, "Before."

Bill's hand was on his shoulder then, squeezing, and they looked so grateful and Percy wondered if this was what his face had looked like when his brothers had first come back and taken over. He hadn't thought through the fact that Charlie was just three years older than him, though Bill had him for six. He'd known they were grieving, too, but he'd hoped, he'd wanted them to be able to handle it better than he could. This felt a little like they were running away.

That wasn't going to help him, though, and Percy shook the thought away. Their jobs were out of the country and Charlie had just started at a dragon preserve in Romania, and the pay was, well it was better than what they'd get if they took jobs in the Ministry. Percy knew, too, that if Bill came and took a desk job, he'd make less than as a roaming curse breaker for Gringotts. And now, they suddenly had to pay for the upkeep of five younger siblings on top of themselves.

It was alright; they'd dealt with worse financial situations; Percy just wondered if he could hold together everything else.

"You always were the responsible one," Bill was ruffling his hair, sadly, "You know if it's too much
you can always floo Aunt Muriel, or Mr. Diggory," His face took on a pinched look as he added, "Or Mr. Lovegood, if you really must."

"Only if you really must," Charlie emphasized, a weak smile breaking out over his face and dying when Percy couldn't return it, "We can help make sure everything's stocked up and-" now Charlie was stumbling over his words, "-clean before we go."

No one had been in the shed since Percy gave over lead to the healers and Aurors, but he knew most of the mess had been cleared away and the automobile parts taken for investigation. All that was left was the blood. They'd kept him quite up to date on what was going on, in the interests of avoiding conflict over movement of the body.

He hadn't appreciated it at the time.

"It's just stains left," he said quietly, "If you could look after the others upstairs, I can deal with it." Bill looked ready to protest, but Percy continued, more firmly, "It's not something that needs more people seeing it."

Not exactly convinced, but willing to compromise at the steely look in Percy's eyes, Bill sent Charlie to distract the younger Weasleys and tramped off towards the shed, "I'm not leaving you in there alone."

Percy nodded acquiescence and they set off to silently scrub the horror out of their shed. He heard Bill's steps falter when the door was open and he was going to reiterate his offer to do it alone, but then they picked up behind him again and the metal bucket was set on a worktable with a quiet ring of metal on metal.

The stains had been left because the magic of the explosion had made them somewhat… resistant to cleaning spells. The Aurors had taken pictures of the scene, then meant to vanish the… stains… and nothing had happened. Scraping at the bl- stains removed them but Aurors didn't have to time to hang around and scrape the drying stains from some poor family's backyard shed. The Weasleys didn't really have the influence for that kind of sympathy.

Some of the festering resentment towards his father for never trying to get a better job than Misuse of Muggle Artifacts slid in and joined the quiet rumble that sounded like a familiar Ford Anglia.

Without realizing it, he'd already dunked his rag in the hot, sudsy water and begun to scrub the old wood of the floor. He paused for a moment when it registered, looking down at the bl- stains, but forcefully returned his hands to the task. Funneling the fear and the grief into anger had helped him before, after all. "He'd have never had a chance if it weren't for you, child," the emergency Healer had said, all in a rush, looking far too distracted by his current task of continuing that chance to be lying, "He will live yet."

His dad was still alive, if comatose. And he didn't even know if this part of the mess was his or… or hers.

Suddenly, he felt his eyes grow hot with tears, saw the floor blurring before him as he scrubbed. And why not? It was just him, Bill, and the stains now. Who did he have to stay strong for? Guiltily, he hoped Bill would notice his growing tears and pull him close. That was all he would need to finally, finally break down.

Instead, he heard a breathy laugh, and looked up to a sight that shocked him away from his own breakdown. Bill had one hand to his forehead, a wet rag hanging limply from the other and tears tracking down his cheeks. "Sorry Perce," he said, choked, wiping at the tears with an arm, "God, it
seems like you're the only one keeping it together."

Percy wasn't sure quite what to do. He'd never... Well, he'd seen Bill cry from joy before, and he'd cried at the burial, but he'd never been the only one there to do anything about it. His throat still felt scratchy, a lump that had formed days ago and remained stubbornly in place solidifying as he reached a tentative hand out for Bill's shoulder. His brother practically collapsed into him at the touch, and Percy found himself holding yet another grief stricken Weasley, this time on the stained floor of the shed, surrounded by a very good reason to cry.

Well, this is backwards, Percy mused, wavering on the fine line between bitterness and hysteria. Firmly, he chopped down on the thought, reminding himself that everyone had lost Mum and if they all thought he was holding up better than he was... well, whose fault was that but his own?

Still, it seemed resentment almost constantly simmered quietly beneath his skin nowadays and it wasn't a fun experience. Taking a deep breath, Percy tried to enfold a little more of Bill in his arms. Percy may have hit a growth spurt, but it didn't seem to be the one everyone else in his family had aimed at. At least Percy had gotten some height. Thank the heavens the twins hadn't hit theirs yet. They would never listen to him again.

Thoughts spinning away from the situation with a little bit of relief, Percy politely pretended nothing had happened when Bill had pulled himself together again and they returned to their gruesome task. It felt longer and shorter than it was, and, all in all, in terms of actual labor it wasn't so bad. Probably because the sudden heat of it had kept most of the mess contained in the pieces rather than as spilt blood.

Percy shook the thought with an unavoidable tremor of horror and added a tinge of nausea to his current emotional checklist.

"Alright, that's taken care of," he whispered, sitting back on his haunches and running through everything else that needed to be done, or spoken about, and feeling the sick feeling in his stomach get a little stronger.

"Yes," Bill said, similarly subdued for a moment before he appeared to shake himself and stand, clapping Percy on the shoulder, "Let's go in and get some rest before tomorrow hits us like a train, yeah?" There was so much to do yet. Swallowing, Percy fought down the irrational urge to get everything done just then, to just get it over with and done, and nodded, following Bill back into the house and up the stairs, splitting off at the hallway.

Bill and Charlie were sleeping in their parents' room while they were there, in the interests of not adding the stress of crowding back together into their siblings' previously shared rooms onto the pile. This had raised mixed feelings in the younger Weasleys, and while Percy didn't mind it, he'd caught the twins' blank expressions tinged with something angrier when the topic was brought up. Not to mention Ginny's minor tantrum after that supper. That, however, had come up and been dealt with. She'd cried it out and Bill had explained to her satisfaction – or at least so the sobbing went down to a trickle and stopped. Fred and George festering...?

More worrisome.

With this thought in mind, Percy took his hand off the door to his room and turned around with a quiet sigh. Doors stayed open in the Weasley household unless one really wanted some privacy or had to change while there were visitors in the house, so Percy didn't wake Ron or Ginny when he poked his head in to check on them. He'd been surprised they weren't having trouble sleeping, but he supposed they were tired out enough from the sheer emotional strain of the situation to sleep soundly. One of the twins, however, was awake. Wide awake.
Percy had eased past the doorframe and seen one tuft of red hair on a pillow just before a voice croaked from beside him, "'lo, Percy," and made him jump right back from the door. "Spying on us in our sleep?" Fred - and it was Fred; now that he wasn't frightened out of his skin, he could see that darker blotch of freckles on the side of his nose – had his face nestled in his hands, elbows on his knees, and shadows beneath his eyes that were emphasized in the low light, hair askew and face pale, "We can't get up to mischief while we're unconscious; promise."

He couldn't help but point it out. "Only George is sleeping."

A finger dropped down to point at him, "There is that."

Percy's arms crossed instinctively over his chest, "Explain."

"Well, what are you doing up?" Fred threw back at him. It was, at least, a valid accusation, and Percy shrugged, consciously forcing his arms to uncross and entering the room before sinking down to sit beside Fred against the wall. If Fred wanted help, he'd explain. If it was a one-time occurrence, he'd probably just tell Percy to bugger off and Percy would have to respond in kind, so Percy would rather be comfortable first if it devolved into some sort of half aware pissing contest.

The silence stretched on and Fred fidgeted beside him. Percy was the only one in the family with any sense of patience so he wasn't surprised when Fred broke first.

"It's not every night. Just the first night after- after it happened and now, with the funeral, and Uncle Parsifal was talking…" Fred trailed off, uncertain, and rearranged himself to pull his knees up to his chest, voice small, "What's going to happen to us?"

"Ah." So it wasn't about the sleeping arrangements, just yet. Maybe Percy was a tiny, little bit to blame for not hashing out the next steps with the kids, but in his defense, he hadn't thought they were thinking about it. Besides, it had only been set in stone today. Well, at least that sick feeling was more than happy about the realization as it settled further into his guts. "None of us are going anywhere. Bill and Charlie figure they can take care of the money side of it and…" It felt a little weird to say out loud something like I'll take care of you, but he'd started the sentence so he couldn't just leave it hanging, "And I'll take care of the house." There. Fantastic.

"Oh," Fred said, not sounding quite relieved, but maybe a little less upset. Half a smirk cracked across his face, looking almost painful, "…Really?"

"I will assume you're doubting Bill and Charlie, to save my ego," Percy sniffed, and the smirk seemed a bit more natural. He ruffled Fred's hair as he got up, and added, more carefully, "I can start some tea, if you want…?"

"No, I think I can sleep now," Fred replied, "Though surely nightmares of your future rule will definitely haunt my soul."

"Such a little snot," Percy replied, wonderingly, as if in awe of the sheer snot his brother personified and Fred grunted rudely in reply, still smirking as he got to his feet and climbed to the top bunk. As Percy passed the door, George turned over in his bed, but didn't rouse, giving a snuffling snore that prompted an amused snort from Fred as he settled in. "Good night, rapscallions."

Fred's eyes caught the light eerily as he chorused back, "Night, Percy."

The next morning was a joy to behold. It seemed any unity from the night before had gone flying out the window and hopping down the road to seek its fortune elsewhere, because the breakfast table very quickly devolved from a quiet meal to an outright screaming match.
It started with Bill announcing his departure that day, and Charlie following it up with his own being tomorrow morning.

"Already?" Percy had asked, sounding more alarmed than he'd meant, and his elder brothers had shared a look that set him on edge, "I mean- it's just that the funeral was only yesterday."

"I'll be taking you into the Ministry for a permit for the use of underage magic before I go," Bill had said, as if that made it better, or even explained why they had to leave so quickly, "And Charlie will stock up for the week."

"You're leaving?" Ron's eyes had been wide, and his voice had been stronger than it had been in days. Too bad on the subject matter, though, "What about us?"

Charlie's tone had gentled, "Percy will be here for you while we're at work, but we'll pop in when we can."

Of course, Ron had not been happy that Percy would be left in charge, and Ginny and George had soon joined in the protests. Fred had, oddly, refrained from adding to the chorus line as the argument had devolved into throwing about accusations of running away, to the elder Weasleys and of being unreasonable, to the younger. Percy would admit that he hadn't exactly been entirely helpful, wanting more of an explanation than Bill and Charlie could provide in between fending off the tag team of George, Ginny, and Ron and feeling more than a little insulted and hurt at the sheer amount of protest his younger sibs were putting up.

As per usual, when Percy's temper took hold, his tongue ran away with him and the memories bled a fuzzy red until he calmed himself again and had time to look around at whatever damage he'd wrought. However, when he unfogged and found himself on the tip of a snide barb about the quality of Gryffindor courage, he bit his tongue with a surge of will power and sat back down, having half-stood at some point during the volume gradation from the pitter patter of mice to the full on shouting that was happening now.

He could vaguely recall saying something cruel about having himself in charge being better than dumping them on Mum's gravestone and hoping for the best and felt familiar sickness gradually replace the fury that had lit in his belly. The rest of the family was still shouting around him, though, so… perhaps his own remarks had been unnoticed by the rest in the onslaught of their own voices?

Still, Percy let his head drop into his hands as the situation escalated around him and Fred, across the table from him, seemed to be winding up like a clockwork bomb, ears turning red and knuckles white.

Finally, it seemed to come to a head for the boy. "Shut up," Fred said, an angry flush across his face from ear to ear, and when the argument continued, he stood and threw his plate to the ground with a shattering crash as his voice soared upward into a shriek, "Shut up, shut up, shut up!"

Ron turned on him with his usual tact and hair trigger reactions, tears shining above red cheeks, "No, you shut up!"

"No!" Fred stomped a foot down on the plate shards, and the others jumped as the ceramic pieces cracked further, probably into his foot from the looks of it, "Mum is dead and you're all being twits and it's not helping!" A moment of silence passed, and tears welled in his eyes as he sat back down with thump and a quiet, ruined, "And now my foot hurts."

"Alright..." Percy said slowly, standing and pulling once, agitatedly at an earlobe, as he approached Fred like a wild animal, but in the end, thought better of it. Just because Fred hadn't spoken up didn't
mean he didn't share the younger Weasleys' feelings about Percy right now, "Charlie, you're going to take care of that foot while Bill and I go to the Ministry and everyone else cools down. ... I think we can assume all of us said something stupid and hurtful we didn't mean, but I don't think we're ready to hug and make up just yet, so please, scatter."

While there was clearly fuming going on, a bit of embarrassed shame had crept in with bells on, and Ginny and Ron fled upstairs to their separate rooms to sulk as George plopped himself angrily at his twin's side. Charlie had seen the wisdom in not leaving a wound like Fred's foot untreated for long and was stiffly approaching the twins when Bill huffed.

"I thought I was too busy running away to help," Bill shot at him, clearly remembering more of the argument than Percy did. Not that he didn't agree with the general gist of that.

"You know, it's actually a bit hazy for me, but I can go without you if you're stuck in a snit," Percy snapped back as his temper flared at the reminder and he went for the Floo powder, managing to shakily untie the small bag before Bill followed him, running a hand through his hair as he approached his younger brother.

"We need to go through the main atrium rather than flooing to the department now that Dad's... technically not an employee anymore," he said, instead of starting some mutual apologizing or renewing the debate, and Percy knew it was as much of a truce as he ever got from his brothers.

"Got it," he replied shortly, as neutrally as he could, and Bill nodded vaguely in acknowledgement before they were whipping through the Floo and on their way.

After passing the assistant, Mafalda Hopkirk's efficient identity and schedule check, they were let into the head's office. Priscilla Selwyn, the official in charge of the department, was an unpleasant-seeming woman with a heart shaped face and strawberry blond hair streaked silver that was pulled back too tightly into a bun. Her robes were crisply pressed and the style stank of old money, but she moved with an efficiency that spoke of pride in her job in spite of her obvious contempt for the two bedraggled Weasleys in her office, and Percy could respect that.

Her subordinates handled most of the day-to-day static of the Department of Regulation of Underage Wizardry, but permits for the use of underage magic had to be approved by the head. It wasn't exactly an uncommon process, anymore, what with the war making orphans and pseudo-orphans here, there, and everywhere, but the tradition held out against the increase in appeals.

"Yes, I'd heard about Arthur," she'd murmured in response to their appeal, looking over thin spectacles at them calculatingly before handing over the paperwork. She returned to her own as Percy and Bill filled out the forms with a similarly supplied quill and ink. She'd been polite, thorough, and distant, aside from the initial micro-sneer when they first entered the room, and all in all, Percy felt a tad relieved at the reprieve from the dual sided coin of sympathy and grief with which the funeral had barraged them. They worked quietly and quickly and returned the finished forms without hassle as Madam Selwyn outlined the rules and consequences in a well-practiced monologue that Percy took a few mental notes on.

This wasn't a carte blanche permission. Defense spells such as jinxes and hexes were not to be used except, as their title would suggest, in self-defense. Only household spells and some minor healing charms were explicitly approved, but listening closely, one could tell grey area spells that could potentially be used in the management of a household, such as near-jinxes and defense counters, would slip under the radar. Apparition still required a license, obviously, which he couldn't get until next year. All in all, it wouldn't be too hard to avoid overstepping his bounds.

"Thank you, Madam Selwyn," he said with a shallow bow at the threshold, which she received with
a sharp nod of her head before distraction overtook her once again.

Bill was shaking his head as they left, "You can't network with a bigoted crone like that, Percy."

Honestly, not everything he did was in context of a goal. Sometimes he wondered if his other siblings remembered he'd been sorted into Gryffindor, too, or if they saw a snake on his robes. "It's called manners, Bill," Percy hissed back, biting his tongue on a sharper reply and rolling his eyes heavenward before going for a more sympathetic explanation than *I'm not surprised they're as foreign to you as England, now,* "Mum would've wanted me to be polite no matter the person." *Well, unless they threatened one of us, and then all rules were off the table and burning in the fireplace.*

"Don't go there," Bill warned, and Percy huffed.

"Fine; it's the truth, though."

As it happened, Bill was gone by midday, and Charlie seemed it as he finished packing and then went out to buy necessities for the week. Tensions were still high and he seemed to edge around the other Weasleys in the house while he was there. Additionally, everyone was wonderfully awkward around Percy, who had managed to offend and be offended by both sides.

Charlie received an urgent floo and left that evening.

"I'll only be a floo away," he said hastily as he'd gone, "You know, when I'm not in the middle of the preserve."

"Bye, Charlie," Percy had prompted sardonically when he lingered at the fireplace as if suddenly not sure he was *ready* to go.

He shook himself, nodded, "Bye," and there he went.

"Supper," Percy decided once the fire died back down, "Come on." They'd been having mostly bland or easy to make foods so far, so Percy had managed to find the locations of *almost* everything in the kitchen, but tonight he was determined to make an actual meal – no small feat since his mother had ruled the kitchen with an iron fist, cooking both alone and from mental recipes rather than from anything written down. Still, he wasn't completely at a loss. There had been times his mother had, somewhat mysteriously, vanished off to a "quilting circle" that seemed to be all talk and no sew. When Bill and Charlie were around, they'd be "in charge" but Percy was the one who had to make sure everyone got fed, and when they'd flown the coop, Percy had been left with the reins on top of the responsibilities. She'd left instructions, then, but at least he knew enough now to follow a recipe. He was sure they did *have* actual recipes, somewhere, because during those periods, the recipe was always separate from his mother's notes, on older, yellow parchment in a different hand.

Now, he just had to find them.

"Fred, George, take the middle shelves; Ron, Gin, you're on the lower shelves; I'll take the top. We're looking for a small wooden box. It… might have a rooster carved on the side." When he received blank looks verging on mutinous, Percy found his hands unconsciously on his hips as he demanded, "Do you want a meal tonight or unseasoned chicken and mash?"

They grudgingly hopped to it, and Percy climbed a counter to reach the highest shelves. Only light bickering occurred as paths crossed and hands and legs jostled against one another. George almost knocked Percy to the floor with a near body check in an attempt to avoid stumbling over Ginny once, but that was the worst of it.
"We're not finding anything," Ron groaned, and Ginny took this as her cue to chime in.

"Mum never worked from recipes; are you sure the box is what you think it is?"

George began gloomily, "It's probably a figment-

"-of your imagination; a flicker from the corner of your eye," Fred continued in a similar tone.

George turned from the current cupboard to an adjacent one with a more thoughtful air, suggesting, "A golden goose for a wild goose chase."

Fred shot back, "A white whale for a vengeful hunt."

"An apple of discord for the fairest of all," George replied.

"That can't count; the myth is all off," Fred argued, but after a pause, retorted, "A will o' the wisp in a foggy bog."

"Are we rhyming now?" George asked.

Their volley continued in the background as they gradually gave up the ghost and abandoned the hunt, prompting Ginny and Ron to break from their task almost immediately when their elder brothers started the precedent. So Percy rolled his eyes pointedly and heaved exaggerated sighs as he continued the search around his unhelpfully bantering siblings, but… Well, he wasn't all that annoyed-he couldn't be that annoyed with the less-than-miserable byplay. Thus, he kept his protests passive-aggressive and quiet, and therefore, nearly missed the box when he finally found it.

"Got it," Percy pulled the box out, interrupting George's increasingly off-topic contributions to whatever it was the twins were doing, and displayed the box for a moment before hopping down from the counter.

"Good, we're starving," Ginny whinged, and Ron nodded loyally.

"We almost asked for that chicken and mash."

"…I won," George added in an aside to Fred, who reared back in mock offense.

"And how do you figure that?" His hand was on his heart, and the two seemed to be gearing up for a truly spectacular bout of bickering. While it was nice to hear his siblings actually engage with one another again, Percy knew one of those rows, real or not, would take more time than they had so Percy quickly attempted to regain control of the situation.

"Why don't you all go…" He cast his net for an activity that would contain them and came up lacking with a lame, "wash up and come help to make dinner?"

"Perce, if you wanted us gone while you reunite with musty parchment, you only had to ask," Fred chimed in, and for just a moment Percy had no idea what he was talking about, until George waggled his eyebrows and looked between Percy and the box. The recipes. Alright. That wasn't the worst thing they'd implied about Percy's bookworm status.

"Out," Percy said, instead of snarking back, and the twins made kissy faces at him as they obeyed, Ron shrugging and saying something about not wanting to help anyway, and Ginny practically fled at the thought of domesticity. He hadn't quite meant to cancel out the previous request but if that's how they took it there was only trouble to be had in correcting the assumption. "It figures," he murmured, poking at the- oh, dear lord it was a puzzle box, "that the only thing to make the twins
perk up a little is taking the mickey out of me."

Luckily for Percy's continued sanity, the puzzle was relatively simple, and although he did cut his finger on a hidden edge, the rest of the pieces moved very smoothly afterwards. He hoped he hadn't bled enough to lubricate the thing, but if he had it was lost inside the box's moving parts forever. It popped open with a quiet *snick* and Percy rifled through the yellowed parchment within with only the slightest trepidation. It was going to be uncomfortable cooking a full dinner for the first time without Mum. Some of the recipes had little history lessons on the back detailing which family members had contributed and how some had been… won in combat? Percy stared at the back of the recipe he was holding and turned it over.

The Zabini Penne Rosa.

Well.

"We're eating stolen intellectual property tonight," he muttered, and got to work. The noodles were a slight bump in the road but he'd substitute long noodles stored maybe a year ago in the pantry and it would probably be fine. Heck, if it went over well with the younger Weasleys, he might scribble down his own recipe for the Weasley Pink Spaghetti and shove it in the box. It was supposed to be more pink than red, right?

Percy tilted his head at the sauce as he considered this point, but decided that it was probably his own preconceptions coloring, if you'll pardon the wording, the pot.

Later, when he was bringing out the main dish to the table, two sets of hands appeared on his shoulder and he barely managed to avoid dropping the bowl, "*What?*"

"Pasta?" George prompted, evidently willing to throw away his previous snarkiness for food.

"Won't it be just as bland as the usual gruel, gov'nah?" Fred simpered with an affected cockney.

"Our ancestors won this recipe through combat with the Zabini family," Percy informed them with a sniff. His siblings did not seem convinced, so Percy sighed and put down the dish with a thump, "… It's Italian and it'll be fine."

"It's *pink,*" George pointed out, but when Percy levelled a less-than-amused look at him, he amended, "Pink food! My favorite!" Evidently, hunger won out in the emotion smackdown in George's head.

"Pink food is ready!" Fred called up the stairs, and there was a distinct pause before twin sets of feet pounded down and two ginger heads peeked into the dining room.

"It is pink," Ginny agreed, and Ron looked torn between his ever-present ravenous hunger and a need to join in on the *entirely unnecessary* discussion of how pink the food was.

"Do you want to eat it or frame it for future generations?" Percy asked drily, crossing his arms over his chest defensively, "Sit down."

"Bossy," Fred and George chorused, and Percy longed to rap one with the stirring spoon he was still holding, but he was the mature one here and he had to… Had to… The discussion of how pink the dish was had started up again around him in whispers and Percy retreated to get the veg and all before the twins could provoke him into actual action.

The others seemed to have talked themselves out after a bit, and silence reigned when Percy sat down and everyone began to eat. Sort of. Poking at his food, Percy sighed. "It is pink, isn't it?"
"It looks like worms!" Ron burst out, and the tension abruptly broke as Ginny chimed in with an, "Ew, Ron," and the twins gave shark grins, sensing weakness and adding in their own contributions to grossing Ginny out.

"Intestines?" George asked, while Fred hummed thoughtfully, the two of them suspending a few noodles between their respective forks and inspecting them from below.

"Stretched brain?" Fred suggested, and Ginny made a gagging noise.

"I don't appreciate these jokes," Percy put in mildly, his family quieting, "I'll have you know it was very hard to get this many tentacles on such short notice."

"Tentacles!" His siblings shrieked, most of them with laughter.

A smugly satisfied grin at his siblings and Percy took a sloppy, slurping bite that made Ginny give another little shriek followed by a giggle as the twins and Ron debated what sort of animal the tentacles could have come from.

Normally, Percy wouldn't have given in to the twins' nonsense, but it felt… good. It felt good to be the one making the jokes instead of being the joke. Especially after these past couple of days. Dinner may have been pink and it might not have been a taste the family seemed to particularly love, but it was happier than it had been so far, and Percy went to bed that night with the hope that maybe things were getting a little better.

And, of course, Fred woke him up at one in the morning.

To be fair, Percy didn't think the younger boy had meant to wake him – or at least hadn't decided to yet – but Percy was a fairly light sleeper, and having the hall torch come on as someone lingered in his doorway was enough to bring him blinking blearily to wakefulness.

A squint to make out which twin this was, "…Fred?"

"Yeah, I…" His voice was choked, and he fidgeted in the doorway.

"C'mere," Percy patted the bed, rubbing at his eyes to rid them of sand. Hesitating steps brought Fred closer until he sat down, silhouetted still by the hall light and impossible to read. "What's wrong?"

"I want Mum back," Fred squeaked, before breaking into sobs like a dam had burst.

Percy's first thought was, shit, because he hadn't hugged the twins since they were ten and less crazy, but he was pretty sure there was no other way out of this. So he sat up and pulled Fred into his arms, at an awkward angle for them both, but Fred just fist ed his hands in the comforter and cried harder into the front of Percy's pajamas.

"Everyone was laughing," Fred hiccoughed, driving the sobs with words now, "And we made fun of you and she didn't whack us with a spoon or make us degnome the garden and I hated it when she did that and I wanted her to now and-"

"I know; it's okay," Percy said, trying to cut off the nearly unintelligible words before Fred worked himself up any more.

"She's gone."

Percy closed his own eyes now, deliberately not thinking about that as Fred's sobs began to simmer down to the occasional sniffle. "If it makes you feel any better, I wanted to hit you with a spoon a
couple times during dinner."

Fred gasped a surprised, wet laugh and began to cry again.

Honestly, Percy was more surprised that Fred had come to him to break down than that it was happening. He felt helpless, again, as he seemed to be feeling every time a Weasley cried on him lately, and increasingly lost, but he chomped down on that feeling with an iron will because he could not afford a panic attack. Percy had to keep it together, since evidently Bill and Charlie weren't up for it.

…And there he went, adding resentment to the pile again. Wonderful. It's not like he didn't understand their reasoning.

"Percy?" Fred's voice was very small, and Percy hummed acknowledgement, "I know you kept us from being split up."

"…Alright," Percy began cautiously, unsure where Fred was going with this, "Did Uncle Parsifal tell you…?"

"I'm not dumb," Fred spat, suddenly all venom and fang, before a sort of teary resignation settled back over him, "I could put it together from what he was saying and how many of us there are. George thinks Bill and Charlie decided to keep us together and just left you in charge while they're working but I know they'd've asked you. They couldn't run away fast enough when it was all settled and they seemed so relieved, I just-" There he went, working himself up again; though Percy was surprised Fred had picked up on all that- though Bill and Charlie were not running away, his mind knew it no matter how much Percy's heart wanted to agree with the statement. They just- needed to cope, too. Plus, they had to bring in enough money together to support the entire Weasley brood instead of just themselves, now. Percy shoved his own resentment to the side to fester away from the current situation with an effort of will.

"They just had to go back to work," Percy said softly, but Fred shook his head, still hiding his face against Percy's shoulder.

"I'm just- I just meant to say I'm glad it's you," Fred's voice was getting back that choked sound, but Percy barely processed it through the weight of that statement, "Usually Charlie's nice and Bill's fun, and I know everyone was upset they wouldn't but… I'm glad it's you taking care of us."

It was like Percy had been thrown back to the days when Fred and George toddled around copying everything he did; a surge of that unrelenting fondness, suppressed but never diminished, had him tightening his hold and squishing his cheek against Fred's head. They sat like that for a while, Fred crying on and off, until George wandered bleary-eyed into the room and plastered himself to Fred's side without so much as a word spoken, pushing Percy back into his pillow as the twins made themselves comfortable in the middle of his bed.

It was a good thing his bed was pushed against the wall or Percy would be falling off the side. As it was, he was squashed between twins and drywall, and he asked quietly, dripping with sarcasm, "Isn't anyone going to ask Ron and Ginny over, too?"

"They won't fit," George muttered, burrowing deeper into the covers as Fred's snuffles gave way to snores.

Trust the twins to ruin any bonding moments – even if they were a part of them.

Percy gave up on the entire situation by turning his back to the two and willing himself to sleep with
his cheek against the wall. He toyed with the idea of just abandoning his bed to the twins and sleeping in their room but... He was maybe a little wary of spending the night in their lair. A deep, pointed sigh did not sway the monsters, and Percy spent the night in various degrees of discomfort that translated into confused dreams of tight spaces and face-hugging spiders.

He awoke to a shriek. No, a series of shrieks.

Was... was everyone shouting?

"I'm pink!" One of the twins was squealing.

"You're pink!" The second exclaimed.

Then the first pointed to the second and repeated the phrase, "You're pink!"

"I'm pink!" The second agreed.

They were pink.

Muffled shouting in the distance clued Percy into the fact that his younger siblings had also woken with some sort of issue, and he dragged himself from bed to see to it. The movement caught the twins' eyes and they turned to him as one, pointing, "You're pink!"

His hands and legs, what he could see of them, were, in fact, pink, and Percy eyed the twins, feeling the remnants of the nostalgic fondness Fred had brought back wavering under the current irritation, "...Is this revenge for the noodles? I know they weren't great, but this is an overreaction that merits at least some degnoming of the garden."

"We woke up like this!" A twin complained, and with their freckles currently hidden by the worm-pink coloration of their skin, Percy honestly couldn't tell which was which.

"Alright, enough of this," Percy grabbed them both by the collars of their pajama shirts and began walking them downstairs towards the kitchen. Protests of innocence and complaints of unfair treatment fell on deaf ears as he marched them in and sat them down. "What did you add and when did you add it?" The twins fell silent, glaring mutinously, and Percy crossed his arms, "Well?"

"...didn't add anything," one of them muttered, and Percy rolled his eyes.

"We're pink," he pointed out, and two curious faces poked around the kitchen door as the recently arrived Ginny and Ron cottoned onto what their older brothers were doing about the situation. They, too, sported a worm-pink coloration reminiscent of yesterday's meal. "Go," Percy said, dismissing the peanut gallery, "Unless you'd like it if Fred and George eavesdropped on your punishments?" Ginny wrinkled her nose and dragged a viciously smug Ron away without a word, but one of twins-George?- jumped up from his chair.

"We didn't do it! You can't punish us for something we didn't even do!"

"Then what did?" Percy snapped, losing his patience with the blatant façade, "People don't just turn pink overnight."

"Actually," chimed a voice from the doorway; it appeared Ron had fought off Ginny's hold and was still lingering in hopes of watching his older brothers get their just desserts, but even as he opened his smirking little mouth to poke at the situation, both standing inhabitants of the room fixed him with a death glare. Instead of continuing, he decided discretion was the better part of valor and made his way to a safe zone.
Percy's gaze immediately narrowed back in on the twins, "There's nothing to be gained from lying, here; you'll only make it worse."

"We really didn't do it, Perce," the sitting twin said in a small voice, "but we can try to fix it, if you want."

Wanting to exclaim again that of course they did it; who else would turn everyone pink, Percy forced himself to take a good look at the twins' faces. The standing one looked hunted, indignant, like he was two steps from shouting how unfair it all was and red under the pink hue of his skin. His twin sat hunched in on himself like he'd been physically beaten down, and Percy felt a little sick at the idea that maybe he'd done that, but- but what else could have done this?

If it wasn't the twins… That could make it more than a simple color-changing potion used in a prank. Honestly, Percy would've preferred it if the twins had been at fault. The devil you know and all that; plus, he'd feel less like the villain right now. Deflating, Percy realized he actually did believe them when they said they hadn't done it. They just weren't smug enough for this to be a result of their efforts. Deflating, Percy reached out to both of them, but when the standing one drew back, he only clasped the sitting twin's shoulder, "I believe you. I'm sorry I jumped to conclusions." A 'but you have to admit you're the prime suspects' was on the tip of his tongue and he knew it wouldn't help to say it, but, oh, he wanted to. Fighting it down, he looked from one twin to the other, "But if it wasn't you two, we might need to floo St. Mungo's, and I don't need to tell you money's tight right now." So, if you want to fess up and save us the trouble...

The sitting- Fred, it was probably Fred who shook his head, as if sensing the part of Percy that still wanted to blame the twins and call it a day, "We didn't do it."

"Alright," Percy said, dropping his hand from probably-Fred's shoulder to run it through his own hair in a nervous fidget, "I'm going to go get that Lockhart book."

"That ponce?" George asked, sounding reluctantly civil, with just the hint of a lingering grudge on the edge of his tone.

"Mum swears by his diagnostic charms, lately," Percy replied without thinking, and an awkward sort of tension rang in the room like an already taut string had been plucked. "Be right back," he said, and rushed from the kitchen. As he climbed the stairs, he realized the most likely place for her to have put it was in the side cupboard back in the kitchen, but he was dedicated now and he couldn't just walk back in without looking around elsewhere and giving them all a bit of time to cool off.

Ron and Ginny sat at the top of the stairs, having been shamelessly eavesdropping despite repeated warnings and Percy raised an eyebrow at them before dropping it with a sigh. This was not worth another argument just now.

"It wasn't the twins," Percy informed them uselessly, as they clearly had already heard that, and gestured at the pinkness of their skin and hair, "I'm looking for Lockhart's book to see if I can fix this; have you seen it?"

"In the kitchen cupboard," Ginny trilled promptly, and Percy fought the urge to cap off his marathon of sighs with yet another. It figured.

"We don't have to turn Ginny back, though," Ron told him solemnly, "She likes it."

"All I said was at least my hair matches my nightgown for once!" Ginny immediately denied, "Don't put words in my mouth, Ronald!"
"Come bicker in the kitchen," Percy interjected, gathering the two and herding them before him as meatshields against the weirdness he'd left vibrating in the air of the kitchen, though also because he figured they should all be involved in figuring this out in case— in case something happened to Percy and they had to tell the staff at St. Mungo's or a pair of Aurors what they'd tried so far.

Not that he was planning on anything, but he was now painfully aware of how things sometimes just happened.

"Pull in a chair," he instructed them as they passed the dining room, and they each dutifully grabbed chairs for themselves in addition to the two that usually could be found in the kitchen. Once everyone was settled and Percy had pulled Lockhart's household guide out of the cupboard, Percy hopped onto the counter and flipped from the table of contents to the spell and its anecdotes, spending a few seconds mumbling the incantation and then practicing the wand movement with little twitches and flicks that didn't translate into the actual spell just yet.

Before casting, he told the twins, "If anything strange happens, just floo St. Mungo's immediately, got it?" The twins came out of the whispered conference they'd been having for who knows how long and looked at him with wide eyes, mirrored by their younger siblings and prompting Percy to add hastily, "It's probably just a color changing potion or hex or something, but better safe than sorry, right?"

Turning his wand on his own arm, Percy flicked through the incantation and cast, holding his breath until the air around his arm—and likely the rest of him—shined with colors as expected, blue and grey, for the most part, with just a hint of red at the fingertips that Percy barely noticed.

He glanced down at the book, but half the color guide was on the next page, and the colors would only stay for as long as he maintained the spell, so… "Ginny, would you mind looking up the meanings while I keep this up?"

Nodding, Ginny slid the book from his lap and skimmed down the page, flipping to the next when she realized what Percy had just previously, and read aloud, "A grey aura indicates no harmful magic is present in the examined area, meaning no hexes, curses, or magical ailments can be found. A purple aura means a love potion, or—"

"Skip to blue," Ron interrupted and Ginny shot him a glare before visibly skimming the descriptions and continuing aloud.

"Blue auras flag the presence of common hedge magic, such as that performed with minor rituals often involving cleaning, singing, needlework, weaving, embroidery or," her gaze flickered to Percy, "cooking."

"Hedge magic," Percy repeated. He pointed his wand questioningly at Ron, who shrugged his acquiescence to the unspoken request, and cast the diagnosis spell again, more confident now that it had been tested. Ron was still pink, but it was hard to see under the blue and grey that lit up his person.

"Looks like it," Ginny confirmed, "There's a reference here to another chapter on hedge magic, if you want…?"

"No, no, that's quite alright," Percy said, dropping his head into his hand, almost as much to hide his face as give him a second to process. He'd been the one to turn them all pink? And with such a low class of magic? It barely even counted as a spell. The Ministry couldn't even pick it up as it more closely resembled the unfocused effects of accidental magic than the disciplined spells that resulted from a wand. Had it been because he'd at first resented the others poking fun at the color of the meal?
It was possible, he supposed, but wait— that was after he'd finished cooking. Had he thought or done anything to… to… *Weasley Pink Spaghetti.*

Yes. He'd thought it clearly while the sauce was boiling, since it was an indeterminate reddish-pinkish mess at the time, and it had only gotten pinker from there on out.

"Good news is this will wear off soon," he informed his siblings, finally looking back up at them, "There wasn't nearly enough effort put into the spell to keep it going much longer. The bad news is that a throw away thought should not have been enough to have even this effect."

"You thought about turning us pink while you were cooking?" Ron gaped, having connected what dots he had, "Why?"

"I didn't," Percy began, but George cut him off.

"Don't lie, Percy," he said, throwing his own argument back at him with no little vindictiveness, "After all, who else could have done it?"

"I didn't *specifically* think of turning us all pink, I just—" Steam lost at the memory of his error— not that he had known the consequences—Percy's voice lost its edge, "I just noticed that the sauce was sort of pinkish, and thought, if you all liked it anyway, I could scribble down a recipe for the *Weasley Pink Spaghetti,* which is the *only time* I thought of Weasleys and pink in the same sentence, and leads us to the actual problem: that should not have been enough to affect me for a second, much less all of us here."

"*Weasley Pink,*" Fred mused, "Like a paint palette."

"And you specified *Weasley* pink," Ginny pointed out, a razor sharp smile edging over her expression just as the floo flared in the other room.

"FRED! GEORGE!" Charlie's voice shouted, and Ron and Ginny snuck glances at each other before bursting into giggles at the identical scowls on their older brothers' faces.

"You have to admit, you've got a reputation," Percy put in, unwisely reneging on his earlier promise to himself not to bring it up, and they turned their scowls on him. "Sorry, sorry; I'll handle this, okay?"

Charlie was… not happy to learn Percy had turned them all pink on accident, and he'd given Percy a measuring look through the fire.

"You managed to turn every Weasley pink, regardless of continent, on accident, using hedge magic," the elder brother summed up and Percy was glad he was already pink or his cheeks would be undermining his attempts to look solemn.

"I'm sorry," he repeated again, as seriously as he could while his mind raced. His mother was—had been—*was* a hedge witch? Or at least, a serious practitioner. What had she been *doing* all this time? "Sorry, Charlie, I have to go," Percy cut off the floo connection, and possibly Charlie's
sentence, to zoom back to the kitchen. Fred and Ginny were still in there, talking in subdued tones, as hurricane Percy hit the area. Pots were turned over, chairs were flipped, cabinets opened, and Percy seriously considered ripping them apart for all of a second before they started to turn up. Little English words repeated in concentric circles. Health, one pot repeated. Protection, read the back of the clock. Cooperation, another pot was inscribed. More and more until Percy had a small mountain of items and a larger number of immovable fixtures with blatant evidence of his mother's secret practice. "Why... why didn't she...?" He sunk to the ground, his frenzy deserting him and Ginny shot Fred a frightened look, prompting the twin into action.

"Why didn't she what, Perce?" Fred asked cautiously, but Percy was beyond responding.

His mother had been a serious, practicing hedge witch. Hedge magic was fairly useless for day to day tasks, but over time, will and magic would build up if focused on certain things, like say, one of the most common words in here: protection. Any sort of set up that could turn every Weasley pink from a stray thought meant his mother had been practicing more intensely and for a greater length than Percy could imagine, as she never breathed a word of it to her family. It made sense – a spell for protection would only be stronger if it were kept secret – the universe always seemed to like the idea of kindness without reward. She'd spent, from the looks of it, practically every second in here willing her family, her friends, to be protected. And then his father had lived. But she hadn't.

Why didn't she focus any of that protection on herself?

She'd been away from the blast; Arthur had been right at the epicentre, and yet she had been the one blown to smithereens? Why hadn't that seemed odd to anyone? Even the shack was better off. Was it some sort of... trade off? Or had she never given her own safety a passing thought?

"It's nothing," Percy heard himself say vaguely, and garnered a snort from Fred.

"You just ransacked the kitchen and threw pots and chairs and spoons to the center of the floor at random, before doing... this," he gestured at Percy's kneeling posture before the mound of junk, and Percy sank back on his heels self-consciously, beginning to come back to the situation.

Crap; he was not in the right frame of mind to be giving his family revelations about their mother right now. "Dinner," he said, "I'll let you all know at dinner."

"That's a full day away there, Perce," Fred squatted awkwardly, his voice still quieter than it usually was, and Ginny seemed to muster up her courage and figure out what she should do.

Soon he had a small hand patting his back and a smaller voice saying, "There, there?"

Percy closed his eyes for a second, unsure if he was about to laugh at the attempt or cry because it was working, and took a deep breath. A second later Ginny shrieked as Percy whipped out an arm and reeled her in, "What kind of bedside manner is that?" Her shrieks turned to laughter as Percy tickled her, "Who taught you how to comfort people?"

"F- Fred, help me!" She squealed, and Fred shook his head.

"You've brought this on yourself," he intoned, "For getting too close to Percy-in-a-mood." The last half of his sentence sounded curiously noun-like, but Percy was willing to let it slide for now. "Besides," Fred admitted, inching towards the door, "I'm way more ticklish than you are."

Percy did not let them know at dinner. The day passed only with minor bickering and sniffling and Percy had only hugged crying, snot-covered, normal-colored versions of Ron and Ginny twice each by the end of it – which was higher than average, but lower than expected recently. He had taken
another recipe from the wooden box— as innocent a recipe as he could find. He almost shuddered to think of what might happen if he tried to bake shepherd's pie. There were recipes from every country on earth—or at least, any Percy had heard of, and a few he hadn't.

He settled on a vegetable stir fry that didn't appear to have been won in combat or hard to make. Checking each pan before he selected one and avoiding the other instruments with writing on them was tedious but necessary to ensure any stray thoughts he had weren't incorporated into the meal; he didn't want anything more dangerous than color-changing to occur.

For his efforts, he was rewarded with a relatively normal-looking meal that he hit with a diagnosis charm, just in case. There was a slight tinge of blue, but nothing like the deluge of light from that morning; it was probably residual from the kitchen itself. The twins were setting the table, and soon everyone was in attendance and picking at the vegetables.

"Vegetables," Ron muttered, "The main course is vegetables."

"We did have meat at lunch," Percy reminded him and Ron groaned.

"Aren't you forgetting something, Percy?" Fred leaned around George to say, sweetly, and George, cottoning on to the tone, echoed his question.

"No," Percy lied blatantly, prompting a frown from Ginny. Part of him didn't want them to know because they could make the same connections he had, see that perhaps she had neglected her own protection for theirs and their fathers, and part of him had been… mulling over the idea of what Mum would want him to do. She'd set all this up, clearly practiced it religiously, and kept it all secret. Wouldn't she want it to stay that way? She must have had a reason, even if part of him were still seething irrationally over the blind spot for herself in her plans.

A hesitant voice broke him out of his musing. "Percy, you were—," Ginny bit her lip, and continued, determined, "You scared me." Not words he'd ever wanted to hear; Percy felt a little sick as she looked at him steadily, "What happened?"

Yeah, screw it; he'd tell the truth and deal with the fallout as it came. Maybe he was letting his anger guide him, maybe it was the guilt that he'd made Ginny, and maybe Fred, too, from the way he was looking, feel… that way. In the end, his motivations didn't matter, as they pointed to the same action. Slowly, he explained what he'd learned about the real reason behind his mother's diligent guarding of the kitchen as her domain alone, and then the reasoning of his own realizations and suppositions as they had come about. Except that… last one.

"Mum was a hedge witch?" George croaked, and exchanged an incredulous glance with his twin, "Only squibs and weaklings work hedge magic!"

"And Mum," Percy ran a hand through his hair agitatedly, "It's the truth. There's etchings all over the kitchen."

"You weren't just freaking out about Mum being a hedge witch," Fred interjected, putting down his utensils and crossing his arms, seeming to gain back more and more determination the longer he had something to ferret out.

"That's… personal," Percy decided carefully, knowing that going that far, to share his suspicions about their father's survival and their mother's death would only screw over any progress that had been made so far. It had for him.

"…What," George said flatly along with Fred.
"Mind your business and eat," he sniffed in response, and the table erupted in protest.

"If you learned something about Mum and you're not telling us, that's not right," George exclaimed.

"We have a right to know," Fred agreed.

"Are you serious?" Ron was asking, at the same time, looking incredulously at Percy. Obviously Ginny had been telling tales.

Ginny's response was lost under her brothers', but Percy waited for a break in the sound to say, "I've told all I know about Mum." Which was the truth since all he had was his own suspicions and his father's survival. Hardly factual evidence, "Am I not allowed to keep my own feelings to myself?"

"What feelings?" George muttered, sending a little stab of hurt into Percy's chest that was quickly covered by irritation.

"This conversation is over," he said, standing and picking up his plate in the same motion, "And the next person to pester me about it gets to help me wash the dishes muggle style tomorrow morning. I'm going to bed."

"Percy, you-" Ginny faltered at the look her older brother sent her, trailing off as he left, "He didn't eat."

"Yeah, well," George's voice was heat and hurt, "The prat can probably sustain himself on his own reflection." When an awkward silence met him, the words lingered in the air, seeming unfinished and George's tone edged into something more defensive, "You all know it's true! He's hiding something and he's always so convinced he's right that he won't listen to a word we say unless it's to kiss his arse!"

"Language," came the tight admonition from the hall before Percy's footsteps stomped up the stairs and a door slammed shut. An angry, mottled flush overtook George's face and he put down his fork.

"And he eavesdrops," he concluded, the anger once again caged in more subdued language, but just as present as before, "I'm not hungry, either. Good night."

*My siblings are a joy and a blessing,* Percy told himself as he glared at the ceiling that night, a joy and a blessing.
Chapter 2

Of course someone was crying by mid-morning the next day, but this time it was Ron. When Percy found him on the back stoop instead of watering the vegetable garden, he’d been ready to scold, but the tear tracks down his face stopped him. Percy hit the relevant questions first, "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," Ron snuffled, wiping his face on a sleeve as Percy lowered himself to the stoop with a grunt. He reached out to put an arm around Ron's shoulders, but got shrugged off. He knew he should take it as Ron getting back to his usual behaviour; he wasn't one to like being touched when he was upset. It still stung a little, though.

This seemed a little like a sulk, maybe an angry cry, rather than grief, so Percy prompted, "Did you fight with someone?"

"Can't fight someone who won't answer," Ron mumbled, and Percy leaned in, silently expectant. Soon, Ron filled the void, "Harry hasn't replied to any of my letters all summer. Even just to say sorry about... Well, he hasn't written."

Despite his lack of acquaintance with the other boy, he couldn't see the quiet child he'd occasionally directed one place or another and who had seemed so excited to be friends with Ron being that mean-spirited. With a quiet leading tone, "Could there be a reason he couldn't write back?"

When Ron immediately paled, Percy felt a sense of foreboding pass over him, and his next words were no better, "The Dursleys."

"The Dursleys?" Percy echoed, and Ron startled, glancing at him guiltily, as if he'd already let slip something he wasn't supposed to, and the ominous feeling settled in Percy's stomach, "His family? The ones who sent him some muggle money for Christmas?" Now that he thought of it, Harry had been rather taken with his Weasley sweater, which Percy had only noted at the time with annoyance for acting as a foil to his own displeasure at having his sweater forced over his head. While Percy valued his own sweaters to a degree, he wouldn't expect someone outside the family to place much weight on his mother's lumpy knitting unless that small token of acceptance meant something to him.

"Yes," Ron drew out reluctantly, "and they don't like magic much, and it might be that they're not letting Harry write us."

"Who is 'us'?" Percy prodded, and Ron conceded that he'd written their co-conspirator Hermione and she had had no word from the boy, either. Plus, a few of his dormmates had asked him similar questions. Sounds like Harry was liked well enough to ask after, at least. Percy, himself, found the boy to be likeable and quiet, if seemingly reckless when out from under his or another authority figure's eye.

Mixed feelings there, what with the whole Ron-knocked-out-by-a-chess-piece-thing. Ron insisted it had been his idea for Hermione and himself to tag along, that Harry had been ready to go it himself without dragging his friends into it, but... Percy shook the thoughts away; right now, he needed to keep Ron from crying again and see whether Ron's friend was alright.

"We'll try the telephone booth in town this evening, yeah?" Percy patted Ron's back bracingly, "Then we'll see."

"Do you know how to use one?" Ron asked, a dubious expression crossing his face, and Percy rolled his eyes.
"I did help Penny with her revising for Muggle Studies all last year," Percy pointed out proudly, "How hard can it be?"

Percy was very glad he'd convinced Ron to stay put and 'watch Ginny' – using similar arguments on the twins – because telephones were horrifying and terrible contraptions. It had taken him a while to figure out the cleaning charm that would trick the monstrosity into believing it had been paid, something about the movement toggling the gears inside as the spell cleaned out debris, and then longer to figure out how to get an operator. He was glad he'd had the foresight to ask about where Harry lived since evidently the muggle system needed that information to find a specific family. How many Dursleys could there be? And if it was the wrong branch of Dursleys, couldn't they direct him to the right branch easily enough? Did muggle families unrelated to one another run around with the same name or something?

As it was, Percy was dangerously close to punching a hole through the side of the booth when a monotonous, "Dursley household, may I ask who's calling, please?" sounded through the… doohickey that you were meant to listen through. Alright, so Percy hadn't focused as much on the actual Muggle Studies review so much as the way Penny's hair fell over her shoulder when she was focused on something else. She was pure perfection in his eyes; could you blame him?

"THIS IS PERCY WEASLEY," Percy said loudly, hoping he would be heard through the device, "A PREFECT FROM HARRY'S SCHOOL."

"Percy?" The voice echoed excitedly, before someone else interjected something inaudible, and the voice became muffled as it addressed them, leaving Percy to hear only, "…from school… probably in trouble… Yes, I'll tell them…" The voice came back to full volume, then, "Uncle Vernon says you have permission to use whatever corporal punishment you see fit." A shuffling noise as Harry ignored Percy's shocked, "What?"

"Yes, of course, I'll take the call in the other room," the voice- probably Harry – continued blithely, addressing his relatives with something before there was another shuffle, some thumping, a couple clicks, and Harry was breathing heavily as he whispered, "Percy? Why did you call? And don't shout, please."

Meanwhile, Percy had noted and filed away all the little things he had very much not liked about how those conversations with Harry's relatives had sounded, before focusing on the relevant subject, modulating his volume consciously, but still a bit more loudly than usual, "Harry, are you alright?"

"What? I'm fine," Harry said, "Is something wrong?"

"It's just Ron hadn't heard back from you," Percy explained, "Have you gotten any of his or Hermione's letters?"

"…They wrote me?" Harry's voice was still hushed, but rather than out of caution, the tone seemed almost reverent, "Really?"

"Yes," Percy confirmed, Ron's suspicions seeming more likely by the minute, "The Dursleys must be intercepting them before they get to you." His thoughts were on the way those voices had sounded openly hostile, how Ron had said the Dursleys 'didn't like magic,' and that Uncle of his suggesting a complete stranger have open range to decide how to physically punish his child… "I should… I could come by and set up a few mail filtering charms that will guide the owls around anyone muggle trying to grab at them."

"Could you?" Harry's voice was tight with excitement, but the tone lost its happy edge after a beat, "The Dursleys wouldn't want one of my kind visiting, though."
Taking a deep breath, Percy braced himself for the sheer ridiculousness of what he was doing, "When aren't they home?" At this, Harry perked back up again, eager to give him the best times to come by when his Aunt Petunia was having tea with the neighbour ladies and Uncle Vernon was at work, saying he could take care of Dudley if Percy gave him warning. They set up a time two days from then and gave their farewells, hanging up.

This was... silly and indulgent, and Percy didn't like how he seemed to always fear the worst, but he just wanted to make sure he was wrong. Probably, Harry would look bright-eyed and healthy and fine, and Percy would feel like an idiot, spell the boy's window, and return to tell Ron everything was fine.

Unless it wasn't.

Ron seemed more cheerful when he got the news that Harry hadn't been ignoring him, and badgered Percy for the next two days to take him along when he went to fix the problem. The latest, last minute argument was literally as Percy was just finished figuring out the flooing/walking journey he'd have to take – using the public floo directory to map it out – and about to walk into the fireplace.

Ron's exhaustive list of reasons he should be brought along started impassioned and ended with a quiet, "...and I want to tell him about Mum and Dad myself."

Low. Blow.

"Fine!" Percy threw his arms in the air, "Fine! We'll have to walk three kilometres from Riven's Pest Talismans, though, and I don't want to hear you complaining about it!" At once, the solemnity vanished as Ron beamed and bounced until he was almost skipping through the floo. "Do not leave the shop until I'm there!" Percy called as Ron vanished, huffing a put-upon sigh and following his wayward brother. He hated getting played like that.

The trip was not so long, and shortened further by Ron's complete impatience with Percy's pace, grabbing his brother's hand for the first time in a year (in public, no less!) and dragging him faster.

Soon enough, Percy and Ron were knocking on the Dursleys' door. There was a series of thumps and the tone of a mild curse, followed by a louder thump and a scrabbling, then the sound of pounding feet, and abruptly Harry was in front of them, flushed and grinning.

"Ron! You're really here," he said, and he and Ron practically fell into one another, chattering a mile a minute with their arms over each other's shoulders. Percy, on the other hand, followed them into the house at a more sedate pace. The first thing he'd noticed was that Harry looked a bit older than Ron, despite being shorter, and it took him a bit more watching to discern that it wasn't age but Harry's lacking baby fat. His face was leaner than it should be, especially considering the house was in better condition from the outside than the Burrow had ever been in Percy's lifetime. They clearly weren't lacking for funds. Inside, the house was spic and span in a way his mother would have envied, but lacked a personal touch, making it seem as if no one really lived there. The only hint the house was occupied were the family portraits (which sat eerily still in their frames) on the walls and end tables. While the boys talked, Percy lifted one such picture, noting the rotundness of what he assumed were Harry's uncle and cousin, and the lack of any such pictures including Harry. If he'd doubted the Dursleys' inability to feed Harry properly being the cause of Harry's thin face before...

"Harry," Percy interjected, breaking the stream of consciousness that seemed to be flowing between the boys, something about a house elf visit after their last call being discussed, "If you can show me your window, I can cast the charms we talked about, and you and Ron can continue catching up without me listening in." He cast a look at Ron, who sobered a little and nodded, a tad nervously. Here was Ron's chance to let Harry know what had happened in their family, if he wanted to.
A strange look crossed Harry's face, "Does it have to be my window? …And can it block… other things than muggles?"

"Yes and yes, it must be your window; there won't be a proper focus, otherwise," Percy lied, scrutinizing the sudden blank face Harry presented him for any clue what was going through his head. Any window one wanted to use was fine, but the twins had practically trained him to poke when someone was hiding something, "Is there a problem?"

"…No," the answer came from him, reluctant and drawn, and he glanced between Percy and Ron nervously before straightening his spine and heading for the stairs, "This way." As they walked, Harry's pace slowed, "How is it you're allowed to do magic outside Hogwarts? Is it because you're a prefect?"

"I have a permit," Percy replied carefully, before Harry's door came into view. His hand came down on Harry's shoulder, stopping him from opening the lock-laden thing before Percy could completely form the thought, "That's not yours?"

"It's just…" Harry made a few negatory, dismissive hand gestures before reaching up to undo the still-intact locks, searching for words and ending with a lame, "It's nothing." Had he… crawled out the pet door installed in the bottom?

"Get your things," Percy said, and Harry stared at him for a moment in shock. Ron wore a similar expression before he grinned, cottoning on. Maybe he hadn't caught the rest of the clues Percy had, but the locks were probably enough for him to want Harry out of there.

"Come on, Harry, we're planning a jail break," Ron said, taking Harry's hand and pulling him into the room, "Where's your trunk?"

"Locked under the stairs," Harry replied, promptly but with something of a dazed tone, as if he couldn't quite believe this was real. If the locks hadn't sealed it, Harry's easy compliance – he didn't even ask what was going on – sealed the deal for Percy.

Mum would have been infuriated.

"I'll get it," Percy waved off the slight concern in Harry's voice, "Get what you need together for the summer and Hogwarts up here with Ron." Locks up the outside of his door, kept spinning in Percy's mind, disgust strong in the mental tone, locks up the outside of his door, and a pet flap, like they're keeping a werewolf instead of a little boy.

He wasn't entirely sure what he was going to do with Harry once he sprung him, but he'd write Professor McGonagall about it and Harry could stay at the Burrow in the meantime. The lock fell victim to a culinary charm for flash-freezing ingredients, which, oddly, Oliver Wood had taught him. The story was long and involved trying to make chocolates for Penny and ended in well-hidden disaster. Percy didn't like thinking about it. Point was, the lock was off and Percy was taking the trunk out when he noticed something that gave him pause. There was a cot in the cupboard. It looked to be in disuse, and it really didn't mean anything, but on top of everything else, Percy wondered if Harry had had to drag it out and sleep in the kitchen at some point in his time with the Dursleys. Shaking the thought, he told himself not to be ridiculous; the locks, the pictures, and Harry's malnutrition were bad enough as it was.

He went back upstairs to help the boys, and found a wide-eyed Harry awkwardly petting Ron's arm as the other boy took deep breaths, clearly trying to keep control of himself. Well, Percy could guess the topic of that discussion. At least it was out of the way.
Forcefully calming the sense of urgency, Percy sat on Ron's other side, the boy wiping at his nose and face quickly as Percy ran a hand over his hair, "Alright?"

Ron nodded, sniffing one more time before hopping to his feet and grabbing a small stack of clothes, "Let's go." It appeared that was all Harry was bringing as he trailed obediently after the other boy and Percy focused on the fact that he was keeping Harry away from there until their Head of House could help him figure something out. This was more her job description than his.

Honestly, Percy was surprised how smoothly the whole thing went; although he was dragging Harry's trunk along on his own, it was lighter than he'd expected. No one came home unexpectedly, a hidden watcher didn't jump out of the shadows… All in all, Percy's first foray into vigilantism was going well. At least until a confused looking Ministry owl perched on Harry's shoulder.

Really? Percy thought, putting down the trunk and snatching the letter from the owl's outheld foot, How could they even know…? Ah. It was from the Department of Regulation of Underage Wizardry, giving Harry a warning for his use of a freezing spell. Percy sighed, "Could I borrow a quill, Harry?"

He'd clear that up.

"Percy, why did Harry get told off for your spell?" Ron asked with a steadier voice, looking over Percy's shoulder at the letter before Percy flipped it and scribbled a short note claiming ownership of the spell and handing it back to the rather dazed owl to return to Madam Hopkirk.

"The Trace is based on location, Ron," Percy replied absently as he resumed trunk duties, a little out of breath at the exertion, "It's not like people use magic in their own special, easily identifiable way."

Ron and Harry processed this for a moment, murmuring back and forth about house elves again and something about Fred and George before Ron's head shot up and he pointed at Percy accusingly, "How long have you known this?"

"A handful of years, I don't know," Percy huffed. Really, what was with the sudden desire for knowledge when Percy had neither the breath nor the inclination to elaborate? If only Ron was half so interested the next time he attempted to educate him.

"Years." Ron squeaked indignantly, "You've known we could be doing magic at home for years?"

"Oh, of course we couldn't, Ronald," Percy replied crossly, a bit of pink in his neck from the unanticipated physical labor, and more than a little irritated that it all came back to self-interest, as per usual with his brothers' dips into intellectual curiosity, "That would be illegal."

Now that was a look Percy was used to seeing on his brothers' faces. Hair was pulled briefly in a small fist as if Ron couldn't quite believe the situation before him and needed to remind himself in a tactile manner of its reality. "But no one would know!"

"We would," was the curt response. Honestly, being able to get away with something did not justify actually breaking the law. Even if… he was setting a pretty terrible example taking Harry from his legal guardians without even informing them. Firmly, that thought was pushed down to be examined and panicked over later.

"Just when I thought you might be cool," Ron sighed, and Percy very pointedly did not make a rude gesture at his twelve year old brother in the middle of the street. Not that Ron appreciated it. Oddly, Harry, the usual rulebreaker of the two, looked vaguely thoughtful, and Percy sent up a quick prayer that he might evolve into a good influence on his brother this year. At least that Hermione girl would
keep them well in hand in terms of studying.

Soon enough, they made it to Riven's Pest Talismans, gaunt and scraggly Riven leaning over the counter to blatantly watch the three as they entered. Seemed like a slow day. Percy sketched a short bow, amused when Harry hastily copied him, before glancing at a disaffected Ron and straightening back up. Riven waved them through to the public floo before Percy could finish the sentence, waiving the fee since he remembered "herding aboot a cloud o' siblin's and what-have-ye's" in his own youth. Another bow and a thank you and then Percy found himself explaining floo travel to Harry as clearly as he could so the boy wouldn't pop out the wrong grate.

"You'll want to keep your elbows in – yes, like that – and I know I said this already, but really annunciate. You don't want to end up in some random living room, or worse, out another public floo somewhere," Percy lectured, Harry's eyes getting wider and more nervous despite the extra care Percy was taking to make sure he knew what to do. When Harry looked almost ready to risk returning to the Dursleys rather than floo anywhere, Ron intervened.

"He'll be fine, Percy," he complained, turning to Harry and summarizing, "Honestly, you only have to throw in the floo powder and say, 'the Burrow,' and step in."

"Try to breathe in before you throw down the powder," Percy added, unable to help himself at this point, and Harry took a deep breath of his own, nodding slightly.

"Just watch me," Ron said, taking a pinch from above the mantle and demonstrating, vanishing in a flare of green flame. It was his turn to try, and Harry let out a single, anxious laugh as he accepted the floo powder Percy gave him.

Before he did anything, he glanced nervously at Percy, who mimed keeping his elbows in, and Harry mimicked the action, taking a deep breath as instructed before throwing the powder down, and saying, "The Burrow!" To his credit, he didn't hesitate to step into the flames, as Percy logically knew must be against what he'd learned growing up muggle. While it seemed to have gone alright, Percy hastened to follow – better to know earlier and all that. He was relieved both boys had made it through to the other side, although Harry had somehow managed to pick up a great deal more soot than either Weasley. No matter. Percy got the worst of it with the floo brush by the fireplace; that's what it was there for, after all. He tried to ignore how wide Harry's eyes were and how tense the boy was as he brushed him off, but it just added another tick to the growing list of concerns he'd be sending Professor McGonagall when he had a chance to sit down. Really, Harry shouldn't go back to those Dursleys at all, but something made Percy hesitate to think where else he had to go. The Professor would take care of it. Percy just had to get the information into her hands.

The twins were downstairs in an instant, grabbing Harry up and passing him between them like a stuffed animal as they twirled him about. Ah, right, they knew each other through the Quidditch team. Percy wasn't much for all that, but he did know the twins did quite well in their positions, and Harry was the youngest Seeker the team had had in some time. It wasn't as if he could skip out on his brothers' games, after all.

The laughter and excited chatter was almost a shock, after so much quiet broken by fits of shouting or crying, and Percy rather wanted to lean unobtrusively against a wall and soak it in, but, "Where's Ginny?"

George and Fred pointed unabashedly up the stairs, where a squeak of dismay sounded and a flash of red hair vanished around the corner. With an internal groan, Percy nodded and made his way upstairs, leaving the boys to catch up and – well, they seemed to be manhandling Harry into a tour of some sort. Percy made a quick mental note to make sure the entry to the attic was still locked. He didn't need anyone traumatized by the ghoul right now. Though, it had been oddly quiet… He made
another note to check on the ghoul later.

Right now, Ginny was priority.

"You're not one for hiding, Gin," he said, dropping a hand on Ginny's head as he sat beside her on her bed, "...Is it the bedtime stories? We can always get rid of those books, it-"

"No!" Ginny said, too quickly, and she blushed when Percy fixed her with a knowing look. It seemed she was still a bit starstruck by the Boy Who Lived. His mother- well, Ginny had begged for the stories, and she'd been read them nightly when she was a sprog. The trend had died off as she aged, but the books about Harry Potter's Adventures were still on her shelf.

Percy's tone was a tad condescending, not that he noticed, "Alright. I know it seems like a lot right now, but you'll see when you're older that a crush isn't something to be so nervous about-"

Cutting him off, Ginny turned away, "I don't have a crush!"

"Well then..." Percy crossed his arms over his chest and looked up to the ceiling, "I suppose you'd just rather be up here alone than be around your brother's best friend. I get it. Ron is enough. Still, you're my little sister, and it's more important you're comfortable... I guess I'll just have to cut the visit short, then; I'm sure he can find somewhere else to go."

"No," Ginny interjected again with emphasis, turning back to Percy with an irritated expression, "And I'm not falling for that, I just- I'm just going to go downstairs now. 'Cause you're wrong." She stood from the bed, ignoring Percy's smug look on his stupid smug face, and stomped downstairs.

"I'm Ginny," Percy heard her state firmly as he followed to the landing, and saw Ginny had shoved her hand into the conversation below, where a bemused Harry took it and gave it a shake with a similarly taken aback introduction. Well, it all seemed to be going well.

"You still have to degnome the garden and water the vegetables yet today," Percy reminded them from atop the steps, waiting for the groans to die down before he continued, "Guest or no guest." Addressing said guest, he asked, having reminded himself, "Do you mind stew, Harry?"

"I don't mind," Harry said, voice that meek and quiet tone it usually was addressing Percy. He knew the boy could raise his voice – he'd heard it when Harry spoke with Ron or the twins. He just didn't when it came to Percy. Pretending to dismiss it, Percy nodded and spun about to leave.

The attic was waiting, after all.

He crept up the next set of stairs to the landing outside Ron's room and tapped the latch on the ceiling with his wand. His mother had keyed him into the lock when he made prefect since she didn't want the kids to go and gawk at the ghoul for no reason, but they did need to shut it up occasionally. When the house was too quiet, it had a tendency to bang pipes about.

"Hello?" Percy called in a low voice, having ascended the ladder he'd pulled down and peeked his head into the attic, "Still alive in there?"

Not a pipe was banged nor a chain rattled, and Percy peered into the gloom, searching for the shock of yellow – ah. The ghoul's strawbright strands of hair spread limply across the floor, the greenish form of the ghoul curled in the corner. Percy might have smiled at the worn overalls his father had left the creature to wear if it weren't so still. Perhaps it had died. He crept closer, letting his footsteps make enough noise to alert it to his coming, but moving slowly enough to hopefully not register as a threat. When he was near enough to lean over the creature, it turned weakly to look at him and made a feeble crooning noise. Still alive, then, but something was wrong. Percy dropped to his knees
beside the ghoul and gingerly brushed the lank hair from its face, feeling its forehead lightly for a fever. He'd never actually touched the ghoul before, and the pebbled texture of its skin gave him pause. How would he even know what temperature was normal for a ghoul? He'd never seen the creature in anything less than perfect health before. While he knew any of the Weasley brood would jump at the chance to complain about their ghoul, it was still their ghoul, and he didn't want it to die because he didn't know what he was doing. It sighed, leaning into the hand Percy had forgotten on its forehead in uncommon placidity.

It felt cold rather than hot, and given that it had bunched itself into a ball for warmth, Percy figured it might be best to bring it down by the fireplace. The ghoul occasionally made its own way downstairs, to the dismay of the Weasley parents, and had to be let back up into the attic when it tired of hitting pots and pans, so it shouldn't be terribly shocked at the change in background.

Sadly, there was only one person who he might contact about this. The house was empty, his siblings out in the yard, seemingly teaching Harry how to degnome a garden, as Percy reluctantly stuck his head in the floo.

"Ah, hello, Percy," a dreamy voice greeted him, as Luna clasped her hands behind her back and rocked from toe to heel, "Did you want something? Our dirigible plums aren't ripe yet, but Ginny does like them a little sour."

Shaking off the seeming non-sequitur, Percy asked, "Is your father home, Luna?"

"Yes," she replied, going still and Percy waited for a moment before he sighed.

"Would you fetch him, please?" She nodded and dashed off, like a spelled paper airplane abruptly given purpose, and Percy waited through the inevitable clatters and crashes before Xenophilius Lovegood emerged from a nearby room, trailing parchment and a variety of burrs from his robe pockets, and a few feathers haphazardly clinging to his hair. It was incredibly likely none of this was purposeful.

"Ah, hello, Percy," he said, echoing his daughter and absently peering about, "What can I do for you?"

"Our ghoul is sick, I think, and I'm not sure how to recognize what it's sick with, much less treat it," Percy confessed.

"Him," Xenophilius corrected, looking over the tops of the glasses just barely clinging to his nose, "You don't know how to treat him."

"Can you help him, then?" Percy knew better than to fight that battle… again.

"Oh, I can take a look at him," Xenophilius replied airily, motioning Percy back. Percy pulled out of the flames moments before Xenophilius walked through, "Where is the sprog?"

"Over here," Percy gestured at the pile of blankets and pillows he'd wrapped the thing in, and Xenophilius tottered over, unpeeling the ghoul for a better look. It hissed mildly at him, before making a few grumbly gurgling noises. Its hand brushed Percy's arm, startling him, and then giving him an additional shock when he realized it was reaching for him. Quietly, deciding never to mention this to his brothers on pain of eternal teasing torment, Percy took the ghoul's hand in his own. It settled immediately, foreign face still slightly tense, but no longer weakly attempting to get away.

"Any deaths in the family?" Xenophilius asked lightly, before taking in Percy's somewhat angry
stare and clearing his throat, "Right, right. Well, that's the problem. Your ghoul, here, has bonded himself to this family, to your magic."

"To our magic?" Percy asked, alarmed, but Xenophilius waved a hand.

"Perhaps I misspoke, he has… taken on characteristics of your family's magic. Sort of adopted himself in, you could say."

"Magic doesn't have characteristics," Percy began didactically, but his tone wavered at Xenophilius's expression, "...Does it?"

"Of course it does, every living thing changes a little when it interacts with another," Xenophilius grumbled dismissively, now poking the discomfited-looking ghoul in the shoulder with his wand.

"But the Ministry-"

"The ministry, bah!" Xenophilius shook his head, "As if they truly know anything about magic." Percy felt his hackles rise just a bit, but he was neighbors with this man and he was depending on him to help their ghoul, so perhaps he should avoid being sucked into another type of unending argument.

"I see," Percy said stiffly, and Xenophilius patted his shoulder condescendingly, still focused on prodding the ghoul with his wand, "So how does that translate into a sick ghoul?"

"Well, the family magic is… missing a piece so to say, and if you're unhappy, your magic is unhappy. If your magic is unhappy, it doesn't get along too well with your ghoul." Another prod to the cheek and the ghoul snapped sharp teeth at the wand, but Xenophilius didn't seem fazed. "If he hadn't bound himself to the family, he'd be fine right now, but as it is, he's being… drained is probably the best word for it."

Well, that was just great to know. What did that binding entail? Why would the ghoul do it? Percy had a great deal of questions he'd like to ask, but he started with the most pressing, "What do we do? We can't just be happy when… We can't just cheer up, anyway."

"You could toss him out," Xenophilius suggested, tucking a wayward strand of wispy white hair behind his ear, "It would break the bond and he'd recover within a day."

"So we leave it outside for a day…?" Percy prompted, looking for more explanation.

"No, no, you'd have to throw him out. Exile him. Permanent banishment," Xenophilius elaborated with sweeping gestures and the ghoul fidgeted at the amount of quick movement within its range of vision.

"Let's… keep that on the back burner for now." Letting the ghoul die wasn't an option but exiling him would be the last resort. He still didn't understand this bond business, but adopting oneself into a family sounded like there was some sort of trust involved. "Is there anything else we can do?"

Xenophilius scratched at his chin with his wand, making Percy swallow down admonishments along the lines of you'll blast your face off, until he came upon an idea, "Healing potions and the like don't work very well cross species, but your mother was quite an accomplished hedge witch and there's likely something there that'll work."

A whimper from the ghoul made Percy hastily loosen his abrupt deadman's grip. Hearing it brought up so easily was nearly… He wasn't sure what to feel. Whatever it was that settled into Percy's stomach kneaded the bottom with razor sharp claws and curled to stay, "You knew?"
"Doesn't everyone?" Xenophilius asked, taken aback, "I suppose no one spoke of it out of politeness, but I assumed the signs were obvious. I apologize if it were meant to be a secret family practice; I'm not in the habit of ferreting those out anymore."

"I can't… It's fine," Percy heard himself say, as if from a distance, "It's not a family practice."

"Ah, good, I'll leave you to it," he stood cheerily, awkwardness on his part completely forgotten, and tottered to the fireplace, "Any sort of health wishes will do. If he doesn't recover in a few days, floo me again." With that, he was gone.

Feeling numb as the gaggle of children filed in behind him, having finished with the garden and beginning to move their attention to the ghoul on the floor, Percy decided it couldn't hurt.

It didn't take too long to explain the situation to the others, though when Percy added a quick explanation of hedge magic for Harry, the boy had immediately gotten lost in thought. Not paying it any mind, Percy had busied himself with busying them. No one was weaselling out of dinner duty tonight. While he'd started the stew itself earlier in the day, they had to make a separate meal for the ghoul.

"Right," Percy tugged once at his earlobe and straightened clapping his hands together, "Tonight we're going to perform a little experiment to see if we can help the ghoul with the hedge magic set up we've got in the kitchen. We'll need to find any containers and utensils we can that have to do with health," he could see Ron whispering into Harry's ear about something, now, and a bit of irritation tingled at his fingertips, "Please pay attention, Ronald. Once we've rounded those up, I'd like you, Fred, George, to dig up a few carrots from the garden and two potatoes. After that's done, you can all eat dinner." Seeing no movement from his siblings and houseguest, he made a shooing gesture, "Hop to, all. The faster you're done, the faster you eat." Catching Harry's gaze, Percy added, "Of course, Harry, you're a guest, and you needn't bother yourself."

A negating shake of the head from Harry, and that small voice, "I'll help." At least when Harry had been still in the thrill of pulling one over the Dursleys or making his escape, he had had a more casual tone. It was something to note for later, but Percy had already taken too much notice of it and so reminded himself again that Professor McGonagall would take care of it.

Percy rolled up his sleeves; it was time to step out of his comfort zone and into... well, the kitchen.

He was just stepping into the kitchen.

Alright, so that didn't parse out too well in his head, but it was still a matter of life and death.

Percy sighed and got to work.
It was only during preparation that Percy realized he would have to shoo everyone out of the room when he actually cooked the ghoul's meal. He wasn't entirely sure whether or not hedge magic worked on a give and take system and the last thing he needed was for his siblings – and Harry – to fall mysteriously ill. So, he focused on getting everything washed and chopped – ghouls ate mostly vermin, including gnomes, and thus Percy was planning on some lightly cooked meat with a bit of veg for minerals – before trying to subtly get everyone out of the room.

"Alright, everyone out," Percy said, making shooing hand gestures at the younger kids. Did he say subtle? He meant blatant. While Percy could be said to have tact, subtlety was more the twins' and Charlie's bag than his own.

"What gives, Percy?" George insisted, whipping his hand away from a bowl Percy was never going to touch again.

"Yeah, aren't we going to experiment?" Fred continued, before George snapped his fingers.

"Percy wants the explosions to himself. That's selfish."

"Right selfish," Fred agreed.

At the mention of the word, Percy's gaze shot up to the twins, but when he didn't see any malice or even recognition of what they'd said, he hissed out a breath through his teeth, tugging at an earlobe to contain himself, "Look, we don't know exactly how hedge magic works, and I don't think I should expose all of you to the consequences of a spell about health going wrong, yeah? Sound good? Get."

"We can make our own decisions, methinks," George said, standing firm with arms crossed over his chest, "Better you let us in now than have us try it out on our own later."

"What about you?" Harry asked, and Percy paused in his reflexive vitriolic response to George.

"Yeah, Perce," Fred seconded, "Who'll nag us if you're down with the flu?"

"It might be easier with more people," Ron piped up, clearly angling to get in on the hedge magic rather than voicing any concern over Percy's continued health, and Ginny was right behind him.

Percy stared back at the five pairs of stubborn eyes in the kitchen, fingers steepled and pressed to his lips as he thought. "No, I'm not buying it."

"Percy!" Ron whined.

No amount of whining was going to let those little brats risk their lives for curiosity. Even if they'd said it was for the ghoul – which no one had – Percy would still be against the idea. His mother had died because of this… this magic. Or at least, in part due to it. As time passed, he grew more and more sure of it. In fact- wait, where was George?

The fire was on behind him and Percy leapt into action, yanking the pan from George's hand in a smooth motion that spilled onto the floor rather than the twin. It was more a roar than a question that left Percy, "Are you bloody well kidding me!" He glared at George, who glared back, unrepentant. Percy dropped the pan to the floor, almost regretting the melodrama when Ron and Harry jumped, and grabbed a hold of George's jumper, feeling the red starting to flicker about the edges of his vision, "You, mister, are grounded. From Quidditch, from potions, and from pudding- for a week."
"That's not fair!" George shot back immediately, ears going red, "You're the one being unreasonable!" When Percy didn't seemed swayed, he added, irritably, "We don't even have pudding most days!"

"We will this week!" Percy retorted, and George practically growled at the spiteful sentence.

"I don't care about that!" He denied, getting redder but seemingly unable to think of something to say that would make Percy change his mind. With a stomp of his foot, he settled for, "You're so- I hate you, you prat!"

Well. Percy wasn't entirely sure anything was supposed to be quite that shade of red and, detachedly, he realized he was getting close to saying something he'd regret. "Get out of my sight," Percy hissed, turning his gaze on the others, though George had yet to obey, "And you lot probably think you're clever, letting George take the fall without saying a word." Ron seemed ready to protest, but Fred seemed oddly resigned to his fate, and he put a hand on Ron's shoulder, getting him to stand down.

"You are banned from this kitchen, and I don't want to see a single toe over that threshold again."

By this point, Fred was pretty much herding his siblings out of the kitchen, nodding placatingly and dragging a fuming George by the hand, and it just made Percy that much madder. He spun away from them to take a few deep breaths, fists clenched at his side and- and wand in his hand? He hadn't even noticed. Percy looked at it with a familiar sick feeling and dropped it to the counter. Still, he sort of wanted to run after George and give him a piece of his mind. A chime sounded, and Percy noted the stew, cooking over the fire all day, was finally done. He closed his eyes and counted to ten.

"...I've never been banned from a kitchen as punishment," Harry worried just outside the door, "Does that mean we're banned from meals?"

"Not likely," Fred was saying when Percy stuck his head out the kitchen, not even bothering to eye the group of miscreants.

"Dinner in ten," he gritted out and immediately vanished back into the kitchen like a murderous maître d'.

Percy resumed plating meals, message delivered, but paused as a thought occurred to him. He cast Lockhart's diagnosis spell on the stew and almost groaned when it lit up with the colors for hedge magic and hexes. He sank down in front of the meal, cross-legged on the floor, and tried to think through how to fix the stew so it wouldn't spell anyone's nose inside out – a somewhat painful hex the twins had tried to catch Percy with last year; instead, it hit Penelope and well, actually that's how they'd become friends. Mutual antagonism with Percy's brothers.

The point was Percy needed to undo whatever the fight with his siblings had done to the food. He couldn't just bring them down and have a forgiveness powwow because he still really wanted to smash George's face into something and wow, Percy needed to get a grip. He spared a brief moment of resentment that Bill and Charlie weren't here to be peacekeepers but he was used to dealing with the rest of the Weasleys on his own, so he brushed it off. He'd still been keeping up the diagnosis spell, and the colors pulsed briefly at the flashes of aggression and resentment, making Percy groan inwardly as he knew what he must do. So, Percy set to trying to understand George's side of the argument.

"He's upset you died," he told the kitchen, unthinkingly, as if his mum's setup still had a piece of her in it. And why not? Ghosts tended to haunt either where they died or where they spent the most time alive, and this was close to both. It hurt, a little, to think about it, much less to speak to her, but she was the only one who'd ever seemed to really understand Percy. His brothers had little to no drive for academic achievement – Bill and Charlie were simply rather gifted, rather than hard working – and
Percy needed to make something of himself. He couldn't just be Percy, brother of a million Weasleys; yet even if his brothers understood that feeling they never seemed to understand how to work the world to make it happen. Percy shook the thoughts away; that was incredibly unhelpful in terms of his current goal. "Hi… Mum. Hi, Mum, it's Percy." Percy paused, took a quick glance at the door to make sure the Weasley-Potter crowd had really cleared off, and settled back down, "I have no idea what I'm doing." A laugh escaped him at the truth in that statement, "I mean, really. Really? I was going to focus on my grades and making Ministry connections this year, so I could start my career off the bat next year. I barely planned to say hi to that lot in the halls unless they asked for help with something. Hogwarts as usual, you know? And maybe…" Percy felt his neck heat as he mumbled, "Maybe ask Penelope out," before continuing in a normal voice, "But now I have to deal with them everyday and think about them all the time and make sure they're brushing their teeth and doing their chores and not hoarding vegetables from their plate to throw to the gnomes." He pressed the base of his palms to his eyes, admitting, "I might hate it, a bit." Shaking off the thought, he said, hastily, "Not them, but just being the- the only responsible one. I know you always said I was, but you- you were around, you know? It was different, then. I wasn't… I wasn't really responsible for much, at all. Now it's like Fred, George, Ginny, Ron… Now it's like they're my duty, period." He looked upward, "Is this what you felt like?" Returning his gaze to the pot, he sighed, "Maybe I can understand why you… why you did what you did, then."

A moment of pensive silence and he shook his head, "Right. George. He's got less idea what to do than I do, I can tell that. He's sad and mad and lashing out and… I don't know, wants to be involved? I wish you could just tell me what was going through his head because honestly. I try to teach them something, or keep them safe, or get them to pay attention to their responsibilities, and they fight me like I'm dragging them to the gates of hell by their ears. What is it about safety and rules that they hate so much? I don't understand them like you did. I don't know how to help them." He snorted, "George said he hates me- which, honestly, shouldn't come as a surprise to me since I practically personify rules to the brats. He's impossible. …We can agree on one thing, though," Percy mused quietly, "If it was a choice- you or me, I'm sure we'd both pick you." A moment of silence, then, and Percy cast the diagnosis spell again, knowing he was too tired to be angry anymore, and found the stew had faded to a customary grey, with the slight blue hedge magic contamination usual for the kitchen. "You did say to never serve food angry," Percy mulled over, finishing the actual serving and setting the plates out on the table, taking his own back into the kitchen to eat as he remade the ghouls meal. His siblings would filter down and eat when they were hungry enough; he wasn't going to go asking.

"I really want the ghouls to get better," he muttered as he plopped the raw meat from the floor back into a pan, "Don't let the dust bunnies fool you." It wasn't as if the ghouls would even really need cooked or sanitary meat anyway, he was only going through the motions to attempt to use his mother's set up to imbue the food with… healing feelings, he guessed? After a few surreptitious glances around – he was doing so many weird things, today – Percy kissed the handle of the spoon, feeling ridiculous, and thought really friendly, healing thoughts.

If anyone walked in on him just now, he would actually skewer himself.

Granted, Percy was pretty used to looking over his shoulder for his siblings; there wasn't much they didn't bother him about. …Alright that was unfair. Percy also bothered them about things that they were supposed to do already or things that were good for them. He ignored that his idea of what was best for them may not have exactly aligned with theirs.

Finishing up the potentially unnecessary embarrassing bits, Percy plated the grub and hit it with what would soon be his most used spell. When enough blue to shame the sky showed up, he felt like maybe this day wouldn't be a complete write-off. Thankfully something went right, he thought, bringing the food out to the convalescing ghouls. Now, he just had to get the slack creature to eat it.
Putting the plate carefully to the floor, Percy slid the plate over to the ghoul. When it didn't twitch, he slid it a bit closer. Soon enough, the plate was pressing into the ghoul's side and no sign of movement could be seen. Percy waited, squatting and leaned in, off-balance and on edge, until eventually the ghoul... sighed.

Now what?

Running a hand over the lower half of his face, Percy mulled over the problem. The ghoul's eyes flicked to the food, but it seemed uninterested in moving to feed itself. At least it had finally acknowledged the plate. Standing, Percy left to retrieve a knife and fork, hearing his siblings settling into the dining room to eat and hastily vacating the kitchen before he could overhear them complaining.

He was fairly certain there'd be complaining.

Gingerly, Percy settled himself on the ground beside the ghoul and cut the meat into manageable pieces for the ghoul's inhumanly wide mouth. He stabbed one with a fork and held it in front of the ghoul. When the ghoul looked from him, to the fork and back again, Percy was ready to force-feed the damn thing and be done with it, but... Taking a deep breath he jiggled the fork firmly, "It's for you. You've got to eat it." If only ghouls could understand language. The creature did seem to be getting the gist of the wiggling food however, and Percy stilled the fork as the ghoul slowly opened its mouth. Finally. With a few muss-ups that prompted the ghoul to hiss weakly, Percy managed to get the full plate of food into the ghoul in under half an hour. By the end of it, the ghoul was chewing contemplatively, rather than quietly swallowing each bite whole, and Percy chose to take this as a good sign. He hesitated, eyes caught with the creature's beady ones, and patted the ghoul's shoulder before standing and brushing himself off on habit. The ghoul watched him leave the room, and Percy found himself with, oddly enough, free time on his hands.

He passed the dining room quickly, hearing voices but refusing to register their words – as long as there weren't any raised voices, crashes, or screams, it wasn't his problem, right now – and made his way up to his room. It was only when he'd hesitantly given into the idea that he might actually be able to go to sleep that he remembered there was still a letter to be written to Professor McGonagall. With a quiet, heart-felt groan, Percy rolled over and snatched a precariously balanced roll of parchment from the edge of his desk.

Peachy.

The next morning, he woke to beady yellow eyes and yelped, flailing beautifully before he hit the wall beside his bed. The ghoul tilted its ugly mug at him, otherwise unfazed, and crooned. Taking a moment to get his breathing under control, Percy put a hand over his rapidly beating heart as if to calm it. "You're doing well, then?" He asked with an edge of irritation, voice slightly higher than average. It shifted, head upright again, and shuffled off. What was going on with that? Usually, if the ghoul ended up in someone's room, it was only there long enough to clang something against the walls or rattle some chains before it wandered off to make more noise. Percy shook it off; clearly, the ghoul wasn't 100% just yet. He'd make it another meal today, and if it was better tomorrow, allow it to fend for itself. Percy glanced at the clock and groaned. It was actually time for him to get up.

When he made it downstairs, it was to be greeted by the amusing sight of Ginny defending her hair from the ghoul's curious grip. It was being visibly gentle, but its overlong fingers were very clearly not wanted so Percy gingerly separated the two, to Ginny's relief.

"What did you do to him?" Ginny asked, reaching around Percy to poke the placid ghoul, which attempted to return the gesture before Percy stopped it.
"I just took Mr. Lovegood's advice," Percy said, moving the ghoul step by step across the room until it was in front of the fireplace once again, and directing it to sit before he swaddled it more to keep it out of trouble than in the interest of its health. "It's probably still not feeling completely better."

"He's acting like he's drunk," Ginny scrunched up her nose, "Like when Dad came back from that dinner after getting promoted."

"More like sedated," Percy mused, stepping away to observe the ghoul as it slowly wriggled free from its blanket, "But for all we know, I had some throwaway thought or another about calm while I was making the food and the setup in there amplified it."

"Do you think he'll go for cuddles?" Ginny asked, a smirk crossing her face, "We could put him in Ron's room."

"That's unkind," Percy scolded, but his lips twitched at the thought, and Ginny grinned up at him, knowing she wasn't really in trouble. Ron's reactions to any sort of surprise or trickery were usually something to behold, perhaps explaining why the twins picked on him so viciously when they could get away with it.

Though the grudges got old long before Ron gave up on them.

"What's he doing?" Ginny had a hold of Percy's arm now, hanging off it as she gazed at the ghoul.

"I don't know," Percy replied automatically before actually taking the time to observe. The ghoul had made it to its feet, and had freed itself from the blanket, but made no move to return to its fascination with Ginny's hair, distracted by something new. It wavered a bit as it wandered from the room, but Percy followed a distance behind, Ginny still hanging from his sleeve. At the door to the kitchen, she glanced up at him surreptitiously, but he didn't seem to be aware of breaking his own rule banishing his younger siblings from the room.

Well, she wasn't going to remind him.

They trailed the ghoul as it came to a halt, crouching by the wall and touching the family clock with a curious finger. It crooned, a bit, and seemed content otherwise to sit there, one finger maintaining contact with the limp hand of the clock, no longer animated by a connection to a living Weasley. Percy swallowed on seeing it, knowing that he should have removed it by now, but Molly Weasley's hand on the family clock remained limply hanging, pointing at nothing. Or at least, it had been. The grip on Percy's arm tightened, and he knew both of them had seen it. The clock hand twitched under the ghoul's touch.

For one, long, stomach-dropping moment, Percy felt a wild hope but- but it was impossible with what he'd seen. Hadn't Xenophilius said the ghoul had… taken on aspects of the family's magic? Whatever that meant. It must only be reacting to that.

"It doesn't mean anything," Percy said, voice coming out hoarse and they both jumped at the sudden break of the silence, as Percy hadn't known he'd meant to speak at all, but he cleared his throat and continued, "Mr. Lovegood said… something like this before- it's just because the ghoul's been hanging around so long."

"Oh," Ginny replied, and he couldn't read anything from her tone, "Okay."

Still, they stood around a bit longer than they should have, watching the hand twitch as the ghoul sat placidly before them, and when Ron and Harry stumbled downstairs in a rustle of quiet chatter, it brought them back to themselves with a jolt. Shaking his head, Percy moved forward, "Let's get it
back to the fireplace. It's not itself, yet." Despite her previous annoyance with the ghoul, Ginny helped willingly enough. Together, they ushered the mellow creature back into the other room, Ron giving a little cry of protest on seeing them exit the kitchen.

"Why's Ginny still allowed in the kitchen?" he complained, and Percy side-eyed his sister, having quite forgotten his previous declaration.

"She's not," he retorted, primly, "The ghoul needed herding and she was the only one awake." Grumbling greeted this revelation, but Ron accepted it quickly enough, to Harry's visible relief, as he had appeared ready to mold himself into the walls and disappear if another argument broke out.

"Well, what's for breakfast?" Ron asked, looking more awake than per usual this early in the morning.

Internally, Percy groaned. He knew he'd been forgetting something.

By the time Fred plodded down the stairs, George sulking behind him but following the pull of his stomach, breakfast was on the table and nearly done with. Not wanting another confrontation, Percy stood as they sat, ignoring the almost disappointed look on Fred's face and the corresponding twinge in his stomach. Well, he was done, anyway; there was really no need for him to linger and it'd be better if he didn't.

"You lot can take your plates into the kitchen and then turn yourselves right back around and leave when you're done; no lollygagging," he informed them, a tad stiffly, and Ginny wrinkled her nose at the tone.

"I'm done," she announced, shoving her empty plate his direction, and Percy took it with a long-suffering sigh that had her sticking out her tongue in response, "You banished me."

"I'm aware," he replied dryly before turning from the room to ward off any such maneuvers from Ron, calling back, "Remember, it's laundry day!"

A chorus of groans met his back, and he heard Ron start to explain the process to Harry.

His mother wasn't- hadn't been the type to believe that one should ignore a spell to make life easier, but she'd been done with doing the laundry on her own by the time the twins rolled around. Percy still vaguely remembered the institution of laundry day, after Charlie had dragged him and the toddling twins into a search for a niffler on the edge of the property, and gotten them well and truly soiled, with skinned knees and busted patches. This was, of course, on the heels of Bill accidentally upending a series of paint cans on the then-new Ford Anglia in the shed, as well as himself and their father. So his mum had taken a long look at her multi-colored family and declared that they needed to appreciate the clothes they had. Dad- their father hadn't tried to argue the first time, but as the day became more tradition than a learning experience, he snuck in a few cleaning spells here and there. It helped that washing by hand was a little less wearing on the clothes than a spell, too.

Magic wore things out.

This is why Percy was arm's deep in suds when an owl showed up bearing parchment. He blew some hair out of his face and addressed his current favorite twin, "Fred, could you get that?" The boy saluted, dropping the sodden blanket he'd been hanging to the ground, and practically tackled the bird, to the kids' giggling amusement and to Percy's dismay. Unfortunately, he couldn't unseat Fred's standing without George getting an attitude adjustment in the last few minutes, so he settled for a lecture on undoing work for no reason, and why work ethic was important, and didn't he think he was just making more work for himself for a moment's laugh?
"Good to have you back, Perce," Fred groaned comically, "Let me read the letter. You know I can't focus on reading when there's talking."

"I don't know why," Percy shot back, but fell quiet, scrubbing more intently than before.

"It's a mystery," Fred murmured, absently, but the hint of mischief peeking through in his expression faded as he made his way through the letter, George abandoning his post at a different wash basin to stand dripping beside his brother at the first hint of a scowl.

"They say Harry's got to go back to the Dursleys," George said finally, with a hint of disbelief and a great deal more anger. Turning to his usual target, he accused, "Didn't you tell them what happened?"

"Of course, I did," Percy snapped, not quite believing it himself. Surely it was against the rules for a professor to knowingly allow neglect. He wiped his hands on his shirt and held one out when it was dry enough not to smudge the ink, "Give it here." Fred plucked the letter from George's hands and wordlessly passed it to Percy, who was focused more on the contents of the letter than Harry paling in the background and George clarifying he'd meant next summer.

George was right; Professor McGonagall expressed her regret over the Dursleys' treatment and promised she'd have a word about next summer, but… We have to keep him safe, you understand. The words seemed oddly unrelated to the Dursleys' treatment. There was a hint there, of something Percy clearly wouldn't have understood, but was shaping her decision. Still… Percy scoured the letter for a third time, ignoring for the time being but noting absently for future reference how his brothers and sister's ongoing conversation had turned to repeated kidnapping.

Nothing about this summer, or about finding another home for Harry, or even reporting it to the Ministry. The last part had Percy a little leery; he hadn't done it himself because he'd wanted the view of an older, more experienced professional- someone who might have done something like this before. In fact, it seemed more as if Professor McGonagall wanted him to keep the whole thing quiet, if he was reading between the lines correctly. In addition, there was a throwaway line about her condolences for their loss, a repeat of what she'd said at the funeral, and a promise to provide whatever help she could, of course; Percy had never doubted that the professor cared, but he didn't like this outcome much. Yet, if Professor McGonagall said he'd be safer with the Dursleys, Percy had to believe her. She knew so much more than he did about children and all that. Percy would just… check in. Every now and again. He was sure there would be enough leeway to get Harry away for the weekends, perhaps.

They'd leap that hurdle when they came to it.

For a moment, Percy shut his eyes and tried to believe that he wasn't adding Harry to his list of responsibilities, but it was a futile effort from the start. Even if his mother had barely exchanged greetings with the boy… Well, he had his own Weasley sweater.

"No kidnapping," Percy stated flatly, coming back to reality and cutting off the increasingly elaborate plans, "If the professor says he has to go back, then he has to go back." At the protests and the resignation on Harry's face, Percy abruptly found himself at the end of his fuse. "I'm not saying abandon him! Or throw him to the sharks! What must you think of me, you little-" The parchment was crumpling in his hand as he cut himself off, not wanting to swear. "Harry," he turned his attention to the black-haired boy, whose eyes were wide at the sudden spotlight, "We're not just going to leave you next summer, alright? I'll make sure you know how to get to the public floo and contact us, and we'll bring you in for visits, do you hear?"

"It's fine," Harry said weakly after a moment of searching for words, "I mean, I'm used to it; they're
really not all that bad."

Attempting not to explode at the already wary boy, Percy took a breath, steamrolling over whatever Ron had been about to say, "Alright. You will visit next summer and I will expect a call every week or I will be dropping in, and I'll inform your Dursleys of that, myself. And for this summer, you'll stay here. Understood?"

"Yes, sir," Harry replied dazedly, before flushing and stammering out, "I- I mean, Percy."

"Good. Get back to work," Percy said, shoving the letter in his pocket to respond to when he wasn't feeling volatile and taking his own advice.

"You can't let him go back."

And there was George, to ruin his day. Again. The others were wisely putting some distance between themselves and the oncoming fight.

"And what do you propose I do, George?" Percy asked icily, dunking a jumper that had done nothing to deserve such rough treatment somewhat harshly, "Hide him in the cellar?"

"All we have to do is take him home with us next year," George returned, "It's not that hard."

Taking a moment to compose himself a little, Percy began to explain what George should already know, the pompous tone he never noticed entering his voice, "Professor McGonagall said-"

"Oh, Professor McGonagall said, Professor McGonagall said!" The mimicry was nasally and grating, and the color was high in George's cheeks as he continued, "What, now you need someone else to think for you, too? You were already aiming to be an emotionless rock and finally you're one step closer!"

Eyes narrowed, and completely derailed from any sort of rational discussion, Percy hissed, "I'm not emotionless."

"Well, you sure fooled me! Perfect, pompous Percy prancing around like nothing's wrong. You didn't even cry at her funeral; I noticed! I'm not as blind as everyone else! You're just loving all this-being in charge, getting to boss everyone around, no one to stop you or keep you in check." With each word out of George's mouth, Percy could see the red flickering at the edges of his vision, that dark bloody color like the veins had burst and begun to blind him. The vitriol spewing at him had its source in hurt, he knew. His brother was just confused, he knew. He also knew he might take this barrel and smack him upside the head with it if he kept talking. "...you're glad she's gone! You're glad!" His brother was screaming now, crying, and Fred was trying to intervene, his hand being shook off George's shoulder and his voice ignored.

It was something of a surprise when the screaming stopped. George was abruptly much closer than before, and Percy found himself to have stood at some point, his fingers digging into George's jaw, "Don't ever say that to me again." His voice was low, dangerously soft, and coming from thoughts he'd barely acknowledged, but knew to be true, "You don't know what I'd do to get her back." As the fear on George's face- the fear on all their faces registered, Percy felt a wash of shame douse the anger, and pulled his hand away from George as if burned, the boy stumbling away several steps before coming to a stop.

"I hate you," he spat, voice weak and tears threatening.

"Yes, I know," Percy conceded, not up to being angry with embarrassment and shame still licking his insides with a hot misery, "Get back to work or go inside."
It took a while, as Percy scrubbed with tight, precise motions in an unmoving yard, but eventually they unfroze, tiptoeing around him like a wild beast. Evidently, the tradition of laundry day was not a force to be reckoned with. …Or they were all still a little freaked out by their still-slightly-larger brother nearly snapping.

_It's not as if the twins couldn't take me down_, Percy thought before his scowl deepened and his movements grew harsher, _They shouldn't have to take me down._

George hadn't even twitched when Percy… Well. The point was, Percy was teetering on the edge of something he hadn't thought he was even capable of and he maybe… a little bit… sort of… needed help. Who did he even _try_ to talk to about something like this? _Sometimes I get so angry I want to hurt the children in my care_, who feels like that? Percy needed to get himself under control, by yesterday. Laundry day eventually concluded and the kids scattered, Percy still in a daze, in _shock_ at how he'd just… Just grabbed George like that. It was hard to even _think_ the words.

God, what if he bruised?

The second thought of what it'd _look like_ if he bruised made Percy flinch into himself a little.

It wasn't acceptable. It was against the rules. He'd just… just…

"If George would stop _provoking me_, this would have never come up," he said aloud to the empty kitchen, immediately regretting the words as he finished making a dinner he'd started on autopilot – barely registering the process, "No, it's not his fault I'm a mess." He sighed, eyes shutting, "I need help, Mum. I need you." Shaking his head at the ridiculousness of it, Percy pulled himself together enough to at least drop the food on the dining room table and run for it on the pretext of feeding the ghoul. Joking over pink spaghetti never seemed so far away. He'd cast the diagnosis spell, as was becoming habit, and the food, at least, was alright. Even if everything else was wrong.

As he left the kitchen, he didn't notice the limp hand on the clock twitching.

It took Percy another day to remember he still had to reply to Professor McGonagall's letter, and he cheerfully barricaded himself in his room, glad to escape the sidelong looks and… Well, he'd overheard Ron questioning his sanity, which… Percy sometimes hated not having his eardrums blown out by the twins' potion experiments as the rest of his family evidently had.

Unfortunately, it was not to be.

The knock on his door was immediately followed by it opening, rather defeating the purpose of the knock, "Percy?"

Putting aside the half-written letter, Percy resigned himself to his fate, "Come in, Fred." To his credit, Fred didn't hesitate to slide into a room alone with his insane older brother. Or maybe, to his detriment? Percy almost wanted to scold him, but shook it off. "What is it?"

"Are you… okay?" Fred asked, and when Percy didn't immediately reply, continued, "Like, are you hearing voices or feeling persecuted by the gnomes or something?"

"Your concern fills me with warmth," Percy informed him, and Fred's jaw unclenched, moving a bit deeper into the room.

"No, wait, I'm trying to be serious, it's just…" He trailed off, looking down, and doing that _thing_ he did with his hands that drove Percy mad from how painful it looked.

"Uncomfortable?" He suggested, "Stop wringing your hands."
“Yeah,” Fred's hands dropped to his sides for a moment, but quickly returned to the wringing motion.

“Honestly, I'm surprised you're not commiserating with George right now,” Percy prompted, leaning back in his chair with eyes on the hand wringing when Fred didn't speak again. “You're going to give yourself warts.”

Again, that momentary pause in wringing before it picked up again, "Look, do you need… I mean, how…”

"Oh, my god, stop." Percy snapped, an edge of irritation to his voice, and Fred's mouth snapped shut, looking up to him wide-eyed before Percy tugged irritably at his own earlobe, "The hand wringing, Fred, you know it gets to me."

He shoved his hands in his pockets, this time, "Sorry."

Ah, wonderful. Fred would never spit out what he really wanted to say if Percy kept this up. Exhaling sharply and leaning forward again, Percy forced himself to say, "No, don't be; I'm being ridiculous." Fred nodded, but didn't look up again. Another sharp, chastising tug to his own earlobe and Percy carefully, slowly, reached a hand out to Fred's shoulder, willing his voice to soften, "I'm sorry, Fred. What did you want to say?"

Fred took a deep breath of his own. "It's… I know you got mad at us before, and I know we've fought and Mum would have to separate us, but it feels… different now, when Mum and Dad aren't here," Fred said, almost calmly, as if he weren't driving little daggers into Percy's gut. He looked up, meeting Percy's gaze, "I don't want… I don't know how to fix it when you and George are fighting. I don't know what to do to help." Yep, just tearing his way through Percy's insides.

"I don't know if you can," Percy admitted, "George misses Mum, and I can't bring her back. He's hurt, and we can't fix it. And I… I'll do better. I have to, so I will." He hadn't quite meant to say that last part out loud, and Fred was giving him an odd look.

"And Dad," he said, and Percy gave him an odd look right back. That wasn't what he'd been expecting. Fred's brow furrowed a little, "You barely talk about Mum but you never talk about Dad."

When his heart rate picked up, Percy was surprised at himself- he hadn't known he was still angry. Maybe he'd be angry until his father could wake up and explain himself. But Fred really didn't need that right now, did he? "There's still hope, for him, isn't there?" Percy replied, expertly skating around the topic until a later date time-stamped never.

Fred nodded, and then shook himself as if remembering why he was there, "So you don't hate George?"

"What- no!" The denial came out more loudly than Percy anticipated and he wondered if he should just give up all hope of ever fully controlling his own speech ever again. "No," he repeated more quietly, "I can't say he's making it easy right now but I will," he paused, forced himself through the words, "always love him and you and Ginny and Ron. No matter how angry I get." Not that he should be getting as angry as he was, lately, but Percy was going to work on it, alright? He wouldn't- couldn't let something like this happen again. "I'm not going to… do anything to- to hurt you all. I'm supposed to be taking care of you, and that means I'll keep you safe, alright?" He didn't like the almost pleading tone that had entered his voice or the lost expression on Fred's face, so Percy gave himself a mental slap and straightened up, "I promise I'll keep you safe."

"Um…” Fred was halfway between confused and something Percy couldn't identify, but all of it was
uncomfortable, "Alright. I…” He paused, raised a finger and opened his mouth, then shut it again, "I'm going to… go… outside… I mean to the hall and…"

"Goodbye, Fred," Percy intoned, freeing the boy to throw back a quick farewell and dart out of the room. When he heard the whispered conference start up and move away from the door, he groaned and collapsed back into his chair like a marionette with its strings cut. "The brats duped me," he rubbed at his forehead agitatedly, the hand waving out and in once for emphasis, "Again." He didn't have to wonder who had been lurking outside the door- Fred and George were, after all, partners in crime, and that last question had probably been a proxy which made him feel, oh, a hundred times worse. So, neither Fred nor George had been sure Percy didn't hate George. What a wonderful revelation after an equally marvellous day.

Kicking his desk overset the ink pot, and Percy watched in detachment as his half-written letter vanished into darkness. With a forced calm, he cleared the mess with a sweep of his wand, having mastered the spell during long hours of essay revision at Hogwarts.

…Which reminded him, he needed to make sure they’d all done their summer work. He was sure they’d be thrilled to have him nagging them to do schoolwork with the week they'd just had. He let his forehead hit the desk with a quiet thump and mused on the disaster his life had become. Maybe… He tilted his head to bring his spare parchment into view. Maybe he could write Penelope. A moment of contemplation and he snorted. And write what? Dear Penelope, My mum's still dead and I might be mad at my comatose father for it. Also, I nearly ripped George's head off during an argument and feel like I need to find some way to keep… them… safe. To keep them safe. Percy's head shot up as he recalled the sheer quantity of protection inscribed pots, pans, utensils, bakeware, and what-have-you in the kitchen and the miraculous recovery of the ghoul, along with the continents'-wide reach of his mother's set up.

Sure, it was probably unhealthy to rely on magical assistance, and maybe he wasn't thinking clearly with all the emotional upheaval lately but hell, he'd seen a calm oriented kettle in there, too, so he could always brew his own tea separately in that. And he hadn't noticed any tradeoff from the ghoul's health rising, yet, so he'd likely not be giving himself terrible luck in exchange or anything like that.

Probably.

Either way, Percy felt he needed to do this; it was a… maybe not a solution to his problem, but a way forward. He couldn't live with himself if he really snapped someday and actually hit one of his siblings. Besides, his thoughts were a mess lately, and calming tea seemed like a really good idea in general. For himself, of course, because he wasn't entirely sure what the effects of 'calm' might be yet and he wasn't going to just pour it down his siblings' throats without their knowing. Protection, however, was fairly straight-forward and unlikely to actually change anything about them. They would be just as free to be antagonistic and whatever as usual.

The next few days saw Percy avoiding his siblings, but laying out meals cooked in the protection set of cookware and sort of… lurking to make sure they ate it without letting them know he was nearby. He had quite a lot of practice at avoidance and hiding, actually, thanks to the twins. It couldn't go on forever that way, though, and soon enough, Percy was eventually confronted by the other twin.

George cornered him coming out of the kitchen, hands full and unable to run. "You're really freaking Harry out," he greeted Percy with uncomfortably, hands deep in his pockets and eyes on the ceiling, "Especially since you just vanished after you flipped out. He started asking Ron if you ever hurt him or anything like that and then he asked if you ever kept us from eating and now that they know you're just being weird, they think You Know Who is involved!"
"Really?" Percy asked, not even a tinge of disbelief coloring his voice. He just couldn't quite bring himself to feel anything deeper what with being drugged to the gills with calm tea. He was drinking that stuff with every meal at this point. It had the unexpected benefit of making it easier to get things done without worrying about what his siblings were up to, mostly unsupervised. Plus, he figured he'd hear it if they managed to really screw something up.

"Well, the Dark Arts, anyway," George admitted, still sounding wary and as if he'd rather be anywhere but here, yet sticking to his guns. The edge of anger was back to stay, as well, as he continued, "Doesn't help that you just vanished afterwards. You need to get a grip on your temper."

"Quite right, George," Percy agreed absently, adjusting a sliding bowl on his arm and thus missing the consternation at the easy acquiescence, "I'm working on it." The guilt, at least, was mostly submerged under the induced calm, and it made it much easier to talk about.

"Um, so you're… not going to vanish again?" George pressed and looked even further taken aback when Percy blinked back at him.

"You don't want me around, do you?" He asked, bluntly, and George took on a cornered expression.

"I mean…" The twin's confusion was very easily sublimated into anger it seemed, as his voice rose slightly, "No, I don't! But- but you can't just stop being around when you're supposed to take care of us!" Deflating as he lost steam, George continued awkwardly, "Ron and Ginny might sort of miss you a little. For some reason."

"I hadn't thought they would," Percy mused aloud, "I suppose I should make an effort to see them. Now, would you mind letting me put these down?" He shrugged as much as he could to emphasize the dishes he was carrying, and George took one as a matter of habit before he could stop himself. "Thank you," was the short response as Percy slid past George and efficiently laid out the food. With the ease of practice, he sidestepped the ghoul as it lumbered out of the kitchen after him and snatched the last dish from George to place with the others. Lately, the creature had taken to quietly following him around, but he couldn't quite bring himself to worry about it. Mr. Lovegood would be by soon enough the check the silly thing, so he couldn't even remind himself that it was his duty to do something about it. Whatever.

Casting a quick tempus, Percy hummed, "I'm off to the garden." There were swarms of pixies this time of year that ate the leaves off the vegetable garden at dusk if you didn't shoo them off. Percy was more than capable of taking care of it, himself, however, since he'd found a handy spell in that Lockhart book specifically for dealing with pixies. Every time he found another solution to a problem in that book, his estimation of this Lockhart character rose a bit more.

"Percy, aren't you going to eat?" George asked, grabbing his arm.

"I already did," Percy lied airily, easily. Without all that emotional mess swirling about him, it was ridiculously easy to lie. In fact, Percy wasn't sure he'd eaten at all that day. He was fairly certain he'd eaten yesterday, though, so he'd be fine. He just didn't have the will to make two separate meals for himself and the kids, and a part of him… cringed away from the thought of giving himself any more protection against the world than he already had. He'd rather not acknowledge it, though, so Percy moved on. He tried to leave again, but George didn't let go.

"Something is wrong with you," he breathed, as if he didn't believe it up until Percy attempted to do chores. Honestly, just because the rest of his family would happily allow the house to fall into ruin didn't mean Percy could be as lackadaisical.

"Don't be ridiculous," Percy waved off but George's grip on his other arm didn't abate.
"No, you're, like, actually emotionless, now," George stated, almost sternly, though a flicker of guilt went through him. He hadn't really noticed how expressive Percy was until he... wasn't. He hadn't understood what the emotions had been, but now, at least, he knew they'd been there.

"Just because I don't want to argue with you doesn't mean I don't feel things," Percy complained, a tiny bit of irritation at being kept from his task for a second time slipping through the general haze. "For example, right now, you're annoying me. I've got things to do," he looked pointedly down at the hand on his arm, "Let me go, George." To his momentary surprise, the other boy obeyed, and the incident practically washed from Percy's mind with no strong emotions to tether it to the forefront. He returned to his self-appointed tasks with the mindless efficiency of an automaton, the ghoul trailing behind him and occasionally batting away a pixie that got a bit too close. While Percy was being very precise, it couldn't quite match the speed that fear could have given him, and a couple pixies got through his casting only to be swatted to the ground by the ghoul's large hands.

"Good ghoul," he said absently, patting its head and drawing a short, quiet croon from the creature. The charm Lockhart's book supplied mostly froze the creatures, so he spent some time in a peaceful silence gathering their rigid little bodies and went for a walk into the forest, ghoul at his heels, until he'd gotten far enough that the swarm wouldn't easily find its way back. Upending the creatures from the picnic blanket he'd carried them in, he made his way home. The immobilizing spell was temporary, and it'd be wearing off any minute, after all. If he didn't get out of range, they'd just follow him back.

Recalling that Ginny and Ron might need him, Percy noted that he had to talk with them and subsequently lurked through the house until the twins separated from the pack. The three left jumped when they saw him, but Percy supposed stepping out of the shadow when you weren't expected would do that.

As they stared at him, Percy wracked his brain for what he was supposed to be talking with them about and settled on the most obvious. "Did you do your homework?"

That broke the tension keeping everyone silent and, surprisingly, Ginny was the one to follow up. "Did we- where were you?" She glared at him incredulously, "We don't see you for nearly a week and you ask if we've done our homework?"

"You do need to do it," Percy reminded her, but Ron snorted, somewhat restraining Harry from fleeing with a hand on his shoulder.

"Oh, that's rich."

Ginny wasn't done with him, however, and poked a finger into Percy's chest, "Where have you been, mister?"

"I didn't think you wanted to see me," Percy blinked, slowly; he hadn't quite believed George, but perhaps the kids had been worried no one would help if they were in trouble, "I was always within shouting distance, so I'd have been there in a second if something went wrong."

"Everything's already wrong!" Ginny threw her hands up, "You don't get to just disappear to sulk for a week!"

"I wasn't sulking," Percy pointed out with a little tilt of the head, "I already told you I stayed away because I thought it'd be better for you. George informed me that I was wrong, at least for you and Ron." He glanced at Harry at this point, "Apologies, Harry, but you and Ron are somewhat joined at the hip, lately."
"It's no problem," Harry was saying before he registered exactly what he was saying and a conflicted expression crossed his face, but the conversation moved on around him.

"Is… something wrong?" Ron ventured, peering at Percy strangely, "Are you really tired?"

"No," Percy admitted before he realized that Ron was practically offering him an out before the boy's suspicions could even form, "I mean, a bit."

"You're lying," Ginny stated, distracted from her line of thought but not the anger as she crossed her arms and pursued this new method of attack. She stared at him a moment, seeming to search for something, before she said, "You're not angry."

"Why would I be?" Percy asked; it wasn't as if they'd said anything cruel just yet.

"You always get angry when people accuse you of lying," Ginny replied. Huh. Percy hadn't actually noticed that about himself. She always was a little more perceptive than Percy was usually comfortable with, though. "George was right," she muttered, more to herself than Percy, so he ignored it.

"Yeah, and you didn't even blink or do that weird little sniff thing when Ginny was yelling at you," Ron said, warming to the topic and clearly percolating something in his little brain.

"Are you on Calming Draught?" Ginny asked, uneasily, an edge of accusation and bewilderment to her tone and Percy automatically shook his head.

He really wasn't.

"That's a regulated substance," he lectured, "You can only brew it under the eye of a registered Potions Master and only buy it on the orders of a healer."

"You're on something," Ron stated, glancing up and down his brother like a potions vial was going to fall out his pocket.

Rolling his eyes, Percy crossed his own arms, "I didn't show up so you could insult me. I just wanted to let you know to shout if you need me, alright? Alright. Even if you don't see me, it doesn't mean I'm not here."

"That is super creepy," Ron protested, "You really must be on something."

Waving them off, Percy found himself distracted from the conversation that really was going nowhere, remembering he still had dishes to do, "Whatever. I've got things to do. Go to bed or something and remember to get your homework done."

"It's not even eight!" Ron called after him, but Percy really couldn't bring himself to care. The ghoul tugged on his sleeve, making a low rumbling noise, and Percy brushed it off, patting the ghoul's head and receiving a disgruntled noise in return as he continued to make his way into the kitchen. He couldn't just leave the dishes out all night, after all.

Still, a part of him wondered if he should go back, an unpleasant feeling growing in his stomach. He shook his head.

That just meant Percy needed to put the kettle on again.

Unseen, the limp hand on the family clock jumped.
"Percy's freaking me out," Ron stated bluntly in the little, mutinous Weasley pow-wow gathered in Ginny's room. Ron's room was too orange, and the twins' room too… Dangerous.

"He spoke to you?" Fred asked, looking a little too eager for information, and Ron wondered when Percy had become the equivalent of the house ghost.

"Yeah," he replied shortly, "Though he wasn't really all there, if you get what I mean."

"He was acting like he was on Calming Draught, like last year when Mum dosed him for a week after he was made Prefect," Ginny put in, "Remember how he was all flat and weird? He just did his chores and slept without saying anything unless you made him."

"Not that it was much of a difference," George joked bitterly, but admitted with a little reluctance in his tone, "He was like that when I talked to him, too."

"It's different," Ginny scowled. Percy had never been her favorite brother; that was Bill. In fact, he only really ranked above Ron, and only occasionally above the twins when they were being particularly obnoxious, but he hadn't been completely awful lately. She couldn't remember the last time before… all this when Percy had spent so much time wiping tears and snot and giving awkward, tight hugs, but here he was, trying. At least, until he went mad while arguing with George.

"It is," Fred agreed, sending George into a quiet scowl because he couldn't seriously argue against it, "But what can we do about it?"

Ginny drew herself up, because she had a plan. A terrible, Terrible Plan that Percy may never forgive them for, which would require them to risk the sanctity of their cheeks and get scolded for their manners. But she knew there was one person who Percy never dared to disobey.

She explained, to great protest from her brothers that eventually died down to a sullen resignation. It was the Only Way.

Percy, meanwhile, was blissfully unaware of his siblings' mutinous plans, only hearing the quiet murmur from downstairs, but unable to muster the energy to be suspicious. No screams, no problem. Besides, the floors could really use a good scrubbing… Thus it was that Percy was blind-sided, on his hands and knees and completely mussed when his Great-Aunt Muriel strode into the room.

Even through the induced haze there was a quiet ping of panic.

The Only Way rose a single, judging eyebrow and… sniffed. Condescendingly. "Percival," she greeted, and Percy scrambled to his feet, unrolling sleeves and pant legs and hastily jamming his robes back on over the work clothes.

"Ma'am," he replied, sketching half a bow before he nearly fell over, trying to straighten his appearance and observe proper manners at the same time. She continued to look him over, and Percy felt the calm slowly regain control, but fought to maintain proper posture. He wasn't entirely sure why she was here, but he felt letting on he was anything but normal would result in something unpleasant.

She hooked a finger under his chin, tilting his head and peering sharply into his eyes. The next second she'd cuffed Percy upside the head, and he was stumbling a step back to escape the light blows.
"You idiot boy!" she scolded, finally abandoning her assault, "What are you using?"

"Nothing," Percy lied, but she fixed him with a look that had him amending his answer out of the memory of habitual terror rather than the actual emotion, "Just a bit of tea."

Muriel's expression slackened ever so slightly in shock, "You're using her setup?"

"You knew, too?" Percy asked, rather than respond to an obvious question with an obvious answer, "Who didn't know?"

She shook herself, drawing up to her full, intimidating height, "You, Percival, are going to march into that kitchen and bring me that kettle, right now."

"...No," Percy said slowly, and heard an intake of breath from the landing, where his siblings were evidently eavesdropping. He turned towards the sound, "To your rooms!" He heard obliging footsteps but couldn't be sure they wouldn't quietly double back, so he lowered his voice, "Ma'am, I have to keep my temper. It's really better this way."

With a sigh, Muriel did something she hadn't done in many years and let the indignation that carried her rest for a moment, taking in the earnest expression and the slightly glazed eyes of her admittedly favored grandnephew. She smoothed a stray cowlick on his head, "Have we expected too much of you, Percival? Should we reconsider this arrangement?"

"No!" he said, eyes wide, before he added belatedly, "Ma'am. I can handle it, I swear."

She nodded, almost to herself, noting the emotion that had crept through what Percy had done to himself, and drew her strength around her like a curtain again, "Then you had better get me that kettle, boy." A bit of betrayal sparked her direction from the boy, but she could handle it, "Now."

"You don't understand," Percy tried, but Muriel would have none of it.

"If you want to keep these kids together, Percy, you are going to fetch that kettle," she interrupted in a sharp, low voice, and Percy startled slightly at the change in address before he finally, reluctantly went for the kettle. He didn't doubt she would make good on that threat if he didn't. He'd... he'd just have to figure out something else. From his siblings' eavesdropping, he could only assume one of them had called her, and as he poured the remaining water out of the kettle, he wondered at their motivation. Surely, they'd known they were safer this way? Percy returned to his great-aunt and hesitated; he could probably figure out how to duplicate the effects of this on his own – hedge magic wasn't exactly complex, just delicate – but...

"Who flooed you?" Percy asked, knuckles white on the kettle.

"That's for me to know," Muriel replied curtly, holding out a thin, wrinkled hand for the kettle, her typically long, painted nails forming an expectant claw.

The words came out in a whisper, because if they were any louder, Percy would have to feel them through the lightening haze, "...They didn't feel safe, did they?"

A considering look, "And that's something you already know." The kettle finally hung from her hand, and she nodded at him sharply, "I don't want to hear you've been misusing your mother's gifts again, Percival."

"Yes, ma'am," Percy murmured, whatever fight he might have had gone from him, gaze firmly on her pointy-toed shoes.
"You don't need to punish yourself for this mistake, Percival; the headache will be punishment enough." Her tone was wry. Still, Muriel cupped his chin in one spidery hand, bringing back the eye contact, "Floo me. You impetuous child. You are not alone unless you choose to be."

A nod, then, because Percy was out of words for today, thank you.

Muriel turned back for a moment at the floo with a weighing look, as if not entirely sure she was going to say her next few words, "And do show your face at next month's tea, dear."

With that, she and the kettle were gone, and Percy was left in an empty room with his dignity in tatters at his feet. A quiet shuffle and a hissed *hush* had Percy squeezing his eyes shut and scrubbing after the last of the soothing calm haze. Let's make that *not exactly empty at all*, then, shall we?

"When this wears off," he announced, too pleasantly, gesturing vaguely at his head, "you're all in trouble." There was a part of him that was pleased at the sudden cacophony as his siblings made their escape, but a bigger part was annoyed there was even a need for it. Yes, Percy was *definitely* coming down hard from the last, morning dose. He put his hands over his face and took a deep, ragged breath. He couldn't *wait* until Muriel's predicted headache hit. His hands slid almost involuntarily from his face, clapping together in front of him. There were things to do before he likely ended up incapacitated for who knew how long.

Percy just really did not want to do them.

*Still*, he thought as he gathered himself like the impending storm of busywork he soon would be, *they must be done*. He had to prepare at least three days' worth of food and give the house a cleaning that could take it through that time without falling apart at the seams or giving Ginny an allergic attack. The girl did not deal with dust well and yet didn't lift a finger to save herself from the ever-looming threat. He attacked his tasks with a vehemence born from necessity, pouring the anger at himself, his great-aunt, his siblings into the tasks and hoping to all that was holy that he wouldn't run out because the sick, slick decaying feeling of guilt ran under it and through it. He'd only been trying to keep his siblings safe, hadn't he? There was an element of betrayal, there, that the sick feeling reminded him he wasn't entitled to have. *They didn't feel safe*, he repeated to himself, and the betrayal died down, leaving the guilt raw and bare.

Maybe he *had* taken the easy way out. Percy certainly was not enjoying the return of emotions more tumultuous than he'd even realized they were before they'd buggered off for a bit. Hours into his mental list of necessities, he was still spinning uselessly around the same cycle of guilt, anger, betrayal, guilt, when the headache hit him like a train. He groaned aloud, putting down the last meal and struggling through the preservation charms through sheer force of will. He'd check the damn meals for magical interference when he served them but for right now… Percy sank into a crouch, pressing the heels of his palms into his eyes with another low groan.

"Great-Aunt Muriel wasn't joking about that headache, huh?" came a smug voice Percy *really did not want to deal with* from the door of the kitchen. He didn't bother to look up at George or shoo him off when he heard the boy walk closer.

"I'm fine," he spat through his teeth, even his own voice grating on his nerves with the onset of this fresh hell. At least the ghoul had curled up somewhere to sleep and stay quiet. He didn't think even its light crooning would be bearable right then.

"Yeah, you look it," was the wry response. George's voice was no improvement and Percy kept himself from making a rude gesture with practiced politeness. A hand abruptly gripped his forearm as Percy was hoisted to his feet, "Come on, you prat."
"You called Muriel," Percy decided, the conclusion suddenly blindingly clear, "Only you would want me in this much pain."

"I could drop you, you know," George reminded him, before correcting with relish, "And it's Great-Aunt Muriel, Percy. Don't be rude." As if he ever practiced proper manners without being forced, the cretin.

"You still called her," Percy muttered mutinously as George half-forced him up the steps, "Traitor."

"No, that'd be Ginny," George informed him, seemingly increasing in pep with every inch deeper into suffering Percy sank.

"…Ginny?" His voice was aghast. Ginny was on his side. Sometimes. A little. Alright, so Ginny had her own side which she did not usually share with Percy, but she hadn't been intentionally antagonizing him lately. He bit back another moan as the world swayed suddenly near the top of the stairs, gripping George tightly and standing stock still until the sensation passed. A quiet accusatory whine, "Muriel didn't mention the spinning."

George snorted, evil being that he was, and forced Percy up to his room, dumping him unceremoniously on his bed. Maybe he wasn't entirely evil. Despite himself, Percy realized he needed to set out lunch and check the food to see if he'd contaminated it with his feelings, and he attempted to get back up. Only to be pushed back down.

"I have to check the food," Percy protested, one hand moving towards the door as if to pull himself there past George's restraint, and his brother rolled his eyes.

"It'll be fine," he drew out the words as if talking to a two year old, "We can deal with that."

"N- no," Percy managed to say, the pain spiking for no apparent reason, "It might be hexed."

"You hexed it?" Someone squeaked from the door, but Percy was beyond distinguishing between Weasleys at this point and he waved the very idea out of the air.

"No. It's probably been marinating in my feelings and I have to go talk it out," he explained. Or tried to explain. The expressions he could still parse were coming across as mildly incredulous. "This is a thing. It's a real… thing." He groaned again, gripping his hair, as the insides of his brain seemed intent on freedom.

"Fred?" someone said, uncertainly.

"I'll get it," another replied, and Percy buried his head in his hands. His eyes were obviously just functioning as doorways for demons to wander through, burning everything in their path, so it'd be better in the long run if he just kept them closed.

An indeterminate amount of time later, after Percy ignored his siblings' questions into submission, the someone who'd left returned and made some papery noises. Or flipped through a book. That made more sense.

"We can use Lockhart's diagnosis charm," the voice turned accusatory, "Now that someone's come clean on how the Trace works."

"I said I was sorry! I forgot! It's not like Percy would've let us anyway!"

"Yeah, alright," the first voice replied, "Let's go try it out."
There was a sound like a quiet stampede and Percy whimpered. It was only when it ended that he remembered to whisper, "If they use magic, they are so grounded."

"Your priorities amaze me," someone said, close beside him, and Percy jumped, lifting his head from his hands and meeting… one of the twins' gazes. Honestly, he couldn't focus on freckles right now.

"Go away," he moaned, immediately burying his face back in his hands and turning away, "I can't even identify you right now."

"…Really?" The tone was far more speculative than Percy was comfortable with. He found himself glaring into his own fingers before the vulnerable undertone registered. Very close to screaming in frustration, he kept himself from ordering the twin out again and just waited to see what he'd do. He'd expected there was going to be some sort of reckoning from one of them going mad eventually and he had always wanted to die in his own bed. Granted, he'd imagined that death to be of old age, but he supposed if anyone deserved to kill him at this point, it was his family.

God, his head hurt.

With these and similarly disjointed thoughts scattering off through his head, he flinched when a hand wrapped loosely around his wrist and just… stayed there. As the seconds ticked by without the grip tightening or jerking his hand from his face, Percy found himself losing tension against his own will. It was as close to holding the hand of one of the twins Percy had been since they learned to cross streets on their own.

"I miss Mum," the twin beside his bed said softly, "and Dad and Bill and Charlie, and you were going to make me miss you, too, huh? Just because you freaked out at… one of us. You didn't actually hurt either of us, you know?" Percy wanted to protest that he hadn't been about to leave or die, but he wasn't completely lacking in wit under the pain and he understood what was meant. He wouldn't have really been there, either. "It's not as if I always like having you around," was the next confession, and Percy had a sneaking feeling which twin was beside his bed, "You can get so condescending I just want to wipe that holier-than-thou expression from your face and that's not what I meant to say." The tone was a little frustrated, and a deep breath was taken before probably-George continued, in a small voice unlike him, "I just- I don't want you to go, too."

The long, drawn out groan was probably not the response he was hoping to get from that moment of vulnerability, but before he could gather himself to be offended, Percy had turned and, with the speed of a lashing snake, yanked George onto the bed and into his chest. "You are such a terrible child," Percy muttered into his hair, subduing the half-hearted struggles by holding on tighter, "I don't know how I'm going to keep from murdering you until you turn 17." At that convoluted declaration of his intent to stay, George stilled, hands still curled against Percy's stomach where he'd been trying to push away. Not understanding his own subtlety with the pain washing through his skull, Percy clarified, "I'm not going anywhere."

For just a moment, George relaxed against him, but very soon after he was tapping out, "Alright, let me go before anyone sees."

"I don't think you believe me yet," Percy murmured, keeping his brat of a brother trapped with a very real mischief buoying up somewhere under the pain.

"I believe you," George protested, beginning to struggle again, but he hadn't quite hit his growth spurt yet and, beater muscles aside, Percy was still the physically superior brother.

"No, I think you're just saying that," he managed a grin that was more a bearing of teeth, "but I'll hug you until it sinks in." The grin became slightly more evil than pained as he added, "George."
George took his turn to groan in exasperation with flair.

"The food was hexed," said probably-Fred as he entered the room, but a snort of laughter cut off whatever else he'd meant to say, instead continuing in an amused tone, "You got too close to Percy-in-a-mood. That's inadvisable."

"So I've been hearing," Percy muttered, wondering again when that had become a noun to his siblings and then wincing as the gnomes pouring firewhiskey in his head found another keg. He'd think about it later.

"Help," George said, abandoning all dignity and squeezing a hand out of confinement to wiggle at his twin.

"What do we do to unhex the food?" Fred asked, ignoring his twin's heartfelt plea with the ease of the soulless monster of which he was half. The other half was currently cursing their practiced apathy to another's suffering.

"I gotta do it," Percy admitted in a quiet whine, releasing George to leap out of arm's reach unhindered, and pushing himself up again from the bed, "I think."

"I just dragged you up here," George whined back, and Percy let his eyes open into slits, to glare his direction.

"I can make it myself," he sniffed, but his carefully low tone to avoid agitating his own headache made the veracity of the claim uncertain.

Fred held up a hand, trying to stop the flow of events, "Why don't we just bring the food up to you?"

Unable to immediately shoot it down because his brain just wasn't working that quickly, Percy thought it over and shook his head, slowly, "We need the kitchen."

"Because that makes sense," George nodded at him, and it looked like he was agreeing with him, but it didn't sound like it, and Percy could not deal with the cognitive dissonance right then, so he waved off the whole thought, to his onlookers' confusion, and waveringly stood.

It was halfway down the stairs, one twin hovering in front and behind him nervously, that Percy remembered an important detail and waved a finger at Fred, "You're grounded." Fred, being behind him, did not hinder him in any way when he stopped dead in his tracks to demand an explanation and justice and something… Percy wasn't listening, and George only sputtered incredulously for a moment before halfway succeeding at biting back a laugh and continuing down in front of him, so he was able to keep moving towards the kitchen, anyway.

"I don't know what I just grounded him from," Percy muttered to himself, entering the kitchen and holding onto the counters in case the world moved again, "I'll make something up later." Of course, now Ron, Ginny, and Harry had joined George in the theatre audience, so he had to use his dismissive waving again to make them stop talking so he could think straight. He could deal with maybe one of them speaking at a time, but he wasn't able to communicate this right now, so he'd settle for none of them. Now, he had to unhex the meals, as Fred so eloquently put it. Percy turned to his rapt audience, "Do you mind?"

"No," Ginny chirped from where she sat cross-legged on one of the counters, Ron and Harry beside her, swinging their feet and probably getting mud on the drawers. When Fred slipped in to stand mulishly beside George, he had the complete set.

"Well," he huffed peevishly, before remembering that wasn't the right direction to move his feelings
Fred leaned around him and cast the diagnosis spell.

"Two weeks," Percy said, immediately, and Fred gaped at him, both of them ignoring the food that lit up in normal, non-hex colors.

"Come on, that's what you meant? That's rotten!"

Opening his mouth to explain that Fred had just broken the law in front of him, he stopped himself and patted Fred's cheek, "Yeah, you're right." When Fred only stared at him, Percy flicked his fingers irritably, the other hand going to his head, "You're free. Fly away, little bird."

Slowly, so as to not scare away the rare moment in which Percy showed mercy, "You… mean I'm…"

"Not grounded," Percy muttered, "Unless you keep pushing it."

"Yes!" Fred exclaimed, pumping one fist into the air in triumph before abruptly paling and saying in a much quieter tone, "Sorry, I didn't mean-"

Percy inelegantly put a hand over Fred's entire face, "Shhh." The shush was cut off mid-word with a grunt as Ginny slammed into his middle. She buried her face into his shirt and mumbled something he couldn't understand, even if his head wasn't killing him. "What?"

"You're back," she repeated, a little louder, "And you sort of promised not to kill me."

He'd only said he wouldn't be upset with them. But yes, that was implied. Percy stooped slightly to hug her back, and received another sibling as Ron insinuated himself into the motion.

"Fred and George can't be trusted with hugs," he muttered, somehow projecting the air of a world-weary veteran into the words. Percy didn't want to know. They separated, and Percy awkwardly patted the tops of their heads, receiving eye rolls from his loving younger siblings and a snort from Fred before they snatched food from the counter behind him and fled. They'd each taken from different platters so there went that symmetry. That… was probably why they'd fled. Fred had taken an extra plate, presumably for George, who had… vanished and Percy was left in the kitchen with a fidgeting Harry.

He put a hand on Harry's head, slouching to be eye level, "I'm sorry you're caught up in all this, Harry. We must seem completely mad to you."

Harry hesitated, and then said, quickly, "It's fine. I- I missed you, too," and attempted to dash past him and pretend he'd never said anything but Percy was, if nothing else, very quick on the grab and Harry found himself very suddenly in a Hug. Which, to Harry, deserved the capital. He wasn't quite sure what to do – with Hermione, he just tried and failed to return it until it was over – but Percy
didn't seem to mind, patting him on the back and releasing him.

"Go ahead and eat," he said, nodding towards the food, "The rest of them already ruined the scheduling, so you can have what you like."

Harry scarpered, and Percy mournfully and quietly added him to the mental list of responsibilities that had been building since his mother died.

Since his mother died.

The shock of having thought it so plainly cut through the pain like a knife and Percy let himself slide from standing to crouching to a seated position on the floor. He had to do better. He was screwing up left and right lately, and there was no safety net if he pushed things too far. Taking a deep breath, Percy laid it out for himself. It was against the rules to touch his siblings when he was angry, or to have his wand in his hand. He was not to serve food angry. He mustn't take their grief personally. Three meals a day. Keep the house clean and together. Keep the family clean and together. Harry's face might as well find a place with the rest, because heavens knew Percy couldn't just let him be. Professor McGonagall and the Headmaster had practically thrown him back into his lap. Though they may not have seen it that way.

Ow.

Yeah, okay the pain wasn't pausing for his interior monologue, and Percy paused to make sure the preservation charms on the remaining platters were intact before dragging himself back up the stairs, more crawling than walking to avoid falling over. He deposited himself on his bedroom floor but couldn't quite find the energy to pull himself onto the bed, so he settled beside it, curled as if to ward off the pain with posture alone.

"I brought this on myself," he gritted out the reminder, trying not to let the self-loathing at the thought morph into anger because he couldn't stand it if his head began to throb, too.

"Perce?" Fred ventured, standing at the door, "You in here?"

"What?" Percy groaned. What could possibly have gone wrong in the minutes since he'd seen everyone last? Was the ghoul making trouble? A glance to his left, and Percy discounted that. It was still dozing under his bed, spread eagle and snuffling slightly in its sleep. There was probably a fight. Percy just knew there'd be a fight. It had been less than five minutes so it had to be.

Meanwhile, Fred was peering through the gloom of the room and locating where Percy had stashed himself. Upon discovery, he took Percy by the arm, forcing him to stand only to fall onto his bed again, and appeared to be restraining himself from poking his older brother curiously. Percy didn't typically do sick like the rest of the family did. When Percy got sick, he usually swaddled himself in blankets and that was the end of it. He'd shuffle through his obligations without complaint, a mass of cloth and mucus, and then curl up somewhere dark like a wounded animal seeking shelter until he passed out and someone dragged him back to the couch, where their mum could keep an eye on him. Very quiet, very prim, oddly collected.

Percy, right now, was quietly complaining that Fred was breathing too loudly and could he please darken the hallway before Percy ripped his own eyes out to stop the light. Honestly, it was weird. Percy complained about them not about… feelings.

"In a minute," Fred conceded, "Do you want something to eat?"

"I want to die," Percy replied automatically before the words caught up with him and he added, "No,
"Okay," Fred said, hesitating by the bed for a moment, unsure if there was something he could do to help, before Percy pulled a pillow over his poofy hair and face and repeated his complaint about the light in a higher, nasal pitch.

Fred really had no idea where Percy's uniquely voluminous hair had come from.

But that wasn't the point! Right! Fred hastily turned off the lights before Percy could threaten grievous self-harm again. Percy, for his part, muttered a thank you, despite the pillow over his face making it impossible for him to actually see the difference. *A mystery no one will ever solve,* Fred thought, quietly leaving the area in deference to Percy's sensitivity.

As his footsteps faded, Percy swore to himself if he heard anyone tap anything that sounded like it could turn the lights back on, he would throw the nearest object at them, and hang the consequences. *Oh,* Percy bit back another groan. He really hoped his estimate of three days of this was pessimistic.

It wasn't.

His siblings occasionally stopped by to make sure he hadn't vanished again – he assumed – and Fred or George sometimes brought food that Percy would refuse. The water, however, was appreciated. Actually, Percy couldn't quite remember the last time he'd actually eaten a meal. He wasn't hungry, though, so he'd likely be fine.

Of course, Ginny didn't seem to think so.

"You should eat something," she worried, sitting on the edge of his bed and not doing the studying she'd used as pretext to bother Percy, "You're going to die."

"I'm not going to die; don't be dramatic," Percy denied immediately, hands still over his eyes, "I don't hear a quill."

From the pause before she started writing again, Percy assumed she'd scowled at him, "Why can't food be transfigured?"

"…Are you looking at the wrong textbook?"

Ginny flipped through some pages, closed the book, and made a "huh" noise, adding, "Yes."

"None of your brothers studied before their first year," Percy tried, desperately hoping she'd take it as reassurance and let him die in peace. Which he meant entirely figuratively. Regardless of Ginny's concerns.

"You did," Ginny pointed out, but Percy waved this away.

"Where's this coming from? Are you really concerned with how you'll do?" He wouldn't want to dissuade her if she was actually interested in academics, unlike every Weasley before her—barring Percy, of course. But he was fairly sure this sudden interest was a ploy.

"A little," she hedged, "But you're up here, refusing to eat and I'm worried." The last word she drew out into a whine, and Percy obligingly winced.

"Ginny, I just can't eat right now; any sort of flavor mixes with the pain into nausea," he explained, for what had to be the millionth time but this once he could hear her being determined. Becoming
determination. Determining to be determined and force food down his throat.

Percy was not on his A-game right then.

"I will make you flavorless food," she declared, standing from the bed and abandoning the textbook, paper, ink, and quill as she swept from the room with all the ominous drama of something about to go very, very wrong.

For the sake of practicality, Percy had lifted the kitchen ban – not that they had entirely honoured it, anyway – but now he sat up, keeping his eyes shut and calling after her, "Wait! Don't! I'm banning you from the kitchen again! I un-un-ban you! Ginny!"

Reluctantly, Percy knew this was a problem for his eyes to help with, and he grimaced as he peeled them open, only getting a little flare of pain from the mostly darkened room and making his unsteady way to the hall and down the stairs. He felt a little… wobbly in a way that had nothing to do with the intermittent dizzy spells, and he conceded inwardly that Ginny might have had a point about the food.

Passing through the dining room, Percy dragged a chair after him. If he couldn't stop her, he would at least supervise. She was already pulling out ingredients from their diminished pantry – Percy needed to get Charlie or Bill on the floo soon – with Harry and George hovering awkwardly in the general vicinity.

"You don't want that," Harry interjected, pushing Ginny's hand back into the pantry where she deposited the rejected onion, "It would enhance flavour."

Ginny glanced at Percy, who nodded in his chair, eyes squinted and a hand limply shading them. Close enough.

"Check for words," Percy reminded them, and there was a slight pause before they were overturning pots and flipping cutting boards to make sure they weren't about to drug Percy with something else.

"Are there any potatoes?" Harry suggested when Ginny and George seemed at a loss, and this time George dug through to emerge with several, from which Harry selected the one growing the least and began scraping the roots off with his fingernails, "Can you handle a boiled potato, Percy, or mash?" He seemed… actually quite in his element, and Percy lost a few moments just watching the boy move with rare confidence, before Harry glanced up at him and the flash of green brought him back to himself, "Percy?"

"Yes," Percy shook himself, no need to make Harry feel self-conscious in the only thing besides flying Percy had seen him do with an air of being in control, "Boiled will be fine, I think."

"Peelers, please," Harry held a hand out to George, who rummaged quickly through a series of drawers before Percy pointed at the right one, and the peeler made it into Harry's hands.

"I could do that," Percy murmured and as one, the three other occupants of the kitchen shot him a combined Look. "Or not."

"You're as quick as Mum," Ginny complimented, when Harry had made efficient work of the potato and she produced the pot she'd been preparing.

"Thanks," Harry said quietly, a hint of the wariness that followed him around creeping back in as he added the single, lonely potato to the pot and Ginny whisked it away to the stove. She held a hand out and George slowly placed his wand into it, which she tapped against the stovetop to start it and handed back.
"We need to take you for a wand," Percy realized aloud, and Ginny, instead of rolling her eyes or telling him off for just realizing, quieted.

"I was kind of hoping…" she hesitated, "I was hoping I could use Mum's."

The Aurors had given it back, of course, and Percy had put it in the small safe in his parents' room along with their various legal documents and health records and put it from his mind. He didn't want to see it again. But that, he reminded himself, was selfish and a tad ridiculous, too. The pause had apparently drawn on too long, though, and Ginny appeared to deflate.

Percy sighed, glanced at George to see what he thought of it, but George was as inscrutable as was inconvenient and his face resembled nothing so much as a brick wall at that moment. "If your brothers will agree to it, and you're not horribly mismatched with it, then you can."

She brightened, "I know I'm alright with it; Mum let me try a few things last year while you were all at school." Blatant favoritism strikes again. "It's weird when you say 'your brothers' like that, though."

"They are," Percy drew out dryly, willing the conversation to end. He was going to take back his permission if he had to keep thinking about it. He didn't want to see that wand again, but he didn't want it damaged, either. Immediately, he felt bad at the thought. Ginny wasn't going to treat their mother's wand poorly; she'd been looking forward to a wand of her own her entire life, and if anything, she would treat her mother's wand better than Percy treated his. He just didn't like it. Not that he had to.

"Well?" Ginny prompted, batting her eyes ridiculously, and clasping her hands in front of her.

George scowled, but ultimately capitulated, "Fine. You've got to take care of it, though."

"You sound more like Percy than Percy does," Ginny chirped, and George sent her a glare that she responded to with a cross-eyed expression. She smiled at Harry, "Two down, two to go."

"Alright," he said neutrally, refusing to be involved, "The water's boiling. Get a lid, please."

She saluted him, in a much better mood than before, and darted off to obey.

"You seem very comfortable in a kitchen," Percy prompted, trying to look trustworthy and knowing without fully opening his eyes. It wasn't entirely successful.

"Yeah," Harry said, and the three Weasleys stared at him for the non-answer until he elaborated, "Aunt Petunia had me helping her out sometimes."

"That sounds… awful," George ended decisively, "Your relatives are awful and any time spent with them was probably awful."

"It could have been worse," Harry shrugged, but didn't exactly deny the claim. Percy attempted to share a look with George, but gave it up as bad business when he could barely focus enough to… Actually, now that he was looking at him, this might be Fred.

That made a great deal of sense.

A great deal of sense.

God, Percy could not wait for this to be over.
Fred seemed a bit concerned at the lack of denial, anyway, even without a knowing look from Percy. It would motivate them all to stick to the plan next summer with the… the calls and… Percy felt a bit woozy.

"I'm just going to…" And he was out.

When he came to, Fred was patting his cheeks with some force and the ghoul had wandered in and somehow ended up leaning against his legs, crooning sadly. As the world came into focus, Percy could make out Harry and Ginny at the stove doing something, and Fred's somewhat exasperated expression.

"If you fall out of this chair and hit your head, it'll be another few days before you can do things again," he was saying in consternation, "Stay awake, Percy."

Percy patted Fred's cheek, more gently, "Definitely Fred."

"Of course," he said, almost offended, "You can always tell us apart."

"I'm a little woozy," Percy admitted, fingers a centimeter apart to demonstrate, "Ginny wasn't entirely wrong."

"Thanks for that," Ginny produced a plate with a single, boiled potato on it and pushed it into Fred's hands, "Maybe we should set him at the table."

"Yeah," Fred agreed, hoisting Percy to his feet with a well-balanced pull and directing him to the dining room while Harry anxiously guarded the plate in Fred's other hand from tipping, as the boy wasn't giving it up.

"I flooed Great-Aunt Muriel," Ginny revealed casually, as if this wasn't cause for Percy to scramble back a step, in turn making Fred stumble, and Harry snatch the plate from his hand before it could meet an untimely end. "She says hello and told me you wouldn't be so bad off if you had eaten."

"When did you-" Percy squeaked before swallowing and repeating in a more normal voice, "When did you floo Great-Aunt Muriel?"

"This morning," Ginny replied innocently. Before the scheming, then, and the fake interest in studying so Percy couldn't directly turn her away. Their great-aunt might have even suggested it. No, that was unthinkable; Percy did not want her second-hand scheming in the house. How would he even sleep at night?

"That's nice," he forced through his strained vocal cords, and Ginny smiled at him, gesturing at the nearest chair to the table.

"Why don't you sit down, Percy?"

Following this suggestion, Fred pulled the chair out for him in a display of courtesy he had probably never shown before.

"You can't be Fred or George," Percy said in bewilderment and Fred rolled his eyes, reaching out for Percy's shoulder.

"Alright, down you go," he pushed Percy into the chair without ceremony and Harry put the plate in front of him. This is when it truly became awkward. The boys had grabbed silverware on the way out, but now Percy was sitting between two standing boys and across from his silent sister as they all watched him expectantly, waiting for him to pick up a fork.
"Could you… not stare at me?" Percy asked futilely, and Fred grinned.

"We've got to make sure you eat, don't we?"

So, sadly and with great reluctance, Percy ate his flavorless boiled potato under the insistent gazes of his stubborn audience. He was rather proud of himself for not immediately bringing it all back up, and swallowed the nausea determinedly.

"You should take him to bed," said a young, female voice from behind him, and Percy whipped his head around so fast he felt his neck protest.

"Let's just drag him back to bed," Fred decided, seeing Percy was now jumping at shadows, and pulled his brother up from the chair, Harry tucking himself under Percy's other arm to 'help.'

Percy didn't ask if they'd heard that because they clearly hadn't. He followed their manipulations blindly as he quickly, hastily re-examined his own memory. No, it hadn't been words, had it? Just the house settling, and he'd misheard for a moment. The noise hadn't sounded like a human voice, something wooden and creaking, rather. Percy shook his head rather violently, as Fred and Harry dumped him onto his bed and left him for dead. Or rather, left him to sleep off the sudden rush of sustenance into his system, which was surely all this was. Percy frowned, something seeming off about the explanation, but felt too oddly… sleepy to…

He'd deal with it in the morning.
Chapter 5

His headache was gone. That was all Percy could register at first, when the light of day smacked him in the face. It didn't hurt to open his eyes or turn his head or hear himself breathe – his headache was gone. "Oh, thank god," Percy breathed, turning over as a shuffling noise indicated the ghoul was emerging from its place beneath his bed and- "Merlin's staff and stars!" Percy scrambled back from the now-confused ghoul that tilted its oddly aerodynamic, sleek head at him, and crawled slightly onto the bed in concern. Its teeth were enormous! And the claws on the end of its abruptly too-long fingers and arms… The growth and… remodeling the ghoul seemed to have gone through in its convalescence had come at a cost, and the creature was nearly skeletal, almost Inferi-like in its proportions, with a touch of werewolf. It still had the same greenish skin and dull, yellow eyes and hair, but the overalls hung off its somewhat intimidating- dare he say creepy - frame as it crooned at him in confusion.

Seeing its attitude, at least, hadn't changed, Percy hesitantly patted the ghoul's head, receiving the now-familiar rumbling as it relaxed, world put back into place now that Percy wasn't avoiding it.

When it wasn't ridiculously early in the morning, Percy had to floo Mr. Lovegood again.

So, Percy reluctantly, carefully got out of bed and began to get ready for the day, gingerly sidestepping the ghoul as it dogged his steps like an abruptly fearsome shadow. It had been more of a comic figure before, with its slight pudge and squat stature, but now it was far too tall, all sharp edges and too thin… Too thin, likely due to that unexpected growth spurt. Percy reminded himself to portion out another bowl of oatmeal when he made breakfast. It wasn't meat, but ghoul weren't obligate carnivores – they didn't have to eat only meat, they could handle oats and plant matter without any trouble with their digestion. After this, Percy fully expected the ghoul would decimate the gnome population in their garden. Good. Percy had never been fond of the pests as his father had been and he'd be pleased to see their numbers brought down. He might have to tell Ron to hide Scabbers, but the lazy rat was so often asleep at the foot of Ron's bed it was practically a moot point.

Percy would just make sure Ron's door was always kept shut. The ghoul hadn't progressed to the point of- Percy cut himself off, toothbrush stilling in his mouth, as the door to the bathroom opened and the ghoul skittered in, awkward in its new, near-quadrupedal state.

Ron would have to hide Scabbers.

Resigning himself to never having privacy again, Percy finished his ablutions and strode down the stairs with the ghoul skittering behind him. Its hind legs had stretched and deformed, making it more suited for strong leaps, and tilting its torso forward, forcing it to use its arms – front legs, now? No, they were still arms, if proportioned a bit more like legs- for balance, teetering pathetically if it attempted to walk upright and returning to its four-footed skitter. Still, the changes were all very predatory, and Percy was not comfortable with it.

The ghoul creepily folded itself into a corner of the kitchen as Percy started breakfast, resembling nothing so much as a humanoid spider with its long limbs folding at such unnatural angles to its skeletal torso. Ron was just not going to like anything about this, at all, was he?

It rather loomed, even folded as it was, and Percy set himself to ignoring it as much as he could.

"Add a little cinnamon, dear."

And that, too. The house was just creaking up a storm today, and Percy kept hearing words in the
sound. Still, he didn't see the harm in some cinnamon. It was probably just his subconscious or something. Probably. Hopefully. The point was, he could only focus on so many problems at once and he wasn't going to deal with this yet. Nope. It was a completely harmless mishearing of the house creaki-

His train of thought derailed at the shriek. Ron had somehow managed to beat everyone else downstairs and was pointing at the ghoul wordlessly, Harry looking vaguely concerned at his side.

Ginny popped her head in after him and flinched back when the ghoul reached out a too-long hand for her hair. "Is that the ghoul?" She asked, reaching out her own hand instead to touch the ghoul's, which rumbled and crooned at her happily.

"I'm flooing Mr. Lovegood," Ron stated with a pale face, and Percy didn't bother to head him off, since that level of pale was not something he could typically reason with. Oh well, at least Xenophilius was a bit too odd to care how rude it was that Ron was waking him up for a non-life-threatening problem. Percy just finished making oatmeal as Ginny pet the ghoul, exploring how its limbs could bend and poking at its thin hands. The ghoul, for its part, seemed to be enjoying the attention, so Percy didn't say anything. Of course, then Ginny pressed on the center of its palm, causing the already sharp claws to jut out to jagged, horrifying blades far too close to her face with a quiet, "Whoa."

"Alright, that's enough of that," Percy ushered her into the front room where Ron was kneeling in the fireplace, Harry leaning on the wall beside the mantle, with Ron's somewhat hysterical tone floating back to his family without any words being decipherable.

Ron moved back just before Xenophilius Lovegood stepped through, in a dressing gown and an inordinately long, multicolored night cap, "Young Ron tells me your ghoul has become a spider?" His voice was bright, eyes alight and his gestures more excitable than ever, "I've heard of cross-species mutation before within magical creatures, but I've never seen--"

"It hasn't become a spider, Mr. Lovegood," Percy interrupted, knowing to cut off the excitement before it could reach full avalanche of scholarly exploration, and Xenophilius deflated, pouting slightly, "But it has gone through a… mutation, you said? It's like it's been transfigured poorly into something else."

"Oh?" Xenophilius perked up slightly and followed Percy into the kitchen at the boy's gesture, "Oh, my." He appeared to be in much better spirits, but not quite about to fall over into a writhing fit of joy as before. The ghoul hissed, as it seemed to always do with Mr. Lovegood, but the sound was more rattling now, and, as with everything else about the ghoul, more terrifying. Xenophilius wasn't fazed. "Let's take a look, shall we?" Fearlessly, he took the ghoul's face in his hands, which glanced agitatedly at Percy before settling with a mulish mien. Percy had never seen the ghoul look long-suffering before.

Xenophilius lifted the ghoul's… front paws? Hands, Percy supposed, and let them drop. He pushed up at the side of the ghoul's elongated mouth to expose teeth in what Percy figured to be a muzzle-like structure. Sort of. The teeth were needle-thin, and bone-white, going up to black gums that Xenophilius poked at to a noise of complaint from the ghoul. Moving on, Xenophilius hovered over the ghoul's back legs with one hand, following the rabbit-like structure of the leg. When it lied down, its knees stuck up past its back in a caricature of most jumping creatures. When he poked at the ghoul's near-concave stomach through the overalls, Percy brought up the creature's seeming malnutrition.

"Should we feed it anything extra to bring its weight back up?"
Distracted, Xenophilius shook his head, "No, this is odd, but this weight looks about right, if my suspicions are correct. You see, there's two types of ghoul, the common household ghoul, and the graveyard ghoul. They share the same genetic code, but express it differently, and it appears as if your growing familiar bond is activating those latent traits. It's rather magnificent, really. I've never seen such a strong effect from-"

"What familiar bond?" Percy interjected with growing suspicion. He didn't know what a genetic code was but it wasn't important right now, and Xenophilius was never good with answering more than one question at a time.

"Well, the one between the two of you," Xenophilius gestured between Percy and the ghoul, and blinked protuberous blue eyes at him, "Why, is there supposed to be another one?"

Of course it was. "How would that have formed?"

Ginny, meanwhile, began to giggle to herself, having edged over to the ghoul to pet its back while Percy was distracted, "You're Percy's familiar. You know what they say the type of familiar shows about someone's personality."

"Ah. Actually that's a rather common myth," Xenophilius started, and Percy felt a little less awful, "It's the changes that the bond imposes that reflect the witch or wizard's personality, rather than the initial species, which is somewhat random in selection."

As one, the three Weasleys and one Potter in the room looked at the awkward, predatory mess of sharp edges and too-long limbs with varying degrees of unease.

"For example, a child's familiar would usually become more sociable and soft than is typical for its species," Xenophilius lectured, oblivious to the tension in the room, "Whereas this… Do you worry a great deal, Percy?"

The eyes moved to him, and Percy flushed slightly, "A bit, Mr. Lovegood."

"Well, your familiar is clearly changing to ease those worries. In fact…" Xenophilius muttered to himself for a moment, searching the multitude of pockets his sleepwear really shouldn't have had, and drew out parchment that he crumpled into a ball and chucked at Ginny's head. Before she had time to flinch, the ghoul's hand had snatched the ball violently from the air and flicked it with an unnecessary amount of force back at Mr. Lovegood, who sidestepped it without missing a step, "Yes, it does appear your worry over protection, specifically your family, is what's shaping your familiar. That being said, I haven't seen changes this strong in quite some time…" He trailed off thoughtfully and Percy tried to bring him back to reality before he was lost for hours, standing in their kitchen staring at the ghoul, and Percy would have to go fetch Luna for the day.

"But, Mr. Lovegood, how did the bond form in the first place?"

"You must have fed him after he was already healed," Xenophilius shrugged, "Or otherwise performed some great kindness that made him start to follow you around. It should've been quite a easy transition, since he was already in tune with your family. If you were sick or frightened for any length of time, then that may have sped the process, too." Very determinedly, Percy did not whimper as the pieces fell into place.

"At least your personality isn't a big creepy predator," Ginny pointed out, already climbing onto the ghoul's back with the ghoul's patient assistance, "You just looove us." She slipped, and the ghoul caught her with one hand, claws sheathed, before settling her onto its back again.
"Well," Xenophilius started, and Percy was struck with the sudden need to stop him before he brought something else into question.

"So, a familiar bond!" He exclaimed, desperately, "What's that?" While Xenophilius rambled on this new topic, the ghoul reached out for Harry next, and Ginny squealed that he had to join her, so the boy allowed the manhandling as he was deposed behind her. When it came to Ron, however...

"No, no, no," He said, hands out in front of himself defensively and eyes wide, "No!" He fled from the room so the ghoul cocked its terrifying head and skittered after him, Ginny and Harry appearing to enjoy the lurching, unsteady ride more than was natural. They probably liked the carts at Gringotts, too, the heathens.

In the lull, Percy herded a still-talking Xenophilius to the dining room, he may as well feed him if he'd woken him up this early just to examine his completely-fine ghoul. He excused himself from the room when the twins entered, blindsided and sucked into Xenophilius' chatter in his stead. Percy did not regret the sacrifice, even on catching the tail end of their simultaneous glares. He flooed to the Lovegoods, stepping through and wandering up the stairs to Luna's room, which he stood outside politely as he knocked on the half-open door.

"Luna?" He called and she popped a bedraggled blond head out to blink at him from within the mass of tangled strands.

"Oh, good," she said, "Breakfast with Ginny," and vanished into her room to make the usual thunking and crashing sounds Percy associated with the Lovegoods navigating their domain. She emerged, still in her nightgown, but with an empty cage in hand and no shoes on her feet. Percy sighed internally, but she wasn't his responsibility, really, and she wouldn't be going outside, anyway. She clung merrily to his hand as they walked downstairs, chattering about whatever she thought she had in the cage and how pleased Ginny would be.

When they got to the fireplace, he made sure she stated the Burrow clearly before he would let her step through. Percy was not above snuffing out the flame and making her try again if she was too garbled, but it only took two tries before he was certain she wouldn't end up in Broxburn, again. The little old lady there who usually received this uninvited guest didn't really mind, but Percy felt he should still try to keep Luna on track, no matter how casually her detours were received.

When he followed, he was relieved to see the line of her small, sooty footprints unerringly following the path to Ginny, and he shook off the usual wondering on how she knew with the ease of practice. Percy couldn't understand the Lovegoods, and he was alright with that.

He bypassed the dining room, still hearing Xenophilius' voice within and set out to the garden and the strawberry bushes. Each set of plants had its own seasonal cycle going on, so there would always be fruit or vegetables in season, while the other plants plodded along at their respective points in their lifecycles, and Percy checked the looping charms on each before picking strawberries to go with the oatmeal for breakfast. Before Bill had completed his warding mastery, the charms had to be reapplied routinely, but Bill had anchored them to the decorative stones lining the garden beds a year or so back, and now Percy checked their function merely out of habit, than necessity.

Of course, the downside to this meant weeding in the winter, but it was a good trade. At least, when they were there to do it. He made a mental note to ask Bill to modify the wards for stasis, while they were at Hogwarts.

"That should do; the Lovegoods aren't much for strawberries."

Even out here, Percy could hear the house creaking! Amazing. Shakily, Percy gathered what he had
and fled back into the house, this time zooming through the kitchen and grabbing the oatmeal before bee-lining to the dining room, where Xenophilius would drown out anything else with his unending ability to talk.

Luna was leading the ghoul in by the hand, Harry, Ginny, and a slightly-less-petrified Ron on its back, before Percy finished putting down the oatmeal and a bowl of strawberries. He wasn't going to question her timing because Luna would have no answers for him beyond a long, confused blink.

Once everyone was seated, the food was passed around, and Percy sighed at the ghoul sitting patiently at a spot cleared of chairs at the table, but he'd expected Ginny and Luna to drag it there so he just scooped out a second bowl of oatmeal for the ghoul when it came his way. The Lovegoods each took a single strawberry, apparently to be polite, because Luna immediately turned and plopped hers into the ghoul's oatmeal, which gave a confused rumble that Luna didn't bother to address. How familiar.

It was less tense than it might have been without the Lovegoods. No one seemed to really register that Percy was upright and functioning again with the dual distractions of the Lovegoods and the ghoul, and Percy was thankful for it. Fred and George were busy cooing with Ginny over the ghoul's newfound coolness, and possibly plotting, he thought, side-eyeing them over a mouthful of oatmeal. Harry and Ron were being dazzled by the Lovegoods' collective aura – the two of them together were magnitudes worse than the two of them apart – and barely spoke a word between them as Luna and her father ran the conversation through them, about them, and around them without batting an eye – meanwhile, Luna would occasionally snag a strawberry only to offer to the ghoul, not breaking stride in her conversation. Percy was slightly relieved not to have a big thing made of his recovery because then they might want to talk about it, and that could lead to arguing, and Percy didn't want to deal with personal drama today. An owl fluttered in, looking pained, and Percy snagged the letter without much notice being given him. Turns out Bill had anticipated the issue with money and groceries, and had had an extra key to the family vault commissioned, so that was one worry off Percy's mind. While they could potentially survive off the garden, they didn't have the wheat necessary for bread or other starches, and they would miss meat pretty fast. Although… Percy eyed the ghoul's sleek, predatory look with new eyes. Of course, that would take training, as Percy was fairly certain that the ghoul could take down a deer or rabbit, but would prefer gnomes and rats. He, himself, wouldn't enjoy the dressing process, but he knew how, at least, and it would lower their financial drain on Bill and Charlie. Just bread, some spices, and non-kitchen necessities, once Percy figured the rest out with the ghoul. Keeping the creature well-fed would hopefully make it easier to teach it to retrieve what it hunted instead of eating it on the spot.

Hopefully.

It seemed to be Percy's mantra of late.

Anyway, this meant he'd be visiting the grocery today, which meant entering the magical commercial zone of Ottery St. Catchpole alone for the first time since his mother died. While most families in the area bought their groceries daily, Percy's family found it more cost-effective to buy in bulk, so their visits had been once a week, at most, but the shopkeeps still knew their faces. It was a small town, and the magical population even less. Regulars were noted and remembered.

Oh, Percy didn't want to go. When they'd gone last, the death was still fresh on everyone's minds, and the aura had been solemn and quiet. Now they'd want to talk to him, maybe about feelings, and Percy wasn't up for… Pausing, he eyed his new familiar again, and smiled. Maybe this whole familiar bond thing wasn't so bad, after all.

Yes, Percy decided later that day, The ghoul is good. While a few brave souls approached Percy at
first to offer platitudes and try to get gossip on how the other Weasleys were doing, a curious look from his horrifying new familiar was often enough to scare them off again.

"Is that a graveyard ghoul?" One intrepid shopkeep by the name of Mr. McDonough squeaked, attempting a smile, "What a... unique familiar."

"Thank you," Percy beamed, sweeping off with his purchases in hand and a spring in his step. That was practically the only thing he'd had to say to anyone the entire trip, and the ghoul was touting a good portion of the non-perishables Percy was stocking up on. The only trouble had been during the floo to the Leaky to stop in at Gringotts and that was more of a passing concern than an actual issue. He'd been trying to figure out how to get the ghoul through the fireplace when it had folded up, calm as you please, and stepped into the green flames. Percy had never entered a floo without speaking an address and had blinked at the ghoul standing placidly in the flames without comprehension for a moment before he shrugged it off, said, "The Leaky Cauldron," and joined the ghoul in the now-crammed confines of the fireplace, the two of them not experiencing more than a bump along the way. Even the goblins had given him a bit less trouble.

Thus it was that Percy returned home grinning from ear to ear to his disgruntled siblings, upon whom he'd foisted the Lovegoods for the day. Well, Ginny and Harry seemed to take it with aplomb, at least; when he returned, both of them were tilting their heads and squinting one eye along with Luna at her empty cage and occasionally saying, "I see one- no, that was just dust."

Ah, childhood.

Fred and George practically ran from the room to help Percy put away the groceries, abandoning Ron to entertain Mr. Lovegood alone, and Percy was in such a good mood, he kissed both of them firmly on the forehead, to their exaggerated disgust, before practically floating around the room for a bit as he unloaded. The ghoul, however, began to fidget after this display, and looked from Percy to the twins, shifting its weight from foot to foot until Percy made a leap of faith and pressed a kiss to its scary, scaly, ugly forehead, too.

From then on, it was its now-usual, helpful self, again, and the twins were united in their complete and utter dismay at Percy's off-tune humming and overall contentedness.

"It's wrong," Fred stage-whispered.

"Dead wrong," George replied in the same tone, "Did he see Shiny Penny in town?"

"No, no, Shiny Penny lives somewhere far away, where we can't prank her," Fred corrected, "It must have been a great deal on beets. He knows we hate them and now we must have ten crates of them hidden away somewhere."

"Not even the ghoul could carry ten crates of beets," George replied, and they fell into a bicker that many often mistook as playful banter. They were aiming for victory at any cost, thank you very much. Regardless, Percy's good mood lasted the second half of the day as they sent the Lovegoods home, and even up until the next morning, waving off catching Ron sneaking the ghoul more strawberries – why that was happening, he didn't know, or care. He was content. Ron and Ginny were as wary of it as the twins, although Harry couldn't understand what was to fear from Percy being happy.

"You'll see," Ginny warned ominously over breakfast, just quiet enough Percy wouldn't hear over the humming as he spooned a small portion onto what would eventually become the ghoul's plate.

"Ish scary," Ron elaborated before swallowing the food in his mouth, and continuing in a whisper,
"If the humming stops, just leave the room. It's like he crashes, 'cause he's not used to being happy, so he's gotta snap back further to re-balance himself." Harry eyed Ron disbelievingly, and the boy shrugged, "You can just find out for yourself, later." The meal continued unabated, Percy patting the ghoul's side in praise as it displayed better manners than most of his siblings. It was just following this that there was a flare in the other room, and footsteps preceding Bill's reappearance.

"Bill!" A cry came up from the various Weasley siblings, resentment apparently forgotten from the time apart, and Bill laughed as he was swarmed.

"I'm between assignments," he explained with a grin, "So I came to see how you were all holding up."

Percy, still seated at the table and watching the reunion with a neutral expression, propped his chin up on his clasped hands, and only the ghoul beside him and Harry across noticed as the humming stopped. A smile crossed his face, quickly, to cover the lingering grudge he held and the twinge of resentment that his siblings had so easily returned Bill to his pedestal, "I'll get another plate." What had happened to their annoyance that he'd left them? Percy supposed this was a case of absence making the heart grow fonder; not that Bill deserved resentment for sticking with his job, of course.

"No need," Bill waved Percy back into his seat, not glancing at him, "I can get it." He trotted off into the kitchen, his siblings at his heels, and Percy felt something bitter twitch in his smile as he sat back down. I love my family, he told himself, even the ones I'm not taking care of, right?

"Is Bill... the oldest?" Harry asked him, quietly, and Percy jumped, having forgotten he was still there.

He immediately softened the fixed smile into something more natural at Harry's innocent interest, "Yes. He's been working in Egypt for Gringotts as a curse breaker. Charlie, that's the one after him, is in Romania on a dragon reserve."

"Oh, right, I know about Charlie," Harry said, with a bit more weight to the words than Percy would have liked. That rumor about the dragon last year... Ron had assured him it was just a rumor, but... Percy couldn't very well do anything about it now, so he pushed it from his mind. "They're not here all that often, then?"

"No, not often," Percy agreed, not allowing his mind to go anywhere else with that, because they were off working, not hiding from the family or anything. Bill was here right now! Because he had a bit of time between assignments! He threw the facts at his resentment as if to blanket it with reality and smother the flames down to embers again. "And I'm sure this will be a short visit. Bill's rather good at his job, and it's not like Gringotts to give him much time to himself when he could be plundering tombs to fluff their coffers," Percy said with a wry twist to his tone, "Goblins are always fixated on the bottom line."

"Doesn't seem quite right to take stuff from people's tombs," Harry replied thoughtfully after a moment, "But I guess the goblins don't care if they're not goblin tombs."

"Quite right," Bill said on re-entry, having caught the tail end of Harry's sentence, "You must be Harry. Nice to meet you," they shook hands, and Bill continued, "They don't mind plundering nearly any tomb. Goblins are all about the bottom line." Harry glanced from Percy to Bill and bit back a snicker at the vaguely disgruntled expression that crossed Percy's face.

"True," was all he said, and the ghoul rumbled in what might have been support. Percy really hoped it wasn't, though, because if it began to understand English, he wasn't quite sure how he was meant to treat it, anymore.
"Bloody hell!" Bill jumped back, having evidently not fully registered the thin, looming spectre beside Percy until it made a noise. "What is that thing doing in the house?"

"He's our ghoul!" Ginny replied, eager to share the coolness with her favorite brother, "Watch this!"

She darted around Percy to the ever-patient ghoul, and under one arm to stand between its hands, taking both in one of hers and directing the palms outward before she pressed at the centers of its palms and its rending claws slid out of their sheathes.

Standing stock-still for a moment, Bill shook it off, leaping into action to snatch Ginny away from the ghoul's general vicinity and shooting a glare towards a lounging Percy, "Can we speak privately, Percy?"

Bill stalked into the kitchen without waiting for a response and Percy reluctantly got to his feet and followed, trudging past his silent siblings like a criminal attempting to retain dignity as he walked to the gallows. The ghoul, as it usually did, followed close behind.

"Percy, what- Merlin's staff and stars, why did you bring it with?" Bill pointed at the creature, glaring at it when it crooned, "That is not a household ghoul. Where did it come from and why have you let it around the kids?"

"This is our ghoul," Percy pointed at the overalls, "It's still wearing what Dad gave it, see? It's just had…" He glanced up at it and back to Bill, "A growth spurt."

"A growth spurt," Bill replied flatly, unconvinced as he crossed his arms over his chest. How trusting and brotherly of him. When was the last time Percy was up to mischief, huh?

"I had Mr. Lovegood come take a look at it," Percy snapped, beginning to lose his temper with the blatant disbelief emanating from Bill's defensive stance. He was telling the truth, the least Bill could do was listen. "And he said household ghouls and graveyard ghouls had the same… stuff in them, and it just took different things to bring it out."

"What would bring that out?" Bill prodded, sure he'd found the flaw in the lie, and Percy hesitated. He'd revelled in the space such a familiar brought him in the usually crowded, nosy market, but it was different revealing that he sort of made the ghoul this way to his older brother. A part of him still worried about it truly being a reflection of his personality, even with Mr. Lovegood's assurances, and without Mr. Lovegood here to explain it to his brother, Percy wasn't sure he'd listen.

"The ghoul is linked to our family magic, according to Mr. Lovegood," Percy said, carefully neutral, as that was true, "And after Mum died, the family seemed to need protection." Also true, but not how he phrased it.

"Don't be bashful, Percy," a voice he sometimes hated came from the door, and Percy exhaled sharply through his nose. He supposed it was too much to ask that he and George continue the unspoken truce between them, wasn't it? Well, if Percy didn't say it, the expression on George's face like Christmas had come early proved he would.

"It's my familiar," Percy managed through gritted teeth, and a silence fell over the kitchen, before Ginny piped up because nothing was sacred and god forbid a single conversation be private in this house.

"Mr. Lovegood said because Percy worried all the time, his familiar wanted to protect him," she elaborated, bouncing into the room to the ghoul's side before anyone could stop her and hanging off its arm as she often did with her older brothers, "And because he was worried about us mostly, the ghoul wants to protect us, too. He's nice."
"Ginny, come away from there," Bill said, clearly not listening, as Percy thought he wouldn't.

"She's completely safe," Percy finally defended himself – or the ghoul – whichever, "It's very protective of them."

"It's a predator," Bill shot back, "It's protecting its lunch."

"That's unfair," Percy retorted, "You haven't even seen it in action for more than a second."

"Graveyard ghouls eat people," Bill exclaimed, and even Ginny paled a little, but she didn't leave the ghoul's side.

"He's never hurt anyone in his life, and you used to like him even when he was banging pipes in the attic, but now that he's bigger, you just don't trust him, anymore?" Her face was flushed with the injustice of it, and Percy felt oddly touched that she would take the ghoul's side over Bill's, even with this revelation at hand.

"Yeah, this ghoul never ate anyone," Ron spoke up, "He likes strawberries, though. Luna kept feeding him them and now he's after them like they're manna from heaven." Yes, that had been a thing that happened. Percy regretted it. He'd caught Ron sneaking the ghoul more before breakfast this morning, the little enabler, but he hadn't been in a mood to do anything about it then.

"He is Percy's familiar," George put in reluctantly, Fred nodding more firmly beside him.

"If Percy doesn't want him to hurt anyone, then he won't," Fred concluded.

Harry was staying out of it, as was his typical stance with the Weasley Family Drama, and he had ensconced himself just far enough away to remain out of sight but still within hearing range, so Ron wouldn't recount the whole thing to him later.

Bill didn't seem like he was able to quite process the consequences of the ghoul, Percy, and familiars in the same sentence, an uneasy expression crossing his face as he looked at Percy, "It needs to stay in the attic, or the shed. I won't make you get rid of your familiar, but it can't be loose with the kids."

…Was he serious? He couldn't be. Oh, but there it was in his stance, if you could look past the discomfort.

"Of course," Percy said, but his eyes were blazing, and his stomach was hot with fury, "Whatever you say, Bill." And he stalked from the room, the ghoul skittering behind him when it noticed he was really leaving, making his way up to the attic, where he plopped himself angrily to the ground, the ghoul opening its terrifying maw of needle-sharp teeth, packed tightly together, and licking Percy's forehead with a thankfully only moderately sticky result. Percy was sure his hair was slightly off now, but he just patted the ghoul's head for a moment as it crooned at him, before he found himself tearing up for the first time since before Mum had died. It was… a myth according to Mr. Lovegood that a familiar's species and appearance reflected their owner's personality, but it was something he'd grown up believing, and Bill had, too. Bill clearly had managed to take in that the ghoul was Percy's familiar, but the other explanations must have just bounced off. To say you didn't trust a person's familiar was to say you didn't trust the wizard it was attached to.

"Then why leave the kids with me, at all?" Percy asked, fighting the heat in his eyes back, because if he cried, he'd never stop. A long, thin hand patted his head awkwardly, and Percy looked up with wide eyes at the discomfited ghoul, which crooned at him almost pleadingly, before he broke down in hysterical giggles. "Oh god, you're learning. You're learning from context. How long until you can read?"
"I doubt it'll get that far, Percy."

The interruption of his train of thought sobered him, and Percy crawled to the ghoul, leaning against its side and playing idly with its retractable claws, as Ginny loved to do and the ghoul seemed to find soothing, while he determinedly ignored the creaking of the attic. It was just the wind.

Just the freaking wind.

When the creaking died down, Percy opened eyes he'd clenched shut at some point and tilted his head up to look at the ghoul, still leaning heavily against its side. It looked down at him obligingly, as if sensing the look.

"Would you really eat people?" Percy wondered, searching the ghoul's somewhat reptilian gaze for who knows what. A spark of intelligence, or deceit. He couldn't find anything but the usual dull contentedness, but he still felt a bit unsettled at the idea. Let it never be said Percy ever truly trusted himself. "Any starving animal would eat people, though," he mused, "Maybe I would eat people." He hadn't really thought about it. He didn't want to think he would, but anything was possible if someone was far gone enough.

"Yeah," George drew out incredulously, his head just visible above the trap door as Percy's ears flushed at being caught at that particular moment in time, "Percy, Bill wants to talk to you without the ghoul."

This reversion to being the child instead of the caretaker was wearing a little thin, and Percy blamed that for why he snapped, "If he wants to talk to us, he can come up here, himself."

"Okay," George replied in the same incredulous tone as before, "I guess I'll go tell him that and get grounded forever."

Right. Like Bill would be able to do anything about that. Percy shot him a dry look, "Who exactly will be around to enforce any lifelong punishments?"

"Point taken," George said after an appropriate, awed pause at Percy's sheer disrespect towards an authority figure, "I'll go tell Bill what you said, then." He stopped when he was almost out of sight, only his eyes visible above the floor, "You're not the worst thing ever, Percy."

"Neither are you," Percy snorted and George's eyes crinkled before he vanished from sight and plodded down the staircase, calling Bill's name in an obnoxious singsong sure to get him riled long before he entered Percy's domain. If he entered Percy's domain.

The attic, he corrected himself absently. He wasn't staying up here forever, after all, he was just slightly feeling like his fury was burning a brand in the bottom of his stomach again and he didn't want to let Bill win.

Soon enough, Bill did actually enter Percy's domain, and Percy gave him a few points for sheer hutzpah. He appeared vaguely exasperated, but not as annoyed as he could have been if George had decided to be a complete nuisance.

"So," Bill started, flatly, sitting at the edge of the trap door with his feet on the ladder, "Everyone loves the ghoul."

"Yes," Percy agreed as calmly as he was capable of being, but the words were still a little pointed, "They do seem to, don't they?"

A sigh as Bill tugged a hand through his hair, "Are you sure you're not all pulling my leg?" He
glanced between Percy and the placid ghoul he was easily leaning against, answering himself, "I guess not." His eyes darted again to the ghoul, and he laughed, an edge of panic to the sound, "This is… This is not the kind of familiar I'd expect from you." Bill shook his head, "I know you wouldn't let it hurt anyone, but it's like… I just never would have expected this from you." The repetition raised something odd in Percy's chest, and he tried to address it.

"I haven't changed," he said, trying to explain without really understanding what he was explaining, "And it's not as if I went gallivanting the countryside and chose to bring home a familiar – it happened to need help and I helped it, end of."

"It chose you," Bill said, with an air of disagreement, "Charlie's nursed it back to health through some rough spots before, and it never did anything like this."

"Well, it was only a household ghoul when it 'chose' me!" Percy protested, but the look on Bill's face made it obvious that that was what worried him, "Mr. Lovegood is an expert on magical creatures, and he said this only happened due to the extent of my own worrying- not because I have some secret, murderous rage in me or somesuch. This is quite literally," he gestured at the entire ghoul, "a big ball of worry. Nothing else."

"That would be like you," Bill conceded uneasily, "You've always been a worrier." He shook his head, "To be honest, it'll probably always creep me out a little, but that lot swears up and down the ghoul is nothing but butterflies and rainbows with them." He sighed heavily and looked at Percy then, "I trust you, Percy, it's just hard to…" Bill gestured at it, getting an offended rumble in return that appeared to startle him momentarily before he shook it off, "They live wherever there are buried human dead, you know? I've seen wild ones k-… on the hunt, and I know this one is different, but it'll take some time, alright?" He hadn't thought of that. Bill actually seeing one… hunting would pretty much justify his freaking out over it being in the house. He might have even been hunted by one, and that was a sobering thought. Despite himself, Percy found his rage dying, the embers scattering away from him.

When Percy mulled it over for far too long, though, it turned Bill's conciliatory expression into almost-fond exasperation. "Alright," Percy said finally, with an edge of mischief, "you can bunk with it to help you acclimate."

Bill choked for a moment before grinning wryly, warily at his brother, "Only if you bunk with George until whatever's going on there dies down."

"Oh, you noticed his burning hatred?" Percy asked casually as he made to follow Bill down the ladder. "Has he turned it on you, yet?"

"I think it's more than capable of taking out multiple targets at once," Bill smirked, "But I'll be out of casting range in a few weeks."

"Cretin," Percy muttered as they clomped down the stairs together, but he couldn't find it in him to be mad at Bill just then, an unwelcome hint of fondness to the insult.

"Ponce," Bill shot back affectionately, only an edge of tension still between them.

And the ghoul followed them down.
Bill's visit was wearing on Percy's nerves. Yes, he was being less fidgety around the ghoul and he wasn't shooting Percy looks anymore, but Percy had become accustomed to a certain amount of... control. He didn't want to admit it, but it was obvious to anyone who took the time to look that Percy was chafing under the reins of another familial authority figure. George particularly enjoyed reminding Percy in a myriad of creative ways that he wasn't in charge when Bill or Charlie was there.

That didn't mean he was any kinder to Bill, but Percy wasn't going to count that as a point in his favour. George just didn't like anyone acting parental, anymore. Not that Bill was the most parental of figures, anyway, but he did seem to be trying to be responsible.

The first night, he'd let them stay up past their bedtimes, despite Percy's twitchy reminder when the time was due, and the next day he seemed to regret it as they dragged themselves grumpily out of bed, resembling inferi more than children through the day, so from the second night on, he took Percy's reminder without too much resentment and sent them to bed on time.

Bill had offered to cook, too, but Percy jealously guarded the last vestiges of his autonomy by hovering in the kitchen with the ghoul around meal times and sweetly declining Bill's requests.

"Maybe that's another reason Mum kept us out of the kitchen," Percy murmured to his ghoul, "It was the only place she got a chance to breathe."

At first, Percy had had the younger Weasleys on their usual chore schedule, but the second it interfered with Bill's plans, the entire thing was upended, his siblings taking shameless advantage of the two older brothers' disagreements on how things should be done to get out of work, and it was only Percy's copious use of Lockhart's household guide that kept the house from falling into disrepair. Granted, Bill did corral them haphazardly and intermittently to one chore or another, but he didn't seem quite aware of what all needed to be done, and was strangely resentful of his younger brother attempting to correct him. Well, it's not all that strange, Percy snorted to himself, He and Charlie have always hated when I'm right.

"Look, Percy," Bill had said, earnestly, "You can take a load off for a bit. I'm home, and I'll take care of things for now."

Right. Just sit back and watch the house fall down around him. Percy had exchanged a look with the ghoul, his only remaining conspirator, and bit back any smart remarks. It was looking like Bill would still be here when the time for school shopping rolled around. Percy wasn't exactly upset about this, since more hands to corral meant less likelihood of losing a sibling in the Alley, but he was really looking forward to Hogwarts, this year.

He could barely wait to get away.

Meanwhile, Ginny had finally cajoled agreement from all six older brothers regarding his mother's wand, having waved Charlie's letter as the last acceptance physically in Percy's face, and could often be seen practicing flourishes and jabs at various spots throughout the house, or pestering Ron and Harry – who were often in their own little world and needed the bother to be dragged out – for pointers.

It was weird, but not as heart-clenching as Percy had feared. It almost felt a little better that the wand was in use again, like it had been rotting away when it lay alone in the safe. He supposed wands...
were built for use, after all, so it was only logical they needed to be used.

Or something.

Honestly, Percy was getting a lot of odd feelings on top of his usual intuition lately. He felt like he was going to sneeze whenever Bill cast a spell near him, and he swore he could tell when someone entered a room without seeing or hearing them. Not that anyone was arguing the point. He hadn't told anyone, after all. Because along with the increase in odd feelings was an increase in the house creak- alright, in the damn female voice he'd been hearing here and there. It kept popping up to give him advice on recipes, and occasionally hedge magic, and he had tried a few out in the interest of verifying that he was, in fact, going insane, but it had all turned out as the voice had said. It even tried to explain the feelings he was having as an effect from inheriting a master practitioner's workspace, but Percy didn't want it to be real. He'd almost rather he was going mad, because if it was real, he had no idea what it was, or what it wanted. Sure, it had been benign so far, but he'd always been taught never to trust something if you couldn't see where it kept its brain. Yet, something about the voice was familiar- and he found himself almost wanting a reason to trust it, which scared him more.

So, he was understandably distraught when he walked into the kitchen one bright morning a week after Bill had come to visit and a young, shapely woman with curly red hair and hands on her hips turned from glaring at the pots and said, "There you are, Percy. Can you get down the health and protection skillets when you fry up breakfast today? Ron's looking a bit peaky."

He'd only seen that face in pictures before, but it was undeniably familiar, as his suspicions and wariness were swept away by bewildered shock like cobwebs before the river, "Mum?"

"Mostly," she replied off-handedly, sweeping her curled mass of long hair behind her shoulder, much longer than his mother had worn it while Percy was alive, "I can't take those skillets down, myself, you know." Finally, she took in his trembling knees and his devastated expression and softened, reaching out a hand that skimmed over his cheek without touching, leaving a feeling like static and a smell of ozone behind it, "Oh, let me explain. I'm an… imprint of your mother's will. Like a ghost, but built of hedge magic and what your mother wanted for you." She dashed a hand through the stovetop and out again, "Only someone who used my setup often enough would eventually be able to see me, because I wanted to guide the next user in protecting our family," now she was beaming, her hands clutching the apron she inexplicably wore to keep from throwing them through Percy in an attempt to hug, "I'm so proud it's you, Percy, and I'm so pleased I can still teach you about all this even if- Percy?" His eyes had rolled up into his head, and a young Molly Weasley watched impotently as Percy collapsed towards the ground in a dead faint. She clucked her tongue, "Oh, dear. He always was sensitive." The ghoul, which had caught Percy with one ominous, long hand where Molly could not, nodded slightly, as if swaying in an intangible breeze.

Of course, Bill had to find him. That first, exasperated thought went through Percy's head as his older brother took his wand out of his face, having evidently cast an Ennervate to wake him up.

"I need water," Percy groaned, thinking fast, "That was plain foolish."

"You passed out from dehydration?" Bill demanded, "Percy!"

"What?" He held one hand up defensively as he stood, "It's just once! I was working out in the garden all yesterday and I'll drink something now."

"I hope you're not that lax with everyone else," Bill said, watching Percy with a weather eye as he puttered about and filled a cup, glancing surreptitiously around for his hallucination. When Percy caught sight of her through the window wandering the garden, she caught his eye and waved. Not so
"Oh, Merlin," Percy stumbled back, then looked to his brother and added hastily, "No. Oh, Merlin no, of course not. Even when you're not here, everyone's hydrated and fed until they can't take it anymore, honest. I need…" He felt for the garden door, not keeping his eyes off the window, "I need to check the radishes. Right now."

"You just said you were gardening all yesterday," Bill pointed out, but he only rolled his eyes as his younger brother practically fled from the room and approached the small orchard. "That's not even the right plant," he murmured, leaning his elbows on the sink and watching as Percy paused, facing away from the window, and made a *come on* gesture without glancing at the ghoul, which was already following behind as Percy ducked through the line of fruit trees and into the forest proper.

Whatever he was up to, Bill felt he'd trampled on Percy's trust enough this visit. They'd all be off to Hogwarts soon, anyway, and Bill had faith that Percy, at least, would go to an authority figure he trusted if he got himself in any real trouble. He'd always been rather good about that.

"So you're my mum's… hedge magic ghost," Percy was summarizing, just out of sight behind a large trunk near the treeline.

"You can call me Mum, though," she said brightly, but at Percy's continuing stare, deflated, "Or Molly, if you must."

"Mum is… alright," Percy said slowly, still staring at her as she beamed again; she was *some* version of his mum, after all. He couldn't… *not* think of her that way. There was an instinctive trust there, that he wasn't sure he wanted, but he couldn't quite… It took a moment to shake himself out of it, "Why do you look so young?"

"This is how I looked when I started practicing!" She gave a twirl, skirts and apron flaring slightly around her as she lifted off the ground, "Just about your age, Percy. We were in the middle of a war, you know, and my brothers made me stay home, so I had to help somehow."

"That makes sense." He was speaking with the ghost of his mother from decades ago, who'd apparently been a ball of joy and light before she'd had children. "Are you… That voice was you, right? Earlier? Why didn't you just show yourself, then?" It wasn't as if the Weasleys were unaware of the existence of ghosts. In fact, Percy himself had looked around in the hopes… Ghosts were only the last imprints of a person's magic at the moment of death, though, and with the way his mother had died, her ghost would have been neither pretty nor happy. He should have expected something like this, if the strength of his mother's set up had been such to cause changes a continent over for Bill, and on the mainland for Charlie. It was well known that continuous use of a place for magic made it more amenable to the formation of ghosts – hence the ghosts of Hogwarts. It was- it was… Percy couldn't find the words for how he felt that this had happened. As if, perhaps, not everything would lead to an unwelcome twist. Like the universe wasn't fully against him.

"It takes a while for us to resonate, if you're just cooking in the kitchen, and not actively practicing as you should," Molly was raising an eyebrow at him pointedly, and he felt inexplicably shamed, despite not having known his mum had wanted him to follow in her footsteps until that moment. Without delay, she clapped her hands together happily, "But that's all in the past. You can start practicing right now! I noticed the attic rafters were a bit dusty lately, and…" She chattered on cheerfully, and Percy, grateful though he was to have some semblance of his mother back in his life, bit back a groan. He should've known she'd come back with more chores.

Still, he dutifully made his way to the attic, and she began to focus a bit on what was going on, "Alright, there's a few categories hedge magic sort of falls into."
"Sort of?" Percy echoed and she shushed him.

"Don't talk to yourself, your siblings will think you're mad," she scolded lightly before continuing in a didactic tone, "Hedge magic can be used to heal and protect, harm, change, or restore."

"Just those, then?" Percy muttered wryly under his breath and she cuffed him casually, making his hair stand on end but not really having the desired result.

"As I was saying," Molly huffed, and Percy found even her agitation weirdly comforting – just having her there made everything… lighter, if surreal, "before someone rudely interrupted again. Healing or harming another person with hedge magic is tricky. It links whoever is casting and whoever is receiving the effect. The other two, changing and restoring, are usually little things, like color," she smirked as the tips of Percy's ears flushed, "That was alright for your first go. You've inherited more than my predilection for the practice, though."

"Your setup," Percy put in quietly, and Molly nodded.

"I made sure the links between family members would pass on the shape of my magic to the next practitioner in our line," she gestured at a darkened broom in the corner of the attic as Percy made it up the ladder, in an aside, "Grab that one."

"What does that… mean for me?" Percy ventured, a little uneasy at the thought of anything 'shaping' his magic.

"You're getting a leg up," Molly summarized bluntly, "That's how you can see me already, and you're starting to feel the links between people."

"I thought I was just going nuts noticing everyone so much," Percy laughed, a mix of relief and unease still coloring the sound. He'd retrieved the broom and was standing by for further instruction. He doubted she wanted him to just mindlessly clean.

"No, the links connected to you come easier at first," she shook herself, "But right now we need to get you up to par! You'll have a lot to sort out at Hogwarts if we can just cram enough knowledge into you!"

"Oh," Percy smiled weakly, "Okay."

Molly hadn't been kidding. It made it a bit easier to avoid Bill, when Percy was always darting from chore to chore, with an accomplice that could find dirt in the most hidden of places. He was still obligingly there, of course; he wasn't about to go back on a promise. Ginny tended to chatter at him, using the ghoul as her own personal jungle gym, when he was working in the front room, and Fred would find him in the attic, occasionally shadowed by George. Ron and Harry, on the other hand, hung about when he was out in the garden, darting around, seemingly unable to keep still. When those two were around, Percy often felt he was being circled by spastic dragonflies. He had yet to figure out exactly what they were doing, but they seemed to be having fun. It could be difficult listening to Molly and the kids at the same time, but if there was anything Percy excelled at, it was learning under pressure. Plus, just being around Molly made him feel lighter, better, as if he hadn't known he was carrying a weight and had set it down. Sometimes, it was as if his mother had never died, even if those times were few and far between. She was… different, like this. It was more like he'd discovered his mother's younger sister than really had his mother returned to him, but it was enough to keep Percy on the thin tightrope of sanity he'd stepped onto when the Ford Anglia exploded.

He'd asked Molly in a moment alone if there was any way to make her visible to the rest, and she
had smiled at him, somewhat sadly.

"It wouldn't feel the same for them, as it does for you," she explained, quietly, "Do you remember when I would read you the Tale of Three Brothers, what happened with the stone?"

From what he recalled, the second brother had brought back the shade of his late fiancée, who hadn't appreciated being torn from her afterlife and drove the both of them insane from her discontent. Or something like that. "But you seem to be fine," Percy protested, but Molly held up a hand.

"They would be trapped between acknowledging my first self and my imprint," she told him, "I'm not exactly the same person as your mother, now. They would be the ones being chained to the past. You may have noticed that you... accepted me rather well?" Percy nodded, mutely, and she cleared her throat, "Well, let's just say that was planned for the next practitioner, and this is all..." Molly made a face, "Temporary."

"How temporary?" Percy demanded. Losing his mother again was not something he thought he could handle right now, even if all she spoke about ever again was hedge magic and household work.

"A year or so," Molly admitted, "And most of that, you'll be at Hogwarts, where I can't go."

"That's why you've been pushing me so hard," Percy realized, and she nodded.

"There are things I won't be able to teach you," she said, quietly, "But I'll do what I can."

A part of Percy wanted to rage and scream. It wasn't fair. It hadn't been fair before and it wasn't now. He was just getting used to having this connection to his mother around, to having someone in his corner besides the ever-present ghoul. And yet. "We should get to work, then, shouldn't we?" Percy was used to disappointment, wasn't he? All that amazing ability to repress has to be good for something, he thought, laying out the strange list of materials she'd had him gather- the hair of a living gnome had turned out to be the hardest with the ghoul's newfound efficiency at catching the buggers. Percy had tried and failed to teach the ghoul to associate a spoken command and a pointed finger with hunting the vermin, partially because Ginny rewarded the ghoul no matter what it did when the command was spoken. Not to mention Ron's damned strawberry dealing. He'd been sure the threat to Scabbers would sour the relationship, but Ron had somehow bonded when the ghoul had started that inane begging for strawberries. Something about the silliness of the obsession seemed to speak to him.

"Are you sure?" Molly asked, her face so much more familiar with the creases of concern, no matter how fleeting they may have been. Percy nodded, firmly, hoping to move things along; he had a lot of practice shoving unpleasant emotions aside so he could work, but if she didn't move onto the lesson soon, he might begin to cry and beg her not to go.

That wasn't ideal or rational, since she likely had little control over it, and would probably... Percy swallowed, but grimly finished the thought, She'll probably fade away against her own will.

"Alright, we've gone through the basics of what the normal practitioners know, and we'll have to move into what I figured out on my own because, not to sound immodest, masters are few and far between. This type of hedge magic isn't the type you can ask someone else about at Muriel's tea parties." Percy startled, but filed the information away for later use, not wanting to interrupt as his mother lectured, "The... stuff we'll be looking at first, it's the most dangerous. I don't want you to stumble on this on your own. What you've got before you now is the startings of a wasting curse. It can be species specific or tailored to an individual, but if placed in the dwelling of the target and undisturbed long enough, will result in death." She met Percy's eyes seriously, "This is not a toy, and
it's not without risk. Another practitioner would notice it right away and destroy it, causing a
backlash that would sap you of however much energy the target had lost, and a master practitioner
could trace the link back to you. Even if someone unknowingly destroys it before the target is dead,
you'll still experience the backlash, and your target will recover. It takes a few months to work and I
originally designed it as pest control before I discovered the unpleasant side effects when the rats'
much larger mother gnawed a set to pieces," she frowned at the memory, but continued, "The more
magic the target of the spell has, the larger the tapestry you'll have to weave- yes, Percy, I recall how
much you hate weaving."

She rolled her eyes, forestalling the protest he'd thought, but not quite been about to vocalize, making
him shift a bit guiltily at the realization that she could still read his reluctance. "The nice part about it
is that shrinking spells hold very well and don't interfere with the curse." She crossed her arms
somewhat proudly over her chest, "Learned that one with the vampires." Oh, Percy really wanted to
ask, but Molly had already moved on. "With gnomes, like the one you nabbed that hair from, and
other magical creatures that only mimic sentience, you can just make the equivalent of a braid with
bits of hair and aconite." Percy pulled his potions gloves back on, as aconite, or wolfsbane, could
tsometimes make one a bit sick through contact poison, on top of its toxicity, and Molly spoke as
Percy worked, "The tighter the weave, the stronger the curse and the faster the spell will work. With
how your ghoul roughed it up before you got to it, this gnome probably has less than hour left,
anyway." She inspected the braid more closely as he finished, "Good. Your distribution of
wolfsbane could be a little less wide, but you've successfully cut a gnome's lifespan from an hour to a
few minutes. Since it technically lives in our garden," this was said with distaste, "our home is part of
its 'dwelling.' With a healthy gnome, this would probably take about a week." Molly paused, and her
voice was conflicted as she elaborated, "With something to the level of sentience and magic of a
vampire or… equivalent, you would need at least three quarters of a meter by a meter and a half of
tapestry, and the target's name. In fact, for any named creature, that's a requirement, or the curse will
make them feel a bit ill, with none of the lethality and all of the risks." When she didn't continue, but
appeared to be waiting for something, Percy turned to speak and- abruptly he bent over, clutching
something in the center of his chest.

"Taking a life is a last resort, Percy," his mother crouched to look him in the eye, her mouth set in a
firm, thin line that seemed out of place with the sheer cheeriness she usually exuded, "And every
time you do, you will feel it. Harm causes just as strong a link as healing or protecting, and if the
being on the other end is strong enough of will, it can pull what it needs from you. This gnome isn't
too smart, but it wants to survive. You won't die if you lose this battle, Percy, but it won't be
pleasant." Molly slammed an incorporeal hand against the floor ineffectually but her point was made
as she demanded, sternly, "Fight."

There was something in him being clawed away at, Percy felt. It wasn't anything new, but before it
had been so directly violated, he hadn't been aware of its existence. Even now, he couldn't quite find
the words to describe it. But he did know, very clearly, that it was his. He wouldn't just let it be taken
from him, and with the sensation of moving a third arm he'd never know he had, Percy dragged back
the bits that had been scraped away and held them tight, in a miser's grip, while the foreign sensation
scrabbled ineffectually, desperately, about the edges of his newfound will. Now that he knew what
was going on, it was easy to fight, like holding Ron back by his forehead while the incensed boy
tried and failed to take a swing at him. Not that he'd had much occasion to do that, but Fred and
George pulled it off often enough. The foreign influence grew progressively weaker in its attempts,
and eventually faded entirely away.

Molly floated over him when he opened eyes he hadn't known he closed, "And what have we
learned about this sort of thing?"

"Last resort," Percy croaked back. Talk about tough love. She softened at the dazed expression on
his face, and ran a hand literally through his hair.

"Back at it, love," she said, and he obediently, if reluctantly straightened. They both turned sharply at
the distant cry of his name, and Percy ran toward the sound, aware of his mother's implicit
permission to do so at that sound from any of her children.

He found Harry carefully carrying a struggling spider out of Ron's room by its abdomen, wide eyes
pleading with Percy to do something, but what? Harry very clearly had the spider under control, and
it- Right. Ron's room and a spider. Not a difficult equation.

Percy eased his way into the room, spotting Ron sat curled around his arm and fighting tears, which-
he supposed made sense for a shock if he was picking up on the tension in the house. "Alright, Ron?" he asked quietly, sitting beside Ron on the bed. He and Harry had been covetously guarding
their secrets lately as they held whispered conferences and vanished from sight when they weren't
out wreaking havoc- well, that was unfair. Percy simply did not understand what it was they were
doing or why they found it fun. Oddly, it seemed to have been helping Ron to cope, focusing on
Harry and their whatever-it-was, so Percy had let it be, even as Ron withdrew a bit more from Percy.
It was a return to status quo more than anything – the twins had soured Percy's view of siblings
before Ron was born, he'd admit, taking up quite a bit of Percy's attention with their constant need
for supervision, and then Ginny had been the baby sister he'd never expected. Thus, Ron
occasionally got a bit lost in translation, finding his own friends in the village and co-opting as much
of Charlie's time as he could, or following the twins as if they were gods – which wore off very
quickly after they'd once managed to change his teddy bear into a giant spider in his arms. Which
brought him back to the current moment. Given all of that, he was a little surprised when Ron threw
his arms around his middle and hid his face in his chest, visibly fighting back tears. He had thought
Ron was moving past that point in his grief, but- what was that? A swelling, red rash on the boy's
arm stood out in stark relief against the freckled skin and Percy glanced at his mother's ghost
surreptitiously.

He didn't expect the atypical fury on her face, but she replied to his unspoken question easily
enough, "Spider bites. Here's how you can help." The instructions made Percy flush slightly in
embarrassment, but a sharp look from Molly kept him on track, "You've got a leg up, having dealt
with a curse already, though it's the exact opposite series of actions. Still, you're not experienced
enough to get through it without going through the motions, Percy. Do you want your brother to
suffer so you're not embarrassed?" She had a point.

Fine, then. Pulling Ron's arm up closer, Percy focused on that sort of third arm feeling and 'groped'
for the connection between them, that Molly told him was- ah. There. It sort of felt like Ron. He
turned his claws gingerly on himself and scraped away willingly a bit of what the gnome had tried to
take from him, pushing it to Ron and directing it by- by hastily pressing a kiss to the rash, alright?
Ron looked up at him in watery confusion, then down at his arm as he felt the change, the swelling
redness easing from his skin until it looked like it was never there.

"Mum used to do that," Ron breathed, still confused, and Percy smoothed a hand over his hair
wordlessly, pulling him back into the hug so he wouldn't ask questions.

"That spider isn't native," Molly was muttering grimly, unheard by any but Percy, and to whom this
was unsettling news, "Someone set it on them. It's not deadly, but incapacitating." She turned to
Percy, and hissed, eyes alight, "Find out what they've been doing." At Percy's wary glance, she
calmed herself slightly, and the scent of ozone faded from the air, "It might be related; it might not.
Either you ask them what's going on or I spy on them myself."

Neither option particularly appealed to Percy, but Harry reappeared then, lingering in the doorway
and took the choice out of his hands, blurt, "We need to tell you something."

There was a long moment in which Harry just fidgeted. Eventually Ron elaborated into Percy's jumper when Harry seemed unable to continue, "There's a mad house elf after Harry."

That broke the floodgates as Harry stepped in and abruptly spilled in a mess of guilty confession, "He said he was just trying to protect me, so we didn't tell anyone, because it seemed like he was going against his master's wishes, and that could get him in trouble, but then he dumped a cake on the ground after you called, and the Ministry gave me a warning, and the Dursleys knew I couldn't do magic over the summer, so they locked me up, but it was okay, since you came and got me, but then Dobby showed up again and told me I needed to stay away from Hogwarts and you all, because it was dangerous, and when I said no, he threw a spider at me and Ron pushed me to the side and I grabbed the spider off him, but when I tried to grab Dobby he left and all I got was this," he passed a torn scrap of cloth to Percy, "and so I called for you and I'm sorry."

"I'm okay," Ron separated from Percy's shirt to show his arm, "Percy fixed it, see?"

"That's good," Harry said, and there was some relief there, but Percy could see Harry was still waiting for the axe to fall.

"Come here," Percy said, instead of attempting to verbally explain that Harry wasn't in trouble, patting the bed beside him and pulling him into his other side as he continued. He didn't want this to seem like an interrogation, even if it sort of was one. Molly clearly would have had no such compunctions as she was 'pacing' again through the air, practically growling to herself, and Percy dragged his gaze down to the floor as he tightened his grip around both boys slightly, "Was Dobby the one stopping your mail, then?" When two surprised faces met his, Percy rolled his eyes, "It clearly wanted you isolated; that's just logic."

Ron looked un-swayed, still eyeing Percy as if he'd been using the Dark Arts to spy on them, but Harry nodded and hesitantly leaned into Percy, "He was trying to convince me my friends had abandoned me so I wouldn't go to Hogwarts. He said it would be dangerous, but that it wouldn't have anything to do with Voldemort." Percy flinched, a little, and Harry added in a small voice, "Sorry."

"It's fine," Percy dismissed his apology. Headmaster Dumbledore had encouraged him to say the name, so Percy couldn't really say anything against it. It was just a few vague memories of fear, of his uncle's funerals, during the war; Percy's childhood had only been peripherally affected by He-who-must-not-be-named, and that had ended not too long after Ron's birth, for obvious reasons. "Do you know who Dobby belongs to?"

"No," Harry admitted, "But we really don't think he's doing any of this on their orders. He kept punishing himself for speaking ill of them and slamming his fingers in ovens and things for warning me." The boy's voice grew frustrated, "But I really don't understand why he'd do this if he wanted to protect me."

"In magical children and adolescents –well, and the elderly - that spider can cause a deep, deathlike sleep, if the antivenin or direct healing isn't administered within a day," Molly threw out, her voice tense.
"He wants you away from Hogwarts and the wizarding world," Percy concluded grimly, "And comatose is a sort of away."

"That elf is a hazard, no matter its intentions," Molly spoke over the conversation, and Percy missed what Ron and Harry were saying as she continued, "Individual protective talismans will be next on the agenda."

"-so he'd poison Harry into a coma to keep him away?" Ron finished incredulously, and Percy nodded, as if he'd been listening the whole time. His younger brother made a face, "Dobby's bonkers."

"I'll deal with it," Percy replied, not disagreeing with the sentiment, and meeting Molly's eyes with his own determination, "Alright?"

She nodded at him approvingly, "I'll get what we need," and beckoned his ghoul from the hall to follow her, which it… did and which raised all sorts of questions he wasn't going to focus on right now because someone had tried to throw Harry into an induced coma and had almost caught Ron in the crossfire.

"We're the ones affected, though," Ron argued half-heartedly, curling further into Percy and surreptitiously resting a hand on Harry, too. While Percy wanted to roll his eyes about how circumspect the two were at showing they actually cared about each other, there were bigger fish to fry.

"What are you going to do?" Harry asked, quietly, taking a middle route.

"I'm going to give you two, and the rest, some… charms to wear that will keep Dobby away from you," Percy replied honestly and they looked up at him with a bit of relief, but more confusion. He couldn't just hide it in their possessions and expect it to be on their person at all times. …Could he? …No, no that was slightly immoral and neither of them carried anything with any sort of regularity; telling them straight out had been the right decision. "Then, we can look into whether Dobby is telling the truth about danger at Hogwarts." Honestly, it was unlikely, but as the boys' eyes lit up, Percy knew he'd made the right choice in giving them something to do while Percy looked into who sent Dobby in the first place. There'd been that… kerfuffle last year with the thieving teacher who Ron swore had been working for you-know-who, but in Percy's years at the school, he could tell that had been an exception to the rule. More likely the entire incident had been a result of the Defense curse mixed with whatever Headmaster Dumbledore had hidden in the school and banned the children from explaining past their guardians. With the Headmaster around and that thing gone, Hogwarts was one of the safest places in Britain, if not the world.

The troll had been… unexpected but evidently the Defense teacher had let it in, so the wards were otherwise intact and functioning. Probably.

In the end, the point was that Ron and Harry would be unable to truly investigate until they got to Hogwarts and there, they'd be hemmed in by classes and professors and prefects. He'd have a word with Hermione, as well, and perhaps head off a second adventure before it began. Percy could recognize a stabilizing influence when he saw it.

"Were there any crests or colors on Dobby?" Percy asked, and Harry looked a bit confused, but Ron shook his head.

"He was wearing a ratty pillowcase the same color as Harry's shirts," Ron informed them with a straight face, and Harry took the opportunity to glare briefly at him across Percy's stomach. It was obvious that the House Elf belonged to a pureblood or their family, but the lack of crest meant it
likely wasn't an Ancient and Noble House. One of the nastier or more apathetic families, since the creature kept punishing itself, whether faked to gain trust or real, which left a list of mostly pardoned Death Eaters and sympathizers. That made motive rather clear on the family's part. Percy would be mad, too, if a child had supposedly thwarted his leader twice before reaching the age of 12, and the rumor of you-know-who being defeated once again by Harry had spread rather quickly after the boy had stopped Quirrel's ill-fated attempt at theft. This implied the family would have children in Hogwarts, perhaps in Harry's year. So, the Flints, the Malfoys, the Notts, the Boots, or the Bulstrodes. Most of the rest were exempt from suspicion either due to not owning House Elves or not having children at Hogwarts.

Honestly, if this were more juvenile, his bet would be the youngest Malfoy, picking on Harry and Ron even over the summer, unable to let go.

"Did he drop any hints about his family, even something you might not have thought was important?" Percy prodded; some people couldn't help claiming credit for things they truly shouldn't want to claim credit for, at all.

Harry shook his head, still only gingerly leaning on Percy, "I could tell he was trying to say they'd be involved, and that he didn't like them much."

"Well, then," Percy said, because there wasn't much else to say until he could do a little digging on his own. The mood was still quite solemn, though. It would do no good to have them dwelling on it impotently, so he said casually, "I guess that's the end of your usefulness," and Percy got a good grip, pushing that third 'arm' of self through his actual arms in an unnatural curve, before standing, taking the boys with him. They gaped up at him, but didn't struggle until Percy shuffled across the hall towards the twins' room.

"No, geroff," Ron kicked his legs at open air, not kicking Percy despite being in range for it, and began to laugh, trying and failing to ask seriously, "What have we done to deserve this fate?" While Percy was barely managing to keep them both in the air with magically enhanced arms, he couldn't shrug, so he settled for a noncommittal sound.

Harry cottoned on quickly. "Don't leave us in there," his tone at the last was fearful and appropriately dramatic.

"There's nasty smelling laundry!" Ron exclaimed, "And the twins only pretend to wash their linens!"

"If the smell doesn't kill us, the leftover joke products will," Harry added solemnly.

"We've still got use!" Ron snickered, ruining the drama, "We've secret information!"

"Oh?" Percy paused, pretending to consider and they jumped on the 'weakness' to negotiate their release, claiming they could only whisper the information, and they'd have to be upright to whisper, you know. He took their blatantly obvious bait out of sheer pity, mournful for their lack of cunning, and the second their toes touched ground, Ron informed him that secret information was secret and they fled for the hills. He watched them go with a little half smile on his lips, feeling accomplished. Was there ever a time he was so easily distracted? Percy couldn't recall, and there wasn't time to muse on it as his mother slid up through the floor.

"You'll have to be outside for this one," she said, and although her mien was serious, there was a twinkle in her eye, "It involves dancing."

Alone in the hallway to the naked eye, Percy abruptly and long-sufferingly groaned.
After a vaguely humiliating experience in which his mother taught him how to do a basic circle dance alone, while also piecing together the haphazard amulets in rhythm, which was harder than it seemed, Percy had a good set of seven. He'd managed to split the cloth Harry had ripped from Dobby into small enough segments that each would repel Dobby, specifically. Ginny might wear it out of pity, and the twins he might just have to use a sticking charm- but Bill and Charlie?

"It's a gift from Luna," he found himself saying, holding the amulet dangling from a cord in Bill's range of vision, "And you know how she is about those things. She'll start smiling at you on the outside and crying on the inside if you don't wear it."

Bill eyed the herbs twisted into a loop with a line of something cloth-like through them and coated with something metallic and red that seemed to have frozen them into shape, making them uniform in color and texture, "A bit artistic for Luna, isn't it?"

"Just," Percy threw it over his head before he could protest and pressed the amulet against Bill's chest, "Keep it on, alright?"

"I'll look like a poof," Bill protested and Percy eyed him with visible disappointment, secretly relieved that Bill had made things easier for him with this unthinking protest.

"How small-minded," he said meaningfully, and Bill backtracked.

"Not that there's anything wrong with gay people, it's just, if women think you're gay, you really have no chance, yeah?"

"Oh, to have a brother that is a bigot," Percy mourned, laying it on a bit thick, "is truly the worst of fates."

"I am an open-minded person," Bill retorted fiercely, stuffing the amulet down the front of his shirt as he kept a finger pointed in Percy's face, "And I see what you're doing, but I'll wear the damn necklace if it means so much to you."

"Good," Percy nodded, and added in one breath, "Never-take-it-off," before fleeing the room in search of the twins. He was pretty sure Bill saw right through the Luna lie, but if Bill thought Percy was going mad he was keeping it to himself.

"Fred, George," he hissed at the door to their bedroom, and a small puff of black smoke escaped under the door before it swung open, Fred grinning innocently at him while George threw a blanket over something in the background and joined his twin at the door in blocking Percy's view of the room.

"To what do we owe this pleasant –"

"- nay, wondrous –"

"- but still unexpected –"

" – oh, yes, completely uninvited – "

"-Surprise?" They finished together, dolphin grins stretching uncomfortably across their face.

Undaunted, Percy leaned around them and pointed a finger at the quickly dampening blanket, "Turn the fire off or you'll set that alight with the potion vapor in it."

They glanced back as one, and Fred dove for the apparatus, whisking the blanket off the cauldron
and turning the fire down, while George's expression turned sheepish, "I was hoping you'd tell us to do something and leave before it became an issue."

"No explosions," Percy forced himself through the word with as neutral a tone as he could, "Do you hear me?"

"Is that why you came up?" George hedged, changing the subject, and Percy sighed as Fred joined George at the door.

"Well, it seems Harry and Ron have contracted some sort of fungus," he said, with a long-suffering expression, "Do either of you notice any itching on your back? It would only be a bit, and it's rather subtle. I'd rather not let it get far enough for a trip to St. Mungo's, though."

"Oh?" Fred asked, slightly sickened.

"Yes, it can get rather nasty," Percy said absently, "But if we catch it early enough, I can take care of it fairly easily."

Fred and George exchanged looks, "What do we have to do?"

Ah, having the reputation of a stuffy, pompous prat with no sense of humor to his siblings could really come in handy when he needed to trick them. Soon, Percy had stuck the damn amulets sans cord to either twin's skin with their misguided blessings. The circular shape and the hedge magic inherent in them made them hold spells better than the average random object. Plus, the fact that the red coating was pretty much Percy's crystallized blood was enough that no one was going to be able to unstick those amulets without some serious effort, for at least a year. He… probably shouldn't let anyone know that.

It was vaguely underhanded of him, but he couldn't trust that the twins wouldn't try to confront Dobby on their own when they found out. And now they couldn't.

He found Ginny soon after and slouched to her level, "Ginny?"

"Yes, Percy?" she asked with some amusement at the puppy dog eyes her bespectacled older brother was giving her, closing *Quidditch through the Ages* and laying it on her lap.

"Would you wear this for me?" He asked, holding up the amulet, "All the time, and never take it off?"

She examined her wide-eyed brother emanating trustworthiness and the amulet for a moment and took it in her hand, her tone changing to that with which she occasionally humoured Luna, "Yeah, alright, Percy."

He gave her a thumb's up and a warning, "I will check."

"Okay," she agreed absently, having tied the cord around her neck and opened her book again, clearly dismissing her brother with all the confidence of a ruler in their domain.

When it came to Harry and Ron, they would likely put the amulets on now, but over time, he could see them eventually deciding they just had to do something else about Dobby, so he'd be sticking the pendants to them, against their will, if need be.

Luckily, they were still just shaken up enough to agree to the measure, on the basis of keeping other people from taking it off, and Percy completed his task with the satisfaction of a job well- oh, right, Charlie. He had a letter to write, then. Or a floo call to make, if his brother ever
visited base camp again. Percy was fairly certain Charlie would happily sleep out among the
dragons, in their very maws if that's what it took, with very little prompting.

At least, he likely wouldn't freak out about the ghoul, whenever he eventually visited. Walking
towards the front room, he heard Fred and George spreading Percy's misinformation to Bill, who
appeared to be buying it hook, line, and sinker, if the expression on his face was any indication.
Settling on his knees by the mantle, he reflected briefly on the merits of a throw pillow or a folded
blanket placed at the edge of the fireplace versus the potential fire and tripping hazard and discarded
the notion. He would just have to suffer. Placing a call to Charlie's base camp, he had to wait,
kneeling awkwardly, until one of the perpetually anxious dragon handlers walked by.

"Oh, hello," a brunette woman glanced at Percy's face, made some mental comparisons, and said,
"For Charlie, then?" Without waiting for a response, she had continued along her path, bellowing
Charlie's name with a strength that belied her petite frame.

For the first time since he had left, Charlie eventually appeared before him, bedraggled, fidgety and,
Percy could already tell, inclined to be uncooperative if not given the real story, "Yeah?"

He couldn't spin the fungus story with him, and Percy knew from the rings under Charlie's eyes that
he wouldn't stand for manipulation right now, and he said, bluntly, "There's a mad house elf on a
self-appointed mission to mess with us, and this'll keep it away." He flicked the amulet through the
floo, Charlie catching it with nary a pause, Seeker reflexes not having decayed with time.

"Oh, cheers, then," he said, with something approaching relief, and tied the amulet about his neck,
"Is that it? Nothing that needs me?"

"Yes," Percy replied, and Charlie nodded and was gone with barely a good bye. Well. Percy drew
back through the fire and sat back on his heels, the ghoul fascinatedly picking at the soot in his hair.
Sleep deprivation was no call to be so rude. Charlie had practically run away.

He's busy and clearly tired, Percy rationalized, He's just relieved nothing else is wrong at home. Or
at least, nothing Percy had told him. Hopefully, he intoned to himself, having already grown tired of
the word, and thus, the mental repetition of it becoming more and more sarcastic.

Dinner that night was a quiet affair, as it usually was, at least in Percy's bubble. For the most part,
Fred, Harry, or Ginny would want to tell him something, or ask him something, or in Ginny's case
particularly, tattle to him about something, but Percy was, once more, mostly excluded from the
general conversation and cacophony, and his ghoul no longer allowed at the table. It was fairly like
before his mother had died, if subdued, but without her, Percy found himself being the one to insert
an occasional voice of reason before fading back into the background. Of course, currently, he had to
deal with being his mother's ghost's mouthpiece, too, but that was alright, since it meant she was still
here.

"No, that's a terrible idea, George," Percy intoned dutifully, repeating his mother word-for-word
without actually knowing what she was referring to- she was over between Fred and George
listening to them whisper to one another, and they gave him a horrified, aghast, downright-frightened
look.

"He's onto us," Fred said in a mock quiet, clutching his twin's arms.

"How can his omniscience have spread so far, so quickly?" George lamented in the same stage
whisper, but Percy ignored them, spearing a piece of asparagus perhaps too fiercely.

"It's pretty safe to say that about most of your ideas," Bill put in thoughtfully, and George sent him a
betrayed look, with just an edge of real anger; Fred, however, cut him off before he could get going.

"No, my ideas are worse," he said, with an offended air, and George immediately fell into a bicker with him that very much excluded Bill.

Bill sent Percy a knowing, exasperated look that Percy deigned to share. He still was a little irritated with Bill, just for brushing him off so many times. And even though the ghoul hadn't been at the table long, he felt a tad guilty banishing the poor thing to a corner for no real reason save Bill's delicate sensibilities. However, he also knew how annoying George could be lately. Additionally, he really should make a concerted effort to be working with Bill rather than against him.

His mother's words.

"Give him time," Percy dully repeated his mother's current words, leaving off the dear, and ignoring her ineffectual cuff at the back of his head for the tone, "He'll come around."

"Your hair is standing up in the back," Ginny informed him before Bill could respond, and Percy patted her head absently before turning the hand to his own hair to push it back down and smooth the static out of it.

"So it is," he said, thoughts on everything that still needed to be done, before it dropped on Ginny and Hogwarts, "When the owls come in, we'll need to be getting you robes from Twilfits and Tatting's."

"She gets new robes?" Ron complained from next to her and Percy rolled his eyes.

"Hardly new, from a secondhand shop," he pointed out, "Plus, she can't be expected to wear the same robes you're using this year, can she? Do you really want to share your wardrobe with your sister for a year?" Ron made a face and Percy conceded, "But we'll be letting yours out a bit this year, I think, and if you keep growing like this, next year you might need new robes." At that, he seemed a bit appeased, even pleased at the blatant flattery to his increasing height.

"Ron should have to share with Ginny if I've got to with George," Fred smirked mischievously, pointing at his twin, "We all know that skinny bloke and I aren't as alike in body size as Ron and Ginny."

"Pull the other one," Ron mumbled through a face full of food.

"No, he's right," George put in, "Fred's a lot smaller than me in… certain areas."

For a moment, silence reigned, and then Bill began to laugh at the same time Percy growled, "Grounded," and Harry and Ginny made faint gagging noises, appeals from George to Bill about the unearned punishment ("What did I say, really? Nothing.") going unanswered because he couldn't stop laughing long enough to speak.

"I don't get it," Ron said into his food, but then again he didn't really care. He shrugged and took advantage of the distraction to slide some of his vegetables to the ghoul, which accepted them with the equivalent of perked ears and a wagging tail. "Good boy," he whispered, his gaze shifting slyly around as he patted his accomplice on the head and returned to the good parts of the meal.

"I'm at least twice as big," Fred protested suddenly after fuming in silence for a while, and then Bill was entirely lost to polite conversation, and excused himself from the room with a held up hand of surrender as Percy nabbed both protesting twins by the ears and dragged them to the kitchen to lecture them on what was and was not polite dinner conversation, his mother keeping a straight face as moral support, but bursting into unheard laughter the moment she was out of Percy's line of sight.
"Oh, I'm glad I don't have to scold them for that," she said to the ghoul, and it snorted at her.
"What?" Molly defended, a twinkle in her eye as she winked, "It was funny."
Chapter 7

"While I'd be the first to say that Lockhart knows what he's doing," Percy stared at the booklist incredulously, "This is a little overboard." Molly was tsking idly over his shoulder at the lists, but didn't interject. He had everyone's annual Hogwarts letters spread over the dining room table (to Ginny's dismay, as she'd prefer to fawn over hers a bit longer) and was tapping the large chunk devoted to every one of Lockhart's adventure books. "We're getting one set," he decided, "and we'll bloody well read them aloud if we have to, to finish them before the year starts."

"We can look through the thrift stores, and get some doubles," Bill hedged, crossing his arms with a huff, "Why pick this year to abruptly develop an appreciation for good fiction?"

"It's hardly fiction, but, I do believe they're been a bit sensationalised," Percy murmured off-handedly, as the two of them trailed off into their own thoughts, eyes locked on the letters spread before them. "We could make temporary copies," Percy suggested, there wasn't a copyright spell yet that didn't take at least 24 hours to take effect, and it wasn't as if they were stealing the book, or distributing it, which were what was actually against the law, "Especially since someone promised Ginny an owl."

"Errol is practically dead and she agreed to both letting the family have use and just getting the one big present," Bill defended, and when Percy's only response was a raised eyebrow, deflated. "We'll look at the second-hand bookstores first and then we'll consider it if we can't get two sets for a reasonable price." Percy nodded with half a smirk; looking wouldn't hurt anything, after all.

"Help," came a plaintive voice, and Ginny was leaning on Bill's arm, a lopsided, half-done braid in her hair. She looked up at him with big, pleading eyes, "I can't reach behind my head to do my braid."

"What about a ponytail?" Bill suggested, shiftily, and she pouted, not accepting the substitution as equal, "You look nice in a ponytail, Ginny."

"Bill, we're going to Diagon today and it's my birthday," she explained matter-of-factly, the pout sliding out of her tone, "I can't be a mess." Bill muttered something about sisters under his breath and tried again.

"The ghoul will likely eat anyone who even thinks you look a mess," he placated, and she huffed dramatically, the reminder that he'd already given into quite a lot she'd wanted today sliding off her like water off a duck's back. Percy still had no clue what it was about Ginny batting big, teary eyes at Bill that had him scrambling to appease her. He should know by now Ginny had complete control of her own tear ducts.

"I got it," Percy interjected, taking Ginny by the shoulders and sitting her down sideways on a chair. With all the practice braiding and weaving he was getting lately, he had her hair done in a snap, "Ribbon?" She supplied it, and he tied off the braid, patting the bow to let her know she was done, "Alright. Get your brothers going, will you? We'll be leaving soon."

"Your brothers, again," she pointed out, but slipped from the room merrily enough, presumably to obey, checking her hair by feel as she left.

"That is weird phrasing," Bill agreed, turning to Percy once she was gone, but let it drop at the first sign of ever higher raised eyebrows, lifting his hands in surrender and turning back to Percy's spread of materials, re-focusing, "What potions supplies can we supplement from the forest?"
At that moment, a wet sound, like a large, viscous bubble popping, could be heard, followed by a cry, "Everything's fine!"

Percy met Bill's eyes wryly, "Ask the twins."

After executive decisions were made and a whirlwind of preparatory activity, they were making second-checks at the floo, as Percy scrubbed agitatedly with his sleeve at an equally aggrieved George's face, and Bill checked feet for appropriate shoes.

"I'm clean enough," George groaned, pushing Percy's hand from his smokey face, "Everyone's sooty after a floo, anyway."

"Come on, then!" Ginny was practically vibrating in place, and surprisingly, Fred was the one holding her down, her usual cohorts of Ron and Harry off with the fairies again – figuratively, that is. She tugged at Bill's robes with a winning smile, "We don't want to spend all day, do we?"

"Alright, we're going, already," Bill conceded with a grin for her impatience, "Everyone has their list?" The chorus of affirmatives that answered him had him nodding and they were finally off. Their little crowd stopped in at Gringotts, again given suspiciously little trouble with the ghoul meandering along behind Percy at its greatest height, having eventually grasped bipedal motion with its new arrangement of limbs. The previously hopping, skittering quadrupedal mess now lurched forward on its back legs as if in a constant lunge towards the nearest victim. Honestly, Percy just enjoyed being able to walk down Diagon without pushing his way through. The opinion of strangers meant little to him.

"Can we meet Hermione at Fortescue's at eleven?" Ron piped up once they'd been through a few shops, intimidating shopkeepers and patrons alike and actually getting some good haggling credit out of the sheer bulk of purchase and the presence of the ghoul. Big, hopeful eyes shot at Percy and Bill, but Percy wasn't having it.

"You couldn't have brought this up yesterday?" He asked dryly, Ron trotting beside them as Ginny clambered up behind onto the ghoul's shoulders, as was her right as Reigning Birthday Queen, and prompting Percy to add, "Plus, it's your sister's birthday."

"Ginny's alright with it," Ron replied immediately, calling up to her, "Right, Gin?"

"Whatever!" she called back cheerfully, swaying from side to side with the ghoul's gait and waving merrily at random passers-by from her perch.

Percy's eyes could not physically roll any more emphatically. Planning was a near-mythical thing in the Weasley household, but he was certain Ron had to actually try to be quite so forgetful.

"If the birthday girl's fine with it, it's fine with me," Bill distractedly gritted out, physically restraining Fred and George from approaching a shady stand on the edge of Knockturn promising perfect luck for thieves and burglars that would clearly be raided by the Aurors by day's end, "You two aren't even thieves!"

"We could be," Fred said seriously, wriggling and twisting in an attempt to free his arm, "You just won't let us."

"We could be glorious," George put in, though he'd visibly given up. He still spread a hand before him in an expansive gesture, "Our money troubles gone like frost in the summer."

"That's right poetic, Gred," Fred stopped struggling to compliment, wiping a single, imaginary tear from his eye, "It speaks straight deep down to the heart of me."
"Thank you, Forge," he responded gravely, "I try."

Having reached his quota of twin for the day, Percy turned to the younger Weasleys and Harry, "There's a couple of things we'll have to get at Flourish and Blott's; you can stay here and help Bill, or we can go grab them quickly before the Lockhart book signing starts and the store becomes a war zone."

"I'll go," Harry shrugged, and Ron was right behind him, if reluctantly. He never really liked shopping for books.

The Birthday Queen felt the need to make a scene, however. "Onward," she declared, chopping her hand forward through the air, "To victory."

"Yes, happy birthday, Ginny, we're all so glad you've survived another year," Ron mumbled, and received a foot to the shoulder as Ginny "accidentally" slipped down the ghoul's back far enough to reach, "Ow, hey!"

"No kicking," Percy scolded automatically, "And don't be a prat, Ron." While he thought he heard takes one to know one from the boy, Percy wasn't willing to get into an argument for a passing jab and let it go.

"It was an accident," Ginny pouted, abruptly all wide eyes and rainbows, as the Queen faded back to make room for exaggerated innocence.

A snort, and Percy shook his head, "Let's get going."

When they made it to Flourish and Blott's, the store was already packed, a crowd milling in and out the entrance, clogging the center of the store, where it appeared Lockhart had shown up early. His outfit was a bit gaudy, almost garish, but Percy supposed such a decorated explorer could wear what he liked while he was back in the midst of civilization. Perhaps mucking around all the time made him appreciate the finer things in life when he had them. It wasn't Percy's business.

The ghoul, however, proved its ongoing worth, and as people caught sight of it, the crowd parted like sheep before a wolf. Yet, the presence of Lockhart kept the movement more excited than nervous, as girls squealed at the celebrity instead of shrieking at the ghoul, and Percy and his hanger's-on thusly waded through towards the shelves with less trouble than they might have had, each with their own search and retrieve missions.

"What's this?" A voice called out dramatically, "A graveyard ghoul? Have at thee, beast!" Ah, Percy had spoken too soon. A space cleared between Lockhart, who had been speaking, and the ghoul, who was still carrying Ginny on its back and tilted its head at him curiously. "A hostage!" His wand was brandished with a flourish, and Percy stepped between the two before this could get any more out of hand.

"That's my familiar," he then calmly, slowly pointed up at Ginny, who waved, looking a bit star-struck and thus of no help at all, "And that's my sister. They're fine." Most people, seeing the ghoul placidly following his subgroup of Weasleys, could connect the dots. Magical creatures following a family were either enchanted or familiars, after all. Still, Percy knew it was hard to turn off battle paranoia, of which Lockhart likely had heaps more than Bill.

"Ah," Lockhart straightened, and gave him a dashing smile, extending a hand, "No hard feelings, eh?"

Percy shook it, "Of course not, sir. I admire your readiness."
Catching sight of something over Percy's shoulder, Lockhart froze in the handshake, "Is that- Oh, my stars, it's Harry Potter!" He rushed past Percy and shook Harry's hand with a great deal more vigor, motioning in his photographer, who began snapping photos, "Harry Potter, himself, come to get his copy of Magical Me!" He ushered Harry with him up to the stage, who, pardon the wording, appeared rather harried, and Percy had to choke back a laugh. Lockhart announced he would be giving Harry a set of his books, free of charge, before Harry murmured something to him, looking sly, and the announcement changed to Harry and his friends, which made Percy actually laugh. It looked like heroes could be star-struck as well. Of course, then Lockhart declared his appointment as the Defense Professor, and, really, Percy approved, clapping along with the rest of them. While Quirrell hadn't been a stuttering wreck as a Muggle Studies Professor, as Defense he'd been a bit… lacking, not to speak ill of the dead – even if he had been a thief.

"That'll be a nightmare," Ron muttered to Harry when he'd been deposited back among them, and Percy huffed.

"Honestly, don't degrade the man before you've seen him teach," Percy berated mildly, "I'm sure Headmaster Dumbledore knows what he's doing hiring a decorated hero and Dark creature hunter for the spot."

"Him?" Ron asked, looking sceptical as they moved into the shelves.

"Never judge a book by its cover," Percy teased, and his siblings groaned in unison.

"No puns on my birthday," Ginny commanded imperially, sitting upright and sticking her nose in the air, "Her Royal Birthdayness demands it."

Sketching a bow, Percy replied gravely, "Of course, my Queen." He straightened, "Now get moving or Bill will catch up to us with the twins." Needless to say, they scattered after their respective goals. Unfortunately, Bill eventually did catch up with them alone and explained that the twins had skipped their leash and were who-knows-where in the Alley, so they gathered what they had in order to hurry through the purchase. At the register, however, they were loaded down with four sets of Lockhart's books, which was more than enough, and Lockhart bee-lined over to sign Harry's, and then inevitably the rest of them.

"I'm afraid I didn't catch your name," he grinned down at Ginny, who had clambered down to the ground in order to receive her autograph personally, and she blushed marvellously. Percy wondered idly if Ginny would be infatuated with every wizard associated with heroic action that crossed her path. At least, he could rest assured she wasn't into Dark Arts.

When Lockhart finished the rest of the signatures, he turned to Percy expectantly, Ron and Harry over-exaggeratedly examining the extravagant loops of his signature just out of his sight. "Percy Weasley," Percy supplied, knowing it was silly to turn down an autograph from a man giving you something for free, though he'd never quite seen the point of autographs in the first place. It was just a short message and a person's name, scrawled in their hand. While it had some magical significance, there was very little value in that type of thing for anything kind.

"Percy," Lockhart echoed, scrawling it with a flourish, "You have quite an interesting familiar. Does it have a name?"

"Sir Cuddles," Ginny giggled from out of sight and they both glanced over in surprise before Percy snorted and Bill, off to the side, covered his face with his hand.

"No, it does not," he replied, giving Ginny a brief mock-glare, "I hadn't thought of it, really."
"Well, names do have power," Lockhart signed the next book absently, "They take and give." Finished with the last in the set, he presented them to Percy with another unnecessary flourish, who slid them without ceremony into his cauldron.

"Thank you, sir," Percy bowed slightly, making Lockhart duck his head belatedly in response, and the Weasley crowd hurried from the store, the crowd parting before them until they smacked into someone who evidently didn't move out of the way of things.

"Weasleys," the tall, blond man sneered, and Bill spat, his back a long line of tension, "Mr. Malfoy."

"I heard about Arthur," Malfoy drawled, "Such a… shame. And Molly, too, I suppose."

"You suppose," Bill echoed, his fists tightening at his sides, knuckles white and mouth slipping into a snarl.

"My condolences, in any case," Malfoy swept his cane to the side as if to sweep away his own words, and stepped calmly to the side, "Please."

They walked past him with sidelong glances and outright glares, Ginny stumbling on the edge of his cane before Malfoy caught her and set her going again without a word, making her brothers tense at the contact.

"Are you alright?" Percy asked her lowly, as they exited the store, and she nodded, looking a little shaky but otherwise unfazed.

"I'm fine," she assured him, and it was Percy's turn to nod as she reclaimed her ghoulish throne and they hurried to find Fred and George before they unleashed unspeakable havoc on the Alley. They managed to follow the colors, in the end, as a series of multicolored and unhappy Alley patrons mixed into the usual bustle. It was incredibly irresponsible of them to test anything on unwilling participants, much less as randomly as it seemed they were working.

Bill and Percy grabbed an ear each, dragging the twins out from their hiding spot behind a few barrels, where they'd clearly been documenting the effects. George snatched up their ink and Fred had the notebooks, even as they protested the rough treatment with a variety of curses and pleas.

"Both of you are in trouble," Percy hissed, "and if we didn't have to meet Hermione's family today… Well, we'll deal with you when we get home." For once, Bill was on his side, though his reasoning left a bit to be desired.

"You can't just prank people without a reason or a calling card," he scolded, as if that actually meant anything, but the twins were nodding, and looked chastised, to Percy's irritation, "And when you run off, you make Percy worry. Which makes the ghoul worry." They glanced up at the predatory creature, which Ginny had been whispering to before it huffed a breath over them and took them both in one arm, leaving Bill looking smug, "So, you've lost your walking privileges for the day."

"On the orders of Queen Ginevra," Ginny hissed to him, and Bill nodded, a smile tugging at one side of his mouth, repeating the words in a grandiose manner.

They began to make their way towards Fortescue's, and the ghoul's loping gait did not sit well with the twins. "I think I'm getting seasick already," Fred moaned. George merely looked a bit pale.

"You know, Percy," Bill remarked abruptly, in a seeming non-sequitur, "I do think I'm growing to like that ghoul."

A blink to process the statement, and Percy grinned, returning the shoulder nudge Bill gave him;
they'd gotten the books they needed, Ginny would get her owl after lunch without too much stress to
to their bank account, and Bill was coming around to Percy's familiar- today was shaping up to be
actually rather nice. He and Bill exchanged a quick series of glances as they approached the ice
cream parlor, however, and came to a silent consensus. "Pairs," Bill said hastily when the inevitable,
watery-eyed, pleading glances turned on him, "One small bowl for every two of you." Ginny
gestured wordlessly between Harry, Ron, and herself, and Bill rolled his eyes, "Except Ginny,
because it's her birthday." There was some good-natured ribbing from the twins about getting fat on
the spoils of her victory, but Ginny took it in stride. Before they found tables to push together, Harry
said something to Bill in an aside that had Bill shaking his head and patting Harry's shoulder, sending
him off with Ron to hash out what they wanted while they waited for Hermione's family to show up.

At Percy's questioning glance, Bill explained quietly, "Harry wanted to help out, but I told him he
has to remember he's paying tuition each year with what he's got, and it needs to last. Only way to
get him to leave off." The last was said with a laugh, "He clearly doesn't know what he's paying
yearly, so it sent him quiet."

"That's a bit mean," Percy said, but a smile was tugging at his lips, "He's going to be irritated with
you when he finds out he could pay for a Hogwarts education a few times over with what the Potters
likely left for him." Bill shrugged, a matching smile on his face; he'd never been one to let a
weakness lie and he had a funny way of pointing it out to you.

"What do you want? Strawberry?" Bill asked suddenly, and when Percy smirked at him, made a
face, "What?"

"You've already shown your hand," he teased, getting a huff in return.

"Alright, so I'm in the mood for strawberry ice cream," Bill admitted.

"That's fine," Percy agreed with a hint of mischief.

Walking around collecting the kids' orders, Bill went up to the counter with Ron and Harry for back
up with the carrying, leaving Percy with Ginny, Fred, and George. And the ghoul, of course.

"What are you and Bill getting?" Ginny asked, and at Percy's answer, began to laugh.

Fred only snorted, "Does Bill know the ghoul will co-opt the bowl?"

"I didn't think I needed to bring it up," Percy folded a napkin primly in front of him, unable to keep
the smirk from his face, despite his casual tone. Soon their wayward party members were back, laden
with ice cream, and the Grangers arrived with their own ice cream, joining them with only cursory
glances at the ghoul. Unlike the magical population, the elder Grangers seemed unfazed by its
presence. When Percy asked about it, the dentist couple explained that they tended to accept
whatever they saw in Diagon Alley as normal, since they didn't have any frame of reference for it.

"I am a little relieved," Jean Granger admitted after a short explanation of what the ghoul was doing
with them, "that most people aren't walking around with pets like that. Hermione would never let up
about a cat, if it were true."

"I'm not that bad," Hermione protested from where she was wedged between Ron and Harry, the
three of them eating from the two bowls of ice cream between them indiscriminately. Her father
made a noise of disagreement from around a bite of his own, and Ron got an elbow to the side when
he laughed. They shared a look of kinship – Dan Granger knew very well how sharp his darling
daughter's elbows were.
"What's the problem with a cat, if I might ask?" Percy ventured curiously, and Dan winced pre-emptively.

"Nothing is wrong with a cat; they just don't like natural cat behaviour," Hermione complained.

"You can't train them, they mark up all your furniture, and they don't really love you," her mother counted off on her fingers, the twins stifling one another's laughter at the apoplectic look on Hermione's face.

"They do, too, love you," she began, and Percy hastily interjected,

"Well, what about a kneazle, then?"

"Oh, yeah," Ron jumped in, "kneazles are really smart, so as long as they like you, they're easy to train."

"It's the 'as long as they like you' that's jumping out at me," Jean muttered to her husband.

"What's a kneazle?" Harry asked, looking blank.

That drew in Ginny, who explained it was a sort of magical cat that she thought was just the best, which drew in Bill, who argued that they could be downright nasty if they didn't take a shine to you, which drew in George, who had to speak against whatever Bill thought, and Fred who just wanted to add to the chaos… Eventually the entire table was involved in a debate over the merits and downfalls of different magical pets. Hermione favoured a kneazle, and was backed by Ron, but George eventually began arguing the value of a jarvey, a sort of talking ferret that would possibly be well-loved if not for its smell and inability to speak anything but insults. Fred seemed to be honestly considering the merits of a small water sprite known as a tokoloshe, but once it was explained that they looked rather like a gnome mated with a cross between Percy's ghoul and a merman, and tended to pull nasty pranks along with the ability to become invisible while wet… He was unanimously shot down.

"What do you think, Percy?" Hermione asked, appealing to the only magical authority around – and Percy was a bit chuffed Bill had been so utterly overlooked, if only for his obvious bias against kneazles, "Kneazles sound lovely, don't they?"

"They can be," Percy admitted, ignoring the evil eyes from the anti-kneazle side of things, including Hermione's mother, "Our Uncle Parsifal had one that followed George around whenever we visited. It was so enamored with him, it would trip him up twining his ankles when he tried to walk."

"I forgot about Hetta," George murmured, a strange expression on his face.

"When you live with this much red hair, you learn to differentiate the shades," Bill replied with a wink that caused Hermione to flush slightly and look down.

"That cat saved George's hand, once," Fred remarked, thoughtfully, and the eyes of the group swivelled to him.

"When did that happen?" Percy asked, and the story came out as George fidgeted beside his tattletale twin. Evidently, young Fred and George had gone poking about their Uncle's study one holiday
visit, and made their way into a locked drawer.

"There was this puzzlebox inside and nothing else," Fred was saying, relishing the attention and drawing the story out, "Wooden, with a couple of pigs and sheep carved into the side. Obviously, we wanted to work it out, and George pulls it out of the drawer, careful-like, not wanting to break it or anything. Suddenly, Hetta comes barrelling into the room like we'd set her tail on fire- we didn't," he added at Hermione's accusing glare, "-and knocks the box right outta George's hands. Right in the nick of time, too, because just as the box was falling, wouldn't you believe it, the thing opened a mouth, full of sharp teeth, and snapped shut on air instead of George's hands." Fred paused for the obligatory gasps, and Ginny supplied one when it was clear he wasn't going to continue until someone did. "So, I threw Uncle Parsifal's throw rug on it and we tossed it back in the drawer and got the hell out of dodge." He shrugged, "Figured it was probably an anti-theft spell, later, but back then, we were too freaked out to care."

Something about the idea of a puzzlebox that bit was niggling at Percy, but he couldn't for the life of him remember when he might have heard of such a thing. It occupied him through the rest of the visit, and well after they'd finished their supplying and returned home, Ginny finally climbing down from the ghoul on the way back so as to better coo over her owl, a handsome tawny creature she'd dubbed…

"Onesiphorous? Really?" Ron's hand was on his hip as they introduced the new, unfortunately named owl to Errol. Percy didn't quite see a problem with it; it was a bit burdensome for an owl, but he doubted Onesiphorous cared.

"Siffy," George piped in as Errol sized up the interloper, "Siffy and Errol. Sounds like a comedy on the radio."

"His name is Onesiphorous," Ginny corrected with a restraining hand on Onesiphorous as if he would take offense, and received only a snort in return.

"No one's going to say all that every time they want to refer to your owl when they could just say Siffy," George teased.

"Don't you start spreading that around, then," she demanded, a finger pointing into George's unruffled expression.

"Why, my dear sister," he put a hand on his heart, "Would I do that to you?"

Leaving the bickering with a stealthy slide out of the room, Percy found Molly rapidly talking at the ghoul, though she turned to him as he entered her field of vision. "Percy," she said, floating up to him and poking through his chest, "You let your sister run into a Malfoy in the Alley?"

"How do you even-" Percy cut himself off, leaning around his mother to glance at his ghoul speculatively, which pointedly did not react, and gestured for Molly to follow him somewhere a bit less likely for him to be overheard speaking with thin air. Or at least, he'd tried – Ron had followed him, fleeing his irate sister and her swooping owl along with George, hollering as they ran past. Trying to send Molly a look that said we are not done, Percy ran after the conflict, catching and untangling it enough to send them up to their rooms for long enough to cool down. Ron and George needed to stop teasing Ginny, and Ginny should not react with violence.

"Only blood will ease my suffering," she replied with unsettling solemnity before heading up the stairs, Onesiph- for the love of god, Siffy on her shoulder. It was getting tedious just thinking that owl's name and Percy supposed he could see where Ron and George had been coming from now. Alright. The combatants were in solitary. Fred was off teaching Harry something in the garden that
Percy would likely regret later. Bill was occupied with the list of locations the twins had dumped on him when prompted to reveal where they foraged up the potions ingredients they used over the summer.

Percy put one hand on the railing and took a moment to breathe.

"No time left to waste, Percy," Molly sing-songed behind him, causing him to jump, "You've got a lot to learn and so little time to learn it in."

"Can you speak with the ghoul?" Percy asked suspiciously, ignoring the lead in and was, in turn, similarly ignored. He wasn't sure exactly how he ended up scrubbing the pantry floor on hands and knees, but he was sure he'd tried his best to get answers along the way. Probably. Honestly, his head went a little fuzzy sometimes when his mother was around, so really he had no idea.

"…and right now, you'll have turned it off, just from sheer boredom," she was lecturing when he came to, 'pacing' around him and occasionally vanishing into a shelf or wall due to the enclosed space Percy was in, "But at Hogwarts, you will get blinding headaches for maybe the first week if you don't figure out how to block out bonds and such before then. The whole castle basically shoves itself into people's magic and then strings them together like beads in a necklace with all the glee of a demonic child…" Her tone was a little bitter now, but Percy just let it wash over him as he worked at a recent spill. Amazingly, he had no idea what had caused this particular stain, despite being the most frequent user of the kitchen, and he had no desire to find out.

Molly was determined to get him to learn how to block the feeling of bonds before Hogwarts, despite her admission that it had taken her around a month to do it, herself. They had around a month left, to her reckoning, and Percy's protests that two and a half weeks were not a month were summarily disregarded.

So it was that Percy was disgruntled, unanswered, and exhausted the day Gringotts called Bill back to work. He'd heard Bill out peaceably with his siblings, and nodded along until he nodded off, being prodded back to startled wakefulness by George's gleeful poking to his side.

"If you're not awake," George whispered, clearly taking his duties very seriously, "I will soon be authorized to test things on you."

"I'm awake," Percy informed him dryly, pushing down the spike of agitation that had no place- oh, wait. It was George. Righteous anger and vindication licked at his insides unbridled for all of a moment before Bill resumed speaking.

"And you're all sure we've got everything?" Bill asked, almost nervously. It was unlike Bill, who tended to take things as they came, and Percy eyed his older brother thoughtfully as his siblings and Harry chorused affirmatives. "Percy will still be here, of course." Percy felt eyes turn to him and remained steadfastly, disinterestedly staring at Bill, his ghoul snorting behind him and upsetting the delicate balance of his hair. Still, Percy did not flinch. It seemed Bill had awoken his paternal instinct in the time he'd had with his siblings, and from the way he kept tugging at that earring, he wasn't sure why he suddenly didn't want to leave his family alone when he'd been fine with it before and-

"We'll be fine, Bill," Percy assured him, cutting off the train of thought he could almost see forming in Bill's furrowed brow. It was… nice, he thought. Yes, it still brought up a twinge that Bill was only now regretting needing to leave, but… He was regretting it. Maybe it was a little off to see someone close to you worried and upset and just think, finally, but Percy had never claimed to be a bastion of mental health and emotional stability. He was just glad Bill was taking the responsibility seriously for once. Or, well, that was a little unfair. He was glad Bill was taking this responsibility so seriously.
"Right," Bill cleared his throat, straightening, "Right. You'll get them all to the train on time, I'm sure. And there's food."

"Oh, Merlin, this is actually painful to keep listening to," Fred moaned quietly, and his twin nodded, still looking put out – probably from mulling on the disappointment that Percy had woken so easily. With some unspoken communication passing between them, Fred and George stood as one and took an arm each, frogmarching Bill to the floo. Bill's surprise passed quickly and he grabbed them in a bear hug, laughing slightly.

"Geroff," George said, sounding distinctly muffled, but his hand briefly joined Fred's on Bill's back. Ron and Ginny attached themselves like the limpets they were in a previous life, as Harry and Percy bore witness to the awkwardness that is an extended Weasley hug. With two people, it was hard enough to decide when to let go. With five? There were several aborted motions before the tangle broke and Bill was free.

"Percival Weasley," Bill began admonishingly, extending an arm his direction, "What are you doing over there?"

For just a split second, Percy experienced a jolt of panic he hadn't been expecting. I don't want to break down here, he found himself thinking, but that couldn't be right, could it? He was fine. Wasn't he? The pause had gone on a little too long, and Percy quickly plastered on half a smile, covering with, "Waiting for you, obviously." He got a roll of the eyes for that, but Bill didn't rise to the bait, instead just stepping forward and sweeping Percy into a hug that... didn't feel like anything. Percy patted his back awkwardly and was released, making him feel as if he'd just tapped out in a wrestling match. Bill ruffled Harry's hair and moved back to the fireplace, taking a breath.

"Well, goodbye," he said, and received the Weasley Song of Farewell in return, mostly consisting of Ginny demanding postcards and pictures, the twins insisting on progressively more elaborate well wishes, and Ron attempting to look disaffected but really just making it more obvious he didn't want to see Bill go. The fire flared green and the sound dropped off.

"Time for supper," Percy declared, too tired to deal with whatever might come about if he let them all marinate in Bill's absence. Pointing to the ghoul, he continued, "You're back at the table, congratulations."

What was that, anyway? Sure, Percy knew he wasn't perfect, but he'd thought he was okay. He'd felt okay. A bit hazy, but okay. Everything had been very... well. Busy, now that he thought of it. He hadn't really had much time for introspection or feelings beyond reacting to whatever was dropped into his lap. There'd been less crying from his siblings and more snark, and he assumed some of the leftover tears and mucus had made their way to Bill. He knew Ginny had ended up in Bill's room the night following her birthday, at least, and had probably kept him up rubbing her back as she cried most of the night judging by the way he'd looked the next day.

"Everyone's homework is done, right?" Percy asked once they were all seated at the table and passing food around.

"Yeah," Ron informed him around a mouthful of something no longer identifiable.

"Don't speak with your mouth full," Percy scolded in perfect synch with Molly. He tried to focus on it, but it was like the thought just slid behind another, hidden and out of reach.

"You asked a question," Ron shrugged, and Percy supposed that was true, but it had not been directly aimed at Ron. Still, further attempts at maintaining discipline would not go uncontested, he was sure, and a war over dinner was not something he'd rationed energy for.
"Everyone else?" Percy prompted, and got a round of affirmatives, "And the Lockhart books?"

"We have notes," Fred's voice had the insistent emphasis of one suffering from persecution of the most persistent sort, "So. Many. Notes."

"I just don't want anyone to be unprepared," Percy defended mildly, batting the ghoul's hand from his own plate and pointing firmly to the one belonging to it, which garnered him a wounded look. The book list tended to come with a series of notes from the professors to read up on one chapter or another before the first day of class. These were typically short assignments on top of the usual summer essays and were more for enhancing understanding than for points. It wasn't as if there were a quiz the first day of class, but the first lecture tended to be based on that suggested reading. With four sets of the chronological Lockhart books and instructions to have at least skimmed them all, it didn't require as careful management as, say, the year Charlie and Percy actually had shared a wardrobe, but it was still something to monitor.

"So, if we're all ready for Hogwarts, and we've still got a few days," Ron began leadingly, mouth actually empty of food for once as he drew his fork across his plate, eyes glued on the motion, "Could we go visit Dad?"

As if from behind a thin, opaque barrier, a tidal wave of hot and roiling anger blindsided Percy, and he thought, dimly, Well, there it is. Was there any way he could say no? It was his first instinct, and he could feel the refusal fighting to hit open air from the tip of his tongue, but… What would he say? No, you can't go see your comatose father. Because reasons. Reasons I don't feel comfortable sharing with you because you might take his side. His mother was watching him curiously, and he met her eye for a moment, taking in the familiar color even if the laugh lines were gone and the eyebrow unscarred. He never did find out what had caused that tiny nick down the center of her left eyebrow, did he? He could ask. Because she was still here. Even if she was… different. Taking in that thought with a deep breath, Percy raised a hand to his temple and made himself say without thinking too deeply on it, "Of course. We should have been ages ago." Molly wasn't the only one with eyes on him, and Fred was being just as obvious about it, but kept whatever he was thinking to himself beyond a light furrow to his brow. "But," Percy raised a finger to forestall the celebration, "you have to finish packing first."

"I'm done," Ron replied promptly, "Harry helped."

"I'm done, too," Ginny said, revealing the depths of the conspiracy as George nodded into his plate and Fred added a verbal affirmative of his similar status.

"So, tomorrow?" Ron asked hopefully, and Percy missed his plate, almost stabbing the table before he set down his silverware.

"Sure." Percy put down the fork, folding his hands in his lap instead, where he could trust them not to cause trouble.

"Really?" Fred pressed, searching Percy's face, even as Ron hit him playfully in the shoulder, all grins, now.

"Why wouldn't he?"

Why wouldn't he, indeed?

Percy let the rest of them move everything along, only chipping in when he was actually required. It was difficult to force himself to actively try to see his father and when they finally made it, it was vaguely surreal. They all crowded around the bed while Percy sat back, legs crossed, leaning his
temple against one hand and waiting for them to get bored staring at Arthur's unconscious face. Instead, they all began to talk to him. At him. Whatever. Even Harry was dragged into it when Ron introduced him and the twins made him say hello.

"He's unconscious," Percy protested when his siblings turned on him expectantly, but George dragged him out of his chair anyway, explaining condescendingly that coma victims sometimes could hear what's around them, that it might help.

Thusly, Percy was now standing at his father's bedside, searching for something to say other than maybe I don't want to help. "Glad you're not dead," Percy finally said, succinctly, "Keep at it, yeah?" And he sat himself firmly back down, meeting the stares of his siblings with a dismissive wave to get back to visiting because he was not going to stay here all day.

He sort of wanted to shake the man and scream at him for what he'd done, so really, Percy felt he was displaying admirable restraint. Now if Fred would stop sneaking looks that were not nearly as subtle as he thought they were, then Percy would be just peachy.

The hand not supporting his weight tightened on the chair's arm as Ginny began to cry, on the other side of the bed, and her brothers awkwardly patted her back as she asked her father to wake up soon. This man didn't deserve tears, to Percy's mind. His eyes were flat and his lips pressed into a white line as she pulled herself together with minimal fuss. Arthur had gotten himself into this, and their mother besides, and he could bloody well dig himself out. Sure, he was comatose, but as George had pointed out, it was possible he was conscious enough in there to fight on his own.

Still… He couldn't say he didn't miss his father. Yet sitting by his body's side when Arthur wasn't blatantly there to react as Percy hugged and then possibly decked him was not something Percy found in any way, shape, or form productive. After about an hour more of this, Percy had had just about enough and came back to reality, standing and causing his siblings to jump after his long stillness. He cleared his throat, "Wrap it up. We've got to get home if you want lunch at all today."

The only real hold he had over them was food, and he dreaded the day they figured it out. Directions ignored would be the least of it. George and Ron were the worst grumblers, but they rolled out soon enough, crowding the thin halls of St. Mungo's with only a part of the Weasley brood as they funnelled towards the visitor's floo.

A notice caught Percy's eye as they left, warning that downsizings were coming in the future for this wing, and he made a note of it as yet another thing to look into later. When a healer found themselves caught against the wall as the Weasley parade passed by, Percy amended his 'later' to 'now.'

"Excuse me, ma'am," he said, bowing slightly and gesturing for his siblings to wait a moment, which at least Ginny heeded, "Would you have a moment to explain what the department downsizing means for patients here?"

"Ah, we'll do the best we can," she replied, seeming frazzled as she juggled a few different potion bottles and clipboards before she produced a flyer and passed it to Percy, "We're going to be ridiculously understaffed, thanks to the budget cuts being pushed through by Mr. Malfoy. His 'sizeable donations' never seem to make it to the terminal ward."

"Thank you," Percy bowed her off as she hopped back to her duties with a frantic energy. When he turned back to his siblings, Ginny had wrangled the twins away from the floo, and Ron was being appealed to in order to help the two escape to explore Knockturn Alley on "accident." He looked almost convinced.

"Alright, home," Percy ordered, herding them through the floo and listening carefully to each
passenger's declared destination. None of them tried to flee with him leaning by the mantle with an
eagle eye and soon they'd all made it back to the Burrow without any other mishaps along the way.

Sometime later, the flyer found its way to Percy's desk, and he smoothed it out over the wooden
surface. It was somewhat unassuming, outlining the cutbacks that could be expected in a clearly
strained cheerful tone. A little healer in training cartoon dutifully pushed about a trolly along the
bottom of the page. While there would still be a healer on duty, it would be just that- a healer.
Singular. So if complications arose in two different areas in the ward, they would need to call for
assistance from people already on other jobs. Wonderful.

He pushed the paper away with an energy borne of frustration, Molly already hovering at one
shoulder and the ghoul encroaching on the other.

"Well, you'll have to do something," Molly insisted after a short period of silence, "Your father
deserves care just as much as any other patient. Just because he isn't conscious doesn't mean he isn't
alive."

"I can see their point," Percy lied, feeling mulish and unreasonable, but the resulting scolding he
could see building in Molly's throat as her chest puffed and her lips pursed made him recant the
sentence, "But yes, I will see what I can do. There's still whoever sent Dobby to look for,
remember?"

"Yeah, yeah," she waved this off, "But Lucius is one of your suspects, anyway."

"So, what, I look for blackmail?" Percy asked incredulously, but his indignation faded as the cogs
started turning, "Or instead of making us more of a threat, I could make us less. Supplicants, looking
for aid."

"What?" Molly asked, but Percy was already beginning to feel a plan come together, "Go back to the
blackmail. I don't like the sound of this."

Holding up one hand as if to fend her off, Percy dug through his desk with the other, "No, it could
work. Two birds with one stone. I don't need revenge; I need to keep the kids safe. If I start to
insinuate that with you gone, the Weasleys are beginning to see the errors of our ways – or at least I
am because Merlin knows the rest of them would rather die than go along with it – and noticing
the influence he wields at St. Mungo's, go to him to appeal the decision to cut funds in the terminal
ward... We're no longer enemies but something below him, even on his side. He'd leave us alone."

"I don't know about that," Molly began uneasily, "Lucius is-"

"Aha!" Percy pulled out a folded handout, slamming it down triumphantly on his desk. Ministry
Mentors, the front read, and Molly quieted. "Look, I can't make him just disappear, so we need to
deal with him however we can, right?" He met his mother's eyes earnestly, "Keep them safe no
matter what, yeah?"

"...Yes," she conceded, "It could work. If you're very, very careful. Lucius is dangerous, but he does
have a bit of honor left to him, I think."

Percy's returning grin was blinding, larger than she'd seen since she came into being with the original
Molly's death, and Molly fell into a disquieted silence, watching what was nominally her son work
out how to manipulate events so as to protect her other children without drawing suspicion.

How far will you go? she wondered, and a dark, fierce smile curled at her lips like fire on kindling.
Chapter 8

The ghoul snuffled sadly at Percy's bedsheets; it had been acting out some variation of the same all the early, pre-dawn morning while Percy flew about fulfilling Molly's last minute requests. The last lookover of the garden had included the terrifying beast basically hanging off Percy's figurative apron strings, making discontented rumbling noises.

"For the last time, I can't take you with me!" Percy exclaimed, turning away from the unfinished Christmas sweaters with a hint of relief. He didn't really want to focus too deeply on the feeling of his stomach dropping out that those half-knitted remnants gave him. Cocking its head at him as if it didn't quite hear was not endearing; that action always seemed more like the ghoul was sizing him up to eat than cutely attempting to understand. Noticing its ploy had failed, the ghoul gave up that particular tactic. It shuffled forward anyway, slumped forward under the low ceiling of Percy's room, and pressed its face with an air of resignation to Percy's chest. The creature was giving off a feeling of exasperation, of all things, and Percy felt a bit of instinctive indignation rise in his chest in response, "The rules are a cat, an owl, or a toad. A rat or perhaps a small dog may pass, as well, but you're as far from a harmless looking puppy as I am from Celine Warwick!"

The fact that the ghoul snorted worried him only for a moment, as Fred took that instant to come barrelling in, forcing Percy to slam his trunk closed over the still exposed Christmas sweaters and feign innocence, sitting atop the luggage to keep it from bursting open. The act was lost on his younger brother, however, who pointed at him wildly before Percy could even begin to pointedly question the lack of a knock.

"We forgot your birthday!" he exclaimed, still unerringly pointing a finger Percy's direction.

"No, we didn't," Percy replied in as steady a voice as he could after Fred sent his heartbeat rocketing like that for no reason, "Though you may not have noticed." Bill had basically banished Percy from the house for the day, correctly assuming Percy's ideal gift from the family to be time to himself to think without hearing minor crashes and disasters for a while. Ginny, too, had remembered, and had given him a bracelet Luna style made of whatever autumn flowers still bloomed. He'd appreciated the… thought, preserved the gift, and put it in a place of prominence on one of his bedroom shelves from which it would never stray.

He wasn't a flowers and jewellery type.

"Why didn't you remind us?" Fred all but whined, before he was pounding the floorboards out of sight again, only to return a while later with a vial of something green and suspicious. Then again, anything the twins handled gained the label "suspicious" until Percy could confirm with two outside consultants its level of harmlessness. "Here," the boy pushed it into Percy's hand, "Happy really late birthday. George helped." He paused, then added in a more relaxed tone now that he'd delivered on his familial obligations, "We'll say Ron and Ginny did, too."

"Ginny gave me that lovely bracelet," Percy waved at it and interrupted Fred's rising eyebrows by bringing the vial up into their shared range of vision before he could get badgered into actually wearing the thing, "What does this do?"

A grin stretched proudly across Fred's face; if there was anything he and George loved more than pulling pranks, it was explaining how they'd pulled them off. Truly, they were show offs in every sense of the phrase.

"Well, George and I noticed, somehow, that you're still a prefect this year, even though you forgot to
daily remind us as you faithfully did last summer and furthermore, we recalled how it distressed you to lose your prefect's badge, due to your own neglect – "

"You stole it."

" – and we slaved over a hot cauldron to bring you our latest and greatest," he spread his arms like a showman, the grin never fading despite Percy's attempt at inserting truth and sobriety into his tale, "The Forget Me Not Elixir! Just put a drop of this on an item you keep on your person daily and an item you don't want to forget, and if you try to leave the room without one, they will both emit a cheery green glow, aiding in remembering and finding your precious inanimate object all in one, fully organic brew!"

That actually seemed rather useful. Percy told Fred so, and was treated to a full on beam, which only increased as Percy continued, "It's very clever of you. Reminds me of a tethered protean charm, but how did you get a potion to recognize distance?"

"Trade secret," Fred winked, touching the side of his nose with one finger, but Percy could see his brother was practically fidgeting at how much he wanted to explain, and decided not to press any further. As long as it wasn't hurting anyone, it wasn't something he desperately needed to know, and Fred telling him when it was clear that George, at least, didn't want to share yet, would probably strain their relationship. Plus, George might just take unholy vengeance on the train or at Hogwarts, where Percy would no longer be the main authority figure and thus, no longer in charge of his brothers' discipline. Which was a shame. Percy was willing to shoulder that particular responsibility a while longer, as George had never been so well-behaved the twenty four hours following his completion of the punishment Percy had set him in cleaning the ghoul's teeth after a rather ugly confrontation over dinner. Not only was it mind-numbingly tedious due to the needle-like teeth being packed unnecessarily close together and thusly fitting rather a lot of the things into the ghoul's mouth, but the ghoul's breath was nothing short of gruesome, and really… Percy was quite proud of the stroke of genius that had made him assign George the task for the day.

Merlin knew scrubbing cauldrons had little effect on him.

"Let's go," Ginny called from downstairs, impatient to board the Hogwarts Express for the first time. For once, the only flurry of activity in the early morning had been Molly's last minute addition to Percy's packing, as she had been unable to recall where her original had hidden the jumpers from prying Weasley eyes. Therefore, his siblings had taken it upon themselves to gather around the floo and complain. He wasn't sure, however, how that had led to Fred's intrusion.

"What brought up my birthday?" Percy asked as he spelled the trunk lighter and followed Fred to the stairs.

"Ginny was being a prat about the tickets for the train saying to arrive ten minutes early on September first, and we kind of realized August had come and gone and we'd only celebrated Ginny's birthday," Fred said, clomping down ahead of Percy, "And Ginny didn't say anything. Which I now know is because she wanted to look like the best sibling." His voice raised on the last phrase to precede him down the stairs to his sister's ears, who popped her head out of the front room to glare up at him.

"It's not my fault you're all oblivious," she shot back, disappearing back towards the fireplace with her piece said. Left unsaid was that she hadn't actually known her brothers had forgotten. She'd just assumed they'd done what she did and gave Percy something quietly while they were alone. Percy had never been the type to like a fuss made over his birthday. His achievements, sure; he was a peacock about his grades and being a prefect, but when it came to holidays or illness, Percy usually preferred to be left out of the spotlight. A peacock with standards. "Hey, where's your bracelet?" She
glanced at his other wrist, having been reminded of her gift and expecting it to be hidden there, and then stared up at him with liquid eyes.

A hastily concealed wince, and Percy let out a quiet, falsified noise of surprise, "Oh, I forgot it upstairs. Well, we don't want to be late for your first ride-"

"I'll get it," Ginny interrupted, abandoning her lightened trunk and dashing up the stairs to amused smirks from Harry and the twins. Ron, as per usual, was oblivious to the byplay.

"It's your own fault for inspiring her with your fungicidal necklaces," George pestered cheerfully, and Percy only took a breath, held it, and let it out through his nose, tugging once, agitatedly, at his earlobe before he let it go.

"Here," Ginny took Percy's hand in her small ones when she returned and retied the bracelet around his wrist, looking up at him and mimicking him with a good natured smile, "Never take it off."

Eyes flicking down to the one of the only charms Percy _hadn't_ had to physically attach to a sibling, still hanging faithfully around her neck, he withheld the sigh and smiled back, "Of course. Don't want to forget it again."

"Now, come _on_," she turned her thoughts towards the train with the sort of complete shift in attention that sometimes left Percy floundering in her wake. Militantly, she checked that her brothers had everything, to their amused humouring of her abrupt pushiness. "We can go," she informed Percy when she was done, "So let's go." Her goodbyes with the ghoul had been tearful but she was evidently over it. The ghoul itself would be fine as it could _open and close_ doors now, rather than just opening them, and though she had this idea stuck in her head that Percy would need it at school, Molly had reluctantly agreed to look after it... somehow. Not that the others knew about any of that. Personally, Percy wanted to _stop_ thinking about it, since it just made his head begin to pound.

The controlled chaos of the Weasley brood flooded out the nearest public floo near King's Cross, a little shop for London based gifts and trinkets for the average wizarding tourist. The woman behind the counter eyed the stream of red hair with a silent resignation, though her gaze turned sharp on the twins.

"Twins are never any good," she muttered to herself, fingering her wand until Percy herded the lot of them out and onto the street to walk the rest of the way without losing anyone to the vagaries of London distractions. It would have been easier by car but for obvious reasons that option was out. Twice Percy had to circle back and pick up a straggler. Harry had been the first delay, caught behind a slow group and being too polite to cut through or ask to pass to catch up with his own gaggle until George noticed and told Percy. They stopped along the edge of the sidewalk and waited until he was within grabbing range before they swiped him back and moved on. As for the second, Ginny had stopped at a window display, ostensibly asked the rest to stop – which no one heard – and Percy had to turn back a block past when his head count came up one less than it should.

"You didn't even notice I was gone," Ginny lamented, hanging off Percy's arm forlornly, "I could vanish off the face of the earth and no one would look for me."

"I noticed," Percy snapped back, looking away as he added in a low voice, "Just not right away."

"We'd look for you, Ginny," Harry assured her, "Ron and I've got your back."

Torn between encouraging family unity and muttering _traitor_ under his breath, Percy fell back into his default and hurried everyone along, mentally counting heads every few blocks or so until they finally made it to the station.
"Everyone still here?" he checked a final time, before they crossed onto the platform.

"You wouldn't know if I wasn't." Ginny sniffed, pulling her lightened luggage through after her and drawing a sigh from her older brother.

She didn't have to keep rubbing it in.

"Alright, follow your sister," Percy waved towards the pillar, intending to make sure each and every sibling at least entered the platform and got onto the train. After that, he'd be detained by his prefect duties, and they'd be on their own for a train ride.

Which had never been much of a problem before, but now Percy felt responsible.

Of course, once they were all through, Percy walked calmly into a solid brick wall after them, and patted the pillar in dismay. A pop behind him, followed closely by another, and Percy wasn't where he'd started from.

"You keep Dobby from protecting Mister Harry Potter, Wheezy," a thin, high voice accused him from the shadows of the dusty room. Percy's wand was out before the sentence was done, but the elf snapped its fingers and the wand was pushed from his hands, "Why do you put Mister Harry Potter in danger?"

"Me?" Percy shot back, "You're the one that threw a venomous spider at him. Blocked his mail, too, to add insult to injury."

The elf wrung its ears, glancing about the sheet covered furniture, stark and small against the white walls and murals, "Bad things at Hogwarts." Its fingers were bandaged and its arms bore the mark of hot iron, but the elf continued muttering, "Danger is coming to Hogwarts this year. Mister Harry Potter must not go. Dobby must protect Mister Harry Potter."

If all the elf wanted was Harry's protection – and if that were true, from the behaviour Percy was seeing, the elf was more than a little mad – then perhaps it could be convinced to leave Harry in better hands. If not, then the farce would end and Percy would feel a little better about tackling a house elf. "Headmaster Dumbledore is at Hogwarts, he reminded the mad little elf, "He can surely protect Harry far better than any house elf. Not to mention Harry's head of house, Professor Minerva McGonagall, and the other professors. Anything that made it through Hogwarts' wards would still have to deal with them."

"Happened before and they didn't stop it," the elf squeaked, "Mister Harry Potter must not."

"-Go to Hogwarts, I get it," Percy interrupted. Despite being unarmed, he felt oddly at ease. There was adrenaline coursing through his veins, yes, but it was a calm, clear high, instead of a panic, "Look, if you tell me what the danger is, I can take care of it. I'm a prefect, so it's rather my responsibility." He was no Headmaster Dumbledore, but this Dobby didn't seem to have a high opinion of him.

Dobby narrowed eyes at him shrewdly, "A Prefect Wheezy?"

"Yes," Percy agreed, not knowing quite how Dobby was taking it, but willing to continue down this track for lack of a better option, "I'm a prefect, and it's a prefect's job to protect the students." Waiting a moment for this to sink in, Percy added, "Not yours."

A moment of silence and a high pitched keen escaped the elf, "Dobby can't tell Prefect Wheezy and so Mister Harry Potter will die at Hogwarts!" Tears were had. Dobby began to twist his fingers to painful angles. Percy had uncomfortable feelings that made him panic just a little.
"Pull yourself together, Dobby," Percy snapped in his best imitation of his mother, and the elf's sobbing slowed to a sniffle, bulbous green eyes turning up to meet his as the elf hiccoughed, "I'll keep a special eye on Harry this year, alright?" The elf seemed just as wet and prone to sobbing as it did before, so Percy amended, "And you'll let me know if something's about to happen, won't you?"

The waterworks looked ready to start again, "D- Dobby can't…"

"Of course you won't tell me anything," Percy began leadingly, "But I'm sure you can pop in to retrieve stolen items, can't you?" In full view of the elf, Percy pushed up a sheet, sliding open the drawer he found and grabbing three pieces of silverware, with a crest emblazoned on the stems, "And you're fully intending to apprehend the thief by returning the stolen items in the future, so there's no use punishing yourself now for the theft. If that happens to be when the threat to Hogwarts is greatest…" Percy trailed off meaningfully, and Dobby appeared to cotton on, brightening slightly.

"Dobby will take back what Thieving Prefect Wheezy took when…" he took on a conspiratorial look, leaning in, "When he needs to."

"Exactly," Percy said, instead of addressing the new nickname, "Now would you mind ejecting this intruder in your master's mansion back to King's Cross?"

"Dobby took care of it," Dobby was muttering, as if convincing himself, "So Dobby didn't need to report." But he snapped his fingers absentely, and Percy found himself falling through the portal to Platform Nine and Three Quarters with his trunk in tow.

Alright. So the elf was mad. Its inability to reveal what was going to happen at Hogwarts implied that their master had something to do with the "danger" there, but its cooperation – and how it just let theft of its master's belongings slide – convinced Percy that it really did want to protect Harry. It just was a bit too bonkers to figure out how.

Standing for a moment in the flow, Percy was rudely brought back to reality as he was jostled to the side by a runner, barely avoiding losing a toe to the wheels of the kid's cart.

Okay. All the kids were… probably on the train. But he didn't have much time to check. What with losing Ginny for a while and Harry being quietly subsumed by the London bustle, then his sudden abduction, they'd run out the clock. He had to load his trunk under the train and get to the prefects' carriage for the Head Boy and Girl's speeches. Percy would just have to assume all of his siblings were on the Hogwarts Express. As he made his way down the train, he thought, Maybe if I repeat it enough, I'll believe it, too.

Squeezing into the prefect's cabin, Percy found himself an unoccupied corner- no no no. To his dismay, Percy couldn't escape before stragglers had boxed him in next to Ross Grimmett. The other boy gave him a weary look. Maybe. Honestly, Percy couldn't really tell and that was what creeped him out the most about the Slytherin prefect. He could physically feel a chill. The other Slytherin prefect in Percy's year, Gemma Farley, was fine and very much a normal human being, but Percy had the hairs on his neck standing up just being within a few feet of Grimmett. Sending a pleading glance across the way to his own partner, all Percy got for his efforts was a clearly visible full body snort before Kendra made a fist in his direction, kindly informing him to man up.

Percy glanced to the side and shared an uncomfortable moment of eye contact with Grimmett before he forced himself to look away. Thankfully, he was just barely on time, so Percy could quickly lose himself enough in memorizing any new rules and protocols to ignore the series of panic attacks he was putting off and the death aura beside him. Although it was true he hadn't exactly had any problems with Grimmett. The other prefect performed his duties admirably. He just didn't… talk. Or emote.
Percy, arms crossed over his chest and the utmost image of paying attention, shuffled slightly further into the wall in a subconscious effort to get away. If only he hadn't been sidetracked he would have arrived early enough to barricade himself in with Kendra and the Hufflepuff prefects on the other side of the train car. Lucky bastards.

The debriefing took a little over an hour, as old rules had to be reiterated for incoming prefects or replacements – which hadn't happened this year, it seemed. As they scattered to start patrolling, Percy didn't notice any new faces among his year, and Penelope gave him a smile and a wave before she left. Fleeing Grimmett's doom, Percy caught up to Kendra where she was waiting near the door and passed by, forcing her to jog or be left behind.

"Is he really scary, Percy?" Kendra snorted, having easily matched his pace and then sped ahead a bit to jog backwards, so as to better fix Percy with a smirk, "I thought you'd have gotten over it, working with him for a year already. He's a good Prefect."

"He just feels off to me," Percy complained, still striding at an unnecessary speed towards the start of their patrol, "I know it's silly."

"Maybe you should challenge him to fisticuffs," she made a few jabbing motions, "Work out the feeling."

"I have no wish to die, thank you." He leaned into a compartment from which suspicious noises were emanating and separated the offenders with a quick spell. Honestly, children could walk into that at any time. When he emerged, Kendra had sobered, fidgeting a little as she fell in step with him.

"I'm sorry about what happened," she said, not meeting his eyes, "If you ever want to talk about it…"

"News travels, huh," Percy said flatly. He didn't want to talk about it, no. There was almost a sting to the condolences, though he'd always thought such things were meant to soothe. Really, he hoped everyone would just ignore it, let him get on with Hogwarts business without being reminded of that reality. He already had worries to deal with, and tasks to accomplish. Adding his own emotions to the mix was not a recipe for success. Kendra had fallen silent after his rebuff, and Percy forcefully blew out a sigh. On the other hand, overreacting wouldn't help anyone. "Sorry, Kendra. Thank you."

"It's fine," she shrugged one shoulder, and they returned to silent patrolling. It wasn't exactly tedious, but Percy found it to be lacking. He almost missed her bad jokes and insufferable teasing to lighten up. A few situations came up, as they always did, but Percy didn't run across any of his siblings, nor did Kendra speak again beyond a few situation-relevant remarks. She didn't seem angry, but cautious, so he was sure it would blow over. Probably. Of course, if he had to have another heart to heart before the week was up he was going to scream, so probably would have to do.

They'd found Luna in her own, empty compartment, and when Percy'd asked after Ginny, she told him she hadn't seen her and rattled off something about an infestation.

"That's nice, Luna," Percy's hand had edged towards the door, "I'm sure she'll find you soon." Merlin, the girl set off all sorts of instincts and Percy had to get out of there before he started sorting out that tangled mess she called hair and scolding her for the dirt she hadn't brushed off of her clothes, yet. When they were younger, his mother had wondered if she was neglected, but after a long day of attempting to smother the girl with motherly attention herself, had discovered Luna was resistant to all efforts to make her look somewhat presentable. She didn't fight the initial actions, but it couldn't have been an accident that set off that mudslide.
She was like some sort of trap for fussers.

At the very least, Percy eventually confirmed Ron and Harry had likely made it onto the train. The Malfoy in their year had blustered by looking awkward and somewhat embarrassed, and Percy knew there was no one in the world that boy liked to pick on so much as Harry and Ron. Since there seemed to be a shred of human decency in him, however, Percy surmised he'd come across the two and waffled between acting cruel or sympathetic until he'd confused himself into walking away… Or Percy could be completely wrong and Malfoy was just embarrassed to have searched the entire train for two people who weren't on board.

A moment of silence for Percy's dwindling sanity.

So it was that a ball of raw nerve exited the train as frazzled as it entered, and Percy lingered near Hagrid until he was sure there was at least one redhead in the boats. Having done what he could, he threw in the towel and entered a carriage himself, not spotting any more siblings in the crowd. If they weren't on the train, then they weren't on the train, and he'd deal with it when he found out. This was not the end of the world if he'd somehow lost a sibling between the entrance to the platform and the Hogwarts Express. Surely they'd panic themselves and owl the professors or Percy if anyone was separated. Oliver, who was sharing his carriage, received nothing but distracted hums of acknowledgement for his conversation efforts.

It wasn't until the Great Hall was full to capacity that Percy's fears were laid to rest. His brothers and Harry were all seated at the Gryffindor table, and his sister was shuffling anxiously amongst the rest of the first years. Still, he couldn't quite relax. Could it be the thought of whatever danger Dobby thought would plague the school? The surprising glare Fred had dashed his direction when he sat down? George's smug face at Fred's irritation? Harry, Ron, and Hermione's whispered conference? Ginny's upcoming Sorting?

No, that would be silly. Who would worry about any of that?

Though, Ginny certainly seemed worried about her Sorting.

"She'll get into Gryffindor," Oliver said beside him, noting the direction of his gaze and the rigidity of his friend's already scary posture. He was clearly not giving up on opening a dialogue and nudged Percy with an elbow, "Anyone you've called a hellion has earned their place here."

"She's worried about it," Percy pointed out instead of maintaining radio silence, "I didn't get to talk to her beforehand, and now she's going to need her robes fixed by the end of the week if she doesn't stop tugging at that cuff."

"It speaks," Oliver cracked, before leaning in to ask seriously, "While you're responding to inquiry, how's Ginny on a broom?"

Hah. As if an entire cadre of older brothers would allow her to get in the middle of something as crazy as the Weasley family with quaffles. "She's never been on one."

"Shame," he leaned back, "Could use a reserve seeker if Potter lands himself in the hospital wing again."

Finally the Sorting dragged its way to the end of the alphabet, and Ginny sat on the stool, looking pale, but composed. Her brothers, on the other hand… Fred was shaking George by the arm as if he wasn't already paying attention and Ron was doing a marvellous job of pretending to ignore Hermione's quiet admonishments that his sister was only going to be Sorted once while simultaneously keeping an eye on the Sorting hat. Promising death by moths if his will was not done.
It was almost impressive.

A few tense moments later, and the Hat shouted, "Gryffindor!"

"Good show, Ginny," Percy congratulated her amidst the clapping as she squeezed in beside Hermione down the table, and she waved him off distractedly, looking relieved, but still a bit pale. With that, the Sorting came to its natural end, and Dumbledore gave a quick run-down of the most important rules – mentioning that the third floor corridor was no longer off-limits, but not introducing any further changes.

As everyone settled in to eat, the usual controlled chaos of the Great Hall seemed to shake itself and spread through the room, students leaning across tables and chattering while Percy tugged his earlobe and pretended to listen to Oliver.

Friends deserve at least the pretence of attention, even when mulling over danger, Malfoys, and mad house elves. He hadn't gotten a response from Malfoy yet, but he hadn't expected one. Just asking the man to be his mentor wouldn't do anything; he had to make himself elevated in the elder man's eyes or bring Mr. Malfoy down a bit closer to his level. Or both. Both would work nicely. As for the elf, he'd finally get an answer as to his masters when he had time to look up the crest on the stolen silver in his inner robe pocket after showing the first years around and… Alright, he'd not make it to the library until tomorrow, but this was still progress! Progress he'd probably be best to leave his siblings out of until he'd figured out a bit more. Sure, he'd all but assigned Ron and Harry to that particular task, but he could still… let them work on it alone. It'd keep them busy and also in the library, which would be win-win in Percy's book.

He was so wrapped up in his many worries, he didn't notice as Penelope sat beside him at the Gryffindor table, ignoring the scandalized looks of her House, "I haven't heard from you for a while." She laid a hand on his arm, prompting Percy to snap to attention and send a quick glare at an unrepentant Oliver for not warning him. Penelope's tone was a bit searching, and it was clear she'd heard about the Weasley family tragedy in her next question, "Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." His reply was a bit stiff, but Percy did not want to talk about that, and Penelope, bless her soul, moved on quickly.

"That you are," she teased, running the hand she'd placed on him down his arm, "I didn't know there was definition under here."

"Oh, yes," Percy agreed with a similar tone, relieved enough to change the subject that he didn't quite register that his crush was flirting with him, but falling into the familiar joking rhythm with her, anyway, "It's those long hours of lifting boulders and training for Quidditch, no, wait- I'm confusing myself with Flint, again." They shared a mutual glance towards an unsuspecting Marcus Flint and laughed. Last year, he'd occasionally hovered near their table in the library and sent them half-hidden jealous glances that made his crush on Penelope quite clear, unlike Percy's well-hidden endeavour, and Penelope had been at a complete loss to explain it. You see, Percy had been the one who'd had the failed tutoring sessions at the beginning of that year with him, and she'd barely dropped in to say hello when Flint had abruptly stood, declared he'd study on his own, and fled. That was, evidently, all it took. The continuous strange reactions of Marcus Flint to love became something of a long running gag between the two of them – a sort of cruel joke Percy only allowed because he'd seen what Flint did to his brothers in Quidditch games. There was little love lost there.

"He does appear to have bulked up considerably," Penelope allowed with a reluctantly admiring tone, her eyes lingering across the room for a moment before they came back to Percy, "But why would I go all the way over there when I've got brains and brawn right here?" Her lips tweaked into a wicked half-smile for a moment before she laughed, "I've missed you, Percy."
That snapped Percy out of whatever had allowed him to ignore the content of the past minute or so, and he flushed, "I-I missed you, too."

A thumb hooked over her shoulder as she pointed at her increasingly agitated yearmates, "I gotta go before they mutiny." He nodded as she looked at him consideringly, and then dropped a kiss on his cheek, shooting him a smile as she stood to leave, "Bye."

Oliver watched Percy watch Penelope leave, and he rolled his eyes, "You've got it bad." The traitor had likely cottoned on that Percy hadn't been listening to his fascinating Quidditch Commentary a la Wood and seemed to delight in Percy having been caught flatfooted.

"Hush," Percy snapped back to reality, scowling, "I do not."

"Do, too," Oliver said, reaching over Percy for more potatoes, "Don't get your hopes up for a relationship, though. Penny's been through more flings than I've blocked quaffles."

That didn't mean anything. In fact, it meant she must have already gotten the wildness out of her system. Already figured out what she really wanted in a relationship. "So, she's probably just about ready to settle down," Percy muttered and Oliver laughed with a shake of his head, clapping him on the shoulder.

"That's the spirit, I guess." Following this exchange, Percy reluctantly allowed himself to be drawn into conversation, ending up in the usual argument about the nature of bludgers. He couldn't do anything now to fix the multitude of problems plaguing his family, but he'd start on it tomorrow; skipping breakfast would get him there as the library first opened. …After he brought the first years back to the Great Hall, of course. And then took them to their first class. The Gryffindor prefects from the year below would handle them the rest of their first day, as their schedules lined up better.

Despite usually attempting to avoid accusations of favouritism, Percy couldn't quite bring himself to pry Ginny off his arm as he led the rest of her yearmates to Gryffindor tower after the meal had concluded. Normally he'd stay firm about that sort of thing – he wasn't Bill, after all – but he was feeling just a bit guilty still that he'd practically abandoned her on the platform, even if it really wasn't his fault. The feeling remained unmoved by such platitudes and settled more smugly into his gut like a fat, clawed cat.

He was almost surprised when they got to the tower, how easily and quickly the lecture sprang to his lips. Despite the guilt, he felt clearer than he'd been in a while. Perhaps it was just having some responsibility taken from him…? Still he got his sister and the rest settled in their respective dorms, then peeked in on his siblings. Ignoring the pillow to the face he got from George, they all seemed relatively at ease with their dormmates, and their dormmates seemed relatively ill at ease with Percy's unexpected check ins.

The infractions he'd seen hastily stowed away were innumerable, and Percy wondered if he shouldn't be making random checks all the time. He didn't bust them on their first day back, but he thought the lectures they'd gotten would put them on the right track. Seamus, for one, really didn't need to be looking at magazines like that at his age, and Percy felt he'd both assured himself of his siblings' continued existence and done his good deeds for the day.

"Don't be crazy," Oliver warned, having started to hang out of the door of their dorm after the first group groan from the second years' room, the better to watch the show. He pointed an accusatory finger at Percy's speculative look, "That face means you're thinking something crazy."

"You'd be the last person with the right to call someone else crazy," Percy brushed off absently, heading for his bed and ignoring Oliver's mockingly heart-broken protests. Perhaps he should have
warned Harry and the twins about Oliver's plans for practice this year…? Well, he had plenty of
time. It was three weeks from now, after all, and it was possible none of them would even make the
team again, if unlikely.

He tried to keep his thoughts mostly light and away from the miasma that was his continued duty to
keep his family safe as he readied himself for bed and drew the curtains shut, so he wouldn't be up
half the night for no good reason but actionless worry. Yet he found his mind drifting in a different
direction. His dorm was quiet, besides Oliver's usual mutterings about quaffles and positions from his
desk with Goldstein snoring only lightly, and he felt a bit… empty. Awake, too, which was utterly
unhelpful; far too alert for the time it was. But the point was there was something that was… not
lonely, but something about the darkness within his four poster bed that made him feel alone. His
mother wasn't darting about nearby, and the ghoul wasn't curled on the floor by the foot of the bed,
legs and back just visible poking over the edge. There weren't going to be any explosions from the
twins where he could hear them, and the house elves would do the cooking that might bring his
siblings together. It was as if he'd emerged from some otherworldly cocoon where his family was all
there was, and reality had inserted itself between them and expanded. Suddenly, other things
mattered, and the time they'd spent so focused on each other and their shared suffering felt like a
strange, melancholy dream.

Which… was ridiculous since they'd been out of the house not even a day and he was already like
some maudlin parent seeing their child off to seek their fortune. Being at Hogwarts wouldn't erase
the loss or make some of them (George) forget the slights.

There was just a bigger playing field now, and a few more players.

No big deal.

Percy quietly mourned the added complexity and tried to keep that delayed panic attack about
being kidnapped by a house elf on top of everything else from destroying what little chance at sleep
he had.

Really, though. A mad, almost rogue house elf. Was he living in a fairy tale?

He turned to the left.

Plus, it wanted to protect Harry from some unnamed danger at Hogwarts. Its masters being involved
meant that at least it was likely to be something that had to remain covert, if the creature had enough
of its sanity to judge that situation at all correctly. Any family in good enough standing to have
retained a house elf was probably one of the "reformed" Death Eaters and thus, interested in
maintaining said reputation.

He fidgeted to the right.

Of course the spoons were probably burning a literal hole in the bottom of his trunk where he'd hid
them before heading to bed, if there were any anti-theft charms on them. Oh, no, wait, he'd wrapped
them in his dragonhide gloves. He was likely fine on that point.

Percy pulled the blankets a bit tighter to him.

He had actually stolen silver, in front of a house elf, no less. What had he been thinking? At least he
could identify the crest and then melt those goddamn identifying marks off of them. Percy rather
doubted Dobby would care in what form the silver was recovered.

He readjusted his pillow.
Though, probably that silver was worth more than the rest of the contents of his chest combined. Selling those and donating the proceeds to the wing Arthur was in might have solved that problem, if he could do something like that. Instead, he had to take the long way. Probably his most obvious point of access was the Malfoy heir.

Percy made a face and rolled onto his stomach.

It did seem a little low to get at the elder Malfoy through his son, but he wouldn't harm the boy. In the long run. Thinking it through now, he realized Hermione might have to take a hit, but he was sure she didn't need to be first in every class of her year. Second was more than enough to get employers' attention, which was something he'd likely have to tell himself to keep from giving up or worse, confessing. He did have a bit of a problem with telling the truth in the past. This, however, was at the very least highly unethical if not quite illegal, and it would do him no good to go around blabbing what actually occurred.

He pressed his cheek further into the pillow.

Percy didn't like the looks of this year, and he sighed as he realized he definitely wasn't going to sleep tonight.
While Percy had the best of intentions, he was sidetracked from dashing to the library after depositing his first years at the Great Hall by Penelope, who was doing the same.

"Got first year duty, huh," she said more than asked, smiling as she touched the side of his arm and made his thoughts essentially dribble out the side of his head in gibbering disarray. "Come eat with me." She mistook his inability to respond as his usual reticence to go against the tide and began to drag him to the Ravenclaw table, "Don't worry, Percy; it's not actually against the rules."

He cleared his throat and sat, belatedly, beside her, "Of course it isn't. That would be intentionally divisive."

"Of course," she echoed, an unreadable smile on her face before she began piling things on her plate.

"Is this a Prefect get-together?" The voice coming from behind them made Percy jump as Gemma squirmed her way into the slight gap between the two already seated. A rueful expression dashed his way from Penelope didn't entirely quash the ember of resentment Gemma had ignited. "Weasley, please. You're killing me here." She elbowed him lightly and Percy moved over a bit more, so the Slytherin prefect wasn't crushed between Penelope and himself. A position in which she put herself. Uninvited, if that's at all a consideration. "Sit down, Ross," she waved a hand, and Percy felt the temperature drop as her partner sat obediently across from them. He resisted the urge to drop his head in favour of glaring at an unrepentantly grinning Gemma Farley, who added, "Audrey should be invited, too."

"Strickland!" Grimmett called, despite sounding as if he couldn't care less. There was a feeling that he was loudly reading an unrecognized name off a sheet. Still, Audrey heard him, and made her way from the Hufflepuff table to theirs. It was noisy, in the center of a gaggle of prefects all gossiping about the newest additions to their broods. With the exception of Grimmett, of course.

"I've got a good bunch, this year," Audrey was telling Penelope, "They all woke each other up excited and made sure everyone was in the common room before I even came down. That would be enough to impress me, but they were introducing themselves in a circle. It's a group Helga would be proud of."

"That's unnatural," Gemma put in, breaking off her one-sided chatter at Grimmett to wave half a slice of toast at the other two girls, "You've got possessed children this year, strawhead. No kid's gonna act like a model citizen without any authority around pushing them back into place. I'd be checking their wrists for ghost marks."

"Ghost marks are just folklore," Penelope corrected, "Possession wouldn't cause any physical changes in a victim directly."

"It's an expression," Gemma enunciated clearly and rolled her eyes, "I'm saying that's weird and Kendra'd agree with me if she were up, right, Weasley?"

"Don't put that on me," Percy denied instantly. Kendra's opinions were many and changing and he didn't feel the need to misrepresent her in a time and place where Gemma could definitely recite back to her whatever Percy had said. With a shrug of dismissal from the Slytherin prefect, the discussion
quickly morphed into an argument through Gemma's gleeful prodding, and flowed well enough without any further input from Percy.

A pear in hand, he attempted to excuse himself from the table without being noticed. He still had just enough time to get to the library so long as nothing else came up. Running there, paging through The Influential Families of Magical Britain, and running back to get his first years to class would only take 20 minutes if he sprinted the whole way without stopping.

"Mr. Weasley."

He turned on his heel to face Professor McGonagall, who was holding out a schedule his direction. Percy took the sheet with a, "Thank you, ma'am," but she wasn't quite done with him.

Firmly, she made it clear she needed to have a talk with him after classes today about his siblings, and Percy felt his focus derail at the possibilities. When he immediately asked what the twins had done – he'd known they would go berserk the moment they had a change in scenery, he'd just known – she nodded to herself before addressing him, "No one is in any trouble. It's just come to my attention there are some logistics to work out," her tone was delicate, words canted as if to avoid shattering dear, fragile Percy irrevocably, "regarding your situation."

"Yes, Professor," Percy smiled sickly. Something about the way she'd approached this was making his hackles rise, "I'll be there."

"Good," she dismissed him with another nod, and Percy took a moment to tally up how much time that had wasted before reluctantly concluding he no longer had time to visit the library. Now, it'd likely have to be during lunch. Taking a mulish bite of his pear, Percy wandered back over to the Gryffindor table and absently ruffling the hair of his favoured twin- or not. The head of red hair ducked his hand, and Percy squinted to make sure he'd got the right one. He had.

Well clearly feelings were being had. He'd have to deal with them eventually, so nothing like a proactive approach, right? Percy swung a leg over the bench to face Fred, "What's wrong?"

"Oh, I don't know," Fred dug a little harder into his food with the knife, "Maybe it has something to do with you vanishing back to your prefects and your girlfriend the instant you got the chance.

There was a clacking noise as the knife hit the plate, and he stopped sawing, turning to glare at Percy, "Ginny was a nervous wreck and suddenly you're just gone. Remind you of a certain promise you made, perhaps?"

"That's not the point, Percy!" Fred ducked his head abruptly at the eyes on him from his rise in volume and continued in a lower tone, "You weren't there. I- we didn't even know if you were on the platform. Why weren't you behind us?"

"I got side-tracked," Percy admitted honestly, gearing himself up for the hard part: the lie. "An old muggle woman started asking me questions about what boarding school I was off to and you know how badly I lie."

"I got side-tracked," Percy admitted honestly, gearing himself up for the hard part: the lie. "An old muggle woman started asking me questions about what boarding school I was off to, and you know how badly I lie." He really hoped Fred didn't want to dig too deeply into that for the very same reason.

"No," Fred denied, taking Percy aback as he continued with a speculative gleam, "You're not a bad liar, you just prefer to tell the truth no matter what trouble it gets us in." Fred pointed an accusatory
finger in Percy's face, "I don't know what you're up to, but you're up to something. George and I will figure it out, so you might as well come clean now."

Thoughts wildly racing for a possible explanation that wouldn't put Fred and George on a highly conspicuous warpath, Percy put his hands up in surrender, "Okay, okay, but you're ruining the surprise. I had to find," his mind grabbed a memory of Audrey knitting, "Audrey for help finishing something for you guys for Christmas."

"Who?" Fred's lack of knowledge of one of the few people who interacted with him regularly as an authority figure somehow didn't surprise Percy. "What?"

"The Hufflepuff prefect who doesn't fall for your pranks," he said flatly.

"Right," Fred snapped his fingers, "The square-jawed lady."

"Don't be rude," Percy scolded automatically, but it was an honest statement of fact. Audrey wasn't unattractive but she had a handsome face, and a sturdy body. There was very little about her that was delicate.

"You still haven't completely answered the question," Fred pointed out instead, "And you didn't have to leave right away to find her."

"Fred," Percy wanted to put his hands on Fred's cheeks to make the boy keep his gaze, but managed to restrain himself from embarrassing them both by taking a shoulder instead, "I didn't leave you. I was on the train with you the whole time, and I'm here now. I'm not going anywhere."

"Jeez," Fred unsuccessfully attempted to dislodge Percy's hand with a roll of his shoulder, ears flushing pink, "Don't act like I'm some needy little kid. I just wanted to know where you'd been."

Right, Percy thought dryly, but kept the unhelpful sarcasm unvoiced. He released Fred and changed tacks, peering over at the sheet by Fred's plate, "Have you got what you need for classes today?"

"It's the first day," Fred groaned, moving his schedule out of Percy's line of sight, "We're not doing anything that needs anything but a wand, Perce."

"Well, technically, you should revise a bit before each class," Percy pointed out, and Fred pulled on George's sleeve, who had been politely ignoring the conversation up until this point.

"He's trying to convert me again. Help," he mock-whined to his twin, but Percy knew when not to push. Sometimes. He was already up from the table and heading down toward the first years before George could think of anything to push him away.

Lately, ignoring or avoiding George seemed to be incredibly effective at helping Percy in following his own rules and keeping his temper. Especially now that Bill wasn't there to pick on and take a bit of the heat off of Percy. The other elder Weasley hadn't been without his uses.

He ruined Ron and Harry's hair successfully as he passed – although with Harry, there was very little that could be called ruined when there was so little order to the crazy alignments in the first place – and felt it made up for being denied the chance to do so with Fred. Ron caught his sleeve, and whispered something about wanting to talk to him at lunch about the thing and Percy nodded silently as his time to himself to figure things out quietly burned in front of him, quickly moving past once Ron seemed satisfied with his acquiescence.

Ginny was sitting with her year group, looking a bit subdued. Thusly, Percy inserted himself beside her, and asked, "Any nagging questions, yet?"
"Can a House go into negative points?" A boy on Ginny's other side piped up immediately, looking enthused at the prospect, and Percy mentally noted that he should find out that one's name. "It's just that I heard from my sister that she heard Professor Sprout saying to Professor McGonagall that your brothers might drive the Gryffindor House into the negatives this year!"

"It hasn't happened in a very long time," Percy hedged, wondering if this was what Professor McGonagall wanted to talk to him about that evening. His answer seemed to open the gates on a deluge of curiosity, oddly centering mostly on the twins rather than on classes. It appeared his brothers were minor celebrities in the Gryffindor house, somehow overshadowing Harry. Well, except to the Creevey kid who seemed to have stars in his eyes and his heart in his throat when he asked about him. Still, Percy's practically asked for this, so he powered through until breakfast was nearly over, when he stood with a clap, cutting off any more questions, "Are we all ready for our first class of the day?"

Depositing the first years safely in their first class was less nerve wracking than herding his siblings through London, but Ginny wasn't hanging off his arm babbling at him this time. He panicked, for a moment, that she'd been infected with Fred's irritation, but when he caught her eye she smiled at him, and he returned it quickly, relieved. There was only so much he could handle in a day. She must just be getting used to being at Hogwarts, and not need her older brother to hang around so much. There was a little pang at the thought but Percy pushed it down where all the unpleasant things went and waved off the group, heading for his own class. He'd have just enough time to look over his notes before class started. When he arrived in Charms, Oliver was bent over his notebook, studiously going over what was written there, and Percy sat beside him to do the same. It was only when he heard Oliver's usual muttering included the name Potter that he realized what Oliver was really doing.

He flipped the notebook shut without remorse, ignoring Oliver's cry of protest and slid his own notes over between them.

"If you're going to review something before class, review for the actual class," Percy hissed, irritated that he'd wasted a bit of pride on someone that didn't deserve it.

"Oi, I've got tryouts coming up and I have to figure out how to make sure I get the best of the best," Oliver argued, voice tight and hair mussed, "And I desperately need a decent back up seeker this year. I can't just cross my fingers and hope; I've got to take initiative!"

"Take initiative in your studies," Percy muttered, but didn't fight when Oliver pushed Percy's notes back where they belonged and opened his notebook again with a huff. Oliver was already deep in Quidditch stress and would likely not return to rational thought until after the first game. It was unseasonably early this year, but as Percy skimmed through last year's Charms notes, he reasoned that they'd also had an early chill this fall, so it was possible Oliver was being influenced by the change in weather.

"If I could guarantee Potter's safety, I wouldn't need a backup seeker," Oliver was muttering. The idea that perhaps Oliver could be an ally in ferreting out whatever danger the mad elf had warned of rose quietly in Percy's mind. "Of course, I could just petition the teachers to delay games until all of a team's players are out of hospital." And promptly died a fierce death.

It was a good thing Percy was used to Oliver's mutterings or he wouldn't have gotten through his notes before Professor Flitwick started the lesson. "This is why I have O's and you have A's," Percy murmured after Oliver was blindsided by a simple revision question.

He waved this off, already descending back into his unique madness, "This is why you'll never be a
Quidditch Captain." It had nothing to do with Percy having little interest in the game. Of course not.

Oliver ignored Percy's sniff as they both turned back to their own self-appointed duties.

Lunch rolled around and Percy beelined for his youngest brother, who dragged him along with Harry and Hermione out of the Great Hall and into a nearby alcove.

"Alright," Ron whispered conspiratorially, "We've been looking into where Dobby could have come from, like you said. We think he had to come from a Death Eater family. I think it's gotta be Malfoy, on account of his undying devotion to Harry," Harry elbowed him, "but Hermione says we gotta narrow it down more before we can say for certain. What should we do?" The three of them turned trusting eyes on him, and Percy swallowed down the uncomfortable twist of his gut. It wasn't a lie. He'd just answer the question. What should they do to narrow down where the elf had come from?

"Check who could pose a danger in Hogwarts," he found himself saying quietly, "The elf would only know danger was coming if their masters had something to do with it."

"So families with Death Eater ties and children in Hogwarts," Hermione said softly, with the air of one thinking aloud, "Or who have a place on the Board of Governors."

Percy nodded, "Rich families with house elves tend to have a seat on the Wizengamot, so you could look up who voted against the failed bill regulating treatment of house elves."

"What do you mean, the failed bill regulating treatment?" Hermione asked, refocusing intently on reality, "Was it unneeded?"

"From the looks of Dobby, I doubt that," Harry muttered.

"Look it up," Percy said, patting her shoulder with a finality borne of his growing desire to leave both this conversation and the guilt at deceiving them behind.

"Thanks, Percy," Ron chirped, dragging Hermione away as Harry waved and followed behind. The girl was lost in thought, and it seemed a bit… ominous.

Well, maybe it'd distract them a bit.

Either way, Percy wouldn't worry about it now; Hermione was the most sensible of the trio, after all. As the day progressed, he and Oliver had their customary bouts over where focus should lie during class – Oliver nearly melted their cauldron during Potions and Percy nearly accidentally dipped Oliver's team notes into the flames, as would only be fair – and Kendra seemed to have warmed up to him again. He hadn't put her off for good with his snappiness on the train, thankfully. A trip through the Forbidden Forest with bloody steak spelled to his back would probably be more pleasant than a year with Kendra feeling tetchy with him.

"Please partner me in Potions this year," he begged her as classes let out, but she held her hands up defensively, shaking her head.

"If I doom someone else to Oliver, they'll kill me," she laughed, "Your best friend, your problem."

"You've been very helpful," he informed her snidely, and she giggled as she ran off to catch up with her friends.

Honestly, he asked someone every year and he had yet to receive a different response, so he wasn't overly torn up about it. Just resigned to E's in Potions.

It rankled, just a bit.
He almost turned towards the library, his underlying worry about the family who owned the mad house elf taking his feet and setting them on the path without conscious decision on his part, but at the last minute, Professor McGonagall's desire to meet with him bubbled back up in his thoughts. An about-face brought him crashing almost directly into Professor Snape's chest.

Percy flushed at the sneer on the Potions Master's face as he dashed around him, babbling apologies and bowing his way out of the situation. Oddly, Gryffindor didn't suffer any point loss as he fled. Perhaps he'd reacted quickly enough to spew contrite nonsense over whatever the professor might have said that he'd actually managed to distract the man long enough for him to escape unscathed. As he rigidly made his hasty way to Professor McGonagall's office, he wasn't going to question the bit of luck. He was due, dammit.

"Professor?" He prompted, knocking on the open door and startling Professor McGonagall from the papers she was looking at. They couldn't be essays, as it was the first day of class, and she swept them out of sight as she waved him in to take a seat.

"Good afternoon, Percy," she said, wordlessly offering him a biscuit as she tilted the tin his direction.

"Ah, no, thank you, Professor," he waved off the slightly stale vanilla wafers, leaning forward a bit as anxiety rushed over him again. She was softening the blow. That meant it had to be something bad, right? It wasn't the twins, Ginny was starting to normalize, Ron and Harry were distracted… Was it him? But really, what could she possibly want to talk about, regarding Percy? It had to be something else. "What was it you wanted to speak with me about, ma'am?"

"Yes, right to it, then," she set down the tin, appearing to gather herself, "I needed to straighten out emergency contacts, should any of you end up in the hospital wing for more than Quidditch bruises this year… And of course, in the case of academic accolades or violations." It seemed like an addendum to the possible harm. Due to the twins, or…? Professor McGonagall was ridiculously upright, her spine stiff though her lips weren't tight, and her face gave nothing away, but her fingers. They moved, ever so slightly, as if to begin kneading worriedly at the desk and then stopped. Twitching to begin the action before she'd notice and stop. Could the danger Dobby warned of be known to the professors already?

"Well, I'd be the first stop," Percy found himself saying. The professor gave him a look which spiked his anxiety up past the threshold of irritation, "Charlie and Bill work in the field and are frequently out of contact, so anything requiring immediate action should be brought to me." His tone was harder than he'd intended, and he added, "Respectfully, ma'am."

Her eyes were steelier now as she looked at him searchingly a long moment. Whatever she found, she nodded without another word on it, moving on. "Would Charlie or Bill be the next to contact?"

Well, right now, he'd prefer Bill, despite the man's initial reaction to his ghoul and the one-sided friction between them. After all, Bill had actually stopped in. No, again, he was being unfair. Who was he to say what a normal level of occupation was when it came to dealing with actual dragons? "Charlie," Percy replied, trying not to let any of his reluctance show and risk losing the forward momentum he'd gained with her, "Then Bill. Charlie's more likely to be within a reasonable distance of a floo when he's out, and Bill has a mobile base camp."

"Understandable," she said, and scrawled down the information on a sheet like the ones Percy had seen Madam Pomphrey perusing in the hospital wing. That might have been the end of it had she not hesitated before beginning to dismiss him. "Well, that's all I needed to discuss; unless you'd like to talk about anything, Mr. Weasley?"

He knew she knew something, and it was something relevant to himself or his family, and
like hell Percy was leaving the office until she spilled. "Actually, I do have a question, Professor. If you have time, of course."

"Of course," she echoed, looking a little surprised Percy had taken up on the offer so quickly. Or at all. Before she could steel herself again, Percy knew he had to catch her off guard.

Directly, then, "There's something endangering us this year, isn't there?"

A moment of silence before a mild curse escaped her, and the tension ran from her frame, leaving resignation and no little irritation. Seeing Percy's little jolt backwards at the language from a professor, she sighed, rubbing at her temple, "I apologize for my outburst," her tone grew more heated, "but I told Albus one of you would catch on eventually. I just didn't expect it so soon. Just favour me one concession." She levelled a stare at him, "Tell him you figured it out before speaking with me; I don't need him believing I broke and told you earlier." A considering mien slid into her expression, "How did you figure it out?"

There wasn't any harm in that, was there? …Unless she'd been about to obliviate him, but Percy couldn't believe that of a professor. "You emphasized injury a bit much, and, well… Your fingers, Professor." That tone was as diplomatic and apologetic as he could make it. No one liked to have a tell.

Professor McGonagall glanced down and restrained said digits from their pseudo-kneading gesture, placing them primly into her lap and clearing her throat, "This doesn't go past us, Mr. Weasley. Albus plans to inform Bill and Charlie himself, and none other, do you understand?" At Percy's agreement, she softened, a bit of pain filtering into her eyes as she reached for the tin again, taking a biscuit herself and pushing it a bit more insistently towards Percy, who conceded. Silently holding his biscuit, Percy waited for the professor to work herself up to whatever it was the mad house elf had warned him about. And waited. And…

"Does it have to do with a house elf?" He prodded, finally, and the professor glanced up at him with a start.

"Yes, actually." He was favoured with a long look before Professor McGonagall visibly decided to leave it for another date, leaning in a bit and actually taking Percy's hand in a gesture they were both clearly uncomfortable with, "You see, the Aurors didn't find anything strange about your mother's death," Percy startled, unintentionally tightening his grip on the professor's hand, to which she gave a comforting squeeze, "But Albus had helped place wards that spring, as- as a favour to your parents, since Molly wanted to take in Harry for the last half of your summer holiday. A non-human tripped the wards that night, minutes before the… incident. At first, Albus thought it would be an animal of some sort, and so he kept it quiet, but he- he looked it over anyway, and it's come to light…"

"A house elf," Percy heard himself say, in a hushed voice as a fire started soft in his blood until it was screaming in his ears. Could it… Was it possible-

"Exactly so," Professor McGonagall replied in that same soft tone, eyes on the table, "We're unable to determine who sent it, but," her eyes rose back to his, fiery, and he couldn't appreciate the support, couldn't stop thinking that- "we will not let them get away with this, Percy. Leave it to Albus, and he will get justice." She squeezed his hand again, "And we'll keep you safe."

"I have to go," Percy said, standing and ripping his hand from her grip. "Percy." She was still calling him by his first name, in that voice. That soft, pitying sound. "You-"

"I won't tell a soul who doesn't already know," he swore, vision bleeding red around the edges as his heart beat shot skywards, the pulses blending like a roar only he could hear, and he was gone.
When he surfaced the first time, he was waiting impatiently at the bottom of the steps to the girls' dorms, and a frightened looking first year pointed down at him, fleeing once the girl next to her – Ginny, his sister – recognized where she was pointing and began working her way down.

"I need to borrow your pendant." His voice was acting without him, almost calm if it weren't for the biting sound of the consonants and the gritted teeth he hid behind tight lips.

"You said to never take it off," she teased before Percy's mood sunk in and she was already handing it over before he could snap at her, "Okay, but I want it back, I've got used to it."

"Sure," he said, snatching the necklace and stalking from the room as the red flooded his vision again now that his sister wasn't in its path.

There was a pull, like something had grabbed that third hand and started tugging in the direction it wanted him to go, and in his fury he stalked after it. The stone floor that took his every forceful step turned to grass beneath his feet as he followed the feeling, pendant in a white-knuckled grip.

He didn't have the emotional capacity to be surprised when the locus of this pull was a familiar loping figure emerging from the forest.

"In theory, this should work," he said aloud, the presence of a given co-conspirator bringing his higher functions a bit closer to the forefront. His voice came out at a soft low that didn't adequately reflect the turmoil beneath the words, but his ghoul's hiss-like, rattling growl took care of that nicely.

His blood and the identifier of the mad elf were already mixed in the pendant, all he had to do was reach through it and grab-

A pop announced Dobby's arrival, and Percy pointed, knowing somehow that this time the ghoul would finally cooperate, "Fetch." It leapt to Dobby, snatching the elf in two hands and loping back to Percy even as the mad little creature began to cry. Percy hadn't let go of what made the elf, and it seemed that kept it from leaving. A squeeze from Percy cut off the crying.

"Thieving Wheezy is bad, bad," Dobby hiccupped, eyes wide with fright, no longer wildly flailing in body and spirit against the bonds, "Thieving Wheezy must let Dobby go!"

"Were you ever at the Burrow before the spider?" Percy demanded, easily ignoring the twinge in his gut at the tears as he steamrolled the guilt with fury, and keeping his voice below a shout only because he didn't want to get caught, "Tell the truth, Dobby! Did you visit the Burrow on your master's orders?"

"No, no!" Dobby cried out, struggling briefly against Percy and the ghoul's holds, both, before the elf fell limp again, tears rolling over its cheeks with a murmured, "Let go."

"Swear it on your life," Percy replied instantly, "And your magic."

"Dobby swears," the elf spat, unhappiness written in every line of its face, misery dripping from its words, "Let Dobby go, Bad Wheezy."

The words began to register, and the fact that they seemed sincere. The fury faded with nothing to burn, and Percy's grip on Dobby loosened, "I'm sorry."

Betrayed, tearful eyes dashed Percy's way before the elf snapped its fingers and the silver from Percy's trunk appeared in its hands. Not a moment later it disappeared and so did Dobby.

"No!" Percy cried out a moment too late. He fell to his knees and slammed one fist against the
ground. It wasn't enough but it felt a bit better than before, and he brought his fist down again and
again until the skin was purpling and his heavy breath caught in his throat. The ghoul crouched in
front of him in a ready stance, watching him unreadably as the hitch became the beginnings of a sob.
"I can't cry," he said nonsensically, as the tears were already freely falling down his face, "I don't
have time to sit here and cry. I haven't so far and I won't now… I…" The words dissolved under the
tears' steady assault and he lurched forward, catching the ghoul by surprise for once when he locked
his arms around its waist and began to let loose heaving, ugly sobs into its overalls.

The ghoul's first, unnoticed reaction was to panic. It patted his head, then his back, then desperately
put both hands flat on his back as he was doing to it, crooning as it did. To Percy, he'd just gotten the
first hug that was meant to comfort him since his mother died. It was a pretty crap hug, but that didn't
stop the second wave of sobs after the first died down, clutching a bit harder at his familiar than
would have been comfortable with a human. Not that the ghoul's skeletal frame translated well to
comfort, on his part. "I'm sorry," he said, realizing he was sobbing all over what was essentially a
very intelligent animal, and while it could probably realize he was in distress, it clearly was feeding
over into the ghoul's distress. A laugh escaped him as the second realization that he'd just apologized
like it could understand hit him. A laugh that turned into something hysterical between tears and
laughter as it patted his head in seeming forgiveness and he remembered it probably could.

The sun touching the horizon was what brought Percy back to the world when he'd laughed himself
hoarse. He wiped inelegantly at his nose with the sleeve of his robes and the ghoul carefully pushed
at his face with the heel of one palm – Percy could recognize it as an attempt to wipe tears without
stabbing him in the eye, but all it accomplished was making him fall back onto his backside. They
stared at one another for a moment after the failed trial and Percy broke the silence with a snort. He
closed his eyes on the hovering ghoul and took a deep, shaky breath, tilting his head back and
opening his eyes on the sky.

Not everything was ruined. If Dobby dared to speak a word about the theft or its involvement with
Percy, it'd probably be put on the block by its masters, and he doubted the mad little thing had
enough loyalty to go through with something like that. As for spite, he… hoped it didn't. He could
still remember the crest, but he'd need to draw it soon if he didn't want the details to fade. Or write a
description of it, as Percy was pants at drawing. As for what had… happened, with the- the new
information… He'd deal with it. Percy would just- he'd deal with it. Maybe he was at a loss for what
to do now, but there had to be something and he would find it. Percy sniffled somewhat pathetically,
and made his way back up to his feet, dirt everywhere and his eyes no doubt puffy and red.

"How do I look?" He asked the ghoul, holding his arms out in display of his sorry state with half a
self-deprecating smirk. It snorted back at him and he laughed, dropping his arms and raising a hand
to scratch behind the ghoul's ear, "How did you even get here? Did you hop a train the moment I
left?" He couldn't imagine such a scene but honestly, how else- There was a popping noise, like a
house elf's version of apparition, and the ghoul was gone from his hands, soon reappearing with
another pop and a gleeful air.

When Percy stood frozen for too long, it nudged at his hands with a whine and he automatically
resumed scratching. God, it could teleport. It could teleport. How the hell could it teleport? It had…
seen a house elf disappear once, according to half a conversation he'd overheard his mother having
with the ghoul once. Usually, when Percy had walked in on his mother very seriously interrogating
his continuously silent ghoul, he'd turned right back around and left the room. Now, though, he was
starting to regret that. How could this creature learn from mimicry so quickly? How…

Percy stopped the movement of his fingers, prompting the ghoul to open its eyes and meet his with
an agitated huff.
How smart was it?

"Do you want a name?" Percy asked, hesitantly, feeling a fool for even wondering-

It nodded.

"Shit," Percy blurted, then at the shuttered look in the ghoul's eyes, grabbed at its shoulders, hastening to explain, "I'm sorry, that was- I just didn't know. I didn't realize you were..." His voice grew quiet, small with awe, "I didn't know you were thinking in there." Obviously, it couldn't respond, and when Percy remembered that, he hugged it instead, "I've been treating you like... Well." He drew back, straightening his shirt, voice turning officious as he pushed aside the guilt for later, "Well, you're just as much a part of the family as anyone else. You're a Weasley, and you need a first name." The ghoul sort of... barked at him. It wasn't quite dog-like, but it was the best description Percy had for the noise. Whatever it was, it sounded pleased, and Percy ruffled its hair. "We'll go through a bunch, but after I... Oh. Oh, I am in trouble." A recognizable set of figures was hurrying his way, and when the ghoul made to slink off into the forest at the approaching strangers, Percy restrained it by the elbow, "By I, I meant we." The ghoul circled behind him with a huff, looming over his shoulder but very clearly and un成功fully attempting to hide itself. Percy had the feeling it had been coached by Molly on how to act outside and set upon the world with very little thought to the consequences. Damn it, he'd known she was up to something when she'd given in so easily after nagging so much on the possibility that he might need the ghoul.

Really, this was all her fault.

"Professors," he drew himself up and attempted to look as professional as he could in his slightly skewed, horn-rimmed glasses and his dirt covered robes. The ensemble was only topped off by the puffiness to his face and eyes, and his rasping wonder of a voice completed the impression of an utterly ruined young man. Still, he forged on, drawing on every inch of pride as he iterated the time-honored words to his audience. "I can explain."

Professors Sprout and McGonagall had their wands pointed at the ghoul as they approached, but upon registering the relative positions of the creature and their student, the wands lowered slightly, without vanishing up sleeves or into holsters.

"A second year came crying into my greenhouse that someone was being mauled by a ghoul on the edge of the grounds," Professor Sprout didn't take her eyes off the creature as she spoke, and Professor McGonagall was eyeing the scene with a calculating air, "What's happened here, Mr. Weasley?"

"Well, no one was mauled," Percy rasped, before his manners came back to him and he flushed at having spoken in such a way in front of his professors, correcting himself with a hasty bow. "I apologize for that, Professors. It's been a... tumultuous evening."

Professor McGonagall nodded sharply, knowing part of the truth of that claim, but still cut straight to the point, "Is the ghoul a danger, Mr. Weasley?"

"No, it's..." He glanced up at the ghoul and started again, not without a cough for the effort, "He's my familiar."

Both Professors reacted somewhat viscerally, but the flinch, the widened eyes, were the extent of it. Their wands lowered, Professor McGonagall's before the Hufflepuff Head.

"I hadn't thought you'd buy into the reckless antics of your brothers," Professor McGonagall said smartly, words crisp and unaffected, "But I suppose it had to out somehow." Probably she thought
he'd somehow found himself in a position to nurse a wounded graveyard ghoul back to life, or in other words, some horribly dangerous scenario in which he took the most foolish option available to him. Well, rather than Bill's initial reaction; Percy certainly wasn't going to correct her.

"I… apologize?" He offered and she nodded curtly, acknowledging the attempt as her eyes softened.

"I imagine your distress called… him?" Her tone became uncertain on the pronoun, but Percy's lack of protest firmed up her assumption, and she asked, quietly, "Do you want to come back to my office and talk?" At his hesitation, she added, "That's not an order, Percy."

"No, thank you, Professor." It was an attempt at kindness that Percy couldn't take. He couldn't afford spilling more than he'd intended if he broke down as he had just now. Doubly careful, he'd have to be doubly careful not to let something like this happen again, now that he'd alienated an unstable ally and learned of a new foe. All he had would have to go into this, so he could keep his family safe and together. Turning his mind to more practical logistics and clearing his throat ineffectually, Percy started, "I'm unable to – ah- send my familiar back home; is there a way he can… stay?"

The professors eyed the mess of awkward predator looming behind the bespectacled Gryffindor prefect and Professor Sprout said wryly, "I figured this would come up the second you said familiar. They're not the type of creatures you can easily leave behind."

"Hagrid!" Professor McGonagall had taken a different approach, and was already stalking off towards the groundkeeper's hut, calling his name with a slightly desperate edge to the tone. Professor Sprout shot him a mixed look of lingering curiosity and amusement and followed after, beckoning for Percy to do the same.

"Well, pal," Percy murmured to the ghoul as they obeyed, "Welcome to Hogwarts."

The last response he expected from the ghoul was a snort, and he refused to sort out the implications of it in his mind. After all, the base shed from which the Burrow had originally grown was an old Prewitt property his mother had brought with her as dowry, and the ghoul had been inherited along with it. There were a great many years unaccounted for in his life and Percy refused to believe he had spent any of them at Hogwarts. *I mean, this is all getting to be a bit much for a creature I paid no mind for most of my life. Wasn't a familiar supposed to make life a little easier?*

A sigh, "You're going to drive me mad before the rest of them do."

Chapter End Notes

Don't forget to comment and tell me how worried you are the ghoul will become a Mary Sue with beautiful blue hair and the powers to defeat both Voldemort and racism in one fabulous wave of its talons!
Chapter 10

He was finally here. Finishing what they'd begun. Advancing the cause and laying the groundwork for their glorious future. Together. The moonlight spilled silver over the scene, revealing himself and his servant. Normally that would worry him, but he knew she lived alone. He'd been there to see her parents taken, after all. Fingers spread through cold grass, sliding against coarse dirt and he laughed quietly at the sensation. He'd never get over being able to do that again.

"Master," the nearby elf whimpered, and he snapped a nonchalant pain spell in its direction.

"What did I say about speaking while we're working?" he hissed pleasantly, air escaping teeth gritted in a grin more mad than merry as the elf thrashed silently, biting its lip in agonized discipline. "No, the time for chatter is over." The fingers he'd buried in the dirt were joined by a wand and soon a yellow glow spread from the point of impact, flooding the earth until it splashed against an unseen boundary and redirected in a thin line about the barrier.

His eyes flashed with glee as they darted upward to the revealed house, his hand easing a potion's vial from his pocket.

"Hello Amy."

Chapter 10

Hagrid took to the ghoul with the same sparkling glee he had for anything that seemed likely to give a small child nightmares, and Percy soon abandoned the ghoul to Hagrid's over-affectionate smothering, despite the slight light of panic in the creature's eyes.

Better him than Percy.

Besides, it allowed him to procrastinate a little on choosing a name for a sentient being, oh god. Did he really need to add something like that on top of his more pressing issues? Not that it wasn't the right thing to do and all that... Oh, hang it, he didn't have time to argue with himself. He'd dig up his History of Magic notes and go over names with the ghoul... tomorrow night? He'd leave it up to the ghoul to decide. That should work. It'd double as review. There, he had one problem half-way to resolution.

Percy tugged at his earlobe in agitation at the numerous others that pressed in on him in its absence. However, it wasn't until he walked through the front door of Hogwarts that they hit him in a rather physical fashion. Or, well, not physical.

It felt like he was being blinded and deafened by sheer overload. He hadn't thought when he'd pulled Dobby to him – the haphazard block his mother had drilled into him was gone. The castle was like a cacophony of bells and sirens, or- or- Percy couldn't think through the crush. It wasn't until McGonagall had passed shaking him and moved onto levitating him to the Hospital Wing that he managed to claw his way through the sheer sensation to fight his way free of the charm.

"Migraine," he gritted out, finding his feet by some miracle of uncharacteristic coordination, "Happens sometimes. I just need to go sit in the dark for a while."

She visibly hesitated, even to Percy's eyes, and when it seemed she was going to relent, Percy thanked his spotless past that she believed him, "Alright, Mr. Weasley. Would you like me to escort you there?"
"No, thank you, Professor; I'll be fine," he paused, wracked his brain for the appropriate ending and forced a half-bow, slow, to keep his balance, "I appreciate the concern."

Following a stop in the bathroom to manage the worst of his appearance, his hand clasped the pendant and he set himself automatically to the next task, still figuring out and building courage for the other things he'd have to do. Floors felt as if they fell away from him. His vision twisted and drew away. The journey was like a psychedelic tilt-a-whirl until he made it to Ginny, still in the Common Room, scribbling away with a textbook open next to her and a million and one bonds running through her like everyone else in the bloody castle. Percy let the pendant fall into her range of view from behind, making her startle and shut her notebook.

"Oh," was all she said as the situation registered, snatching back the pendant and returning it to its usual place, musing aloud, "You know, it's kind of cool that all our siblings have one of these now. Why did you need mine, though?"

"...Tune up," Percy replied cryptically, stealing his father's usual transparent excuse for going out to enchant the car before he could think it through and stop himself. He flinched at his own reference, but Ginny wasn't fazed.

"Fine, don't tell me," she muttered, flicking her fingers at him in clear dismissal as she returned to her notes. Normally, Percy would address that sass, but he didn't want to discourage her actual interest in learning, and left her to her own devices. Plus, he was pretty much done with the day as a whole and he thought the feeling might be mutual. He'd need a bit of strength just to make his way up the stairs without looking noticeably wobbly.

"Send her up before it's too late, please?" He murmured quietly to Kendra, curled in an armchair with a Lockhart book, as he passed.

"Yeah, yeah," she promised with heart-warming devotion and a steadfast assurance, waving a hand at him without lifting her gaze from the book, "I know how lights out works for the firsties."

He paused, noting the sass parallels between the two girls, and wondering if he wanted to encourage any interaction at all between them both. It was just a reminder to get some sleep at a reasonable hour, though. That was nothing that could forge a bond or create an undue amount of influence… right? Shaking that train of thought away, Percy decided he was still a little affected by his breakdown of logical thought and probably needed to turn in early, the crush of sensation within the castle aside.

Upon making it to his bed, he pushed to the floor the dossiers of various young Gryffindor students which had spread from Oliver's bed to his, ignoring the protests of his harried looking friend and the silent pleading eyes of his dormmates. The curtain swished shut and Percy curled inward in the dark against the distorted sense of reality his accidental block-breaking had induced. He honestly had very little idea how he'd managed the block in the first place; his mother had been going on about turning himself inside-out and he'd been sort of ineffectually scrabbling about with his inner senses when something had popped and almost tore, it seemed. Abruptly, Molly's lecture had turned to approval, and Percy had shrugged and called it a day because he'd been terminally exhausted of late and his curiosity had been beaten to dust.

He would just have to attempt to replicate it now.

It took a few hours of needed sleep from him, but eventually his blind fumblings produced a weaker version of the original pop, and the world was no longer painted in twisting technicolor screams.

Everything was just a little… bright, to describe it visually. Distracting and uncomfortable, but not
impossible to deal with. Finally, Percy could take his shoes off and slip under the covers, even if he was fully clothed. At this point, he didn't much care.

Oh, it had been a long day, and he wasn't particularly looking forward to tomorrow.

Which… started off just under the same degree of terrible. He woke up to rumors circulating that a rabid graveyard ghoul had made its way onto the grounds and begun munching on innocent passers-by, which, of course, had Ginny and the twins on him within minutes, demanding he take them to see the ghoul before breakfast, and eating into his time to work on his academic and – ahem- bigger problems. He unleashed his siblings on the ghoul, reminded them to leave time to get to the Great Hall and eat, and trudged his way through half an essay while he shovelled through an unseasoned bowl of oatmeal and rubbed at his temples which didn't actually ache. It was hard to deal with a pain that wasn't quite pain. At least it had been a quick acclimatization for once. He hadn't been looking forward to potentially being out of commission for a week as Molly had allegedly experienced.

On top of all this, his Head of House kept shooting glances at him, lips pursed and brow furrowed in concern. He smiled pointedly at her and she smiled back with the same edge.

Well. Percy could recognize the for your own good look from a mile away and he resolved to avoid being alone with her for the foreseeable future. On the bright side, fleeing now would leave him enough time to actually identify the family for which Dobby worked. He filed away his essay, told the whispering trio of Ron, Hermione, and Harry to visit Hagrid later today, and made it nearly three feet out of the Great Hall before he tripped over Penelope coming around the corner.

"Penelope!" He managed to right himself and grabbed her shoulders to keep her from falling, as well. "What are you doing here? I mean, how are you doing? H- how is your day going?"

"It started off pretty well," she smiled sleepily, winking past Percy at a fellow Ravenclaw male, who blushed and hurried into the Great Hall. Her smile turned to Percy, who attempted to keep his own from becoming strained, and she patted his arm, "Thanks for the steadying hand, but after such an exhausting start to the day, I do need sustenance."

"What?" As he said it, Percy registered he was still holding onto her shoulders, and released them, brushing them off once as if he'd dirtied them and taking a step back, "Oh, my apologies."

"Still on for Friday night study sessions?" At his nod, she brushed past him into the Great Hall with another smile, leaving only a light floral scent behind her.

"What did I mean, what are you doing here? It's the Great Hall. She's obviously getting breakfast," Percy muttered as he shook himself back into motion and marched with no little determination towards the library, a hand still ineffectually at his temple, "Smooth, Percival."

The journey was much smoother than Percy, and he nodded at Madam Pince on the way in, slipping into the aisles of books and towards the right section with the ease of familiarity. He went towards the most likely books – one on historical pedigree and another on influential families of wizarding Britain – and turned only to immediately arrest his movement to avoid tripping over the three second years that had evidently followed him in with the silent padding of a cat. A trio of cats. Whatever.

He kept the exclamation trapped through force of habit – this was a library. Still, the heart beat pounding in his ears had yet to abate.

"What are you doing here?" Percy demanded quietly, and this time the question was justified, even if the edge was due more to his own guilt than anything they might have done.
"Following you," Ron admitted shamelessly, even as Hermione and Harry flushed slightly at his bluntness and he got an elbow in one side and a mild whack to the shoulder in the other. He rolled his eyes, clearly unharmed by the mild rebukes. "Did you have an idea about," his voice dropped in a cartoonish caricature of stealth, in stark contrast to the three students' practiced silent approach, "Dobby's family?"

"Yes," Percy admitted, immediately. He knew when he was caught and now he'd need to run damage control, "I was going to tell you tonight if your homework was done; I hear you have an essay due next Monday…?"

Ron steamrolled over his attempt at a delay, "Yeah, we've got the whole weekend to work on it, though. Seriously, Percy, I don't need to work on homework as much as you think I do." Ron glanced at his companions for support under Percy's judgement; Hermione's expression was somewhere between disgust and exasperation, but she nodded anyway to back him up. There was a just this once reluctance to it, though Harry's nod had no such hesitation.

It… did involve them. Percy would prefer to be left to do it himself, but… If he took the same approach as he was with Mr. Malfoy, where he tried his best to neutralize them with kindness – or alliance… The power of friendship, really. Then, it would be more effective if his claims that his family had "seen the light" weren't constantly battling the actual actions of his family.

The real sticking point was: would it put them in danger? Or would it make them safer?

Percy hadn't wanted them to run in and muss everything up, but… They had the anti-Dobby pendants, barring Hermione, who was only peripherally Percy's responsibility through his prefect duties, and they were trapped in Hogwarts, unable to confront whoever it was except through their child. Of course, there was the possibility the child could be an issue, but… If they didn't know, and whoever was connected to the coming danger caught on to Percy… That "child" might be a prefect, or someone the kids would trust to a degree, if they weren't warned.

"Alright, so I got a… tip from someone on the crest of the family involved," Percy informed them in a quiet voice, "I promised not to say anything about them, but I can tell you that they're a reliable source, in this case."

"What?" Ron exclaimed ever so slightly too loudly, but Hermione shushed him even as Percy shot him a quelling glare. After a moment of silence revealed no angered librarian about to swoop down on them, Ron rolled his eyes at them both and asked more quietly, "Who?"

"That is none of your business," Percy sniffed, scribbling out a brief description of the crest and handing it to Hermione. When she tried to take it, however, Percy didn't let go, waiting for the three of them to look at him curiously before he spoke, "This is a serious matter. You can't go waving this around, and once you're done with it, burn it. We don't need anyone else knowing about this," he paused and looked to Ron, "Including the twins. You can tell Ginny to stay away from whoever this crest belongs to, but the twins…" Ron shuddered and nodded, before scampering away with Harry and Hermione into the aisles as Percy released the parchment scrap. No one deserved Fred and George on a mission. Percy would hesitate to say even You Know Who deserved that. Idle chaos was just their low energy setting.

Besides, they were highly unlikely to trust anyone with an iota of authority.

Thanks to this tendency, Percy awaited the day they joined a radical terrorist group promoting anarchy with baited breath. He wouldn't be in the least surprised.

…He was already regretting letting Ron and friends know. Was this really the right choice? But
Percy really didn't like lying, and he'd had to do enough of it lately... No point second guessing what was done. So he'd stop now. Or now. Percy determinedly put the worry from his mind; it was done. Searching for the book he wanted, he was pleasantly surprised to find Hermione had it in hand, and looked to be grabbing his second choice absently as she balanced the first open book in her other hand. She was... disconcertingly quick about it.

"Are you sure of this bit about a star in the upper right-hand corner?" she murmured, passing the second book to Harry, who sighed and opened it, Ron holding up the parchment scrap for Harry to compare description with text and crowding in.

"Ah, yes," Percy finally replied when Hermione glanced up curiously from her book at the lengthy silence.

"Might it have been a small sun, instead?" Hermione pressed, flipping the book around for him to see the hand-drawn illustration that Influential Families of Magical Britain was known for, "Like this?"

"It might have," he admitted after a moment to consider the crest, "The rest looks accurate, too." To be honest, his reluctance stemmed mostly from how ridiculously expedient the young girl had been. A stab of jealousy surprised him and he shook it away. She was right. That was the crest he'd seen. Just because it had taken him days to get to the library and she'd found the damn thing in a second...

"That's the Malfoys, then," Hermione said flatly, shutting the book with a matter of fact air about her, "Why am I not surprised?"

"It's always Malfoy," Ron confirmed, letting a fist fall into his open palm gravely.

"Has it ever been Malfoy before, really?" Harry asked curiously, but Ron shushed him with a repeated, "Always."

"What can we do about him?" Hermione muttered, with an air of distraction, "We don't have proof for Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape isn't likely to mind us. Maybe Professor Flitwick...?"

"Professor Flitwick?" Ron echoed, "Really?"

"Honestly, Ron, just because he's a bit short," the lecture began.

Now, normally, Percy was all for going to an authority figure with new information, but he already had a plan. One he wasn't entirely sure a professor would give approval to. "This isn't a matter for the professors, Hermione," Percy admonished lightly, trying for knowing and hitting condescending, "None of the incidents occurred on school grounds."

She looked a bit torn at the reprimand from a prefect, and another sharp little stab of guilt sunk just one smidgen deeper into Percy's gut, "Even still, can't the professors help?"

"There's nothing they can do without proof, as you noted earlier," Percy reminded her, pushing down his own unease over the direction he'd need to push them to get them to cooperate. Unease that only grew when Harry nodded along with him, "And the best way to get that proof would be from the source."

"What do you mean?" Ron prompted curiously.

"I'll tell you later," Percy offered them in a conspiratorial tone, "The library is not the best place for this discussion." They nodded, little faces solemn and trusting, and Percy reminded himself that everything he was doing was to keep them safe. Plus, he wasn't exactly sinking them into a web of crime or depravity – the end result of this little manipulation would hopefully be them being a bit
nicer to Malfoy junior.

It was nothing to feel guilty about. Just because he knew he'd have to persuade them into it didn't mean it was wrong. After all, he persuaded Ron to do his chores on a regular basis… Though this wasn't quite the same thing.

It was close! Practically speaking, he'd just be getting them to mind their manners.

Yeah, Percy didn't believe himself, either.

That sick feeling was everywhere lately, even as he shooed the three off to their first class and hurried to his own. He was getting sick of the thought, just noticing it.

Tuning out his own choppy, swirling thoughts, Percy tried to think only about the path to class, the cacophony of the halls as a small Ravenclaw pushed through a mixed group with their nose so deeply in a book only hair and pages could be seen and other students strutted and slunk and ran through their own schedules, chattering and shouting madly to each other in a controlled chaotic rumble of life.

Herbology was next. Percy straightened as he walked and took a deep breath, the smell of damp stone that permeated the castle's edges familiar and vaguely comforting as he refocused on problems he could address now, the sound of humanity drowning out the others. Oliver had opted out after OWLs, thankfully, but so had Kendra. The class was with the Hufflepuffs, so Percy hoped he could snag one of his fellow prefects before he was paired with an underachiever of the worst sort: someone from his own House.

Upon entering Greenhouse Five, he was lucky enough to be preceded by a small commotion between Yuvraj Suri and Natalie Fairbourne, both shining examples of the usual work ethic in Gryffindor. Thus, he went unnoticed as he scuffed across the dirt floor and ducked the swinging nettle of the Scarfing Sunvine to inch up to Audrey's side.

"Do you have a partner, yet?" Percy asked, too eagerly, and she laughed.

"You're far too excited to escape Wood." Her tone was admonishing, but she shrugged acquiescence with an easy smile, "It's not like it'll hurt my grade." The smile faded as a thought occurred to her, the strongly sculpted features of her face melting into something sympathetic that caused Percy to tense. "I'm sorry for your loss, this summer. I thought about writing you, but it seemed… Intrusive." She waved down the terse bit of manners Percy had been about to treat her to with a, "We won't talk about it anymore unless you want to."

He nodded, sharply, and she turned to the empty table before them, a bubble of silence growing awkwardly in their corner of the room, pushing aside nearby conversations until Professor Sprout called the class to attention.

He didn't take out any notes. The professor didn't appreciate note-taking – scribbling, as she called it – while she was trying to talk. Thus, she always had Percy's full attention each time she lectured as he desperately attempted to absorb the key points of each topic. When he'd brought up the topic before, he'd been amiably dismissed as Herbology was meant to focus on practical application more than theoretical knowledge at Hogwarts. One's Mastery may take a different course, but it wasn't applicable here.

"We'll be covering a lot this year in preparation for NEWTs," Professor Sprout began cheerily, "So don't expect a reprieve just because the tests are next year." She met Yuvraj's disgruntled expression with a twinkling wink, "The really fun material starts now."
Taking her attention as permission to speak, Yuvraj pointed out, "You said the Venomous Tentacula would be 'fun' last year, Professor."

A bounce could be seen in Professor Sprout's step, "Oh, this year's course is better."

Audrey winced, and Percy ran through his mental repertoire of protective charms accumulated for Charlie's exploratory phase in beast-taming.

Goody.

When they filed out of class later in the day, Percy's head was still spinning with the sheer mass of flora Professor Sprout intended to go through and the number of sinister adjectives involved in the given list of common names. It was a welcome reprieve.

"…Hidden Strangling Bleedbloom," Audrey read aloud, eyebrows furrowed. She seemed to be of the same mind as Percy about their foreboding syllabus.

"Did you see Jumping Skinner down the list?" Percy tapped the parchment, "I sincerely hope it's referring to its discoverer and not an activity."

"I don't want to look at this anymore," Audrey declared, folding the sheet with finality, "I just want my yarn and my perfect firsties." She turned to him with enthusiasm, "Did you know they've started a study group with all the other House's first years? They're starting on a schedule for the quarter that'll keep everyone on the same track. Your sister didn't show, but neither did her little blond friend, so they were probably off exploring. They're invited to the next one still, of course."

"The more I hear about your first years, the more I think Gemma may have had a point," Percy told her, "They can't possibly be this organized. It's not even been a week."

"I know," Audrey smiled smugly.

Mentally throwing his hands up on that particular conversation, Percy moved onto a different concern of which she'd reminded him, "Speaking of yarn, would you mind..." He really hadn't wanted anyone else involved, but now Fred and George would be on the lookout for it. Admittedly, he likely would produce something horrid on his own. Still, his words stuttered to a halt, despite the nonchalance with which he'd approached it. For just a moment, as Audrey looked down at him, he felt a little like a child who had become abruptly lost in a strange place. Alone, small, and terrified to ask a stranger for assistance. The emotion seemed out of place, and he balled it up into something manageable, tugging once on his earlobe as he continued, "Would you mind helping me with a knitting project? I just... You know my mum..." Audrey hadn't even twitched as she stood patiently like a particularly kind stone wall, and Percy's stumbling words burst into a babbling stream, "Well, I've got to get six - no, seven, there's one half-done for Harry, I forgot – I've got to get seven sweaters done before Christmas and I'm pants at knitting."

"Sure," she said softly, "I was looking for a good project."

"Thanks," Percy turned away slightly, trying to close off that part of the conversation, "So, when would be convenient for you? I've got time on Thursday evenings and Sunday morning."

"Well, I do homework on Sunday, but Thursday works."

"Thanks," Percy said again, flushing slightly when he realized his mistake, "I've got to go. Check on the lower years. Gryffindor isn't as lucky as Hufflepuff this year."
Audrey patted his shoulder with finality, her grip strong but brief, "Bye, Percy."

"Bye," Percy breathed with relief, released from the tangle of words he’d vomited about himself as he scampered away. He really would check on the lower years, talk to his siblings about the Malfoys, and he had an hour of patrol to do just after curfew.

And the ghoul needed a name.

Lips tight, Percy upped his pace. He’d squeeze it in before patrol.

Of course, his distraction meant he couldn’t shake Ginny and a curious Hermione on his way out. Maybe it could be a boon. Explaining things first to Hermione and Ginny, the least volatile of the younger group, might be a good idea.

"I haven’t signed up for Ghoul Studies, but I was thinking about it," Hermione was saying to Ginny as they trotted alongside Percy, taking two steps for his every one. It showed, as she could only give half a stream of consciousness, "It’d be such a step up to have hands-on experience."

"There’s no OWL for it," Ginny hopped over the trip stair a step behind, "so it’s easier at the end of the year. Charlie really liked it."

"No OWL?" Hermione echoed, sounding more disappointed than intrigued.

"It’s an old, optional class that isn’t very popular," Percy elaborated, pausing to hold the door open for the two younger girls, "As such, the Ministry doesn’t have a set curriculum for it, and thus, no way to create a nationwide OWL without bringing together a committee of all the people teaching it."

A beat of hesitation and Hermione pushed back ineffectually at her wild mass of hair, "So there are other British schools of magic? It’s only that I didn’t receive any letters from anywhere but Hogwarts."

"They tend to be for those who..." Percy hedged delicately, "wouldn’t thrive at Hogwarts."

"Weirdoes, squibs and almost-squibs," Ginny clarified bluntly, ignoring Percy’s admonishing, "Ginny!" But she did think for a moment and add, "Also a lot of muggleborns, so it’s not all bad."

"Oh," Hermione fell quiet, retreating back into thought in a way that sucked her presence from the area, as if when she fell deeper into herself it became a physical absence. This thoughtful pause was not in any way respected by the youngest Weasley.

"Sir Cuddlington!" Ginny broke the silence with a near-shriek upon viewing the ghoul at a distance, and sprinted forward. She was caught by the ghoul before she could collide with him and lifted into the air for curious inspection of her robes, "I missed you, too!" It- he picked at the badge on her chest until Percy batted his hand away for fear of it ripping off.

"We’re not calling him that," he interjected, dropping to a cross-legged position on the ground beside the ghoul as Ginny scaled the creature and Hermione gave a polite hello, inching closer in Ginny’s wake. Ignoring the resultant chaos, Percy opened his beaten history textbook and flipped to the index in a smooth, practiced motion, "We’re finding you a name today. How do you feel about Auxilium?"

The ghoul snorted and Hermione noted, emerging from her pensive pause, "It sounds like part of a machine."

"Cadaleanas? Algernon? Ebenezer?" Percy listed, glasses sliding to the tip of his nose before he
pushed them back, "Renatus? Sigismund was a wise ruler in the ancient past…” All suggestions were cut down by negative replies.

"Melchior," Ginny suggested, draped over the ghoul's shoulders in such a way that her hair gained flecks of garden soil as it swung over the dirt, "Oooh, Cerritulus!"

"Howell," Hermione put forth, but the ghoul only gave an amused chuff.

"If we're out here until curfew, I'll start calling you Humphrey," Percy warned, but continued down the list to his unfazed ghoul, "Kenelm? Uriah. Ghrian, Berodach, Bran-" The ghoul had slapped a hand to the ground, and Percy looked up curiously, "Brando?" A snort. "Well, no need to be so snippy about it. Berodach?" It- he nodded, and Percy's brow creased as if he were in pain, "Really, Berodach?"

"What's wrong with Berodach?" Ginny prompted and slid just a little further until she was in danger of dropping headfirst to the ground. The ghoul caught her as the risk became reality and set her down gently.

"The only Berodach I can recall was Berodach the Berserker, who single-handedly turned the Battle of the Coins around during the last Goblin Rebellions," Hermione recited easily, getting a nod from the elder Weasley before he turned his attention away.

"The main problem I foresee is introducing you," Percy addressed the ghoul, taking on a higher, fluttery voice as he mocked out said introduction, "Oh, yes, this is my terrifying graveyard ghoul- the type that eats people, yes. He hasn't, of course- his name? Oh, Berodach. The Berserker, yes! No, of course he doesn't kill people. I already told you that. He merely liked the name." He fixed the ghoul with a flat look which it returned.

"You did read it out for him," Ginny smirked, already in possession of the ghoul's hand, which she turned to Hermione to demonstrate her favorite ghoul fact, "Did you know they have retractable claws?"

"Technically, I've read the proper term is talons," Hermione corrected, not in the least bit concerned with the wickedly curved weapons extended her direction, "Although the term is usually used for avian creatures, so the usage is odd."

"They're related to harpies," Percy put in, breaking off his staredown with the newly dubbed Berodach, "So even though they don't have the wings, the terminology stuck. I've done a bit of my own research since…” He trailed off, looking at the obvious answer as Berodach wiggled his extended talons playfully in Ginny's grip.

"When did you have time for that?" Ginny asked in one of her brief flashes of perceptivity. Sometimes the similarities between Ron and her were blinding.

"It's not as if you didn't see me studying this summer," Percy sniffed, and her big brown eyes didn't waver until he conceded, "Also, I asked Bill." It had just been a matter of efficiency. Percy only had so many hours in the day. Even if it stung to rely on someone else's knowledge when it came to academia.

"Ah, Mr. Weasley!" A gaunt man with wild dark hair approached. Despite the darkness of his skin, he still seemed to exude a sort of sickly pallor. His tone was jovial, in stark contrast to his rather foreboding features, "I'm glad I finally caught you! Good evening," he nodded to Berodach, who shifted from foot to foot, perking up with an expectant gaze fixed on the approaching man. "Ah, yes," he fished about in his leather bag, slung over broad, but thin shoulders, "Here we are!" What
appeared to be a dead bowtruckle was flung through the air to the ghoul's waiting jaws. He crunched happily on the treat, relegating the man back to unimportance. At Percy's curious look, the man turned abashed, "I apologize for taking such liberties with another's familiar. I'm afraid I've let my enthusiasm get away with me. After all, it's not every day you can study a graveyard ghoul up close. Not without losing some limbs, anyway!" He laughed at his own joke and stuck a hand out in Percy's direction, "I'm Professor Evermonde; I teach Ghoul Studies."

"I know, Professor. Pleasure to see you, though." Another chuckle came from the professor as Percy shook the proffered hand.

"You'd be surprised how many students don't recognize me. I don't live at the castle, and so I may as well not exist to those with no interest in my class," he explained in a confiding tone, the amusement never leaving his face. Leaning back, he clapped his hands together as if closing the book on that topic and moving on, "Now then! To business! Mr. Weasley, how would you feel about an opportunity to share your knowledge of ghouls with a ravenously interested audience?"

Well, his first instinct to any request made of him by a teacher was to hop to it, but… Did he really have time? With his own extracurricular activities planned, he didn't know where he'd fit it in.

"I would love to help, sir, but I'm worried about what sort of time commitment would be required of me… Being a prefect and all."

"Oh, just one visit out to your ghoul is all I'd ask," the professor grinned, the skin around his eyes crinkling with good humor, "Unless you find yourself hopelessly enamoured with the class, of course. One visit is all that may take."

Well, that seemed reasonable enough. He may not have a lot of time, but a professor was asking him for a favour – one that wasn't exactly moving mountains. Percy smiled politely in return, "When would be a good time, sir? I have a free period Thursdays before lunch."

"That'll do," Professor Evermonde reached out and shook his hand again, "Next week too soon?"

"No, sir," Percy retrieved his hand as soon as he could without seeming rude; the professor was a little more casually touchy-feely than he was comfortable with. A formal bow would have been better, "Shall I meet you out here?"

A nod and a wave as he resumed his journey to the gates, "See you then, Mr. Weasley."

"I'm surprised Kettleburn hasn't gotten to you yet," Ginny mused once Professor Evermonde was out of earshot, swinging off the ghoul's arm to precarious angles.

"I should think Professor Kettleburn would rather stick to the board-approved curriculum," Percy grabbed the back of Ginny's robes when she inevitably tripped, handing her back to Berodach, "Ghouls aren't extensively covered in Care of Magical Creatures – they are more relevant to Defense against the Dark Arts."

"Professor Lockhart might ask you a favour, then," Hermione supposed, looking just the slightest tinge jealous, "He seems fond of demonstrations."

"Oh, you've had him already?" Ginny returned to a normal, upright position, "What's he like?"

The jealousy faded, and Hermione patted back a mat of bushy hair, "Well, he's very hands-off. Believes in students figuring things out themselves, you know. But I won't spoil the surprise."

"Surprises are boring," Ginny intoned, and Percy snorted.
"She reads the ends of books first," he informed Hermione gravely, Berodach echoing his snort before a train of thought reoccurred to Percy, "Speaking of revelations, Ginny, has Ron gotten to you yet?"

"We told her about the Malfoys and Dobby," Hermione interjected, "But you still haven't told us what we're meant to do about it." The interruption on Hermione's part gave Percy pause just long enough for Hermione to blush and look down. "Sorry, Ginny, you can answer for yourself." The supposedly offended party shrugged.

Percy had just been surprised Hermione had confronted him like that. He hadn't quite expected it from her for some reason. Shaking it off, he took on a serious mien, "I can tell you now. But the plan won't work if Malfoy gets wind of it, so you must be discreet. That's why I couldn't speak of it in the castle."

"What is it, Percy?" Ginny prompted.

"It's actually rather simple," Percy began, and Ginny groaned.

"Get to it."

The siblings shared a glare with one another before Percy cleared his throat, "If you're quite finished?" At Ginny's resigned hand wave, he continued, "We have neither the money nor the political pull to fight the Malfoys on their terms or to push through an accusation. Especially considering our known animosity. We must end the enmity between the Weasleys and the Malfoys," he held up a finger to stop Ginny's protest before it began, "At least, outwardly, until we can acquire proof of their wrongdoing."

"You'd like us to... play nice," Hermione summarized, "And lull Malfoy into complacency in the hopes he'll let something slip?"

"There's just a bit more to it than that, but you have the gist of it," Percy agreed, "Of course, there does need to be an explanation for the change in attitude. Ginny," he turned to the girl to catch her gaze, "You can help me with that."

She looked from Percy, who was hoping he'd come across as grave but managed to hit dramatic instead, to Hermione, who had her brow furrowed and her mouth ticked to one side as she thought. Well, it wasn't as if she had a lot of other friends to fill her time.

"Kay," she shrugged.

Percy grinned, "You'll like this part." His eyes narrowed and a finger came up warningly, "But you'll have to take care not to overdo it."

Hand to her chest, Ginny blinked at him innocently, "I would never."

She did.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

A day passed before they could put things into motion. The plan was thus: Ginny provoked Malfoy into insulting her. Percy 'noticed' the altercation at that point and showed unusual lenience to the boy, telling off Ginny instead before soothing Malfoy's ruffled feathers. Hopefully he could then lead the conversation towards a certain arrangement.

"Remember," Percy had said, "You just provoke him a bit. I come in and stop the fight, give you all incentive to change your attitude towards him, since you've been told off by a prefect."

"Like that's ever changed Fred and George," Ginny snorted.

"Well, we're not counting on Fred and George to pull this off, are we?" Percy remarked mildly and got a sly smile from his sister. She and Ron could always be counted on wanting to show up the twins.

"Show on the road," she murmured, catching sight of platinum blond hair and dashing around the corner and down the hall to collide with him.

The usual bickering from such an occurrence flared up, Ginny seeming to keep admirable control of herself-

And she'd punched him. Directly into the sternum, which was a poor choice, but with admirable form.

"Ginevra Molly Weasley!" Percy exclaimed without any need to exaggerate his disapproval, rushing onto the scene and separating them before any more damage could be done.

"He said – he said –"

Ginny was flushed, shaking, and Percy snapped out, "I don't care what he said! Violence is never – " A deep breath, a glance towards the near panic of the young Malfoy boy as his large friends helped him stabilize, "You never use violence against a member of such an esteemed family! I'm too disappointed in you to discipline you right now – go wait for your punishment in the tower!" Still panting with anger, almost dazed, Ginny finally met his gaze, and Percy raised his eyebrows at her meaningfully. Take the out and get out before you make it worse. She fled, thankfully, leaving Percy to whirl around to Malfoy, "Do you need the Hospital Wing, Malfoy? You have my deepest apologies. I will ensure nothing of the sort happens again."

"She nearly killed me!" Malfoy yelped, eyes still wild even as he caught his breath and smoothed back his hair anxiously. Pulling himself together slightly, his voice was tight, "I want her expelled!"

"Oh, she does have some brute strength for her size, from all that manual labor," Percy laid a hand on the younger boy's shoulder, forcefully and crudely dragging the wound to himself as much as he could for the lack of a bond between them and biting back the accompanying intake of breath, "But I'm sure a little girl like that can't harm you."

Malfoy shook off the contact, but a hand went to his chest uneasily, "No… Of course it doesn't hurt. It's the principle of the thing."
"I do apologize ever so for that," Percy continued in a single breath, trying to act as if the Minister were before him instead of a young boy, "I haven't had time to re-educate her entirely just yet; our father was overly lenient with her in some ways. But she will be reined in." If there was some venomous truth in the middle of his rampage, Percy felt he could, perhaps, be forgiven for feeling a bit let down by his sister's complete lack of self-control. "Are you sure you don't need the Hospital Wing?"

He could see from the somewhat dazed look on Malfoy's face that he couldn't quite remember whether he'd made that assertion or not, but rolled with it anyway, "I'm sure." He truly wasn't at his best. With that concession, Percy wondered if perhaps the plan might be salvaged after all.

"Even if there's no damage," Percy pushed further, now ushering Malfoy along beside him before the momentum was lost, "I must take responsibility for her barbaric lack of manners. There must be something I can do to make it up to you."

A bit of cunning was beginning to sneak back into Malfoy's demeanor, a greedy glint to his eye, "You can go to Hogsmeade, can't you?" His friends, trailing behind them, made sounds of approval. …Or so Percy assumed. Hard to tell one grunt from another.

"Well, of course," Percy replied promptly, "But my debt couldn't possibly be paid so simply. And I doubt someone like you could need anything I have in my possession." Malfoy looked ready to interject, but Percy made a noise, as if he were thinking, to put him off, "Perhaps… No, you'd have no need of it. In any case, some might see it as unethical."

Still riled, Malfoy gave him a sidelong look, reluctantly asking, "What is it?"

"Well, I know you wouldn't need help in your classes, but I do know certain… tips, tricks one might say, that make things easier," Percy elaborated, slowly, trying to sound hesitant, "Not anything directly against the rules as stated, of course." At Malfoy's echoed agreement, he knew he could press on, turning to take a bit longer to reach where he'd be dropping the boy off. "There are some benefits to having so many siblings; I didn't get my grades from some natural talent, after all." No, Percy worked damn hard on them. If it sounded like he was implying other means – well, that was hardly Percy's problem. "For someone with your background, of course, they would merely augment the ease you have with classes already." With a sigh, Percy looked away, "But I couldn't ask you to accept something as paltry as that. I'm sure you're top of your year." A lie he hoped didn't show in his voice, "I do hope you will allow me time to figure out what else I have to give."

A moment of silence passed as Malfoy thought things over. Percy, for his part, attempted to look deep in thought, but mostly looked vaguely pained. Thankfully, Malfoy was rather oblivious to that expression from routine exposure, and the boy stood straighter, though still unsteadily, "I might be willing to show mercy, Weasley. Your tips are surely the best someone like you can offer me, and I wouldn't ask more than you could give."

Well, thank Merlin he hadn't pieced together what having a prefect in his debt could mean quite quickly enough to take advantage of it. Perhaps Ginny punching him had been for the best, after all. "Oh, thank you, Malfoy." Percy smiled broadly at the boy with real relief and as much forced gratitude as he could handle, "I will send for your available time promptly." He gestured towards the two boys who had yet to say a word, "Should I direct my queries to your… friends?"

"No," Malfoy said hastily, flushing before he continued more coolly, "No, you may… direct your queries to me. I will allow it."

"Thank you, Malfoy. Your compassion knows no bounds," Percy gave a sweeping, ridiculous bow,
the likes of which he wouldn't give Merlin, risen from his grave, and Malfoy blushed deeper, pleased and embarrassed at once. "I would take my leave, if you no longer require my escort…?" They were at the edge of the dungeon stairs so he would certainly hope Malfoy could make his way from here.

"Ah, yes, you may go," Malfoy cleared his throat and made a swift about-face, going down the stairs at a rapid pace.

Okay, maybe Percy had overdone it. He hadn't expected the young Malfoy to react quite so bashfully to schmoozing of this sort, but rather bask in it. The Slytherin could be led around by his ego, it seemed, but pushed to ridiculous extremes, would be more embarrassed than smug. Good to know.

…Especially whenever Malfoy figured out he'd essentially signed up for tutoring. Granted, Percy was a brilliant tutor – not to toot his own horn, of course, he'd had it mentioned to him on multiple occasions and denying it would just be false modesty (his siblings believed he had none of any sort). In truth, he really did have special tips and tricks for studying, spellcasting, and essays he'd been dying to pass on to someone, but from Fred and George down, the Weasley family seemed disinterested in any sort of academic effort. Though perhaps, Ginny…

Ginny. What would he do about the fact that she had gone wildly off-script just then? She'd physically punched another student! Well, perhaps her shame in explaining the mistake to Ron, Harry, and Hermione would be punishment enough on its own. By now, they should know and be worried about the outcome. He likely didn't have to worry about intervention from a teacher – no one had been around and Malfoy was currently appeased. And turning her over to a teacher would likely backfire as Ginny was the type to betray in turn when she felt as such. So, it was up to him to figure out a punishment that was strong enough to get the message across, but mild enough that she didn't feel betrayed. Hopefully, having her older brother and his friends disappointed with her performance would help get across to her that she shouldn't have done that before Percy had to take her to task for it.

Cheering met his ears as he entered the common room.

"-and then, apparently, Ginny socked that pointy-faced git right in the stomach!" Ron was saying excitedly to Harry and some muggleborn in their year, while Ginny hovered behind him anxiously, clutching her books to her chest, "That's what he gets for insulting the Weasley honor!"

"Did you get him right?" the boy – Dirk? Dan? – asked, leaning around Ron towards Ginny and demonstrating proper form, which she nodded through, to his approval, "Well, good on you. If you're going to punch someone, do it right."

"Or don't punch anyone at all," Harry said, eyes on Percy's approach, "Because violence is wrong."

"It's Malfo-" Ron caught sight of him, too, "mal-malevolent and bad to punch people." That didn't wipe the grin from his face, though. "Even if they deserve it."

"Which they don't," the other second year boy added, cottoning on quickly.

"Yeah," chorused the other two as Percy now stood over them, arms crossed.

He let them sweat for a minute then crooked a beckoning finger Ginny's direction and led her out of the tower. The whispered encouragement and praise from the peanut gallery was not missed but he couldn't turn to acknowledge it yet, either. At this moment, addressing Ginny's behaviour was priority.
They stopped in a more private study nook, and Percy gestured for Ginny to sit, following suit and opening his mouth to start off, *Perhaps I'd expected too much of you*. However, Ginny beat him to the pull.

"I'm really sorry," she said, looking pale, "I've been- I've been having some issues with my emotions lately."

Weren't they all? Percy fixed her with a tired look over his spectacles, "Be that as it may-"

Oh, but she wasn't done.

"Lady issues," she blurted, flushing horribly afterwards and looking anywhere but at Percy.

"Oh," Percy said, taken aback. He hadn't expected… Well, she was only eleven… But what did he know about when…? Soon they were both flushed and Percy pulled at his earlobe uncomfortably, "How long…?"

"Just yesterday night," Ginny admitted, keeping her gaze on her shoes now, though her forehead betrayed the red hue that still lingered, "I went to Madam Pomphrey after Hermione calmed me down. She said it'd be better than waking you up."

"Well, you can come to me with anything," Percy said automatically, but his tone was flustered, "Do you have any- any lingering questions?"

"No!" Ginny exclaimed, meeting his gaze with horror evident in her own, "No way, Percy, Madam Pomphrey told me enough!"

"Alright," Percy cleared his throat, "Did she explain what… what it means in terms of… er, babies?"

"Yes!" Wide eyed and red faced, Ginny looked close to covering her ears and running for it.

"Oh, good," he said faintly, and they sat in mutually traumatized silence for a long minute before he shook himself, "It's not an excuse, though. I hope you know it is *wrong* to physically assault another student, no matter what they may say."

"Yes, yep, you're right," Ginny replied, nodding in a way that clearly spoke to how *great* her desire was to just get out of the conversation.

"…Well, I think this talk has punished you enough," Percy concluded, *It certainly did for me*, he thought wryly. At least he could tell Malfoy honestly that Ginny's punishment had probably left her mentally scarred. Maybe other families laid out such facts of life in a more open manner, but with the Weasleys, the last thing anyone wanted was to talk such things through with their *siblings*.

Especially poor Ginny.

…He gingerly smoothed a hand over his chest; 'poor Ginny' hit *hard*. There were definitely bruises. Maybe he *should* have looked into whatever Malfoy had said to her, but it would only have been counterproductive to their goal. Brownnosing was that much more difficult when you were furious with the person involved.

…And, yes, he'd admit to *himself* what it was. Percy did know the difference between manners and *slime*. He just knew slime worked so much better at times. It was a concession his father had never made, one that kept him trapped in a job that could barely- Well. Not as if his father would have even *tried* to advance, was it?
But he did his best where he was, Percy reminded himself sharply, weariness setting in his shoulders. Better to focus on now. His father wasn't exactly capable of defending himself and Percy was supposed to be working to protect him, along with the others. Running through his schedule, he knew he'd have to devote some time after patrol to History of Magic and on Thursday – his mind tripped over the date. Had he…

A quiet groan was all he'd allow himself.

His meeting with Audrey was in the evening, and his demonstration with Berodach before lunch. This wouldn't be quite so bad if he didn't have Transfiguration, his worst class practically speaking, in between, nor if he'd accounted for one or the other when he made either set of plans. Now he'd have no time to prepare for Transfiguration or get any studying done before patrol. Well, it was… just one day. He would work on homework instead of revision during his meals and… maybe Audrey would agree to revise – or rather let him revise aloud - while she taught him.

He couldn't push it, though, because no matter how much he hated to admit it, he desperately needed help if he was going to finish his mum's sweaters before Christmas.

Plus, he'd be studying with Penelope the next day, and she was brilliant. Beyond that even, she took good notes, so he might finally take her up on that offer to peruse them. Getting a different perspective might make up for missing a day.

It was just one day. NEWTS were only a year away, but they weren't this year and he'd have to keep reminding himself of that.

Nope, he still wanted to pull his hair out by the roots.

He'd just have to take it a step at a time. Don't think about the rest of it until the first part was done.

It was at that moment a belaboured owl perched on the outstretched arm of a statue and chuffed at him menacingly. If an avian could look exasperated, this one did in spades as it extended a foot his direction with a familiar red envelope attached.

Percy honestly had no clue what he had done to deserve this, but at least he was in an abandoned hallway when the owl caught up with him. Apparently wandering off halfway through meals trailing scrolls and with his nose in a book for his next class had kept him Howler-free in the Great Hall. Brilliant timing, though. Life was lining him up for a string of punches today, metaphorical or not.

"Let's have it," Percy sighed, pulling the letter down and slicing the envelope open neatly with a flick of his wand, "Whatever it is."

The slit sealed shut as the envelope formed the approximate shape of pursed, red lips and her voice addressed him sharply, "Percival Ignatius Weasley. You have disappointed me."

"Oh no," Percy mumbled, face draining of color. How could he have forgotten?

"There was an empty place at my tea, Percival, and you will pay penance for this in time. I expect your letter." The Howler crumbled to ash, and though it had been quiet, it was no less devastating for it. Percy wanted nothing more than to pretend he'd never received it, but that would be unwise. He'd need to pen a letter begging forgiveness from Great Aunt Muriel sooner rather than later, or her machinations would seep into the school somehow and he would pay in more than wounded pride.

What a day to be alive. He was set to go get to it, but a voice stopped him in dramatic, bad novella fashion.
"Bad form to run out on a party, Percy," Rodger Davies said, his tone giving away nothing as he continued, "Especially the only one you're likely to be invited to attend."

"I haven't got time for your nonsense, Davies," Percy rolled his eyes as the tease had bounced neatly off his ego, as Davies had known it would, even given the ragged remnants of his patience of late, "Aren't you cutting it a little close to curfew to be wandering up here?"

"We've got special dispensation for planning out Quidditch trials without overlap," Davies shrugged, ignoring the implied probing as to why he was up near Gryffindor tower, "How's Wood coming on that?"

Well, that explained that. Davies was always looking for an in on Oliver's plans. Even Percy could recognize that Oliver's mania for the sport had a tinge of genius. Perhaps Davies had been lurking in the hopes of snagging a first year not yet indoctrinated into the holy church of Quidditch as they returned to the tower. Tone a little sharper now, he half-turned to leave, "Why do you always ask me about this? I have no interest in it."

"Exactly," Davies pointed at him with a smile, stepping in closer, "So why not tell me whether he's thought up something new or not? He's already distracted this early in the year; we both know that's unusual. Besides, it's just Quidditch. ...And if there's a House in Hogwarts you really owe loyalty to, it's Ravenclaw."

"I am a Gryffindor, still," Percy huffed, a bit offended he'd so blatantly assumed Percy would be fine betraying Oliver and his House even if he cared little for the sport, "If you're done wasting my time, I need to check in on the common room."

"Fine," Davies held his hands up in good natured surrender, "I wasn't expecting this to be that easy, but you can't blame a guy for trying. Still... If you change your mind, Penny always knows where to find me."

I'm sure she does, Percy thought with a licking of venom, unable to help a sting when Penny's most frequent... friend grinned at him and turned heel.

If he ran across one more problem today he was going to walk into the Great Lake and join the merpeople. This was bordering on ridiculous.

At least Davies could be safely ignored.

...That letter to Great Aunt Muriel couldn't, though. And with that in mind, he hurried away, intent on getting something done right away.

There was only so much that could be addressed immediately.

Soon enough, he sat in the common room as he composed his apology, perched on the hearth within sight of the rowdiest in the room, and noted the actual decrease in commotion with his presence. Kendra, who was sprawled over an armchair arm wrestling Oliver, never had as much effect due to her more lax approach to rule-breaking. Percy regretted the necessity, but there was a bit of pride in being able to contain the chaos, even slightly, due to his own work.

A blot of ink ruined a flourish and Percy swept the mess away with one of his most used paperwork spells. There was no way he would send something subpar to Great Aunt Muriel. He could use the delivery as a sort of delay in his letter to the younger Malfoy, though. Final flowery phrases begging for mercy in place, he dug out another sheet of parchment and prepared his query on scheduling. Writing to Muriel first put him in just the right frame of mind to make this beautiful.
"Um, Mr. Weasley?"

But it would have to wait. Blinking out of his concentration, Percy refocused on the nervous first year shuffling her feet. He would be joining the merpeople tonight, it seemed.

"Just Percy between us Gryffindors," he said smartly, putting away his quill and drying the parchment for storage in a few quick motions, "What seems to be the problem?"

"Anna is crying in the upstairs bathroom because…” she leaned in, voice a whisper and expression pained with sympathy, "Because her teeth all turned moldy and some of 'em fell out after she ate some candy someone left in the common room."

Well. Okay. Taking a moment to process this didn't faze the first year as she waited as patiently as an eleven year old could. Per his promise to himself this summer, Percy wouldn't immediately blame Fred and George, but he would be mentioning their recent penchant for edible creations to Professor McGonagall when he reported this.

"Kendra," he called, "Your epic feud with Oliver will need to take a rain check." Oliver slammed her hand down in the moment of distraction and that chaser Fred fancied – Angelina, he thought - cheered while Kendra's cronies booed.

"Percy! Look what you've done!" Kendra exclaimed in dismay, but made her way over to have the situation explained once she got promise of a rematch out of Oliver.

All in all, it wasn't impossible to fix but was beyond the combined skills of the Gryffindor prefects, eventually requiring a trip to the Hospital Wing that further ate into Percy's time. He'd have to put off his letter to Malfoy until tomorrow and work on his potions revision tonight. Professor Snape did not easily suffer fools and Percy had already made one of himself a few days earlier, what with crashing bodily into him.

Speaking of the potions master, he had been in residence in the Hospital Wing, talking something over with Madam Pomphrey in hushed voices, before the incoming Gryffindors' footsteps had interrupted. They had glanced up and quieted, but not before Percy caught the nurse's final advice.

"You should go to the Headmaster with this," she'd said as Professor Snape shook his sleeves back down his arms, "Whether you're sure or not."

The look of reluctance on the professor's face deepened to distaste when he laid eyes on the students at hand. "I believe you have patients to attend to," the taller man informed her uselessly, giving Percy the evil eye before sweeping from the room.

A cold dread settled resignedly in his gut. He knew he couldn't have been forgiven so easily.

"What seems to be the problem here?" Madam Pomphrey asked, already scanning over the young girl between the two prefects, but glancing up at Percy and Kendra questioningly when she didn't see anything meriting a prefect escort after curfew.

Before either could explain, the girl tearfully opened her mouth, and Madam Pomphrey tutted at the damage, herding her new charge to a bed, "I've got just the thing, dear, but you'll have to stay the night." Her eyes landed once back on the prefects while she worked, expectantly, and Percy straightened without thinking.

"Ah, yes," he cleared his throat, "it appears she has been the victim of a prank item left out in the common room; she ate some candy left unattended and her teeth began to suffer not shortly after, Madam," he reported, hesitating only slightly before holding true to his rules, "No one has come
forward with information on the guilty party." Percy couldn't blame Fred or George without actual proof. From what he last overheard, the twins had been working on something about canaries – still an edible concoction, yes, but canaries. Until he had evidence or a confession, he wasn't going to lay the fault at their feet without even a motive…beyond testing and chaos.

"It's probably the twins," Kendra put in lazily, "Though we have no proof."

"Well, I'm not here to hear baseless accusations," Madam Pomphrey responded, adding in a mutter, "Though I wouldn't be surprised." Her demeanor softened again as she coaxed the young girl to swallow a potion, murmuring about the wisdom of refraining from eating whatever is lying about to the girl's wet, sniffly nods, and she threw over her shoulder, "Back to your tower. I expect you will report the matter to your Head of House even without my direction, but I would highly advise I don't find Minerva in ignorance at our next tea."

"Yes, ma'am," they chorused, though only Percy bowed before they left.

"It's unusual for you to cover up for the twins," Kendra prodded when they were out of earshot of the Hospital Wing, "Do you really think it could have been someone else?"

"I'm trying to give the benefit of the doubt, lately," Percy admitted truthfully. She didn't say anything, and he didn't have to tell her, because she didn't ask, but maybe that's what made it easier to say, "I bungled it with them once this summer already, because I blamed them for something they had nothing to do with. I'd rather not do that again."

"Ah," Kendra nodded, like her world had been put back into order, "So the rules still come first, but the twins are no longer guilty by default."

"That's-" Percy bit back his immediate protest, tugged an earlobe, and sighed, "I suppose that's fair, but," he brought up and waved a hand defensively as he continued, "I've had too long a day to examine the injustices Fred and George must bravely rise up against in their noble rebellion."

"Oh my, they told you?" Kendra questioned urgently with mischief in her eyes, "You know of their secret struggle for light and glory and freedom?"

"They didn't have to tell me," Percy rolled his eyes with a huff, "I'm sure I play their Dark Lord." After a moment of thought, he eyed her mock-suspiciously, "And how loyal is my evil partner, I wonder?"

She paused, surprised he would play along, before the content of his remark caught up to her and Kendra bit back a laugh, "You'd be foolish not to place your trust in me, my lord." A shiver ran up Percy's spine that was not altogether unpleasant at the address, and that slammed the boot down on any vestiges of humor. He'd never thought a title of that sort held any allure to him.

No. It didn't. Not on any conscious level. …He'd rather be called Minister someday, in any case.

Still, he uneasily laughed it off, any true mirth gone, and turned the conversation awkwardly to Transfiguration. Neither of them were any good at applying the theoreticals of it to wandwork without intense practice, so it was always a safe distraction. A good rant would keep Kendra from returning to that particular joke, and it would hopefully fade into obscurity.

His siblings were still lingering about the common room when they arrived, so it was easy to slip away from the conversation with the excuse of checking their homework, which had the benefit of being true. He'd need to get into the habit, now that classes were moving in earnest.

"Percy, you haven't forced a homework check in a year," George complained as Percy perused an
essay George had surprisingly started on his own for Potions.

"Yeah, you trusted us last year," Fred continued George's accusation, "What's…" The question died, and Percy looked up to find Fred staring at him a bit uneasily.

"Spit it out," Percy said, turning back to the essay, "This is actually not half bad."

"I'm not bad at schoolwork just because I don't obsess over it," George grumbled, but it clearly didn't sting his pride. Academia just wasn't something he or Fred got too worked up over.

"Mom and Dad never checked our homework, Percy," Fred started, slowly, as if easing into a minefield one foot at a time, "You don't have to…" Really? He was saying this now.

"I just had OWLs last year; there was no time," Percy snapped, hating the carefulness, that even with that tone Fred would just bring up their parents in the middle of the common room after the day he'd had, "It's not always about them."

Fred closed off, arms crossing over his chest, "Well, whatever, Percy. Nice to know we rank below test grades, I guess." He stalked off and George snatched his essay from Percy's hands.

"Yeah, nice job, Perce," he sneered, before following his brother up the stairs, intent on catching up.

"Ouch," Ron said, from where he'd been sitting with his friends and Ginny just feet away.

"I don't want to hear it," Percy said through the hands covering his face, breathing out sharply before straightening and extending a hand their direction, "You have work due tomorrow in Charms, don't you, Ron?"

"Uh," Ron's eyes were wide, and he stood, "I must have, um, left it upstairs." He beat a quick retreat followed by an equally anxious Harry, and Hermione watched them go.

She sighed, "I'd better go help them out."

Percy resisted the petty urge to ignore her just because she could succeed with them where he couldn't, and forced out in as polite a tone as he could manage, "Thank you, Hermione." She blushed at the praise and vanished. Perhaps she hadn't had much positive feedback on her intelligence over the years – that was something Percy could identify with enough to force down the irrational jealousy beneath sympathy.

"I don't have homework yet," Ginny chirped, clearly forcing brightness after that argument the common room had politely ignored in the Gryffindor way, "And I've been studying. I can almost mess up floating a feather on purpose now."

A tinge of alarm pulled Percy from his exhaustion-fuelled apathy and he prodded for details that set off a lecture Ginny had been entirely unprepared for, judging from the increasingly desperate bids to escape. Unfortunately, 'messing up' a spell like that was the key to higher level function of spells, such as using the levitation charm in more directed ways than floating merely upward. That may sound fine on its own, but there was a reason the simple, straight-forward version was taught first. Without that grounding, the effects of warping a spell's results on purpose could be dangerous. See, eventually that skill could lead to spell creation, and Percy knew too of far too many deaths attributed to that. Luna's mother, for one. It was just as likely to be destructive as creative.

Ginny was one hundred years too young to be messing around like that.

Her last garbled groan of frustration when he wound down was still followed by an aggravated, "I
got the point a whole minute ago," so Percy considered the time well spent.

When he opened his mouth to be smug, though, she said fiercely, "Good night!" He was hugged painfully over the bruises she'd given Malfoy, and she stomped away.

He may have essentially scared them all off like a flock of pigeons, but at least they were all going to bed at reasonable hours tonight. As Percy left for his own bed, he decided to hesitantly chalk that up as a pale win, just to balance the board a little against the losses.

Morale, and all that. Though it took a hit when Oliver opened his mouth, having followed him up.

"I won't say you're terrible at this hovering thing you've got going, but please don't try to give a pep talk or teach anything to my beaters before a game," Oliver whispered not unkindly to him before he could fall asleep and safely ignore him.

"You haven't even had try-outs, yet," Percy groaned and pulled the pillow over his head. Would he be assaulted endlessly even in his own bed?

"For future reference," Oliver said, patting his blanket-covered back and turning back to the work of donning his pajamas.

"I won't say you're terrible at friendship because you should know it deep down," Percy muttered acidly.

"I do," Oliver dismissed airily, "It hurts me every day I don't instil a love of Quidditch in you."

"Good night," Percy growled. There was a good few minutes in which only the sound of the other boys murmuring amongst themselves could be heard, and then a weight dipped the bed next to him.

"You know, if you ever really want to talk…" Oliver trailed off.

A blown out breath as if to expel the lingering malaise of the day, and Percy repeated without the venom, "Good night, Oliver."

After a pause, Oliver removed himself. "I mean it. Night, Percy."

_I know you do_. He couldn't afford it. Having someone listen to him too openly, too sympathetically, and he might say something he didn't intend.

…Percy had forgotten to check Berodach that day.

It felt like a little crack in his heart to lift his head and reluctantly check the time. He really just wanted to sleep but… There was curfew and there was curfew. Prefects had a bit of leeway. Looking at his tempus charm, though, that leeway was gone. It was a relief and a disappointment. He’d have to hope Berodach didn't take it too personally and check in with him tomorrow morning.

Thankfully, the ghoul was not the type to hold grudges. At least, in Percy's limited experience. He seemed perfectly happy to see Percy before classes, just as quietly content as he typically was. Percy had extended a tentative invitation to Fred, when he'd seen him coming down, but the boy had refused without explanation and George had made an ugly face Percy's direction.

Great.

The ghoul reached for him as he approached and he only allowed it after checking the grounds for witnesses. Cuddling an animal, even one as fearsome as Berodach, would be endlessly embarrassing
"Morning, Berodach," he said, arms caught at his sides for the most part, but he could manage an awkward pat to the creature's back, "I'm sorry I didn't come yesterday." A croon met his words and Percy relaxed a little. It was nice to have something... someone on his side, even if it made his stomach heavier with guilt for neglecting to visit. "I've got to study, Berodach," Percy wiggled loose and Berodach did not grab him back as he might the younger Weasleys. Pulling out his Potions text, he sat beside the creature in the cool grass, "Do you mind if I read aloud?"

Berodach didn't *nod* as he had before, but he sank into a ready crouch that seemed to be as relaxed as his posture would allow him. Percy sank back into revision, repeating steps to himself out loud, and eventually the ghoul began doing *something* to his hair. It wasn't the attempt at combing Berodach had tried with Ginny, but more of a curious manipulation. Not wanting to give into distraction, Percy read a bit louder. He held out twenty minutes more, until Berodach pressed down with a flat palm and made a surprised noise deep in his chest when the hair sprung back, taking a step back himself before returning more cautiously. Percy closed the book and took a deep breath, then stopped fighting the giggles that overtook him.

"You're not alone," Percy told the ghoul when his spat of laughter ended, a smile lingering, "No one else in the family understands my hair either." It had been an endless source of amusement for his elder brothers to ruffle his hair almost to point of hurting and watch it spring back up, irrepressible in its desire to poof. His mother had taken the practical approach and had him gel it back, so it at least appeared to be a deliberate style. He hadn't been quite as cursed as, say, Hermione, who would probably need an entire jar of Slickeazy's to control her mane and which accounted for her lack of trying. That would get expensive quickly.

Then again, not everyone lacked for funds quite so sorely as the Weasleys.

The thought sobered him, and he scratched Berodach's slight, dangerous snout to the sound of the ghoul's pleased rumbling. "You do have a variety of vocalizations," Percy noted. It was something he could look into before next Thursday, which was coming up quickly. "Then again, if graveyard ghouls live in social packs, that would mean communication, wouldn't it? And verbalization is useful over distances, such as in locating a lost member or coordinating hunts." Berodach's eyes slit open slightly, the glint of mischief that swept out the calculation in them Percy's only warning before a gross, greyish tongue swiped over Percy's fingers. "Alright, that's disgusting," Percy drew his hand back, to Berodach's exaggerated dismay. "I'm off to breakfast. See you tonight."

Now that he was waking up earlier than Oliver for no discernible reason (and, yes, he'd *tried* to go back to sleep), he'd managed to churn out a decent letter to Malfoy before coming down and now he just needed to fix things with Fred, keep from setting off Professor Snape, and make sure he had *something* prepared for Thursday if the professor required he speak.

"Hey, Percy," Kendra slid into his stride, tone unsure, "So, the twins confessed to me, but with everything happening-"

"They confessed to you?" Percy echoed, confused, "Both of them? It's probably a prank; I mean, Fred's got that thing with Angelina."

"Not their love, you oblivious bookworm," Kendra scolded, on edge, "The candy. They left it out trying to test it on someone, but they felt bad it caught a firstie."

"The candy, right," Percy nodded, "Well, if they confessed, what did Professor McGonagall say about it?"
"I haven't told her yet," Kendra took his arm, stopping him, "I don't know if, after this summer- I wanted to talk it through with you, first."

"Despite… this summer, I'm not really in charge of their punishments at school," Percy reminded her a bit testily for the reference, and she threw a hand up in exasperation.

"That's not-" She shook her head, stepping away, "Nevermind. Do what you want!"

"So, you want me to report it…?" Percy asked, but she didn't reply, just threw her hands up again as she left. Well, he would have to catch Professor McGonagall after classes, then, too. A confession made it pretty obvious where responsibility for the crime belonged. He did appreciate their honesty, though; he'd let Fred and George know they'd done the right thing, even if they'd probably rather throw something at him than listen to him.

It was just another thing to do.

He slid into Potions a few minutes early, and prepped what he could without overstepping Professor Snape's safety precautions. The professor despised anyone working with actual ingredients before class started. While Kendra complained that Professor Snape just wanted to limit their brewing time to panic them, Percy knew it was rather practical of the man to keep his students from mucking about unsupervised when the professor couldn't know what they'd done wrong in the first place to fix it.

After all, he allowed students to boil inert base liquids or set out ingredients in the correct order before class without a word. It was only the potentially dangerous activities that got points taken and detention. Not that Percy expected many to make that distinction. Professor Snape was not a likeable man, and his manner poisoned his actions. Though, Percy couldn't criticize – he had no idea what it would be like to attempt the education of students like his brothers on subjects as explo- mistake-ridden as Potions.

Percy finished his set up with a subdued air, thoughts churning wordlessly in the sudden darkness of his mind. As per usual, Professor Snape gave him ample opportunity to test his knowledge with only a slight shifting towards the latter end of the textbook, but even with his revision and the professor's surprising leniency towards Percy's unintended slight, Percy stumbled over a few questions and twice nearly added an ingredient too early. When Oliver reminded him to take the cauldron off the fire for a minute, Percy forced his preoccupation into submission, but it was too late to scrape more than an A.

An A. Percy had only had one A before, and that had been back before the OWLs had filtered the worst students out of Potions. He didn't understand exactly how Oliver had managed the grade (and honestly rued whatever luck had made the syllabus exactly what Oliver studied the day before), but he was only the worst NEWT student – not the worst in their year. Percy had been able to escape Oliver as a partner only once and that had resulted in a mad dash to counteract every move Natalie made.

He'd gotten his first A then. Now he had two.

It put a thundercloud over his head that followed him through lunch, two essays, and his last class. He blamed that for how he handled Fred at dinner.

Now they were definitely not speaking. It had started off innocently enough; Fred had been shifty and wringing his hands and Percy had guessed the reason correctly. Telling him he appreciated his honesty and that he'd be telling Professor McGonagall the extenuating circumstances had oddly not gone over well.
"So, you're going to run off to a professor and get us in more trouble," Geoge had remarked caustically, "Well, that's the last time I let Fred decide how we handle mistakes."

What exactly had the twins thought would happen once they'd confessed? Sometimes a prefect knowing was enough. They could take a few points or give a lecture and it was done. This, though, this had required an emergency visit to the Hospital Wing; he had to report it! Either way, he misspoke or they misunderstood and now Percy was going to have to calm himself down before he went to the Head's office.

Yes, they'd scared a young child, but she hadn't been hurt and it had been on accident. He couldn't let the coiled, venomous hurt in his gut run his tongue when he went in there or their relationship would probably be beyond repair.

He had to do this. Why didn't they ever…?

A tug to his earlobe and he sighed, stopping a few feet from Professor McGonagall's door.

George had a point. Was he rewarding honesty with punishment?

They had broken a number of rules – some of them Percy's rules, but would they learn anything from this?

…He was too close to the problem. Kendra seemed to want to sweep it under the rug, but because… of what had happened, and Percy didn't think that had anything to do with this.

In the end, it came right back around.

Professor McGonagall was fair, and in this, he trusted her judgement.

Percy knocked on the door.

Chapter End Notes

How will things go down with the Malfoys? Can Percy pull off the whole list of tasks he's assigned himself?

Where is Perry the Platypus- uhhh, how is Berodach spending his days?

Learn some of this and more in the next installment of Percy Take the Wheel!

And thank you for reading this far :)


Percy woke up the next morning clear-headed. Remarkably clear-headed. Noticeably clear-headed. He lay there for a long moment, staring up at the underside of his canopy and ticked a finger against the bed.

It wasn't relief from Professor McGonagall's decision being perfect, because he still felt a little uneasy at the detentions his brothers had earned. He didn't want to think about it. His mind turned from the small pit-trap to the gaping, hungry void of cold fear stretching from his throat to his chest and recoiled. No, he could also safely say he hadn't gotten through another stage of grief nor accepted Molly's inevitable… Well. Suffice to say, there were a few minor issues he was stringently not thinking about that had not resolved themselves.

He took a moment to swallow down and stifle the drowsy, half-woken emotions reaching lazily out from their usual home, with a feeling not unlike smothering oneself.

There.

Panic attack averted.

So, if it wasn't relief – or healing or whatever – there had to be some reason behind it. He'd noticed the haziness intermittently over the summer, but not thought too deeply on it. Likely due in no small part to the haziness. Now, though, his clarity had been returning in leaps and bounds since returning to Hogwarts. Could it be simply that his siblings were no longer in his sole charge? If-

"Percy, there's a first year being bullied!" The shout preceded Fred's face being shoved through Percy's curtains. Being thusly thrust from his thoughts, Percy drew his blanket to his chest instinctively as he sat up, before the situation registered.

"Where?" he asked, pushing the blankets aside and slamming his glasses on his face, "Fred, I'm glad you went for a prefect, but you're perfectly capable-"

"It's seventh years, Percy!" Fred grabbed his arm, dragging him from the room, and Percy stumbled along behind him, gaining speed as his sleep-heavy legs awoke.

Well, that made sense.

…Right?

Despite the urgency of the scenario, something was nagging at Percy. Wouldn't they have preferred any other prefect than Percy right now? Or was he underestimating their maturity? A sliver of guilt slid into his heart with a quiet snick.

"This way!" Fred turned a corner. At some point he'd released Percy, and he was a bit ahead. Percy shook himself. Now was not the time to lose focus when he had to confront… how many seventh years?

…Did he have his wand?

It was with no little relief that he found the magical instrument to be clasped painfully in his off hand,
but as he turned another corner, he noticed Fred had been joined by George ahead, and they were waiting at the end of the hall.

Come to think of it, he knew this hall from a particularly unpleasant experience in his second year and he'd taken pains to expound routes not to take to the twins when they'd joined him at Hogwarts.

There were mean grins on their faces and the guilt Percy had felt at misjudging them exploded into hooked, grasping fury.
"You petty little twits-"

And the hall was slime.

Dripping, greyish ooze like the insides of a flobberworm was everywhere and Percy couldn't finish the thought without it getting in his mouth. He could hear them laughing even if he couldn't see them through the torso-thick, long strands of goo bridging ceiling and floor. Every third person down this hall experienced the wonders of whatever-this-was if they didn't reset the count by tapping the statue of Delphina the Daring's hand at the east end before entering.

Of course, that didn't help if some unsuspecting victim came in from the west.

Percy violently vanished and scoured the slick substance from his person and cut a path down the hall with unnecessarily wild swinging motions of his arm. Fred and George hadn't deserved his consideration, dammit. No matter how much they pretended to change; no matter how subdued they'd been; no matter how much he'd wanted…

Percy's stupid eyes were burning and he huffed - an unseen bit of bluster for no one – before he sank into a crouch with his hand over his mouth and an arm over his knees, wand in a vice grip pointing at nothing. Slime stretched and oozed around him like thick saliva.

He'd thought, maybe… He'd thought Fred had been… Well, he hadn't been as- as antagonistic.

Percy wasn't fooling himself about that, but-

Had he wanted to belong so much?

He'd wanted someone on his side, wanted someone to understand, sure. But this was…

Percy was the enemy, still.

The thought filled him with an unexpected, icy calm.

After all, it was just a return to the norm. Silent, he rose and sliced his way out of the hallway with the efficiency he'd practiced, no more and no less effort than he needed to free himself. So what if the one person who used to take his side was no longer…? The note they'd pinned to Delphina on the other side – 'Guess they got away!' – scraped at the thin, frozen seal but he clamped down on it. So what if he'd thought maybe his family would…? He crumpled the parchment and let it fall.

If he could live on the edge of a panic attack for the last four months, he could last until the weekend now. No need to get dramatic. Not after he'd already glanced over a wound he was ignoring before Fred had barged in.

Tomorrow was Thursday.

He had a trio of challenges waiting for him and he'd best prepare. Not to mention writing up Fred and George for a prank on a prefect. Always good to have another chunk of time ripped out of his
schedule.

He had better go get dressed. Yes.

When he reached the common room, he relaxed his death grip on his wand and slipped it up his sleeve. Wouldn't do to break his own rules, after all.

Really, reacting that strongly to a single prank was pathetic. Shame flushed under the ice and was smothered, but the itch of curiosity remained. It seemed along with his newfound (regained?) clarity, he might be experiencing some… mood swings?

Percy wasn't entirely sure, but it wasn't what he needed to focus on, just now. He walked up the steps to his dorm, passing the fourth year boys' room in a large radius but unable to escape snippets of retelling that just made red flare at the corners of his eyes as laughter exploded out into the hall and rolled down the corridor. With a huff, Percy sat himself on the bed to try and reach for the ice, instead. It came eagerly and the curiosity itched again but was easily suppressed. The sweaters and yarn crammed, shrunken, in his trunk, needed to be sorted and set aside for him to grab tomorrow evening, his notes for the Ghoul Studies class should be given another good review, and he should probably practice his nonverbals for Transfiguration. It chafed to be reduced to inanimate-to-inanimate conversions, again, but nonverbal casting demonstrated an innate understanding of the subject matter necessary before Professor McGonagall would allow them to move onto conjuration and human transfiguration. Sure, they hadn't quite started nonverbals, yet, but Percy needed all the practice he could get with Transfiguration. As he untangled the strands of miniaturized yarn, he muttered various ghoulish facts and trivia under his breath until Oliver swung a pillow at his face and threw him off.

"Oliver, I am trying to avoid disappointing a professor," Percy admonished, but the ice in his chest cracked at the good-humored, half-aware grin Oliver was fixing on him, "And you know shrunken items are more fragile!"

"I've been meaning to ask why you have your fingers encased in multi-colored yarn," Oliver made to retrieve his pillow with a sleepy summoning charm and yawned, "But your mysterious chanting at six in the morning is what kept my attention."

"You've dragged my brothers out of bed at three, before." His tone was wry, even as he swatted the pillow out of the air before it could reach its intended recipient, waving it tauntingly, "This is mine now, thanks."

"That was for Quidditch," came the predictable, bleary protest, "You're just obsessing over not getting any E's."

Well, that was rude. Whose fault was it that Percy had gotten an E last year? He'd more than made up for it with his OWL in the subject, hence his acceptance into the NEWT class, but what rankled was that Oliver proved with his own OWL result that he could have done better, all along! "If you'd spend a little less time dreaming of doing unspeakable things to the Quidditch Cup and more time on your studies, I wouldn't have to worry about the E I'll get this year in Potions, would I?"

"Oh stop," Suri groaned from across the aisle, pulling his pillow over his ears, "Take your lover's spat to the common room."

"I didn't know you were jealous," Oliver murmured with a half-awake sort of mischief, "You know if you've got the skill, anyone can ride my broom-"
"You're disgusting," Percy threw the pillow back at its owner, even as Suri and Oliver broke down into giggles. "How is that an appropriate thing to joke about?"

"Yes, we all know Weasley's saving himself for that Clearwater bird, Oliver," Suri scolded him teasingly, "How could you damage his pure, naïve ears with your crude humor?"

"I'm not saving myself," Percy snapped, feeling said ears beginning to burn, "It's just that gentlemen don't kiss and tell."

"Erathabeth told, though," Oliver revealed with a toothy grin, and Percy felt his entire face flame with indignation.

"She didn't!"

"All good things, I hear," Oliver assuaged him placatingly, even as Suri's ears seemed to perk.

"Okay, this I've gotta hear," he demanded, rolling out of his bed and throwing himself on Oliver's as if they were having a slumber party.

"There's nothing to tell," Percy denied, but Oliver steamrolled him.

"You know Erathabeth, right? Slytherin prefect? Graduated last year?" Oliver was sitting upright now, and the two boys were leaned in toward one another, eager to share the gossip, "Turns out she wanted to go out with a bang, and for some reason unknown to mankind, those icy brown eyes of hers landed on our own, dear Percival-"

"How do you even know this?" Percy interjected, but Oliver just grinned.

"Gotta protect the privacy of my sources; sorry, Perce."

"You got with Erathabeth?" Suri asked, sounding close to squealing, of all things, "Man, I need a play by play. She was crazy strict; was she into that bad student in detention sort of thing…?"

"No, nope, not happening," Percy set aside his untangled sweaters and picked up his Defense, Care, and Arithmancy notebooks and texts, sliding them into his bookbag and setting about changing rather than listening. Still, they continued to talk.

"Well, it's not as impressive as when I got to second base with that one metamorphmagus in Hufflepuff," Suri was saying, and Oliver snorted.

"That never happened."

"It did!"

Honestly, Percy kind of wanted to forget about that thing with Erathabeth. He'd still been more interested in Penelope, and it had led to an awkward end to a somewhat stilted relationship.

He had not been too heartbroken and neither had she.

At least the rumor mill had only picked up on part of it; it had been a miracle they'd kept it under wraps for the month it lasted.

Well, it would fade on its own. Oliver was too invested in Quidditch to care much about dating once the season started, and Suri wasn't the type to bring up other's conquests without prompting; he preferred boasting over gossiping, as the evolving conversation behind him could attest.
"Natalie will fall to my charms," Suri insisted, "We've been friends forever and I've got the experience to keep her satisfied."

Oliver waved his wand mockingly, "Only if you actually charm her, Yuvraj. You've been friends for so long she knows you."

Drivel.

It was the only reason Percy looked forward to the first Quidditch game of the year. Although Oliver was reaching for his strategy notes, even as the conversation continued. It appeared being so completely crushed by Slytherin last year (due to Harry's hospitalization) had lit a fire under him that refused to go out.

Percy shut the door to the bathroom to keep out the noise as he started his ablutions, and later slid from the room without attracting the attention of the gossip vultures his roommates had temporarily become.

By way of extensive practice, Percy scribbled out a report on Fred and George's latest misdemeanour balanced on a textbook on the way down the stairs, his mind still on Oliver and Suri. Honestly, they hadn't even had breakfast yet and instead of preparing for the day ahead, they were gossiping. Sometimes, Percy felt like the only person in Gryffindor with a work ethic. Excepting, perhaps, Hermione, who was intently studying something in the Common Room.

"You can take the book down to breakfast, Hermione," he reminded her gently, but the noise still startled her and she shut the tome quickly.

"Oh, hello, Percy." Her shoulders, which had shot to her ears, relaxed with the recognition, "I was just researching House Elf laws. The current state of affairs is simply deplorable; did you know there are barely any laws regarding the safety and humane treatment of House Elves? Not to mention the complete lack of an emancipation program for any desiring freedom! After you mentioned that the family we were looking for might have voted against that failed bill on House Elves, it's been nagging at me, so I took out some light reading," she was cordoned off from the rest of the table by four books each the thickness of Percy's fist, "and I must say, I never expected to find this sort of slavery still flourishing in the wizarding world! I guess I should have anticipated that sort of antiquated thinking after Binns explained in his first lesson on the Ministry that it was set up a few thousand years ago and barely changed since, but-"

"Hermione, you haven't given me any chance to actually respond," Percy interrupted, and Hermione blinked at him before flushing.

"I'm sorry; my mum says I'm too excitable," she looked ready to turn back to her books and escape the embarrassment, but Percy, prompted by a little guilt that he'd shot down the only good influence his youngest siblings had, leaned against the table to regain her attention.

"How about we talk about it on the way down to breakfast? I don't know about you, but I'm starving." Plus, he didn't want to linger and have to deal with the twins when they reappeared.

"Well, I was waiting for Harry and Ron to wake up…" Hermione said uncertainly, but she was already packing her books into a bag that was nearly bursting at the seams, "I suppose they'd be another half hour, though, and I am hungry."

"What was that about an emancipation program…?" Percy prompted as they exited the common room. What started as an earnest discussion quickly snowballed into a loud argument where neither quite disagreed with the other, but still felt their opponent was approaching it wrongly.
"The Ministry clearly can't step up to the plate on this," Hermione was protesting vehemently, waving a fork at Percy and clearing a radius of a foot around her as early risers hastily scooted down the bench and away, "They've had hundreds of appeals and not one has gotten through."

"The Ministry is the only way to make any sort of progress," Percy shot back, nearly knocking over his goblet with a dismissively curt wave of his hand, "The more traditional families aren't going to listen to an upstart without any backing, or authority. If you want to change something that's been in place for thousands of years, you've got to have research, and funding, and credibility – all of which is gained through the Ministry!"

"The research could speak for itself!" Hermione's hand smacked the table, "If I could just interview House Elves in a variety of families' homes – "

"And how would you expect to get in?" Percy prompted, a little high-handedly, "You can't just waltz up to a Noble or Ancient family's manor- "

"Oh, I bet I can!" Hermione interrupted, one finger pointed dangerously at him, but Percy ignored the interjection altogether.

"-not even taking into account the trespassing wards, which can be nasty, but they won't waste a word on the likes of us – " This time, Percy cut himself off, and his voice, when it came back to him, was subdued, "I mean, they won't want to talk to someone unproven."

Hermione was not dissuaded in the least, "Then I'll prove myself! I won't turn my back on injustice now for vague promises of the future! I'll stand alone, if I have to, and let my work speak for itself!"

"Oh, bravo," Fred wiped a tear from his eye as he sat beside her, George clapping as he took the seat on her other side.

"What has Perfect prefect Percy done to upset such a fragile flower this early in the day?"

"Yes, should we punish him for this dark and dreadful deed?"

Looking a bit off-balance, Hermione shook her head, disgruntled, "We were just having a friendly debate."

"Percy's earlobes are abused to the point of redness," George pointed out admiringly, "I think you were waging a war."

Irritably, Percy released the ear he'd been subconsciously pulling at and stood from the table. He addressed Hermione alone, not letting his gaze meander to either ginger bookend, "I've got to check on the first years, but you've raised some interesting points, Hermione. I'll be sure to think on them, if you'll consider mine."

Reluctantly, she nodded, "Bye, Percy."

George waved mockingly, "Yeah, get out of here – "

" – before she completely destroys your ego," Fred hooted.

Hermione turned on them presumably to scold them, but the words had struck home. She was a second year and Percy had found himself struggling to address some of her arguments on the Ministry. Him! Someone who aspired to join the Ministry in less than two years! Sure, he did manage to hold his own, but that was the least to be expected when debating someone who had only had a few lessons from Binns and some early morning's readings of background! That should have
been easy, not an accomplishment!

…But that didn't mean her claims didn't hold water, he reminded himself. If only Fred and George hadn't spoken up, Percy would have walked away from that discussion in contemplation, without the tinge of resentment and shame that prickled his stomach now.

"How have classes been going?" he prompted the first years absently as he sat down, akin to thoughtlessly pulling the capstone from a dam, and the following deluge derailed his previous train of thought altogether.

He spent some time addressing concerns as the rest of the first years trickled in, recounting the way to the Owlery, the Hospital Wing, and other areas of interest as requested and reminding them of certain rules as violations were hinted at or popped up. Ginny didn't come down, and the Robbins girl – Dementia? Demelza? – implied she was feeling a bit under the weather. Percy wondered briefly how long a girl's first period was supposed to last, then put it hastily from his mind before he could flush with discomfort.

Well, if he didn't see her at lunch, he'd hunt her down and force some food down her throat. And make sure she'd been in classes that morning, of course.

Another item on the list. Professor McGonagall swept past and reminded him of a prior one. He called out after her and she slowed, allowing him to catch up and match her pace.

"Yes, Mr. Weasley?" she looked over her spectacles at him, and as per usual, Percy had to fight the urge to return the gesture. It was a weird ongoing compulsion but he didn't need that sort of attention.

He sketched a shallow bow, "I regret to inform you that I've had to write up another incident report for Fred and George, Professor." Extending the slip of parchment her way, he straightened, and she accepted it with a sigh.

"Well, what do you think?" she asked, unexpectedly.

"Ma'am?" Percy prompted, feeling a bit wrong-footed and not entirely sure what she wanted.

"Detentions haven't dissuaded them in the last three years, and I can't imagine something worse than the pickling Severus has had them do," she waved the parchment, "and as the incident involved you, it seems only fair that you have some input on what happens next." When he continued to stare at her in bewilderment, Professor McGonagall's face softened into a wry smile, "I wouldn't ask for your opinion if I didn't trust it to be reasonable, and I assure you, I will make the final decision on the matter."

"Cleaning Berodach's teeth is always viable," he blurted when he realized how long he'd been silent, and a flush settled across his face like a scarf hanging from his ears, "Er, I mean, they're not fond of cleaning, and my familiar is not exactly fresh of breath. Ma'am."

She blinked at him once, as if processing something, and surprised him with a half-stifled snort, and her tone was strained, "Well, thank you, Mr. Weasley; I will take that into account. If there's nothing else?"

"No, Professor," Percy intoned, giving her another, short bow and fleeing at her nod of dismissal. He wasn't sure then if he'd bollixed it up or not, but as he left, he heard her murmuring something that included the word Berodach to the approaching Professor Sprout, and the two of them descended into what he would have called giggles, if they weren't his professors.

Ah. The heat of his flush intensified; he'd known that name would come back to bite him.
They were probably thinking something along the lines of *Oh, look, it's harmless, bookish Percy Weasley and his familiar: Berodach the Berserker*. He'd have laughed, too, if he weren't the butt of the joke. It was like saying Godric Gryffindor's familiar had been an asthmatic mouse with a heart condition.

At least he was used to it.

Being such, he shook it off as he slid into a chair in the Defense classroom and retrieved his notebook to revise before class began. He'd taken copious notes on the relevant sections of the Lockhart series – the mechanics behind the defeats, how Lockhart had recognized the situations, whether other options had been weighed, etc. In all honesty, though, the man was a brilliant writer, if a bit fond of himself, and Percy had found himself more sucked into the story than focusing on the Defense applications on many an occasion.

It was a tad embarrassing.

Luckily, only Ginny had cottoned on, and she was similarly enamoured.

"Good morning, class," Lockhart beamed, flashing a smile of straight white teeth as he swept into the classroom with the grace and bearing of a hunter of the Dark Arts, "Now, I've been starting my younger years' classes with a written pre-test, but from the feedback I've been getting, that'd be a bit too easy for my sixth years! You're NEWT level, after all!"

A tinge of disappointment that his studying would be in vain was swept away by cautious excitement as Percy parsed *too easy* to mean Lockhart would be giving them a different way to showcase their efforts. The gentle wave of murmuring that circled once about the classroom meant his fellows agreed with him.

"Books away and wands out!" Lockhart said grandly, confirming the suspicion, even as he continued with a dashing grin, "Now, everyone's always very excited to start non-verbal casting their sixth year - though, I, myself, hardly needed the instruction at your age – and the thing many an underprepared young spellcaster forgets when they make their first attempt is precise attention to detail." Pacing in front of the class, Lockhart had the room's interest, and he preened, ever so slightly, "So there I was, in my office, trying to think of a way to challenge the talented youth of Hogwarts and I thought to myself, I thought, Gilderoy, you already have the materials at hand. Life favors the prepared, after all, so why not start the class with a demonstration of not only your preparation, but your attention to detail? These are key skills," Lockhart tapped his wand against his hand with each word, something his mother said was a bad habit, but only showed how strong his control over his own magic must be, to be able to do so with such nonchalance, "in your quest for nonverbal defense spells." He spun on his heel to a military rest, then spread his arms wide, "One by one, I will have you come to the front of the class and attempt a single spell used for defense but not yet covered in your past curriculum – which I am, of course, intimately familiar with. I know what you're thinking, *But Professor, that's too easy for NEWT-level studies* – and that's why there is a catch!" He pointed a finger, swept it across the crowd, "All of you will be required to use different spells, and they must only be those mentioned in my books! If you can remember the situation in which the spell was used or the enemy it was used against, you will receive extra points!" His smile grew slightly patronizing, "Of course, I don't necessarily expect you to *succeed* at your attempt, but the closer you can get to a passable result, the better your score. This will be a test of your self-awareness as well!"

Gemma raised a hand, frowning, and didn't wait to be called upon, "Professor, this is hardly fair when muggleborns don't have parents that can pass on information outside the curriculum."

"Miss - Farley, isn't it? You look just like your mother, Madge. I won't hear such distinctions in my class. It's against the rules to practice magic outside the school for people of *all* parentage," Professor
Lockhart frowned back at her, "Two points from Slytherin for perpetuating blood status stereotypes."

Well, that was… a bit… stern. Percy wouldn't have taken points had he been teaching; Gemma had brought up a valid point in defense of muggleborns, but the bristling from said muggleborns like Natalie Fairbourne, Georgia Schmidt, and Derrick Chen had eased off with the Professor's response, so it must have been a peace-keeping attempt. Still, Percy felt he'd misinterpreted her, and he raised his hand, "Professor Lockhart?"

"Ah, Percy, so nice to see a fan again," Lockhart beamed, "Would you like to go first?"

"Oh- ah, of course, Professor," Percy replied, taken off-guard by the man remembering him from the book signing, but he supposed the companions of the Boy Who Lived were hard to forget when they'd also been accompanied by a graveyard ghoul. Not to mention the Weasley monopoly on red hair now that the Prewitts had sort of funneled into their family tree through a series of unrelated marriages of female Prewitt to Weasley male. Shaking himself, Percy continued, "Only, I don't mean to overstep, but I believe Gemma was trying to say that those of us with magical parents may have an unfair advantage, simply because we have sort of built in tutors outside of school – not necessarily to practice over the summer, since that's illegal without a permit, of course, but to guide us through wand motions without casting the spell and the like. She wasn't saying muggleborns were in any way inferior or different, somehow."

"No, just that we're unable to make connections or do research on our own without being prompted by an academic framework," Schmidt shot back, crossing her arms over her chest and shooting a glare at Percy and the Slytherins present. Which was brilliant. Exactly as planned. Percy should have let the Professor's peacekeeping stand. With the… inability to keep one Defense professor around for more than a year that had plagued the school since his parents' times, Hogwarts had a small enough Defense class to combine all four Houses. Not quite as small as Potions, but enough. This meant tensions were high as the well-worn relations between Houses one-on-one were suddenly dumped into an environment usually confined to the corridors and the Great Hall. Schmidt, being a Ravenclaw, was understandably miffed at the unintentional slight against her resourcefulness.

"I didn't mean you were unable to get those resources," Percy back-pedalled hastily, "Just that it would be harder." Why did he respond? Schmidt was puffing herself up again and Lockhart interrupted with a nervous laugh.

"Alright, I don't think we're here to argue about blood status, but to learn how to defend ourselves against what lurks in the dark, hmm?" He clapped his hands together, "Percy, come on up."

It was a good thing Percy had reviewed his notes. He felt a small burst of pride that he'd studied just the right thing for Professor Lockhart's assessment, even with the chagrin lingering under Schmidt's silent glare. He shrugged at her apologetically; he really hadn't meant anything by it, and she wrinkled her nose at him, but didn't seem quite as irritated now that he'd made eye contact. Percy had no way of knowing that the big, blue eyes he shared with Charlie and Ron made his sincere apology abundantly clear, especially with his typical oblivious manner. "Yes, sir," he addressed the professor as he walked to the front of the class.

"And what spell will you be attempting?" Lockhart grinned, leaning back casually on his podium.

With the majority of the creature-based repelling charms being impossible to cast without the creature, and the rest requiring him to actually cast against another person – and he wouldn't be attempting a new spell against a professor! – there were only a few options. In the interest of maintaining an even playing field, Percy disregarded the ones he'd heard Bill, Charlie, or his father talk about or explain, but a little guiltily picked the one closest to his most recent practice, over the summer.
He still wanted to impress the professor, after all.

"The Dust Clapper spell, sir," Percy replied, "You mention it in Gadding with Ghouls, where you explain how you used it to reveal the second chameleon ghoul in the barn." They were slightly more vicious than the household ghoul, but not as deadly as, say, Berodach's brethren.

"Excellent!" Lockhart crowed, "I can see you've been doing your reading, but I should have known that particular book would hold your interest, what with your impressive familiar," he winked, and Percy felt his fingers tingle with anxiety as his Housemates – and especially Oliver – gave him searching looks. He hadn't exactly told anyone outside his family, beyond the appropriate staff and Hermione, of course, but Professor Lockhart couldn't have known that. He hoped Oliver wouldn't take him to task for it. "Why don't you give it a go?"

Well, he couldn't have kept it a secret for long; the demonstration for Ghoul Studies was tomorrow, after all. And Hagrid, while not a hot spot for student visits, was soft on Berodach to the point of inviting the creature in for tea.

Which he'd learned from not finding Berodach one evening and having a minor heart attack before Hagrid invited him in to join them.

Professor Lockhart obligingly gathered up the erasers from the chalkboard – by hand, oddly – and placed them on the ground before him, looking from Percy to the erasers with an anticipation that reminded Percy of Hagrid's boarhound, Fang, when Hagrid was wobbling a platter about.

It brought a light flush to his cheeks at the thought that one of his professors expected success from him to the point they were excited about it. He wondered what Lockhart had been told to shape that opinion – or if he was just so observant that he could form a judgement on a person from having met them only twice. The wand motions had been explained in the book, as they were for nearly every spell except that beyond the skills of an ordinary witch or wizard (such as the overpowered Homorphus Lockhart had used on a rampaging werewolf) and Percy duplicated them as well as he could from a textual explanation, intoning the incantation as he did and focusing on the way it felt when he had to beat the dust from a rug by hand for a hedge spell.

The towering, floor-length curtains all straightened with a loud thwack and a shudder as if they'd been smacked with something simultaneously, and a cloud of dust settled over the students, though Percy and Professor Lockhart were shielded from the blast by virtue of the windows ending midway up the length of the room. Percy's cheeks were burning now, and so were his ears. That had been… something.

"No need to show off, Percy," Lockhart chuckled, and Percy tried to apologize, explain it had been a mistake, but Lockhart steamrolled over him with a gleam of amusement in his eye, "You remind me of myself at your age, always trying to go above and beyond. Don't worry, I'll give you plenty of opportunities to help me demonstrate in this class."

Percy snapped his mouth shut against a second attempted protest. If the professor still thought well of him after that, he should probably shut up and let Lockhart believe what he would.

"Thank you, sir," Percy gave the man a short bow and retreated to his seat, ears burning as those fastidious few glared him down for the dust and Davies clapped him on the shoulder with glee from the neighboring table, eyeing Gabriel Truman's clear distaste. Honestly, Percy had no idea what the Ravenclaw Quidditch captain had against the usually easy-going Hufflepuff prefect and he didn't want to know.

What mattered was that he hadn't known he could overpower a cleaning spell like that, and assumed
it had something to do with the sheer amount of cleaning-related hedge magic his mother had had him perform that summer. Cooking had always come easier to Molly, and was something she enjoyed, but there was only so many times a day Percy could prepare meals without wasting food, so the majority of the time he'd been cleaning, and it had been nearly meditative for him. Hazy, yes, but when he really needed one of those memories, it jumped to the fore like he'd whistled for it.

Which was vaguely suspicious, now that he-

Oliver shook his shoulder, "Come on, Percy, you'll be late to revision or whatever you do before lunch if you don't get up." Had he dozed off? Percy blinked, noticing that the other students had gone, and only Oliver and Professor Lockhart were lingering. He'd been thinking about something, and then… And then Schmidt had gone up, and one by one the rest, yes. It was a bit… a bit… Well the word escaped him, but Percy had been awake all class. "Plus, I'd like to know when you got a familiar, mate." Ah, yes, that. He must have been worried enough that the time passed without him really registering it. Oliver stood above him, waiting, and streaked with dust that told the tale of half-hearted swiping.

Standing, Percy shook the last vestiges of spiderweb from his mind and absent-mindedly vanished the dust still coating Oliver; he'd had more than enough practice with it once he learned Harry was more comfortable if Percy flicked away the soot of floo visits to the Lovegoods or Diagon by wand rather than by brush. "It happened over the summer, so it was a bit overshadowed by everything else. I didn't really mean to keep it secret, but he is a bit… surprising?" Percy didn't have a good way to describe Berodach and he hadn't really had to yet, but he gave it a shot, "Very calm, more affectionate than I'm comfortable with, intelligent, and mischievous, I think, for as much as a creature like him can be mischievous." Sometimes it seemed more like calculation than mischief, but Percy wasn't willing to consider it, just yet. He was still struggling with the ghoul being more than a mindless creature, much less a manipulative one.

"But what is he?" Oliver pressed, and Percy felt a curl of mischief in his own gut now that Oliver was more curious than annoyed. He'd been more worried Oliver would be upset Percy hadn't said anything than that Oliver would freak out over the species. His fellow Gryffindor was simply not the superstitious type if it didn't relate to Quidditch.

"Ah, he stays down with Hagrid, so we can visit him for lunch, if you'd like?" Percy suggested innocently, already making plans to break off his revision period a little early and grab food from the kitchens; Oliver wasn't as familiar with Hagrid and wouldn't know to expect the rock-hard tea cakes Hagrid typically plied visitors with.

"So not a cat, owl, or toad, then," Oliver ticked off on his fingers, "And you gave Scabbers over to Ron, I saw, which McGonagall has yet to object to, so not a rat, either. A dog would fit your description fairly well. Or a pixie; I can't see the professors letting one of those loose in the castle."

"A pixie?" Percy echoed incredulously, "Oliver, I am not some empty-headed, vain-"

"Your familiar doesn't define you, Percy," Oliver rolled his eyes with no little exasperation, "But now I know you identify with it, so that's a clue."

"No, I don't," Percy protested, startled, before he collected himself to argue back, "It's just- you know how my family is. We're all a bit superstitious, so I- I suppose I just expect everyone else to be, too," his voice turned wry, "even though I know you 'don't abide by that humdrum.'"

"I really hate your ability to just quote people back at them; I was twelve when I said that," Oliver was clearly not present in the moment however as he hummed thoughtfully, still absorbed in the mystery, "But alright. Meet you at the front door."
There was time to revise before Percy would need to visit the kitchens, so he did. The incident during Defense had reminded him of his promise to continue practicing hedge magic while he was away from Molly so that they could make the most of the time she’d have left over winter holidays, and hopefully next summer. Not that Percy liked to think of that, but that sort of avoidance was how he’d nearly forgotten. He could do braiding while on patrol, and cleaning up around the common room while he was making himself available for homework help for the younger years and his siblings.

Not that Fred or George would be taking him up on it anytime soon.

Shaking the incident from his mind, Percy quickly tucked away the rest of the sandwich he'd begged from the elves before reaching the front door. No need to give Oliver warning that lunch with Hagrid was something to avoid.

Served him right for all the times he'd woken Percy at three as he prepared for Quidditch practice.

There might be something to be said about a friendship not fraught constantly with irritation and revenge but Percy wasn't all that interested. He was relatively sure he'd been too irrevocably warped by growing up with the number of siblings he had in a shared, cramped space to appreciate it.

He'd meant the thought as a joke, but it had a slight ring of truth to it that made him snort.

"What's funny?" Oliver asked, trotting up to him, and Percy waved it off. Never one to let a silence live, Oliver filled the walk down to Hagrid's with Quidditch, and Percy tuned it out, still thinking about ways to fit hedge magic into his schedule.

"Merlin, is that…?" Oliver was squinting, and Berodach was pacing Hagrid's pumpkin patch under Hagrid's less-than-watchful eye – probably hunting for flesh-eating slugs – but the ghoul wasn't exactly easy to see against a forested background. The muted, grayish green tone of his skin blended well with the gray-brown of the trunks. "That's a ghoul; that's a graveyard ghoul," Oliver stated as they got closer, not panicking since Hagrid was completely unbothered (which was, really, a poor decision in most cases, but correct this once). Let it not be said Oliver was unintelligent when Percy could drag his mind from Quaffles and Quiditch Cups, though, because the hints Lockhart had dropped and Berodach's presence clicked rapidly into place, "Percy, you've got to let me hug it."

"What?" The reaction startled a laugh out of Percy, "Why?"

"Don't you know how agile those things are? If I can just absorb even a little of it, through osmosis or something, I could be legendary," Oliver told him with the seriousness of a fanatic, before he broke character to grin, "Really, though, it'd be interesting if we could get McGonagall to give us permission to bring him onto the pitch for some ground drills. Work on our evasion, you know?"

Uh, no. While it was nice to know Oliver accepted Berodach so easily, and yes, that might have made something warm settle in his chest, Percy still balked at the idea of setting his familiar on another human being, even in jest. Berodach still had enormous rending claws, after all, that would slide out any time his fingers stretched far enough, whether he meant to or not. "That's not happening," Percy said flatly. Berodach had noticed them, however, because the ghoul had perked up, freezing on the field before bounding across it towards Percy in a graceful, rolling lope. He'd clearly been getting in some practice. It was still an intimidating sight watching Berodach barrel down on them full-throttle, however.

Percy was plucked with an amazing lack of injury from the ground, at the speed Berodach was going before that wild skid to a halt, but he did have the breath knocked out of him as Berodach swung him up into a sort of tackle-embrace.
"I can see what you meant about him being more affectionate than you're comfortable with," Oliver laughed, entirely unfazed by the charge and subsequent grab, "If I did that, you'd hex my ears off."

Percy gave a sort of head tilt of acquiescence, not quite up to talking yet and unable to really move his arms. Finally, Berodach put him down, and Percy took in a gasp of air before he straightened his robes and pushed up his glasses curtly to regain a bit of dignity, "He's not normally like this."

Hagrid, who had followed Berodach at a more sedate pace to greet them, paused, looking sheepish, "Er, well, tha's prolly my fault. Normally I jus' give him some tea cakes an' he's happy, but I, er… I know ye said he's got a fix on 'em, but he's normally so good at behavin' I didn't think he'd eat the whole bushel of strawberries." Their gaze swung collectively to the ghoul, which looked pleased with itself, but no less bony. "I don' know where he puts it," Hagrid admitted, "Didn' even stop hunting the slugs what have been infestin' my pumpkins."

"Well, I'm glad he's making himself of use while he's here on your hospitality," Percy said, with a slight bow, "My apologies that he ate so much, though."

"Oh, none o' that now," Hagrid waved it off with a large hand, but his tone was bashful, "Ye don' gotta be so formal with me, Percy; I told ye before."

"I'll stop when it stops making you smile," Percy said with a grin and Hagrid laughed, before the sound of bells from the sideyard had the half-giant stomping off to check on it, muttering something about foxes being after the damn chickens. Oliver let out a low whistle.

"Why don't you act like that with Penny?" he asked, the smile that stretched across his face strained with stifled laughter, "Or does your type run a bit…" One hand rose up over his head and wobbled there, "Bigger?"

"Oh, lay off," Percy rolled his eyes with a delicate sniff, "It's called being charming. Goes along with manners, but I'm sure those are as foreign to you as they are to my siblings."

"It's called kissing up and you'd be doing a lot more kissing if you talked to Penny like that, I'm telling you, mate," Oliver cajoled, the entire reason for his trip down here completely forgotten.

"So how's your line up looking this year? When's your first practice?" Percy asked a little too loudly, but the bait was still taken. Oliver gave him a look that said he knew Percy was just making a ham-fisted attempt to change the topic but hell if he would pass up the opportunity. They drifted in Hagrid's wake, Berodach practically dancing circles around them as he worked off the sugar (strawberry?) high. Unfortunately, when they did catch up to Hagrid, he was more than willing to talk Quidditch, because it also meant talking Harry. This continued for at least ten minutes as Oliver recapped Harry's best plays and how he'd be working to help him continue to improve and blah, blah, strategy and broomsticks and Harry…

Well, there was an in there; maybe Percy could actually get something useful done, "So, what do you know about Harry's relatives?" Percy swirled his tea with a spoon, the four of them having migrated into Hagrid's hut as the conversation continued. Oliver had nearly nicked a tooth on a tea cake more than once because he kept getting too engaged in the conversation.

A strained look came over Hagrid's face, as if he were about to start sweating, "Well, I'm sure I wouldn' know. Muggles, on Lily's side, aren't they?"

"Her sister," Percy confirmed, continuing delicately, "I thought you might have a little more information, seeing as the headmaster trusts you so highly."
"I can tell ye it's the safest place for him, but I got the idea from Harry that he'd prefer not to talk about it," Hagrid was in rare form, his voice as stern as it got, "and I'm no' abou' to go gossiping."

"Oh, my apologies," Percy looked up from his tea, affecting a startled expression, "I hope I didn't sound too nosy; I've just been trying to determine whether inviting Harry and his relatives over for Christmas would be a good idea." He knew already it wasn't, just from the looks he'd seen up outside of Harry's door this summer, and he planned on taking Harry home with the rest of the Weasleys – if they went home for Christmas. There'd have to be a vote on that, because it was something that could be good and bad in equal measure.

"Oh, er, no, the Dursleys aren' too comfortable aroun' magic," Hagrid replied, deflating, but though he clearly felt chagrined at 'misreading' Percy, Percy knew there would be no pushing Hagrid on that front. For now.

Meanwhile, Berodach was lapping gingerly from his own oversized mug – practically a bowl, and equal to the one Hagrid held – and managing not to just overturn it in the attempt. Oliver was transfixed.

Percy took a sip of his own tea and made a noncommittal hum of acknowledgment, before sending Hagrid a smile, "You haven't told me how your bid to the headmaster went, yet."

"What bid?" Oliver prompted, curiosity alight once more as he tore his gaze from Berodach.

"Professor Kettleburn's retiring next year, and Hagrid would be a shoe-in for the position," Percy explained, nodding towards Hagrid as he mentioned him.

"There ye go again," Hagrid shook his head with a helpless smile, "I'm sure there's plen'y of better choices."

"Who's got the passion you do? I don't know anyone who cares about their field as much as you do," Oliver encouraged him unironically, and Percy nearly snorted into his cup at the lack of self-awareness.

"You boys are just tryin' ta get me flustered now," Hagrid scolded, but the smile lingered, "Ye ought to be gettin' back up to the castle, before you're late for classes." He wasn't wrong, so they traded farewells, and Oliver got a curious pat goodbye from Berodach, before the two boys hurried to the castle.

"I'm for Arithmancy," Percy said when he needed to split off, gesturing down the hall he needed.

"Divination," Oliver grinned, "Mum wouldn't hear of me having less than five NEWT classes."

"I applaud her efforts," Percy replied wryly, the two of them still lingering and blocking traffic. The dark looks had them moving over to the edge of the intersection, where the statue of Cardenia Vexmoor caused a blockage, anyway.

"I'm surprised you're not going for 12 NEWTs to keep your streak going," Oliver mused, and brought a scowl to Percy's face.

"I was… dissuaded by Professor McGonagall in our career meeting last year," he sniffed at the memory, "I'm sure I could handle the workload, but she had a point about some classes… lacking relevancy for a Ministry official."

"If you really want a job at the Ministry, there's always an opening in the Goblin Liaison office," Oliver laughed at his own joke and glanced over his shoulder, "Oh, I've spotted Kendra's newest
Kendra appeared to have overpowered a straightening charm, as her typical cloud of dark curls hung flat and limp down her back like an oil slick. It was a bit disconcerting, actually. Percy had never seen the shape of her skull before.

"Oh, lay off!" The shout could be heard before Oliver even caught up with her, as Kendra had seen him coming. Oliver's laugh pealed over the crowded hall in response.

It was only when Percy was setting out his compass and protractor in Arithmancy that he remembered he'd meant to check on Ginny at lunch. She'd probably be fine for another couple of hours, he told himself to combat the edge of guilt that dug into him. Besides, for all he knew whatever it was had passed already.

But Ginny had no one to write home to about it, and it was his responsibility to check in.

Percy almost missed roll call fretting about it, and the near-miss gave him the force of will to put it from his mind. Nothing to be done about it now. He had to focus. He didn't even know who was sitting at his –

Oh, no.

No, no, no.

Sharing the two-person table Percy had sat at was none other than Ross Grimmett.

Chapter End Notes

There goes the comedy duo, with their whacky, lovable antics- what? No? Percy is actually- Oh, right, yeah, Percy's terrified of this guy for no apparent reason. That can't be plot-related.
At his boggart in the spotlight look, Grimmett heaved a silent sigh. The taller boy inched a little away, and Percy instantly felt the fear crash down into guilt. He didn't know what it was that set him off about Grimmett, but the other boy was just as unaware. The Slytherin prefect had never done anything to him, but knew Percy felt so weirdly repelled by him that he'd scoot away on his own, like Grimmett was infected with something contagious and Percy was the only one who knew.

Ugh.

Percy felt the guilt from Ginny double down on this situation and knew he'd have to work on this this year. He had to get over this silly little thing about Grimmett.

He wasn't sure how to convey this while the professor was going over the work they'd cover this year, but he had to do something. If only to keep Gemma from coming after him later for having 'upset' the terrifying creatu- other prefect. After arguing with himself yielded no better solution, Percy tried sort of deliberately leaning into Grimmett's space, fighting the chill it gave him, and leaned his elbow on the desk, chin on his hand to give himself an excuse for the slight angle.

Grimmett looked down at him with those flat, blank shark eyes and Percy forced a smile. He was too unfamiliar with trying to read Grimmett's stoic, stoney mask to interpret what reaction there was, if any, but forced himself to bear with it. He spent the whole class at that weird slant – yes, other students sat like this all the time, but Percy usually prided himself on his posture – and squeaked out a, "Bye, Grimmett," as he fled.

Of course, Grimmett walked into Care of Magical Creatures with the same placid nonchalance with which he'd watched Percy run from Arithmancy, but Percy made a beeline for Audrey when he felt Grimmett approaching from the castle.

She favoured him with a concerned look that melted when Grimmett came into view, "You have a problem, Percy."

"I am aware, but I'm going to work on it in Arithmancy," Percy sniffed haughtily, the image only slightly destroyed by the way he ducked behind Audrey's sturdier frame under Grimmett's slow scan of the crowd. Kendra sauntered in and slapped Grimmett on the shoulder, out of breath from the distance between the Divination tower and the clearing near Hagrid's hut typically used for Care.

"Hey, Ross," she panted, and Percy exhaled a sharp sigh of relief. When Kendra had caught her breath, she demanded of the Slytherin prefect, "Do you notice anything different about me?"

"…No?" Grimmett offered slowly.

"Good. Partner me," she clapped her hand back onto his shoulder, not really giving him a choice in the matter.

"Oh, poor Kendra," Audrey murmured, noticing the hair, "Looks like a perm, too; she'd have to re-curl it with another spell if she wants it back before the year is out." A moment of consideration, "If she put a few braids in it to give it some texture, fake the volume, it might be salvageable."
"I will be sure to inform her," Percy straightened, now that Grimmett was too distracted to notice his head pop up over Audrey's. While Grimmett did seem to acknowledge Percy's inexplicable terror for him, there must have been some sort of optimism deep down that kept him seeking the Gryffindor prefect out, as if to check and see if Percy's insanity had passed.

See: sitting beside Percy in Arithmancy.

"Are you still doing Magical Languages on Sunday mornings?" Audrey asked, abruptly, "Gabe's dropped it this year to focus on getting in the running for Head Boy; if you're doing the same…"

"Oh, I was planning on attending, yes – I'm surprised he didn't tell me in Arithmancy." Well, no, he wasn't, seeing as Truman tuned into the class with more fervour than he did anything else, "What exactly is Truman going to do to increase his chances Sunday mornings? Everyone else is asleep." A thought occurred which he normally wouldn't have had, were it not for recent events, and Percy waved a hand, "Except the house elves."

"I've no idea," Audrey snorted, "He's just gotten it into his head that if he gets Head Boy, he'll be in a prime position to get the attention of the Arithmancers' Association of Amsterdam, and you know how he is about that."

"Well, that's a bit ominous." If Truman was planning to turn the focus he typically had on Arithmancy to getting the position of Head Boy next year, Percy might have some serious competition. The Ravenclaw prefect seemed uninterested, and Percy couldn't imagine what went through the professors' minds when they picked Grimmett for prefect, much less what blunt force trauma to the head they'd need to make him Head Boy. Still, Percy didn't really have any free time left, and Magical Languages, while not being a graded course, would be more important to his Ministry career in the long run. Hopefully, it wouldn't be a mistake to just keep about his business as per usual.

"Yeah, we'll have a Hufflepuff Head Boy next year, sorry, Percy," Audrey teased, poking his shoulder once and laughing when Percy irritably shook it off with a roll of his eyes. Professor Kettleburn called the class to attention, then, and Percy pulled his notebook out of his bag, balancing it on a textbook in preparation to write.

Honestly, he understood the whole go where the creatures are mentality, but would it be so hard to have the lectures seated somewhere first?

This professor liked to dive right into the lessons, perhaps from a seize the day mentality beaten into him by his job and written across his skin in the scars and missing chunks he could no longer completely hide with over-sized robes.

"…and with that, I'd like to remind you that NEWT level courses in this discipline involve quadruple X-rated beasts and also beings, so if you'd all like to faff off and save me the trouble, now would be the time."

A few students laughed uneasily, and Professor Kettleburn sighed, "Alright, we're starting with the merfolk because they're the least likely to lead to my imminent demise." He waved them to follow with a three-fingered hand, and Audrey tapped Percy's elbow as they fell in line behind him.

"Does Kettleburn sound a bit more morose than usual?" Her brow was knit with concern.

"Well, he's only got one more year to hold out, so I don't think he's about to throw himself in the lake, if that's what you're getting at," Kendra put in from behind them.
"Kendra," Percy hissed, glancing to see if anyone but fellow prefects had been close enough to hear, "Don't speak that way about a professor. You're setting a bad example as a prefect."

"Yes, I'll corrupt these impressionable fifteen and sixteen year olds," she wiggled her fingers like a muggle stage magician, "Who all share our intellect and maturity."

Percy glanced over at Suri, trailing the group with a few Hufflepuffs, and resisted the urge to snort, *Speak for yourself.* "Just try to maintain a certain level of professionalism in the halls, this year?"

She didn't have a chance to confirm, deny, or more likely, tease, because Professor Kettleburn was clearing his throat at the front of the group, and they spread out silently along the shore to allow the majority to see what was going on.

"Now, our local population of merfolk would fall under what subspecies…?" The professor prompted, and when Percy's hand hit the air, he sighed, "Go on, Mr. Weasley."

"They're known as selkies, due to their location – Scotland, and their less flattering appearance compared to the Greek sirens," Percy rattled off.

"Two points to Gryffindor; you're correct, of course, on both counts, but try to keep remarks on their beauty or lack thereof to yourself when our volunteers arrive," the professor turned away as a titter ran through the class and Percy flushed with embarrassment. Audrey patted his shoulder in silent sympathy, but her lips were quirked in amusement.

Professor Kettleburn refocused on the rest of the class when there was no sign of approaching merfolk, "Now, then, if anyone besides Mr. Weasley did their summer reading, one of you can tell me what the third known subspecies may be…? Ah, Mr. Suri, as you find the lake more entrancing than this review, you must surely know…? No? Well, then, Mr. Grimmett…"

The review continued, and something itched unpleasantly in Percy's chest, like a brush across the feathery edges of shredded flesh, before the water was broken by the merfolk's arrival.

"Doileag, Ealasaid, a pleasure to see you again," Kettleburn murmured, inclining his head to the two bobbing merfolk, a gesture which was returned. He turned back to the class, "Remember to be on your best behaviour, children. You may not understand our lovely volunteers, but I assure you they understand you."

Percy was a little distracted, but managed to nod along with the rest of them. Something was *stroking* over the class, causing the feathery, painful itch, and on its next pass over them, Percy reached out with his third arm, the sense he'd gained from practicing hedge magic, and snagged it. The- the will, he supposed, was slick to his 'touch,' cool and wet, and made him think of dark, empty places in the deeps.

The merperson on the left, Doileag, he believed, let out a short, offended shriek that had Percy unintentionally letting go. She glared at him with narrowed, yellow eyes and pressed into his chest with what felt like a prick of talons against his own will, not clawing into him but giving warning. Most everyone was staring at her, but for Professor Kettleburn, who had followed her gaze to Percy and raised an eyebrow.

Percy was unsure exactly what had just passed – maybe he'd broken some sort of social convention, but it seemed a little rude to be magically feeling up the group of students there in good faith to learn more about her culture, in the first place. He didn't want to speak and draw attention to himself, but Percy *did* recognize that tone of offense being *definitely* taken, so for the sake of smoothing things
over, he dropped into a hasty bow, lifting back up quickly yet still catching Audrey's gaze. She looked between Percy and the merfolk, visibly gave a mental shrug, and followed suit with a bow.

"Don't humor his etiquette obsession," Kendra muttered.

Audrey merely darted a glance back at her, eyes sparkling with impending mischief, before she spoke up, "Professor, I don't think we've shown proper gratitude to the merfolk for coming so far up just to help us learn about their kind. Don't you think we should give formal thanks before we start?"

Doileag seemed less ruffled, after Percy's bow, though she was still eyeing him huffily, before Audrey's words registered and she shifted her gaze over, even as Ealasaid preened.

"Oh, if you must," Kettleburn rolled his eyes, then raised his voice, "Bow together now, with a good, loud thank you. We only want to do this once!" This garnered a reluctantly amused glance from Doileag and seemed to go right over Ealasaid's head as she batted her big yellow eyes and tossed her snarled, sea-weed green hair over one scaly shoulder, "And… now!"

The students exchanged glances but literally and figuratively bowed to his demand with a flatly collective, "Thank you." Yes, even Kendra, whose eyes couldn't roll any further.

"Now that that's settled, we can actually learn," Professor Kettleburn huffed, gesturing for Doileag to begin. She did. It was horrible. Kettleburn raised the volume of his ongoing translation to be heard over the awful screeching, but that didn't make it any easier to take notes. Kendra had abandoned the effort, notebook hanging at her side with a glazed expression like she couldn't quite tune back in to reality until it was over. Like Percy, Grimmett had his teeth clenched, but was dutifully scrawling notes – however, Grimmett's scribbling appeared to be focused mainly on scrawling additions and corrections (he'd crossed something out harshly enough that Percy had noticed) directly onto his textbook's chapter on merfolk.

At least it was efficient.

Audrey had a fixed smile on her face, and her notebook clasped to her chest, as if it took all of her willpower just showing she appreciated the time these merfolk were donating and there was nothing left for notes. Well, Percy would copy his for her – she would be majorly helping him out with the Christmas sweaters, and it would be the work of a single spell.

Kendra, as well, because she knew where he slept.

When the ear-shattering lecture was over from Doileag, Ealasaid took over. Her voice was higher in pitch and more grating to the ear. The period ended with a Ravenclaw actually passing out and needing to be levitated up to the hospital wing. Percy duplicated his notes, twice from the original, because copies of copies never held up well, and passed them to Audrey and Kendra. Everyone's ears were ringing, so Kendra gave him a thumb's up and Audrey a dazed smile before they wandered up to the castle.

Percy turned to follow, but the Doileag's slick will coiled around him – not restraining, but resting there as if to gain his attention, and he reluctantly turned back towards the lake, curiosity prickling at his senses from a foreign source.

Doileag screeched something to Professor Kettleburn, who tilted his head, "Excuse me? You'll speak to the adept? Adept at what?"

"Adept at rudeness," Percy ventured, stepping up to the shoreline but not touching the edge of the water, "I think someone spoke of what I said before she showed up and I do apologize if my actions
caused offense."

Doileag gave him a hard clicking noise that Percy hadn't heard before and Professor Kettleburn startled, before Doileag let loose a long series of screeches and Kettleburn scrambled to keep up, "Oh, she says, 'You have the shape of a master but the mind of a child – do not reach out for that which you do not understand. It may reach back and drag you down against the rocks.'" Another hard click, as if to drive the point home, and Doileag seemed satisfied, flipping back under the waves with Ealasaid on her tail, both vanishing into the murk. "She scolded you," Professor Kettleburn muttered, and Percy shrugged weakly.

"I might have deserved it," he said, still unsure on the point himself.

"No, she scolded you, in the way they caution their own youth," Kettleburn insisted, looking up to meet Percy's gaze, "That click is something I've only heard directed towards a young merperson."

"Perhaps she knew Charlie," Percy suggested, but the implications hit home for him, anyway, "He had friends among almost all the magical populations around Hogwarts."

"...He did have a knack," Kettleburn said, and the wistful tone of his voice let Percy know he'd set the professor down a different track. It was safe to give his farewells and leave Kettleburn to his thoughts, so Percy could focus on his.

Perhaps hedge magic wasn't just practiced by squibs and the weak.

The shape of a master had to be referring to his mother's built in conditioning, and Doileag had clearly reached out to him with the same kind of third arm, or will, or whatever – Molly was mostly self-taught, and not clear on terminology – that Percy used in hedge magic. Additionally, merfolk were known for their music, art, and complicated underwater dancing that could cause changes in the weather, or beautiful water displays, and how had no one ever connected this?

Before Percy had too much time to ruminate on the possibilities, however, he nearly tripped over a sodden, blond mess in the entrance hall.

"Luna?" he queried, and she smiled at him in that faraway manner she had, "What happened?"

"Oh, I wasn't watching where I was going," she explained, ignoring that the question was clearly pointed at her dripping clothes and missing shoes.

"Why are you wet?" Percy tried, sitting up from where he'd sprawled to avoid crushing her, "And where are your shoes?"

"I don't know," Luna hummed, "I think the nargles took my shoes, but they should be bored with them soon enough. They aren't very interesting." She looked down at her bare toes and wiggled them against the stone floor.

"Right," Percy stood, brushed off his robes, "Well, that's not very nice of the nargers or whatever –"

"Nargles," Luna corrected airily.

" – but let's get you dry, at least," he said, swishing through the motions for the drying charm from Lockhart's book of household spells, "And I can't let you walk through the halls barefoot; it's against the rules."

"I can't find my shoes-" Luna began to remind him, but Percy waved this off, nodding.
"Yes, I know, and I think George has an extra pair you can borrow." He'd have to fix them up a bit, shrink them down, but they were a serviceable pair of trainers and the important thing was that Luna would have something to cover her feet instead of walking bare through a stone castle in Scotland's version of September. He held out a hand to her, and when she took it, set off in the direction of Gryffindor tower. Luna tugged at him to slow him when he forgot himself and they made it there without more than a few stumbles on her part.

"I've been told not to set foot in any other House's common room," Luna informed him at the door, and Percy glanced down at her with a frown.

"As you're accompanied by a prefect, I think the point is null and void." She merely blinked bulbous blue eyes up at him and he sighed, crouching down, "Well, hop on." Luna appeared puzzled, and Percy explained, "You won't set foot in the common room. I'm not leaving you out here to get harassed about hanging about without a Gryffindor to vouch for you."

She climbed on without protest, and hummed with interest as Percy entered Gryffindor Tower, "I hadn't expected so much red, but it might ward off the horfalumps. Have you noticed a lower rate of parchment deterioration in here?"

"No." The best way to make it through a conversation with a Lovegood was to answer their questions and ignore their statements. Percy made it up the stairs without being stopped, but it wasn't actually against the rules for students from other Houses to visit one another's common rooms – just a matter of House pride, of which Percy had very little. "Knock for me, would you?" His hands were a bit occupied supporting her legs, so Luna leaned over his shoulder and complied, rapping small knuckles against the fourth year's door.

"I've never been in a boy's room before," she marvelled and Percy shut that down right quick.

"And you won't; we're just getting George." He was ready to raise his voice and call for them, though that might make them less inclined to answer, knowing who was on the other side, but Lee Jordan opened the door a crack and blinked up at him.

"Fred?" he called back into the room, "Percy's here."

There was muffled cursing and the sound of something toppling over and being shoved across the floor before Fred appeared, red-faced from exertion. Of what sort, Percy didn't want to know.

"What?" he asked flatly, eyes flicking curiously to Luna and softening, "Hello, Luna." More open now, Fred looked back to Percy, "What's going on?"

"She's had her shoes misplaced and I was wondering if George still had that beaten up pair."

"Ah," Fred winced, "Well, we've got them, but we sort of... Oh, let me get them." He vanished back into the room, closing the door in Percy's face, and there was some sort of back and forth exchanged, and a loud rummaging noise before he reappeared with a pair of monstrosities. "They're not dangerous," Fred was saying as the multi-colored shoes hissed ominously, "We were trying to make them snakeskin and instead they just sort of... hiss, and sparkle."

"Sparkle?" Percy echoed, not seeing any evidence of this, and Fred nodded.

"When you take a step, they just sort of poof a small cloud of glitter into the air that vanishes before it hits the ground," he looked at Luna apologetically, "If we'd known someone was going to need them, we wouldn't have messed about."

"I love them," she said, and it was the most direct statement Percy had heard from her yet. Fred
looked taken aback, then pleased, flushing slightly and passing them into her reaching hand.

"Well, uh, no need to return them, you know," he mumbled, rubbing the back of his neck, "We don't have any use for them, and the spells haven't worn off in months, so… Just keep 'em."

"Will they shrink?" Percy asked, before Fred could retreat entirely, and he paused, hand on the door.

"I think so," he said, "But it might be better to stuff them with socks."

"I don't mind," Luna smiled brightly and Fred's entire face went red, the door shutting with a slam as he fled.

That was unexpected. Percy had thought Fred was head over heels for Angelina. Luna was a bit young for him… Though, well, there were only three years between them. Either way, he'd be keeping an eye on that until Luna was old enough to make her own decision about it.

Not that it was any of his business.

Percy shook himself and trotted back downstairs, glancing over at the girls' side and remembering with a sinking feeling that Ginny might still be feeling ill. "Do you want to see if Ginny will come down and visit with you?" he asked Luna, hoping to hit two pixies with one hex.

"I'd like that," she was still smiling over the shoes, which hung in her grasp against his shoulder, a quiet hiss disconcertingly close to his ear.

They caught a first year on her way up – the same who had been victim to Fred and George's teeth-rotting candy – and she agreed to see if Ginny would come down. The dash of red hair down the stairs a moment later answered that question. "Luna!" she exclaimed with a bubbling glee, "You're in the Tower!"

"I haven't stepped foot in Gryffindor Tower," Luna disagreed from her perch, and Ginny laughed.

"If we put you on the couch, I can get Kendra to levitate you out, later," she said, glancing at Percy thoughtfully.

"Very considerate of you," he murmured when Luna agreed, setting her down before fixing Ginny with a keen look, "Are you feeling well?"

"Yeah," her eyebrows rose with surprise, "Did someone tell you I wasn't? I didn't miss any classes or anything."

"You missed breakfast," he reminded her and she blushed.

"I got caught up studying and forgot to go down in time," she confessed quietly, and a little surge of pride erased the lingering concern, "Don't tell our brothers."

"Oh, but I want to gloat," Percy teased, ruffling her hair and garnering irritated protests from her. She smoothed it down with a glare when he released her, "I won't tell, but you can't skip any more meals, Ginny. You can always bring the book down with you."

She shrugged, "Alright, Percy. Now let me and Luna talk."

Percy held his hands up in surrender just as Ginny noticed the shoes.

"Oh, um, Luna, what…?"
"Fred gave them to me," Luna beamed, "They sparkle when you take a step!"

"Well, if you like them, that's all that matters," Ginny replied a little dubiously, shaking herself out of it to lean in excitedly, "So what classes have you had so far?"

Percy saw that as his time to jump ship. There was only so much rehashing of first year courses he could take in one week and he'd probably have to subject himself to it tomorrow. Besides, he had homework to finish. Setting himself up in the least noisy corner of the common room allowed him to keep an eye on Ginny and Luna, as well as make himself available if anyone else needed assistance. He only had an hour to speed through a bit more work, but he got enough done that he wasn't worried about completing anything at the last minute. It helped that he tended to multitask meals.

"Kendra, I'm heading out," he told her, receiving a lazy salute from his fellow prefect where she was embroiled in a pile of history texts. He didn't know and he didn't want to know. He'd be patrolling with Truman this evening, and they met up at the Great Hall.

As per usual, without any of his main interests to focus on, Truman looked a bit absent, his pale hair fluffed up in the back with no rhyme or reason, and ink blotches scattered from finger tip to where his sleeve began, rolled halfway up his forearm.

Percy greeted him with his most relevant concern, "I hear you're making a serious bid for Head Boy."

"Oh," a bit of life sparked and Truman smiled at him, "Yeah, no hard feelings. It just seems like I need to up my game if I want to get the triple A's attention, you know? May the best man win and all that."

"Well, I have heard it looks excellent on one's resume," Percy shot back wryly as they set off on the usual route, "I just didn't expect you to take up the challenge." Truman shrugged.

"I was pretty sure you wouldn't smother me in my sleep," he confided, "But if you're thinking about it, would you mind letting me know before you snap?"

"Anything for a fellow prefect," Percy replied, hands clasped behind his back as they walked, nose slightly in the air, "At least twenty-four hours' notice."

"Thanks," Truman snorted, and Percy broke character enough for a sly half-smile that made the snort become a full laugh.

"Anyway, when do you want to go up to the Astronomy tower?" Percy asked, refocusing on the least enjoyable part of patrol, and Truman winced at the reminder.

"Later," he said firmly, opening a classroom door and peeking in, "Oh, hi, Nobsy." Unlike most people, Truman was oddly in tune with nearby house elves as they did their usual cleaning and maintenance; he would hear the movement and beeline to them. It was part of the job to check weird noises out, after all. Last year, the elves had all been somewhat embarrassed to be caught out by a wizard, but when Truman did it consistently, they seemed to get over it. He closed the door and returned to Percy's side.

"Well then, if you don't mind, I'd like to loop past Hagrid's when we start the grounds run." Truman shrugged, approaching another door. The outside circuit was only once a week, and randomly assigned, but it tended to fall on Percy and Truman any time they were paired up.

"A-haaa," Truman's exclamation of victory trailed off into flat boredom, "Oh, it's you."
"Yep," came Penny's voice, and she peeked out the door, hair disheveled and top partially unbuttoned, "Prefect privilege and all- Oh, hi, Percy!"

Percy gave her a tight-lipped smile, the churning forces of attraction and disappointment fighting behind it, "Hi, Penelope."

"Wanna take a break?" she suggested, grin fierce as she tilted her head to look up at him through her eyelashes, and whoever was in there with her yelped some kind of protest.

A tug in his gut at the sight – and the suggestion - made Percy finally return her grin with a sly smirk, "Oh, I wouldn't want to overshadow anyone."

She mock-pouted, "Back to patrol with you, then."

The door swung shut.

Truman leaned on Percy's shoulder, whispered with a bit of mischief, "We could report her."

"Prefect privilege," Percy shrugged off the Hufflepuff prefect, making him flounder for a moment before he stabilized. Prefect privilege referenced the sort of pact prefects had with one another to allow dalliances and post-curfew wanderings pass, so long as it was within that wiggle room between curfew and yeah, you're screwed. A highly specific and strict cutoff.

Hence, Truman's suggestion being ever so slightly valid.

"Well, let's get the cold bit out of the way," Truman decided, tapping himself for a warming charm; Percy followed suit. They made haste out of the castle, towards Hagrid's hut, where Percy intended to pick up a more effective deterrent for breaking curfew out on the grounds.

"Berodach!" Percy called, from across a field from the hut. There was a sleepy grumble just barely audible before Berodach unfolded from the shadow of a glumbleberry bush, making Truman jump.

"Shit, what is-"

"My familiar; he's harmless," Percy explained.

"Oh, right, Lockhart said something about that," Truman mused, his wand dropping back to his side casually, "What exactly is he…?"

"Ghoul," Percy answered shortly before Berodach had caught up to them and licked a wet stripe up the side of his face. The creature seemed more pleased with Percy's subsequent disgust than with the actual greeting. Percy glared at him and received a mischievous sparkle of a glance in return.

"Nice," Truman patted the ghoul's side fearlessly, "He's as lanky as you are. I guess he's patrolling with us?"

"Yeah, I thought he'd like to stretch his legs and it'll keep any first time offenders freaked out enough to at least break curfew inside the castle," Percy scratched just under Berodach's jaw, gaining a low, rumbling croon from the creature, and couldn't help a half-smile, "Hopefully. Once people hear he's my familiar, no one seems to be too cowed by him – at Hogwarts, anyway. He was very helpful when we were shopping in town."

Truman laughed airily, reminding him eerily of Luna before they set off towards the lake, "I bet." He
turned to Percy after a few moments of crunching along the seashore, "Oh, I know you don’t get *Arithmancers Weekly*, but there was this article that you've got to laugh at with me. I mean, even a third year who's had two classes would know it was ridiculous… Quality is going the way of the Ethiopian Ebonyscale." Percy snorted, never having heard someone refer offhand to the loss of an entire species of dragon as a scale for such a casual subject. For anyone else, anyway.

Truman drew him into reluctant discussion of the article, and then onto yet *more* Arithmantic theories as they finished the outdoor circuit, Percy waving Berodach off at the door when he attempted to follow.

Berodach drooped like a wilting plant, so pathetically that Percy knew it had to be faked.

"Don't be so gauche," he scolded, and Berodach perked up again, flashing a gaping mouth full of teeth in a pseudo-grin before dashing off into the darkness.

"Adorable," Truman said with a sort of flat sincerity, turning back to Arithmancy with a brutal efficiency, "So the third side drawn of a triangle has a stronger influence over the meaning of the whole triangle, maybe because it's the line which defines the shape as a triangle. But if that were true, then a square, a dodecahedron, a whatever should be the same. Instead, it's just triangles!"

Percy hummed in acknowledgement that yes, Truman was still on this topic.

They jogged through the last few floors on their schedule, then ousted no less than three couples from the Astronomy tower. One of which, Percy scribbled two notes, spelled them with a Protean charm, and instructed them to visit the Hospital wing tomorrow and learn about proper contraceptive spells before he would let them go.

"If Madam Pomphrey doesn't have *both* of your notes before the next time I catch you, I will *know* and I will *go* to your respective House heads, understood?" Percy fixed them with a glare over the top of his glasses, ignoring how the girl looked ready to let the floor open up and eat her, because they really should have thought this through, "Twenty points from Ravenclaw and Slytherin, each."

"Don't look at me for mercy," Truman had his arms crossed over his chest when the boy turned pleading eyes on him, "You were both very irresponsible and lucky that the only prefect who actually gives you a chance to learn before telling your heads happened to be on this patrol." They looked a little betrayed by the suggestion that *Percy* was the lesser evil.

"You expect us to believe *Weasley* is being fair and lenient?" the girl demanded and Truman shrugged, clearly fighting a smirk.

"How many prefects do *you* know that would take you aside for the sex talk instead of just writing up a report? Which sounds easier to you?"

"Alright," Percy interjected before Truman could cast any more shade on the other prefects, "You've defended my honor, Truman. I anticipate you forcing repayment in Arithmancy rants later, but I suppose it's still noble. Let them get back to their dorms." The boy looked relieved, and he put a restraining hand on his partner's arm.

Truman’s sly look melted into a sheepish one, "You know me well, Weasley."

"Yes, well, you're not earning any brownie points admitting it," Percy tipped an eyebrow wryly, nodding farewell to the miscreants, and turned on his heel away from the situation, "Let's go."

"Sleep sounds good," Truman agreed, falling into step with him, until they were forced to go their
separate ways to their respective common rooms with a wave goodbye.

There was someone on the couch, in front of the fireplace, when Percy slipped into Gryffindor tower. It wasn't exactly against the rules, but it was discouraged. Especially for the size of the offender.

Percy hopped over the back of the couch and sat beside the small figure with a thump, startling the boy into reaching for his wand before they recognized each other. Harry let his hand drop to his side again, drawing his feet up onto the couch and his knees towards his chest. "Hi, Percy," he murmured once he'd achieved this balled-up, defensive state.

"Hi, Harry," Percy echoed with an edge of amusement. Normally, the younger years tried desperately to explain themselves if they were caught up past light's out – an informal sort of bed time the prefects encouraged but didn't really enforce. "Why are you still up?"

A shrug.

Harry was staring into the fire with the slightest crease in his brow, lips tight.

"…Alright," Percy settled himself in for a wait, arms resting along the back of the couch, one ankle resting on the other knee. The very picture of repose. The very picture of an older brother waiting for their sibling to give into a cuddle, too.

He realized Harry wouldn't be familiar with it after the first minute of silence passed.

"Come here," Percy insisted aloud when the thought registered, dropping an arm around Harry and nudging a bit. The bewildered cast to Harry's face almost made him laugh, but Percy just gave up on suggesting it and dragged Harry bodily into his lap, wrapping his arms around him with a confidence borne from the weeks and weeks of shaking off the rust this summer, "Do you want to talk about it?"

Harry was sitting upright, completely tense, and he shook his head.

Beginning to wonder if maybe he shouldn't have just thrown Harry facefirst into a full-on Weasley hug, Percy prompted, squeezing once so Harry knew what he meant, "And this is okay?"

The nod came without hesitation, even though Harry didn't relax for the first two… five minutes. Before he did, though, Harry said slowly, almost reluctantly, "I think, Percy, I might be too old, though, for um…"

"You're not," Percy interjected with a smile tugging at one side of his mouth, "Don't tell anyone I told you, but even the twins crawl into Bill and Charlie's laps when they can get away with it."

"Oh," Harry leaned, gingerly, against Percy then, "Do you…?"

"Alas," Percy sighed, knowing what the unfinished question would have been, "I am too tall and gangly, now, for that to be my role. I have to content myself by catching the younger Weasleys and squeezing them until they pop." From the almost pointed nature of the silence, Percy was pretty sure Harry had rolled his eyes at him, but the tension began to drain from him the longer Percy didn't toss him to the floor and laugh at him or whatever terrors the kid was probably imagining.

The fire crackled, throwing strange tails of light across the empty room, and Percy was contemplating how many more inches of parchment he'd need for Charms when Harry took a hand from his lap and rested the fist against Percy's side.

It was sobering how the tension returned to his small frame at the simple action – not even really
returning the hug. Percy moved a thumb reassuringly over his shoulder, not reacting otherwise, and Harry finally leaned fully against Percy.

"I was dreaming about Quirrell," Harry said, voice steady, if quiet, "And that this time he died burning up before Voldemort's spirit left him." At Percy's tensing, Harry added, "Sorry."

You Know Who? That was the tall tale Ron had tried to feed him, but Harry wasn't the sort to… Had Ron been telling the truth? "It's fine," Percy said, and Harry ducked his head, clearly having said what he needed to say and done with sharing. He didn't know how long he and Harry sat there, turning over his memory of the story Ron had told him and trying to focus on the details this time. Ron had said something about Harry burning Quirrell and forcing You Know Who out or something. Suddenly he regretted not listening more carefully, even if he hadn't believed it. Well, if anyone knew the truth, it was the professors. Percy would ask Professor McGonagall about it tomorrow, before Transfiguration.

"Is Harry…? Mmph." Ron had puttered around the couch, half asleep and blearily took in the scene, before gripping one of Percy's arms and lifting it to insert himself into the embrace, wrapping himself around his brother and friend and promptly beginning to snore.

"I think I woke him up by not waking him up," Harry muttered after a moment, implying his nightmares were frequent enough that Ron had perhaps been trained to wake at certain times from however it was Harry reacted to them. It was clear Harry believed he'd faced You Know Who, and right then, that was what mattered. Percy gave a pat to Harry's back in response. He would really like to just go upstairs and sleep, what with tomorrow being Thursday, but he couldn't just dump these two off in bed without potentially wrecking the progress he'd stumbled through with Harry. And it would be incredibly callous, besides.

"How about a story?" Percy suggested, words only a little softened with sleep, and didn't give Harry a chance to respond before he began, "Babbitty Rabbitty and the Cackling Stump has always been Ron's favorite." Ron roused enough at his own name to snuffle and press the pointy tip of his nose deeper into Percy's ribs. He winced at the discomfort, but continued, occasionally slurring or having to go back over a point he nearly missed. Still he finished intelligibly enough the tale of the clever animagus who tricked a muggle king into abandoning witch hunts and protecting wizardkind, instead.

Harry had not been lulled to sleep, but his hand was flat between Percy's side and Ron's stomach, and his head heavy on Percy's chest as he thought about the story, instead of his dream, "Does that mean that country didn't go for the whole Statute of Secrecy thing?"

"It's just a fairy tale," Percy dismissed, and practically heard the sound of a clam shell snapping shut before he hastened to add, "But I'm sure if it's based in truth, then it might be one of the hidden kingdoms, today."

A pause, as if Harry were deciding whether or not that had been a one off or if Percy was no longer someone he wanted to ask questions, and then, "What are hidden kingdoms?"

"There are patches of the earth that are not just unplottable, but inaccessible by magical or muggle means. The Isle of Drear was almost one of them, before someone managed to Apparate in the Bermuda Triangle and ended up nearly being eaten by a quintaped when they popped up five years later on the – er, anyway," Percy redirected when Harry looked up at him with a cross scowl of confusion, "I wouldn't expect Ron to know anything about that, either, sorry." Shaking himself and trying not to fall into rote recitation, Percy tried again, "Some of them have names that survived their disappearance, like Baile de Sol or Atlantis – "

"Atlantis"
"Atlantis?" Harry repeated in surprise.

"Oh, I'm glad you've been studying outside the curriculum a bit," Percy smiled down at him, but Harry just blinked back, flabbergasted.

"No, it's- that's a muggle fairy story," Harry shook his head, sitting up a little, "But I guess unicorns and fairies are all in muggle stories, too."

"Well, it wasn't as if the first few years of the Statue involved everyone running around obliviating every muggle in sight," Percy mused aloud.

"…Obliviating?" Harry's tone was weary, now.

"A memory charm, which is not something you should look up or try to perform at your age or you might forget how to walk or breathe or something." The cautionary, didactic tone drew a laugh from Harry.

"What would I want to know it for, anyway?"

"Academic curiosity," Percy suggested in a purposefully shifty tone and Harry snorted, falling silent shortly thereafter.

He shifted, and said, "I don't want to keep you up all night." It was clear Harry didn't think any of Percy's clever tricks would put him to sleep. Percy was beginning to agree.

With a groan, he tipped to the side, pulling the two boys after him. "There," he said once he was at least reclined, if not comfortable, "Now you won't. Just watch, I'll be gone in minutes."

Harry gave him a helpless smile just this side of sad, but didn't protest.

Merlin, Percy would be sticking to his schedule next summer and checking in like clockwork on this kid. He was so different from Percy's siblings and it all screamed the same thing Luna's quirks did: No one is taking care of me.

While Luna was usually able to repel attempts to remedy that situation, Harry was quite literally in his grasp. After one more wriggle only made it less comfortable, Percy gave up on movement and just closed his eyes, leaning his head back against the arm of the couch and feeling it dig into his neck.

He didn't know when he dropped off, but he woke up to Harry shaking his shoulder.

"We're going to go get dressed before anyone comes down," Harry told him, sounding remarkably awake but, now that Percy was looking for it, there were shadows beneath his eyes that his glasses partially camouflaged in the morning light.

"Harry," Percy rubbed at his own eyes, adjusting his glasses, and they were still a bit askew when he looked to where Harry had paused, waiting for him to speak, "When you can't sleep, come wake me or another prefect up, alright? If this continues, I'll see about taking you down to Madam Pompfrey for some Dreamless Sleep potion." No response came immediately, so Percy prompted, voice still rough with sleep, "Understood?"

"Yeah," Harry ducked his head, and Ron was tugging at him, mumbling something about breakfast, so they made their way up the stairs.

Percy let his head drop back when they'd vanished from sight. It was early, but not as early as he would have normally woken, from the sun streaming in through the windows. Ah, there was
"Good morning," Percy practically grumbled as he sat up, knowing he needed to get a move on, if he wanted to build any sort of momentum to get through this probably horrendous day. Hermione slipped on the last step and fell on her backside with her mouth in an O of surprise.

"Ouch," she complained, standing and rubbing discreetly along the side of the affected area, "What are you doing sleeping in the common room?"

"That's just what I asked myself before I fell asleep," Percy replied, standing with a twist to stretch his back, "Are you alright?"

"Fine," she answered in a clipped tone, obviously done with him for the morning, and Percy wisely retreated up the stairs to his dorm.

His notes bore a good looking over, and he guiltily split his focus in History of Magic that morning, noting down the dates and event names Professor Binns mentioned but otherwise revising for the Ghoul Studies presentation and Transfiguration that afternoon.

He felt reasonably well-prepared for any ghoul trivia they might throw at him as he walked down to Hagrid's at the beginning of his free period. Percy had been studying for this since he'd scheduled it with Professor Evermonde, after all. There was already a bit of a crowd, but they were milling a respectable distance from Berodach. Percy slipped through with little notice until he entered the empty zone about the ghoul and sat beside him. He was patted fondly on the head by the creature, and Percy rolled his eyes up at him.

It was when it looked as though a few students had just about gathered the courage to ask Percy something that Professor Evermonde strolled cheerily onto the scene. He strode to Berodach and stood on his other side, turning to face the crowd and clapping his hands together, "Let's get started, shall we? Percy, if you would do the actual handling when I'm talking about ghoul anatomy, it would be much appreciated."

There was a mix of disappointment and relief that he wasn't expected to give a whole speech swirling in his chest like competing currents, but Percy nodded and stood, "Of course, Professor." He played assistant throughout, and when the lecture wrapped up – rather early, actually – rolled about the idea of just leaving. Professor Evermonde put a halt to that.

"And now the floor is open for questions for our very own Percy Weasley, who is selflessly volunteering his time and familiar for the sake of your education," he waved at Percy grandly, almost putting himself off-balance with the gesture, and grinned.

When the sea of eyes focused solely on him, Percy felt abruptly like the merfolk at the lake.

Well, he'd prepared for this, and at least they were waiting for him to call on them, hands raised patiently.

"Yes?" Percy nodded at the short girl in front; she couldn't be older than thirteen, at most, and, if Percy were honest with himself, it was why he'd chosen to let her speak first.

"Does he miss his pack?" she asked, with all the seriousness of Truman asking after the vagaries of an Arithmantic equation.

So far as Percy knew, Berodach had never had one. He glanced upward, decided to let his familiar field this one, "Well, do you?" After a pause, Berodach pointed at Percy and turned back to the girl with a head tilt that made her giggle, even as one finger remained extended Percy's direction. He
made a jerky rattling noise that may have been laughter, and shook his head, letting the hand drop.

Just behind them, Professor Evermonde looked a little shaken, but neither Percy nor Berodach saw the reaction before his face cleared of expression.

"Aw," said the slightly taller boy beside the girl who'd asked, "Is he saying Mr. Weasley's his pack?" The gaping grin Berodach shot him was taken as assent and the crowd moved on, now fielding their questions to Percy and Berodach, both.

"Do you hunt in the forest?" someone asked, and Berodach made a wobbly motion with head and shoulders that didn't really answer anything. Percy was being assailed with questions on Berodach's diet preferences and sleeping habits – things he hadn't thought anyone would find the slightest bit interesting.

"Is Percy the leader of your pack?" Gemma asked from the back, revealing her presence with a smirk, and Percy should have known she'd be there; Ghoul Studies was right up her alley. So was taking the piss out of Percy. His familiar might have been developing the same hobby, because Berodach flexed his talons mischievously before shaking his head negatively. "Oh, are you the leader, then?" A series of clicks, reminiscent of the merfolk at the lake, had all the students flipping through notes and talking over one another to figure out. Percy didn't need to look it up; Berodach's stance was lower, solid, and his expression shuttered, with a head tilt that was more predatory than playful. That was an I don't want to talk about it. Percy was sure, even if Berodach had never used the sound with him before.

…There were too many mysteries for him to follow, lately.

He smoothed a hand down Berodach's side and addressed the students, "I'd appreciate it if we stayed away from pack hierarchy through Berodach's eyes, for the sake of my ego, at least." There was general laughter, but they seemed willing to let it go, as the next question was on Berodach's age. Gemma was still flipping pages in the back, but all she'd find was probably that the noise was used for scolding – if Percy's hunch about the merfolk was correct.

"Younger than ten years?" someone called and Berodach slid a look to Percy, as if saying you take this one.

"He's been around since my parents inherited him with our land," Percy explained, "So we're not entirely sure how old he is." There was a great deal of nodding; after all, it was something of a long shot for Percy to have raised the ghoul from birth or known who had.

"How in the heck did you bond with him?" And there was Gemma again, sounding both amused and honestly curious. Any side conversations petered out as the collective focus of the crowd drilled itself into Percy again.

Thanks, Gemma. "According to a specialist in magical creatures, Berodach had already… bonded to my family, since he'd lived with us – er, on our land, that is, for so many years," that had nearly been a bad mistake; Percy didn't want to reveal Berodach had always lived in the house. He'd be facing a whole new series of questions. "As most of you probably know, we had a death in the family this year," his voice didn't falter, but he wanted to stop, pause and collect himself – he didn't, barrelling on with sheer force of will, even as he heard murmurs about Arthur and third Ministry official down for the count and poor Weasleys, "and that made Berodach fall ill. I helped him regain his health, then fell ill myself and his lingering nearby –" Berodach made an unhappy sound, a sort of irritable whimper, "Do you object to my word choice? Really? Would you prefer following?" A shake of the head, nearly violent, as if he had a gnome in his teeth. "Stalking?" Being favoured with a distinctly unimpressed look from a ghoul was a new experience for Percy, but he rolled his eyes at the
stubborn creature, offering, "Guarding?" which made the ghoul perk up again, smugly pleased with himself as if he'd accomplished something. Percy shook his head but summarized, "Alright, so Berodach guarded me while I was ill, just after I'd helped him out, and that probably formed the bond."

"Probably," Gemma echoed wryly and Percy fought not to gift her a particularly rude gesture. His self-control was ironclad. Particularly when there were children of a variety of ages making up the audience between him and her.

"There's usually a web of causes leading to a familiar bond," Grimmett spoke up from beside her. "How did Percy not notice him before now."

"Thank you, Grimmett," he said, in the interest of furthering his let's be nice to Grimmett attempt. The taller teen nodded, grimly. Percy gamely fought a shudder and smiled at him before turning to the rest of the crowd, "Any other- oh, yes, you with the ribbon?"

She seemed a sweet thing, so it was surprising when she opened her mouth and out popped, "Is your ghoul truly capable of empathy or is it simply mirroring you?"

Percy was going to answer it seriously before Berodach's raised hackles caught his attention from the corner of his eye. The ghoul looked more than a bit angry. He was leaned forward like he might lunge into the crowd at any moment, and for a group of self-professed ghoul enthusiasts, they weren't paying it much mind. "I think that's enough questions… Professor?"

Professor Evermonde smiled at him around Berodach and stepped in to take control of his class once more, herding them back towards the castle as he continued a lecture that must have been interrupted in an earlier class, since he started, without context, to ramble on about the relative corporeality of ghosts.

"Berodach…?" Percy wasn't sure what to ask, but the ghoul snorted irritably and turned his head away, teeth out. He put a hand on Berodach's side again, and received that series of hard clicks. "For what it's worth, I don't believe you're just mirroring." Another expression Percy hadn't seen yet from the ghoul – a helpless, fond look in his eyes even as the face around them was set in anger. Berodach was shifting restlessly at this point, and Percy wasn't surprised when he bolted off into the fields in a low, hunting prowl. He winced at the squealing swears of a jarvey that were cut short.

…He had to get to Transfiguration, though.

Even knowing he might be late if he lingered any longer, Percy stared after the harsh lines of the ghoul's silhouette as he tore into his catch for a moment more.

Turned out there was no one in his life he didn't have to worry for.

He wasn't late, but he slid into class just before he would have gotten a tardy, and received a delicately raised eyebrow from Professor McGonagall. Resisting the urge to offer an excuse when he hadn't actually done anything wrong took more effort than he'd expected, but Percy sat beside Kendra without a word and the professor didn't address him before starting to lecture. This was mostly review from the text, and Percy took notes on automatic, mind wandering to Berodach and trying to connect the two subjects the ghoul hadn't wanted to talk about. Emotions and faking them, as well as the question of whether Berodach led his pack. Perhaps it had something to do with Molly, then; Percy hadn't noticed before, but there did appear to be some sort of hiera- Then, abruptly, Professor McGonagall was in front of him, looking down at him expectantly. He could have sworn she'd been at the chalkboard not a second prior. He glanced at it, and rather than a rough outline beginning to form, the board was full. Percy almost remembered it being written.
"Two points for inattention, I think," she said, but her pitch wavered a tad with concern, "Are you alright, Mr. Weasley?"

"Yes, I apologize, Professor; I didn't sleep well," he couldn't stop himself from adding a last, redundant, 'Sorry.' Her gaze rested on him piercingly, but when Percy didn't offer more, she turned to Kendra.

"Perhaps you can enlighten us, Ms. Sykes."

"Oh, it's, er, because nonverbal magic requires…" Kendra landed on the correct word with audible relief, "restructuring our perception of the, erm, of the spell?" And as quickly as she'd gained it, the confidence was lost. Percy noted she was holding her breath.

"Acceptable," Professor McGonagall allowed, and Kendra blew it out with a noisy exhale, "We'll be starting with something I'm sure you all remember fondly…” With a flick of the wrist, a box levitated itself to her desk and neatly upended itself, depositing its contents in a controlled pile on the wood, "Grab a match, everyone."

The spell just wouldn't come to him. Percy had managed to make the match at least silvery and pointed on his own time, before, but now his head was spinning with Harry and Malfoy and Berodach and Fred, not to mention the mystery house elf that may lead to the cause of his mother's…

He could hardly focus on one set of problems, much less on making a match less useful. The thought shocked him for a moment, because he knew this exercise was a building block to greater things, but it just… It didn't quite compare, somehow.

It was as Percy was realizing this that McGonagall had made her way around the class and stopped at his and Kendra's desk. Kendra's match was longer, which wasn't the desired effect, but was an effect. Being the two worst at NEWT level practical application of transfiguration, they could be used as a meter for one another's level of effort. Percy's was unchanged.

Her brow furrowed, and her voice was laden with disappointment that cut strips of guilt into him, "This is very unlike you, Mr. Weasley. Please come to class prepared to learn next time; you are dismissed." It was possible she was trying to be kind, but Percy took it as nothing more or less than rejection. He gathered his things and left the match where it sat, feeling a stinging in his eyes as he strode past his silent classmates and into the hall. Perhaps Transfiguration wasn't for him, after all. Professor McGonagall had implied as much during his course selection the year before, but he hadn't… No, this was just one failure. He knew that, and still it felt like his world was falling down around him. Sure, he didn't like failure – would go so far as to say it made him feel a bit sick, but this?

This wasn't normal.

His mood had been dipping too low for things that wouldn't usually faze him. And even if he was, for the most part, clearer now than he had been over the summer, it was like he'd have episodes, where the haze-

The world tried to skip around him and Percy bit his tongue hard enough to bleed, dug his claws into his own will like he was trying to pull a piece away to heal another, but only kept them there, buried in himself with ripping away. Which pain grounded him in the current moment was difficult to determine, but the point was, the haze hadn't been able to slam him forward to the next distracting event. Or slip in and cloud things until then – Percy didn't really care about the accuracy of his thoughts on the method right that moment.
The problem was, this probably had something to do with hedge magic.

Yep, there it went again, Percy clinging to the edge of the world with his teeth in his tongue.

And he'd noted more than once feeling hazy around Molly, but she'd never addressed the lapses, never noted the inattention… Probably she just hadn't noticed – or she'd known the cause and thought it would fade. It had begun to fade, while at Hogwarts, up until… Looking back, it was hard to pinpoint when the haze had started to surge, almost defensively, but the only major thing he'd done with hedge magic had been to… Turn something inside out in a way that hadn't felt quite right to block out as much of Hogwarts as possible.

Well.

That seemed important, in hindsight.

Something he might've worried about, had he been in his right mind.

(- he was still claw deep in his sense of self, blood dripping down his throat —)

With the way they'd easily groped about the shape of his will, Percy might have gone to the merfolk, if it didn't require a translator. But unless he wanted to trust them enough to stick his head into the water – a tempting prospect for a species that routinely lured young men to their watery graves – that wasn't an option.

And there was no way to ask Molly, since she couldn't exactly pick up a quill and reply.

Percy cringed away from the idea of the last possibility, but unless he wanted to bite his tongue clean through by the end of the week, he'd just have to suck it up.

It was the Only Way.

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun... duuuun.
Welcome... to my favorite fanon cliche

On the one hand, Percy wasn't going to make it up to the owlery if he let go of where his teeth dug into his tongue and his claws into his own will. Probably the haze would sweep in. He'd wake up knuckle deep in a Christmas sweater, chattering aimlessly. On the other hand, Percy wasn't going to make it up to the owlery if he didn't let go, either.

Blood dripped slick and hot down his throat, forcing him to swallow it or risk asphyxiation. It only added to the roiling nausea he assumed came from voluntary mutilation of his will. There was something wrong inherent in the act, something he felt only the slightest twinge of when he was taught to heal with it, multiplied by a hundred when his claws sat heavy and unmoving in his center instead of scraping lightly along the surface to be done with it.

The world felt distant. Twin points of pain flared like stars of awareness in an inky dark sky as he put one foot in front of the other in a jolting, dragging rhythm. There was only the sound of his shoes rasping against stone, and the furious thumping of his heart in his throat and his head. Bile had rose and was forced down often enough in his trek that the taste tied with the metallic tang of blood as most prominent in his mouth and nose. Time passed.

One foot in front of the other.

Don't let go.

It wasn't fair.

The thought made his next step falter, the ones following slow, until they stopped.

He hadn't done anything to deserve this. Had he? If he was paying back a debt, he could almost accept it - accept everything. Being alone in his family, before and after; the whole Malfoy debacle; his own lingering, irrational resentment for- for all of them. But what crime could he have committed that merited losing his mother? Or his mind?

He hadn't.

There was no balance of rule broken to punishment meted out and for some reason it was that thought that made his eyes burn. The stone of the halls was rough as his hand unintentionally clenched against it.

Why did nothing ever follow a clear, obvious set of rules? Why was it hidden and full of exceptions for the carefree, or the powerful? Why were there pitfalls that only caught the people taking the marked path?

It wasn't fair.

It was chaos.
And he hated it.

His feet started moving again. Not because he'd overcome the churning in his stomach or his head, but because he'd reached a point where he was sure he'd cry if he stood still any longer, with nothing to focus on but the pain and the injustice of it all.

Time was limited if he wanted to keep anyone from seeing him this way.

Class was still in session, but he didn't know how long he'd been standing in one place, much less the struggle before it. There was an off-chance a professor might come across him, and it was more real, more possible the longer he was unmoving. Of course, that'd require the professor to be obsessive enough about finding students out of class to spend their free period patrolling the drafty castle mid-afternoon instead of taking the time for themselves-

"Mr. Weasley, I see we are too good for our usual schedule. A detention should suit."

Percy stifled a laugh that might have broken into a sob. What were the chances?

As Professor Snape stalked up beside him, the dour man continued in a clipped tone, "And don't bother trying to tell me you've a free period when Minerva was so worried about your continuing Transfiguration to a NEWT level…" It didn't raise a flinch, but only because Percy didn't want to clench his jaw any harder. Getting a better look at Percy, the professor's tone didn't change, but his sneer faded, eyes piercing rather than accusing, "Injured or ill?"

Percy had come to a stop, knowing it was folly to try limping away from a professor when he'd been thoroughly caught. There was no good way to communicate. But he didn't want to go to Madam Pomphrey when he was sure she'd not have the background to help. It would only be further humiliation. So he'd need to figure it out. He had his book bag, and his wand, but…

"Can you speak to explain?" Professor Snape's posture was tense with alarm, "Look at me." He'd taken too long to respond. There was an idea about parchment and heat on the edge of his awareness, but he wasn't given the time to put it into practice. A hand gripped his shoulder roughly, pinning him in place as the professor's gaze darted about his features, cataloguing clues Percy couldn't guess at. "Imperius…?" His tone was verging on horror, but it firmed up again quickly, as Professor Snape repeated, "Look at me."

This time when Percy met the professor's flinty gaze, the taller man flinched. His eyes glazed slightly and the almost painful grip on Percy's shoulder eased. Professor Snape turned with a sleep-like countenance down the hall, hands dangling limp at his sides. Entirely unlike how they typically were, clasped behind the professor's back or curled into claws with stress.

Oh, Merlin. It was contagious.

Percy redoubled his efforts, feet dragging faster and jaw tight.

Of course, that begged the question of how it had jumped between them without a bond – that Percy knew of, anyway – but that was a worry for another time. Perhaps there was some sort of mentor-student link between them, as Hogwarts seemed to facilitate the forming of connections at the slightest opportunity. Percy wouldn't be surprised.

A worry for another time, he repeated to himself strictly. Then a hand gripped his arm with unnecessary force and Percy was spun around again in the wrong direction. The professor appeared to be more proficient than Percy at shaking off the haze's effects – or it might have been due to the fact that whatever it was had originated in Percy – but no matter how it came about, Professor Snape
was staring at him with a combination of horror and fury that did nothing for the man's looks.

He bit out, wide eyes at odds with the venom in the statement and the snarl at his lips, "We'll be visiting the Headmaster. Now."

No, no, no; the last thing Percy wanted was for the Headmaster to know Percy had so horribly screwed himself up using magic known for being the domain of squibs! He was already miserable about the idea of contacting his Great Aunt Muriel in the position of supplicant. So far as he knew, she was the only one who could help. There still remained the problem of communicating this, but the frantic scrabbling of his mind finally fell on the idea that had been forming at its edges.

With a supreme force of will, Percy pulled parchment from his bag, allowing himself to lean against the wall and Professor Snape's hold on his arm so he wouldn't have to waste any focus on standing. He didn't have the dexterity to work with ink and quill as he might have, but just burning the words into parchment with his wand would work well enough.

Producing pinpoint heat was a mistake he'd made, learning to iron out wrinkled robes with Molly. Now it could serve a use.

"Family issue?" the professor read with an upward tip to his tone that expressed his incredulous disgust a little too well, "And owl-you can't possibly be trying to make it up to the owlery in your condition, you dim-witted fool-" Percy tapped owl again, with a bit more force, and crossed shaky arms over his chest.

It was bad enough Professor Snape's opinion of him would drop; he'd prefer no one else knew.

"It would be pathetically easy to stun you and take you to the Hospital Wing, Mr. Weasley." A hard glint was in the professor's eyes. All Percy could do, with a flagging spirit, was stare back at him and hope whatever had hopped the haze over before would do it again. Unfortunately, that didn't seem to be the case, but Professor Snape let loose a long-suffering sigh of the type that was blatantly fake, before Percy was trying not to flail at his sudden levitation. Was the professor just going to drag him to the Hospital Wing against his will?

…Percy supposed that would be the responsible thing to do, but when they reached the next corner, Professor Snape turned the wrong way with a snap of his robes, marching towards the owlery with Percy bobbing along beside him.

Curtly, the professor informed him, "Please note that you will explain yourself to me, regardless of how secret your family may desire these events to remain." Severus could tell the boy was telling the truth – that much his passive Leglimency could pick up without issue. Of most importance was that something had leapt at him, overwhelming his mind for only a minute before his defences finally shut it out. For something borne of a family issue to make it past his Occlumency so quickly, even if he wasn't expecting it… And with the number of times he'd thought nothing of glassy-eyed Weasleys in his class…

Percy wasn't in the right state of mind to note the professor's nearly imperceptible shiver.

If Professor Snape was taking him to the owlery, that was all well and good, though he was not looking forward to holding up his end of the deal to which he hadn't quite agreed – being mostly unable to do so. The most prudent use of this time was, then, not staring at the professor for his unusual decision but instead attempting to burn a mostly coherent message for Siffy or a school owl to bring to Great Aunt Muriel (Errol had been flooed through to Charlie weeks before, since it was unlikely the daft thing could hunt for itself at home). …He was taking great pains to make it somewhat neat, as well, if only to avoid bringing down any additional wrath on himself. Tears kept
prickling at his eyes, making the writing blur but he'd pause and breathe deeper through his nose, waiting for it to pass before he continued.

Woe unto the soul that sent his great aunt an SOS in sloppy handwriting.

The professor was blatantly reading as he wrote, but Percy wasn't exactly sending his great aunt an epic volume on what had happened and why. If her prompt response to his siblings that summer was any indication, she'd be flooing to Hogsmeade and storming the castle later that day when the owl arrived. He never thought he'd be thankful she lived in Scotland, near to Hogwarts. Prewitt Manor was situated a day's walk away from the far edge of Hogsmeade so he had little doubt the owl would reach her in just an hour or two.

He might actually bite his tongue off in that time, but needs must. Asking for help was all the message she'd need. Even if she'd ream him up one side and down the other when she showed up.

…And he'd probably need Professor Snape's continued cooperation to keep the visit under wraps.

At least that part of being caught had worked out. Even if he'd rather not be blotchy-faced and on the verge of tears around his most critical professor.

When they'd reached the owlery and the message was sent, Professor Snape eyed him, "How long?"

Percy wasn't an idiot; he held up a parchment where he'd already painstakingly written, 2-3 hr.

"You're lucky your brothers have made the potions classroom uninhabitable for the afternoon," the professor sneered and Percy determinedly did not think about it. The Gryffindor hourglass in the Great Hall was probably – no, he did not think about it. While Percy was not thinking, Professor Snape clearly had been, as he straightened back to his full height and jerked Percy back into the air with a distinct lack of the bedside manner appropriate to someone with their teeth through their tongue. As in, Percy regretted the jostling more than Professor Snape probably knew.

"You still refuse the Hospital Wing?" the professor asked with a sly edge that made Percy re-evaluate how much Professor Snape might have guessed about why he wasn't talking, but the prefect still shook his head no and wrote hastily, I won't tell you anything if there.

The twitchy curiosity of the professor was served with a side of tense anger in the lines of his stance, but they were off in a direction not hospital-oriented. It appeared Percy had judged the man's original concession correctly – Professor Snape wanted to know what was going on more than he wanted to follow school policy. There was an uneasiness that slid like creeping slime into his gut at the thought that a professor could be so easily led by his curiosity to break the rules, but it was working so shut up.

That he'd just told his own emotions to shut up was another thing he couldn't spare the will to think about.

He was pulled from the mindless fight – like a bull dog with its teeth clamped on a struggling serpent – when he hit the ground again. The landing was not gentle but it wasn't painful, either. More like the professor had brought him down to an inch above the ground before abruptly cancelling his spell. A jolt more than anything.

"That should do it," the professor said aloud, opening a window. They were on the ground floor and, from the view of the lake, towards the front of the castle in a classroom that had seen little use but still retained a few tables and chairs. Professor Snape shot him a glare, "Don't move." He stepped into the hall and there was, a moment later, the popping noises of a house elf appearing and
disappearing in quick succession before the professor returned, parchment, closed inkpot, and quill balanced on top of a blanket.

The writing supplies and- essays, Percy guessed, were deposited onto the nearest table, and Professor Snape approached him with the blanket. For one wild moment, Percy feared the professor might be about to smother him to death, but the blanket merely fell about his shoulders with a heavy weight.

"You appear to be shaking, on top of whatever manner of issue," he sneered the word, "plagues you. Our esteemed headmaster would take my hide for a hearth rug if I let a student die on my watch. Try to breathe and if you pass out, you will wake up in the Hospital Wing, secrets or no." Without another word, Professor Snape took a seat and pulled the top essay off the pile, quill in hand, as if there were no one else in the room.

Percy tried to drag his limbs into a more comfortable position and clamped down harder on everything he was digging into. It would be a long couple of hours. Professor Snape's quill was harsh as it scratched against the parchment. Percy's breathing was harsh as it scratched through his lungs and nose. Percy knew which one he preferred to focus on.

When Percy had been in an almost meditative state of pain for who knew how long, the sound of quill on parchment trailed off. He shook himself back to reality as Siffy swooped through the open window. A deft hand snatched the attached parchment as Professor Snape disregarded all propriety and casually took over the task of reading Percy's mail. He could see it, just barely. Percy didn't get to see the letter long but he didn't need to when it only contained two words.

"I imagine I'll need to let this mystery relative in at the gates, then," Professor Snape stood without delay, belying the reluctant tone of his voice and Percy nodded. He'd correctly interpreted Great Aunt Muriel's I'm here.

A statement which would ordinarily horrify him.

Still, as Professor Snape swept off, he could only hope his 'mystery relative' didn't try to take his professor to task for his shoulder-length hair. That could only end in disaster. A stand-off between his great aunt and his potions professor would be a thing of nightmares. Hogwarts might not survive it.

Though Percy wouldn't mind seeing the expression Professor Snape might have had at the criticism. They both appeared in the room in record time, however, and Percy panicked for a moment that he'd slipped but- but clearly he was still thinking about the haziness so it was probably a moot point.

"He won't speak, you said?" Great Aunt Muriel had knelt beside him elegantly, but her question was directed at Professor Snape. Her next statement, however… "Your call for assistance left much to be desired," she informed Percy cuttingly. For just a moment, Percy closed his eyes against the situation. He'd known she'd be insufferable, but he had no other choice.

Even if the slightest hint of her disapproval added the heat of shame to his already roiling stomach.

It wasn't fair, but when had these two cared about that? Percy curled in on himself slightly, with a mental reminder that they were both here to help him, in one form or another.

"I believe Mr. Weasley, here, is literally biting his tongue on the matter," Professor Snape drawled, arms folding over his chest as he drew his cloak further about him like a great, upright bat, "Would you happen to know what family issue might cause bouts of distraction beyond the usual haze of the feeble-minded?"
His great aunt leaned over him, frowned, but did not answer. It took a moment, but Percy eventually realized she was not just staring uselessly at him. A weak, nearly insubstantial will was haltingly working over his own. With what he knew about the iron force of her actual willpower, Percy took an even longer moment to connect the struggling thing with his great aunt.

"Percy I need you to let go for a moment; can you handle that?" she prompted in a low voice that Professor Snape didn't even pretend not to be raptly following, "This will cause, perhaps, the same amount of pain."

Oh, well, sure, let Percy just go get his party hat because that sounded like things were about to get fun. Despite the sardonic nature of his thoughts, the underlying cold fear that had dug a thousand prickling claws beneath his skin had him nodding. Whatever this was, it was messing with his head. With the heart of who he was. Without his mind, Percy was nothing.

And that scared him more than pain.

He slid the claws of his will gingerly from their temporary home buried in itself, and hissed, blood dripping around his newly bared teeth and down his chin when the previously weak will of his great aunt sharpened to something thin and slicing as a cold wind. It cut into the slowly closing wounds he'd inflicted on himself and slid deeper, searchingly.

For a moment, the search paused, and Great Aunt Muriel's eyes blanked. With a snarl he'd never seen on the elderly woman's face before, her gaze cleared and her will thinned, becoming impossibly sharper as it condensed and sliced viciously towards something foreign. Now that it had been attacked by an outside force, Percy could almost feel the edges of it. Unlike the merfolk's slick cold or his great aunt's feathery thin ghost, this was something… clutching, even malleable, in how it gave under the attack but did not break. Water parting around an intrusion, but clinging to the lake bed all the same.

Great Aunt Muriel slid away - or her will did, anyway. The thing resettled, unharmed, and Percy hastily cut his claws back in.

"We'll need your uncle Parsifal," her voice was firm and gave away nothing, but her hand was gentle on Percy's shoulder, "He's not the best at legilimency, but needs must." Would that mean she was taking him out of school? Or bringing Uncle Parsifal in? Percy was beginning to worry there'd be more Weasleys than not in Hogwarts if this became a trend.

Professor Snape cleared his throat. When Great Aunt Muriel gave him her attention, he smoothly offered, "I happen to know something of the practice myself."

"Handy," she replied flatly. Her gaze did not waver from him, however, and Percy knew judgement was being passed. To his credit, the professor did not falter under the intensity of her analysis. Rather, he seemed to be giving her the same treatment in turn. "I'd rather not have this spread about, but I suppose there's no sense in having Percival suffer needlessly. The Prewitts train our youth in hedge magic before they're ready to hold a wand, in an ancient tradition honoring those young who died at muggle hands, merely due to their inability to cast through a wand. A secret tradition," she emphasized, garnering no response from the potions professor beyond a glimmer of something sharp in his gaze. Honestly, Percy had no idea whether a word of that were true, but it would explain where Molly had learned the basics. "And there's a reason it is kept secret, Mr. Snape."

Oh, Merlin, she was insulting the man intended to help muck about in Percy's head. Professor, he wanted to correct, but there was no way for him to fix things with their eyes on each other and his great aunt still talking.
"This type of exposure when one is young can shape the magic to allow certain spells to… sink in more deeply, with allowances for the personality of the individual. Such as a charm that affects emotion. Or a compulsion." She allowed the two men to take this in for all of a second, before addressing Percy with a hint of steel, "I don't know what it was meant to do, but it seems to be amplifying something already in you, rather than adding something new. If we can remove it, you will have to identify the obsession on your own, to truly end it. Still, you must have done something to disrupt it already, or it would not be lashing out."

…Thus, when he'd popped whatever it was, trying to block out Hogwarts, it hadn't been a mistake, per say. The balm to his wounded pride helped more than Percy would have liked to admit, had he even been able to admit it.

"...go in after it," she was saying, and the professor's eyebrows were high with skepticism.

"Legilimency does not actually place the mind of the user within the victim's." His arms were crossed over his chest, haughtily. "I might have expected an amateur to have such a warped idea of what it can do, but you did not initially give me that impression." Oh look, they were both in on it, now. If they couldn't cooperate, Percy really didn't want to be here. Inadvisable would not begin to cover a full on enmity between two people with such depth of experience in antagonism. "Still, there is that saying regarding books and their covers."

"Legilimency without a hedge assist is only half of the original spell," Great Aunt Muriel sniffed, "I believe you may have experience with the wandwork of it, perhaps even enough to do without the motions from your composure. However, I'd thank you to trust in my expertise in this particular field."

This needed to stop. They were both just within Percy's reach, and out of the two of them, one scared him less.

Percy tugged lightly at Professor Snape's sleeve and stared up at both of them pleadingly.

They exchanged a silent, disdainful glance before refocusing on the problem at hand.

"...You really should have come to tea," Great Aunt Muriel scolded Percy absently as a way to get back on track, but there was more exasperation than anger in her tone, so it was alright. She appeared to sense his thoughts, because he was cuffed lightly upside the head the next moment. No consideration for the teeth in his tongue, but what had he expected? The jolt of additional pain took him out of it for a moment.

When it passed, they were plotting quietly, harsh but hushed, and Percy fought to pay attention - in fact, the adrenaline screaming through his veins at the image the two made, conspiring together, demanded it - but he was feeling more helpless than ever. And it didn't exactly help him keep his composure or his focus. He blinked rapidly. Other than George, there was no one he wanted to see him cry less.

Well, maybe the Minister.

"Buck up, Percival," his great aunt took his hand bracingly, appearing to loom over him even as she daintily slipped her other withered hand into his professor's. They both avoided looking at or acknowledging the movement. "Lie back and think of England, and all that." The phrase finally roused a reaction from his professor, as he pinned her with a pinched expression. She settled herself, and her feathery will curled tight around something between Percy and Professor Snape, "Oh, for pixies' sakes, get over my word choice and focus. There is a time for propriety, and it is not when there is no time."
There was no hesitation, "Legilimens."

And the world went black.

When he came to, it was to a buzzing murmur that vibrated in his bones. The texture of the ground beneath his hands was wrong. Pebbled, almost, but with the smoothness of finished wood.

"He's awake," Great Aunt Muriel gripped his shoulder and pulled him to his feet, "Things should settle, now."

"It's already impossible," the professor was a few feet away, running his hand over a blurry shape that was rapidly coming into focus, before jolting back, "It's sharp! But it only felt like wood. A railing, perhaps."

"No sense speculating before it's shaped." The words dripped condescension, despite the matter-of-fact curtness they attempted. Her lips quirked in her weathered face, betraying the smug satisfaction of being right.

"It looks almost like a courtroom," Professor Snape murmured, ignoring the remark entirely and holding his palm with the other hand as if to apply pressure. He wasn't wrong - there were benches lining the edges of the room, and shadowy figures stepping forward to fill them. The three of them were down in the center, where the speaker or plaintiff might stand, and a podium bubbled up from the ground and solidified, another figure stepping up behind it. Gradually, the shadows cloaking everything eased to the edges of the room, making the walls impossible to identify but revealing the features of the occupants, and that same pebbled texture of the metal and wooden furniture, alike. As if parts of it were unnaturally raised and indented in long lines of nonsense.

Percy didn't recognize the man on the stand. He was tall, dark-haired, and thin, with an angry smile under an aggressive amount of freckles.

"I appeal to the confederation," he stated, expression unchanging.

As one, the occupants of the stands rumbled back, "The confederation acknowledges your appeal." There were familiar faces - his brothers, his sister, classmates, professors, even duplicates of Professor Snape and Great Aunt Muriel - and there were unfamiliar ones. Ones that varied between stranger on the street to other. Dotted among the sea of human faces were the usual magical beings Percy was familiar with and creatures that appeared to have stepped out of a nightmare. Features distorted and twisted and mixed between species for these few, monstrous councillors - the word jumped to mind and Percy couldn't dispute it - but they didn't disturb him as they typically might. He'd noticed that they had spoken along with the rest, following the rules of whatever governing body this was. They were not a threat.

The man at the podium, the plaintiff, opened his mouth and the screeching of the merfolk exited. Every councillor in the stands was leaned forward, rapt, until it ended. As one, they nodded, and the man stepped down from the podium and into the stands, lifting something dangling from the edge of the half-walls of wood separating the different levels as he sat. In fact, each councillor held something in their left hand that connected back into the half-wall before them.

Professor Snape, evidently following the same line of thought Percy was, traced the line splitting off of the wall with his gaze, "It's a chain. It looks as if it were an organic part of the wood. Is that…?"

"That's not the compulsion," Great Aunt Muriel turned away, "There's a bit of it in here, but it's reaching up from somewhere deeper. Look for a way out."
After a moment, the professor pointed, "Down there. The line must enter somewhere and we can follow it to its start."

As they'd been speaking, another had stepped up to the podium from the seemingly endless line Professor Snape had brought to Percy's attention. A young woman, looking desperate and haunted with the shadows under her eyes, "I appeal to the confederation."

The thunder of the practiced response nearly sent Percy back to the ground.

"Where are we?" A thought occurred to him, but it was impossible and the image was slightly off. Still, he added, "Why does it look like the International Confederation of Wizards?"

"Is that what it's modeled on?" His aunt mused before visibly dismissing the thought, "This is your mind and heart, Percy; do keep up." At his lost expression and the professor's seemingly involuntary sickened air at any mention of heart, she elaborated, "Your mind is built of your thoughts, memories, and plans, your heart is a term for what's used in hedge magic. Together, they form the part of you that is individual, the magical construct that leaves a ghost. While you're still alive, true legilimency can visit it in the image of a place." She shot the professor another smug look that had him scowling and shutting his mouth on what might have been a curious question before she'd antagonized him yet again.

Another plaintiff had stepped up to the podium, another woman, but smiling prettily, "I appeal to the confederation."

"This is… me?" The room was the size of the Great Hall, at least, and well lit in the center but dark about the edges. Packed to the indistinct, shadowy walls with that mix of familiar and foreign faces. The appeal this time was music, beautiful and sweet, but with a few discordant notes that made a frown pull at Percy's lips without his permission.

It grew in volume, and the councillors appeared unmoved, faces blank as the sound - the violin, maybe? - grew more frenzied, the sour notes more frequent.

A shadow fell over the open floor, cast over Percy and his tagalongs as well as the plaintiff at the podium. Shapes loomed out of it, twitching and crawling into three dimensions until a four-legged, spindly beast pulled itself out of the shadow and up onto the floor. It paced for a moment, limbs bending unnaturally and clicking at it moved. The creature resembled Berodach in the same way a cave painting resembled an actual animal.

There were more lupine influences, though it was hairless and dark as shadow. The snout was longer, the eyes hungrier, colder, the creature more quadrupedal as a whole with a long, whip-like tail. Every angle sharp, every movement threatening. Each part seemed almost unattached to the whole. Distinct. It was put together as if the connection had been an afterthought to picking out the pieces. Limbs jolted as if they could come free of the thin flesh. Yet it was clearly in control, moving with a purpose.

Finally the music spilling from the plaintiff's mouth reached a fever pitch, and the councillors turned their heads from one side to the other in a simultaneous rejection. The creature lunged, teeth closing on her middle as they ran into and through the ground. They vanished with the shadow, and the next plaintiff stepped up to the podium.

"I appeal to the confederation."

"Lovely." Great Aunt Muriel intoned wryly, "Would you call that a one track mind?" She shook the humor before Percy could come up with any sort of response, "Better get on with it, unless you want
your professor to invade your privacy any more than he has, already."

The professor straightened from where he had been crouched, running a finger a centimeter above the raised texture shared across every solid surface in the room. His hands clasped behind his back and he said nothing.

"Shall we?" the elderly woman prompted. Putting action to words as she walked down the line of plaintiffs forced the two less experienced men to follow or be left behind. Professor Snape managed to catch up more gracefully than Percy's scramble.

The queue of people and creatures stretched out though a plain, wooden double door into a hallway Percy recognized as Ministry standard. Clean white walls with sconces lit and intricately tiled floors in nonsensical mosaics of tiny squares in a mix of dull color and clear glass.

Professor Snape must have recognized it, too, because he snorted.

He was strangely open in expression and word, as was Percy's great aunt. Perhaps it was because they were functioning without a body to hide behind. Percy knew stoney expressions and stiff postures couldn't make the emotions behind them settle on their own. If they were in his mind and will - or heart, if that's what real practitioners called it - then they couldn't be anything but their own will, could they?

It put him a little at ease to know that, although they were tromping through his head, the other two were vulnerable, as well.

The texture of the ICW's main convention room followed them through the halls. Surreptitiously, Professor Snape had tapped the wall with his wand while he followed them a few steps behind. Despite being out of Percy's view, he knew it was happening. At least, he could be sure anyone wandering off would be unable to do anything without his knowledge. Not that there were side hallways or doors to wander off through. There was a hiss interjected into the unending, buzzing drone at the edge of hearing, not unlike the white noise of the wizarding wireless when it wasn't tuned correctly popping with sudden static. A line of red opened on the professor's hand and he swore, making another line appear before he dropped his wand and the second hiss faded back into an unintelligible drone.

"What was that?" the professor hissed, unintentionally echoing the sound.

"Well, you already found out Percival doesn't respond well to touch in the first room." His great aunt sounded far too pleased, "It appears the second offense is punished twice."

Percy wouldn't do that! "No, that's not fair," he interjected unthinkingly, "Two punishments would only be for two broken rules."

"Swearing?" the professor ventured through gritted teeth. Percy assumed, for his own peace of mind, that the expression was irritation more than pain. He didn't want to think his mind would dole out anything too horrid to its visitors.

If he were to think of rules the professor might have broken, one came immediately to mind. He wasn't entirely sure he wanted to share, but the glare from said professor promised points off that he couldn't afford with Oliver as his partner in potions. "You can't be angry with a wand in your hand," Percy revealed reluctantly and the professor darted a sharp glance up at him before equally reluctantly leaving his wand where it lay.

"It's a construct, same as you," Great Aunt Muriel reminded them, bringing their pace back up with a
curt, "And if that's settled, we should get a move on instead of gawking about like muggles in the moonlight."

Percy didn't wince at the casual prejudice only because he was too used to it to feel more than a twinge of embarrassment. The professor, on the other hand, had revelation dawning over his far-too-open expression. Yet he stayed silent, fell in step, and left the odd texture of the walls alone.

Percy didn't like it, but he wasn't about to provoke Professor Snape when he didn't know what damage could be done from the inside of another's mind.

As they walked, a chill made itself present in the air. The far end of the hall was cloaked in shadow that didn't retreat as they moved towards it, unlike the shadowy edges of the ICW, but thinned as if they were walking into a bank of fog. The plaintiffs, still waiting in line, began to look sickly. Paler and gaunt, with a strange feeling that held Percy when he caught them out of the corner of his eye.

"I am not surprised you have a very straightforward approach to neglected thoughts," his great aunt broke the silence, perhaps registering his unease and seeking to assuage it. Or to soothe the professor, whose quiet, disgruntled gaze was further down the line, where parts of the plaintiffs began to flicker. A hand, an eye, would start off one way, then flicker to another. A different ethnicity or missing pieces. For only enough time to blink, then it would return to the sickly norm, "I have seen far worse."

But this was not the end.

Eventually, aside from the flickers, Percy could not call the plaintiffs anything but dead. Dead men, women and creatures standing in an interminable line, with necks and limbs at angles that made the viewer uncomfortable.

"Your creature should make a visit down here," she commented, unruffled, "Clear out the trash."

"They haven't gotten to speak, yet." The words were his, came from his mouth, but he hadn't consciously decided to say them. He crossed his arms over his chest uncomfortably and kept his eyes on the ground.

"I can't help but wonder if they will retain the ability to do so, once they reach the stand." He got the sense she was trying to catch his gaze, but he wasn't having it. "It's better to let go of the things you can't help, Percival. Keep that in mind for the future, at least."

Nodding was the only acceptable response and so he did.

At least Professor Snape looked as uncomfortable being present as Percy felt having him there. Sharing the misery made it a bit less humiliating. It was a shift in emotional focus.

"Hmm," the hum was disapproving as Great Aunt Muriel put a hand out to the side for balance, nearly brushing the line of standing dead, "Watch your step. You really need to tidy things up, Percival."

The heat of a flush flooded his face as Professor Snape tried and failed to suppress a nasty smile. Ice had infiltrated the grout between the tiny glass tiles and began to steadily replace it, climbing over the edges and across the floor as they continued down the long corridor. It crept over the walls and the plaintiffs alike, eventually thick enough to hang in clumps of icicles from the ceiling and sconces that were slowly dying down. The corridor grew ever more cold and dark, but their vision remained clear, as if it were only the feeling of darkness they waded into.

"I do believe I see it," Great Aunt Muriel squinted, pulling out her monocle and muttering something
about overcoming that dreadful bias towards nearsightedness later before she confirmed, "Yes, that should be it."

The creature at the end of the hall more closely resembled Berodach than the beast in the ICW chamber, but made out to be as dead as the plaintiffs. Inferi-like. It clawed relentlessly, mindlessly at the solid wall of ice that blocked it from going any further, a plaintiff half-uneathed, hanging limply in the places where it was free. A hazy fog dripped from the Berodach's mouth that seemed out of place in the cold and dark. For one thing, it was a pale, misty color that looked as if it were less a physical vapor and more a glimpse of nothingness. Like blotches of erased world before it fizzled back into existence. Around the Berodach creature, wooden and glass chains like those held by councillors in the chamber stretched into the ice from the walls and floor, keeping to the same texture and medium as their source.

"I was wrong." She ignored how the uncharacteristic words nearly gave Percy a heart attack and his great aunt approached not the Berodach but the wall, peering into it. The dead stretched back ad infinitum in the ice. "This is not where the ideas end, but where they start. Your compulsion here is controlling the flow from your subconscious, but your beast prunes the unwelcome under the reign of higher thought. It's almost an elegant balance, if one weren't the result of a foreign influence." Her brow was furrowed, and her hand hovered over the ice, looking into the eyes of the dead. Those who would be returned to life, if her theory was correct, "It's not often one's mind turns the cycle backwards in this way."

"Is there a reason the compulsion takes the shape of the boy's familiar?" Professor Snape was leaning carefully around it, analysing and absorbing with the kind of focus one gained from fascination.

"Camouflage," she replied, before giving it a second look, "Goodness, Percival, that's your familiar? Where have you been taking the children?"

"Nowhere," Percy protested hastily, fully aware of how much pull his great aunt had in the family. If she thought he was putting his siblings in danger, she could break them up. "I- he's the same ghoul from our attic. Mr. Lovegood explained that he changed into something stronger because of how often I worry. I didn't take the kids anywhere dangerous."

She sniffed, but didn't say anything more on the topic, pushing her robe to the side and sliding a rapier from the folds of her skirts, "Regardless, this has to go." A wave at them both, "Think deeply on attacking; you may need a weapon."

Professor Snape raised an eyebrow, then startled when a wand slid out of his flesh and into his hand, pale and notched at one end like a finger bone. Great Aunt Muriel took this in with a little less of the ambient disapproval that she usually exuded.

Percy took a moment longer to focus, but ow.

It cut smoothly out of his thigh, lengthwise and parallel to the bone, the flesh closing behind it as it had for Professor Snape. An honest-to-god smile touched Great Aunt Muriel's face when he lifted the sword awkwardly; she tilted her own, thinner weapon in a sort of salute.

"Getting here should have been the most difficult part, since most people are naturally hostile to invasive presences. I would surmise we haven't broken any of your major rules." She spun the rapier with an expert flourish, "You should only need to strike the killing blow."

And she was off, faster than she'd ever moved in reality. She darted around the Berodach duplicate like a hornet, landing shallow cuts by the dozen before it could turn and swipe at her. It was practically spinning in futile circles as she dashed about it, a whirling dervish of bladework and fancy robes.
Then it thrust a clawed hand into the floor and began to dig.

"Shit!" Percy clutched a hand to his chest, bent over from the sudden stabbing pain.

His great aunt spared a moment to tsk at him. She speared its heart from behind, taking advantage of its apparent distraction, but it continued to dig into the floor, ripping great chunks free that floated up into the air and slowed to a halt, frozen in more than one sense of the word.

"Incarcerous," Professor Snape jabbed his wand forward and its limbs snapped to its sides, encased in metal chain. He probably hadn't cast before for fear of hitting Great Aunt Muriel. Still it made another play. Throwing itself back impaled the Berodach creature further on the rapier, but knocked it from his great aunt's grip. It clawed at the floor with a hind foot, frantic, as Great Aunt Muriel got ahold of the rapier again and twisted it.

If anything, it focused harder on digging into the floor.

Something cracked with a sound like glass, and light flooded the hall, glinting off the ice and bathing the area in red. The Berodach creature smiled.

And Percy swung at the professor.

It was a clumsy bit of swordplay that went wide the first time, but the arcs of metal got faster, closer. Still, Severus wasn't exactly slow on his feet. He managed to stumble back out of reach, the sword instead sliding through the wall without damage.

"Clever little thing," Muriel stabbed through the Berodach creature's head from behind, but it only wobbled in place, the dead grin still macabrely stretched across its face.

Easily, Severus took down Percy with another set of chains, and took a few steps back when the boy bared teeth at him. The professor's lip raised in a light snarl, "What's wrong with him?"

"It's just his temper," Muriel grunted, having hefted the creature up onto her frail back using the rapier now buried to its hilt in the Berodach creature's chest for leverage, "Bit strong, even for a Prewitt. We will be having words about his self control in our next exchange of correspondence, I assure you. Can you pick up his sword?"

Might as well. He was curious what use it had when Muriel seemed unable to do much damage on her own. It was heavier than it looked, and hilt was raised with the same letters he'd noted alternately impressed and raised on the walls. He was sure it spelled out more of the Weasley prefect's inane rules, in a finer font. It was smoother than the wooden half-wall he'd touched before it cut him. This time, nothing tried to split his skin open, however.

"Well, you survived," the elderly maniac waved at him dismissively, even as Severus almost tossed the sword away at the pronouncement, stopping himself merely to preserve his image, "You should probably be able to stand in for Percy here, since you're technically a guardian."

As you are a teacher at *Hogwarts,* if Percy had been aware to notice, he'd have realized Muriel and Molly spoke the word with the same irreverent exasperation, "It will have strung you together with students as a type of guardian, should you have shown the slightest concern for their well-being. Congratulations, you've a weak bond with practically every student in the castle."

"I'm thrilled; what does this have to do with… this situation?" He didn't normally find himself at a loss for words, but he found himself gesturing between the bound compulsion and Weasley with his
borrowed sword.

"Percival has been rather effectively dispatched; the compulsion is manipulative rather than brute force as I might have anticipated. It usually takes an attack from the person under the compulsion to throw it off, but as I said, you can stand in as a guardian," she slid the ghoul off her sword and to the floor, standing above her bound grandnephew with a poised dignity, "All you have to do is stab it through the heart."

"Is that all?" he muttered, looked between her and her prone grandnephew, and stabbed down into the creature's chest. He could trust, at least, that she was acting to save her family, and not in the right frame of mind to be executing some plan to dispose of the Headmaster's pet Death Eater. The sword glowed silver as the creature burst into dark tar, as if it had been a balloon ready to pop. Muriel dashed forward, before Severus could startle away, and clasped a hand around his wrist before the light faded. When she pulled back, there was a silvery band there of the same color.

"Keep the secret," she smiled, and ripped her hand down through the air in a clawing motion. The world dissolved around them, until they were back in the abandoned classroom they'd started in. Percy appeared to be unconscious, a fresh trickle of blood dripping from the corner of his mouth.

Jerking his hand away from Muriel's grip, Severus eyed her with the air of a cornered animal, "What did you do?"

"Compose yourself," she ordered, straightening her robes with a few precise tugs and smoothing out the wrinkles in the next second, "You shall only find it difficult to communicate what occurred here to anyone who doesn't know of it. In any form." A tight smile, "I'm afraid I couldn't find it in me to put my trust in your honor. Or your loyalties. There will be no effect, otherwise."

"I have more than one acquaintance with better than passing interest in my mind," Severus said carefully, "The Headmaster being one of the most... insistent. He is one of the most likely to know which side I am on. Your concerns are unwarranted."

"It's the other one that worries me," she looked pointedly at his covered forearm and stood, "However, I trust you cannot let a student bleed out under Hogwarts' wards, yes?"

Sweeping out before he could reply was petty, especially when it was her grandnephew that she abandoned to him, claiming- alright, yes, he was paler than was healthy, extremities cold, and when Severus pried his mouth open... Somehow the boy had retained the sense to keep his head turned so he wouldn't choke on the blood that poured out unless it filled his mouth to the point of pushing down his throat. Which it probably had. Damn her, she was right. Vials clinked in his robe as he shoved a clotting and a blood replenishing potion down the boy's throat, levitating him in the next instant.

He had made no promises about keeping the boy from the Hospital Wing afterwards and thus, the Headmaster's attention, once his curiosity had been sated.

Percy woke to an agitated owl, hissed arguing, and the clacking of knitting needles.

"You wake him up," one of the twins pushed the other towards the bed, "He still likes you."

Thus it could be assumed by the discerning that Fred was the one whispering back with fists clenched at his sides, "I don't want to tell him!"

"I can tell him," a quiet voice put in, needles going silent and still, "I already had to tell the Hufflepuff common room, so Percy can't be any worse."
"I'll tell him." That was Ron.

"No, you'll botch it." Ginny, her voice flat.

"Will not!"

"Ron," Harry put in, sounding grave and entirely unlike his meek persona when Percy was around and awake, "You're my best mate. You are not sensitive."

What could they possibly have to tell him that was so horrible? He'd noted every one of his younger siblings by voice. The world was blurry - but that was down to his glasses being on the table. The owl that had woken him with its annoyed hooting snapped at someone when they tried to take its message.

"Leave it, Grimmett," the unknown woman sighed, "He'll only give it to Percy. That's why he's still in here."

Grimmett? He'd thought it was chilly in here.

Reaching out for the owl, he untied the message and was halfway through the message: Saturday afternoons would be convenient. 3PM. Library entrance. Yours - the word was crossed out violently - Draco Lucien Malfoy when the room exploded. Not literally, but the noise was comparable. He tucked the missive in his pocket, relieved he was still wearing his robes. Only his shoes had been removed.

"You're awake!" Ginny was on his chest, holding onto him tightly, and it was awful. How could he be expected to respond when someone threw themselves on him like that?

"Who chews through their tongue-"

"-like it's taffy, you-"

"-daft imp-bitten-"

"-twice-poxed idiot?" Fred and George finished together, and Percy could be excused for immediately groaning and covering his face.

"Couldn't you wait until I'm fully awake?" The words hurt to say in a purely physical sense.

"Don't talk," Audrey said, leaning over him, the maroon of Ron's Christmas sweater hanging from one hand as she revealed herself to be the unknown voice in the conversation, "You're not fully healed yet."

"Snape said you got hexed with a babbling curse and wouldn't give into it," Harry reported, tone skeptical, "Is that true?"

Really? That's the excuse his professor went with? How idiotic did he expect Percy to appear to others? Passing out from blood loss because he bit his tongue against a babbling curse? He wanted to deny it, but that would just put him against a professor. Whose word would they believe? Well, it looked like Harry would believe him - was hoping he'd say no, really. Perhaps he could tell his siblings the truth, later. He glanced at Audrey, and Grimmett hovering at her side as she tensely worked at the Christmas sweater, one of eight that were out and at normal size. Either it had worn off, or someone had hunted them down in his pockets and reversed the shrinking.

Moving his gaze back to Harry, he nodded his head slowly.
Putting his hands in his pockets, Harry followed the direction of the glance and his expression shuttered, "Oh, okay."

That put aside, Percy turned towards Audrey expectantly, and she stared back for a moment before looking down at the knitting in her hands and setting it to her lap as she took the straightforward approach. "There's a serial killer on the loose, and they think your dad was supposed to be his second victim. They're targeting pureblood Ministry officials. The head of the DMLE, Amelia Bones, showed up at the Ministry last night, dead." She paused, jaw tight, "Half of Hufflepuff is here under calming droughts."

Oh, was that all?

He'd known someone had been involved in his parents' incident from Professor McGonagall, already. Though he hadn't shared the information. Now people might be on the lookout. There was a chance the killer could be caught without Percy getting involved. Not that he had real plans to get involved or- or he didn't think he did? That was best left to the Aurors. And Dumbledore, since he was already in the know, from his wards about the Burrow. The general public would be more aware now that this death… Shaking himself, he realized he'd just glossed over the death of another Ministry official and felt vaguely sick, forcing out and immediately regretting, "That's horrible. Have they got any suspects?" He reached for his glasses and slid them back into place, vowing again to keep his mouth shut until his tongue was less sore.

"I could have told him," Ron decided agitatedly, sounding almost vindicated by Percy's less than dramatic response.

"No," Audrey shook her head, replying to Percy's question rather than Ron's huff, "Not for lack of trying. Apparently the body was portkeyed in this morning, and two more have shown up through the course of the day. The rumors were crazy until the Daily Prophet put out an emergency edition this evening, clearing up the facts."

"And thus, Madam Pomphrey hasn't kicked us out yet," George smiled with a thin edge, and Percy, now that his vision was clear, could see the tension in him echoed through the room, in others' postures and gestures, from his family to the strangers from other Houses and years he didn't know. Their noise didn't intrude on the area, however.

The last time there'd been an epidemic of wizarding tinnitus - when a witch or wizard found themselves hearing high-pitched, whistled versions of popular tunes twenty-four-seven - they'd put up silencers around each bed to keep any outside noise from exacerbating the condition. It appeared they'd revived the use due to the sheer number of incoming patients.

That was odd, though. His father and one other, probably far enough apart that no one initially linked them, then three in one day? Well, there was the autumn solstice coming up, from what he'd learned from Muggle Studies and studying with Penelope. If the killer had a grudge against purebloods, it would probably be a halfblood, or a muggleborn, and muggles who called themselves witches tended to celebrate solstices and equinoxes. The autumn one was… Mappin? Mabon?

He was glad he wasn't taking that class anymore. Well, if it really was relevant, the Ministry would probably come up with that connection on their own.

A chill washed over him before he registered Grimmett had patted his shoulder and wandered off.

Audrey watched him go, then informed Percy, "He wanted to make sure you were okay before he left. We were on patrol together when the news came in, and he knew you'd missed our meeting." She pointed both needles at him, careful not to dislodge them, "Next time you're hexed, swallow
your pride and ask one of us for help, Percy. I'm taking this to work on, and I'm glad you're not dead from your own stubbornness, but I've got to get back to my Hufflepuffs." She gathered up Ron's sweater and stood, making good on her word, as she added in farewell, "I'll see you next week."

When she was gone, he abruptly had Harry in his face, "So did Snape lie?"

Well, not maliciously. Or at least, giving the excuse was just keeping his word to Great Aunt Muriel, but the excuse itself may have been a bit malicious. Or the professor just had that low an opinion of him. Ouch. The last one felt most likely to Percy - he'd already pissed off Professor Snape once this semester and Oliver had a knack for it.

Anyway. Percy tilted his head side to side in a so-so gesture and Harry's eyes lit, "I knew it. What a git."

"Harry, don't-!" call your professor that! He subsided with a little moan, wincing when his tongue spasmed. It was hot and throbbing, now that he'd pushed it for a third time. He hadn't realized his tongue moved so much when he spoke. Obviously, he knew it on a logical level, but now he really knew.

"Did Snape hex you?" Ron crowded in next to Harry, and Ginny, who had been leaning beside his chest instead of on it, leaned in further on his other side, one elbow back on his chest.

A firm shake of the head, no.

"Like Percy would say if he had," George snorted, but was, for the most part, ignored until he added, "Professors can do no wrong in Perfect Prefect Percy's eyes."

"Okay, George, that's enough," Fred snapped, before sitting down hard in the visitor's chair and looking away from George's bewildered glance. His voice was small when he said, "Sorry."

George crouched beside him and they began a whispered conference.

If Molly were here to eavesdrop, Percy would feel much more confident in ignoring it, but he had no other choice, as it stood.

Ginny edged further into his space, cutting off Ron and Harry's progressively more outlandish theories - Percy heard and flinched at the name Voldemort - as she ventured hesitantly, "Okay, you can't tell us what happened to you yet. But… if the Malfoys sent the spider, could they have been the ones to kill Mum?"

Ron straightened, pulling a bit away from the bed.

The idea hadn't really occurred to him beyond the instant suspicion of Dobby when the idea of a house elf visiting the Burrow had come up, but Percy didn't think the Malfoys were behind it. Honestly, he'd thought Dobby might have done it on his own. The idea of a mad house elf, circumventing orders, sent shivers down his spine. There was a reason some of them were shackled to wizarding families.

No, he doubted the killer was among the Malfoys. Not if the modus operandi as of yet was killing Ministry purebloods, as the Prophet and the Ministry believed. They had to have more information than they were releasing to the public, after all. Of course, without knowing the identities of the others, he couldn't be sure, but…

Why would the most powerful man in the Ministry aside from Minister Fudge starting killing people in the Ministry? Malfoy had other avenues of attack beyond the obvious. Legal channels afforded
him more ease and security than if he started operating outside the legal loopholes and ancient laws that protected him. And Mrs. Malfoy? She was practically a non-entity outside the social circuit. The loss of her sister to Azkaban had hit her hard. Percy shook his head.

"It's really annoying that we can't ask you why not," Ginny pointed out, frustrated but unwilling to push him to speak.

"Well, they're supposed to be after purebloods," Fred pulled his feet up on the chair, George now perched on its arm, "That's not really the Malfoy way, is it?"
"But they're all Ministry," George replied, "Maybe he's assassinating key opponents."

"Maybe they're trying to pave the way for Voldemort," Harry muttered to Ron, who looked a bit pale, but nodded.

"We won't know more until the Ministry releases the identities of the last few victims to the Prophet," Fred put in, wringing his hands, and Percy pointed at him in agreement. The debate devolved further, despite his best and silent efforts, however, until accusation had been thrown at practically every corner of the wizarding world. And outside it. George had somehow stumbled onto the idea of a muggle hitman and convinced himself of its validity. The boy was pale, shaken, and Percy couldn't speak to dissuade him of the ridiculous idea.

At last, Madam Pomphrey eventually remembered Percy and shooed his cloud of siblings out of the Hospital Wing. She was clearly frazzled, hair falling out of her usually neat bun, but she still managed to threaten everyone equally and make it clear she expected Percy to stay the night for observation.

Without a solid grounding in silent casting, a mangled tongue could spell career death for a witch or wizard.

She got no argument from him.

His mind lingered on the new information he'd been given on his parents' attacker, despite telling himself there was nothing he or his family could do about it. It was up to the Ministry to find justice. Yet as Percy drifted off to sleep, an unsettling thought occurred to him.

Couldn't they come after his father to finish the job?
Albus Dumbledore had not trusted himself for the majority of his time on earth. Not since the day his fatal mistake had delivered the death blow to his faltering family. Yes, the mistakes of his youth dogged his steps, making him wary to tread any similar paths, wary of his own judgement in choosing a direction to walk.

Yet, Nicholas Flamel was dying.

It was a sad fact that at Albus's age, more of the people he had known were dead than alive. His mentors, his friends, people who knew the world he had grown up in, they all moved ahead without him. Leaving him behind to stand alone. Even Flamel. There was guilt in the thought, but he had been right not to trust Gringotts' security, even if his own trap had not captured the would-be thief as he'd hoped.

Even if Tom's spirit had slipped right through his fingers.

He put down his quill, clasping said fingers together and resting them on his desk. It would be counterproductive to continue pretending to read what was in front of him when he was so deep in rumination. In self-recrimination.

There were ways to catch a spirit, but it had not occurred to him that Quirrell could be possessed. He had thought the man only a servant... One from which he might extract key information. Alas, the poor man had died with Voldemort's escape, and from the burns he had sustained from his struggle with young Harry - not a fact to which he would be enlightening the boy any time soon, if at all.

Sometimes, he worried he had not done enough for the boy. It had eased his guilt to see Harry folded into the Weasley family more securely this year, even if the letter Minerva had received this summer had disturbed him. Yet Harry had said nothing of it, this past year. Legally, it was out of his hands. The wizarding world was strict when it came to familial rights and attempting to place Harry elsewhere would disturb more than just the magic of his mother's sacrifice. The vultures that would swoop in on young Harry - suffice to say, an uncomfortable relationship with his relatives was preferable over the torment the boy might suffer at their hands. As it was, he'd allowed Minerva to have a private word with the Dursleys about their treatment of their nephew, and he doubted they would be so foolish as to attempt to reinstall those locks. Those particular locks were useless for the purpose, anyway, after Minerva had finished with them.

Still, he worried.

He could not bother Flamel with his thoughts, anymore. Indeed, soon enough the alchemic genius would be beyond worldly concerns altogether. Aberforth would always be willing to take him down a peg, should he but present himself before his brother, but Albus found himself lacking in impartial sources of advice amongst his peers. In fact, he found himself rather lacking in peers. More and more so as time went on.

It was a bit lonely.

Hogwarts and her staff were, as always, there for him, but he could not lean on them too heavily. The students must remain priority, not the worries and crusades of an old man. In any case, it was an
issue Minerva had brought to his attention that concerned him now. One that had been exacerbated by Severus' strange report. He could not rely on them for answers when they had supplied him with the questions.

Severus had knocked sharply on his office door that evening, and swept in at Albus' distracted allowance, speaking before the elder man could even raise his eyes from his desk, "Percy Weasley has been admitted to the Hospital Wing," he'd stated, hands not clasped behind his back as was his norm, but fisted at his sides, "For a wholly unremarkable reason."

"Severus…?" For a moment, the headmaster's brow had creased in confusion, but it quickly edged over into concern, "Wholly unremarkable, you say?"

"I could not describe it as anything but," his potion's master had gritted out through bared teeth. The poor man could hardly escape suffering from jaw pain, with how frequently that expression crossed his face. Typically, it was related to the Weasley twins, however, and more recently, dear Harry. Meeting his eyes, Severus had repeated gravely, "I could not."

"You have been bound," Albus then surmised, "to keep your silence on this?" Carefully, then, to skirt the boundaries of whatever oath may afflict him, "Would you say there is danger to the school of which I am unaware? Some threat on which we have not yet spoken?"

There was a glint of reluctance in Severus' eyes before he'd replied truthfully, "No, Headmaster."

A sigh, "I fear I would do more harm than good attempting to remove it, Severus. I will not risk you for mere curiosity."

It appeared that had not been the answer Severus wanted to hear, for his eyes had flashed once, defiantly, before he bowed, to hide the emotion, "Then, if I may take my leave?"

"Of course, Severus."

And the man had swept away with a dark cloud about him that Albus could nearly see.

Albus reached out a hand to Fawkes, who crooned and rubbed his face against it.

Another worry he couldn't share. Another decision he'd have to make unaided.

Perhaps a conversation with young Percy would shed light on this and the other incident of which Minerva had informed him. Perhaps there would be nothing worrisome revealed once the shadows of misunderstanding were swept away. He would have to find the time Friday.

Preoccupied wasn't a strong enough word to describe it. Percy had been practically autopiloting through the day, and Penelope picked up on it. They'd only been studying for a quarter of an hour before she'd leaned over and shut his book. "Okay," she held up a hand asking for patience when he'd opened his mouth to question her. He subsided. "I'm trying not to be vain about this, but I've been flirting with you since you sat down and you haven't even flushed. Is there something on your mind you'd want to talk about?"

Well, the fact that she kept flirting with him this year, but no, Percy did not want to talk about his mother's potentially accidental, side effect of a murder or the increasingly far-fetched schemes he'd been concocting and dismissing for his father's protection. "Apologies, Penelope; I'm not feeling well."
It had the benefit of being true. Whenever he thought about some malicious stranger walking sedately into his father's unguarded room, anger and fear crashed into each other like roiling waves of half-frozen water. The icy claws dug into his gut and clawed their chaotic way up and out the longer he lingered on it.

"I won't pry if you don't want me to," she allegedly returned her gaze to her notes, but peeked up at him through dark lashes to relay, "Flint at two o'clock."

Accepting the change in topic gratefully - though his thoughts churned and he couldn't do anything about it now; tomorrow he could be proactive, but it would be slow, maybe too slow but, Merlin, he couldn't do anything about it now - Percy confirmed surreptitiously that, yes, Marcus Flint was lingering in the shelves on transport, flying, and air sports nearby. "Well, at least he's in the most believable section." Upon noticing their attention had landed on him, the tall Slytherin tried to flee, bumped into a shelf, and sent a series of texts on the history of flight to the floor with a few reference books on transportation scattered throughout.

Percy felt for the awkward Quidditch Captain. He wasn't the only one without a hope of snaring Penelope's full attention. With a sigh, he stood to help, and Penelope padded along with him to lend a hand.

Flint accepted the help silently by not menacing them or attempting to otherwise frighten them off. It was as gracious as Percy assumed the other boy could be. His cheeks were ruddy with embarrassment, yes, but he was not lashing out. Yet. For all Percy knew, it was only a matter of time, with the way Oliver described him as some kind of jack-in-the-box of bad temper.

"Thanks," Flint muttered, gaze fluttering between Percy and Penelope before he dropped it back to the floor with a disgruntled scowl. This time he didn't collide with any inanimate objects as he made his escape, but he did push between his two helpers to flee, even if it was oddly gentle. Likely he realized it would make a bad impression on his crush if he threw both Percy and her to the ground in his haste to get out of the situation. Always nice to know Flint had reasoning skills.

"Honestly, I'd give him a go if he weren't always beating up on your kid brothers under the guise of Quidditch," Penelope confessed casually as they regained their seats. It wasn't anything Percy hadn't heard before, but usually the subject of their conversation at least managed A's in their core classes.

"I will never understand you," Percy laughed off the twinge of hurt; he was used to it; he was used to it. Besides he had bigger things to not think about, and at least this was distracting. Still, there was no way he'd let her know how these discussions affected him. He turned what could have been a pathetic, hopeful question into a friendly tease as he struck a slight pose, "Weren't you saying just this month you had the whole package right in front of you?"

A roll of those pretty, dark eyes. "Yes, but I've been under the impression that his true lover is his academic standing," her lips split in a grin, "Which is a feeling I am not unfamiliar with. Back to work, mate."

She wasn't entirely wrong, and Percy wasn't feeling quite light-hearted enough to argue. They returned to a more companionable silence, despite the setbacks on Percy's side of things. It was broken occasionally by back and forth questions on this or that concept until their time came to an end.

Even if he kept slipping off into mental tangents of worry, Penelope's pointed prodding had brought him back on track. And her insight was, as always, invaluable in understanding the latest practical forays in Transfiguration.
It was as they were walking out of the library, Penelope's hand burning a brand into his arm where it was tucked into the crook of his elbow, that Fawley Hilliard stumbled into him. Penelope's fellow Ravenclaw prefect pushed the three of them off balance just enough that the projectile aimed their way flew harmlessly down the hall, instead. Fawley recovered his balance and tripped the other way, effortlessly stumbling under another dungbomb and provoking an angry, tea-kettle whistle of fury from the pursuing poltergeist.

"Give it up," Fawley told Peeves with an air of repetition, "Even if I tried to stand still, the next one would be a dud, or the Bloody Baron would materialize. You know this is impossible."

"Alright?" Percy asked Penelope, getting a nod before he turned to the other Ravenclaw prefect, "Evening, Fawley."

"Evening," Fawley's top book in the small stack he held slid to the floor and he bent to retrieve it, causing the final dungbomb to sail futilely overhead, bounce off the wall and roll down the hall to where several disgruntled bystanders had already been caught in the crossfire. Pleasantries dispensed with, Percy turned to escape the general radius, Penelope of the same mind as he, when Fawley gripped his wrist, "Hold on, I've actually got a message for you. You're expected in the Headmaster's office as soon as you get a minute."

"Oh, Percy, your rebellious ways have finally caught up with you," Penelope sighed, a teasing grin breaking the facade, "However will you explain yourself?"

"I… Well, I had better go, then." The smile faded from Penelope's face at his reticence, but Percy still slipped out of her loose hold on his arm without offering any further explanation, "I'll see you later. Thank you, Fawley."

"I'll get you, I will!" Peeves promised Fawley with color high in his misshapen cheeks, ignoring Penelope startling and hurrying the other direction. Fawley offered the poltergeist a sympathetic look that only infuriated him more, spitting out poor verse as Percy fled the scene. "Four-Leaf Fawley - irk me shall he? Soon I'll see, if green he bleeds!" The threat did not worry Percy as much as it might, were it made to anyone else.

There was a long-standing and one-sided rivalry between Fawley and the resident Hogwarts poltergeist. Fawley had unnaturally good luck, to the point where Aurors had questioned his mother on whether she'd been dosing with luck potion during her pregnancy after his first year at Hogwarts had left his professors… concerned. It was a serious charge, as the effects on a fetus were usually deleterious to the extreme, but she'd sufficiently proven her innocence, with a reportedly long-suffering air and prepared testing slips for Fawley's yearly work-ups.

Anyway, the relevance of this was that it was advantageous to be where Fawley was not when Peeves decided to take another crack at him, and that there was little need to worry Peeves' efforts would bear fruit.

For Fawley, anyway. His surroundings suffered the brunt of the poltergeist's frustrations.

Percy's thoughts were more on why the headmaster would want to see him. Maybe Professor Snape had told him about his great aunt's less than planned visit. It was technically within the rules, under the idea of a medical emergency requiring family intervention. Well, at least it wouldn't be as humiliating as he'd originally anticipated - it hadn't been his fault. His great aunt had seemed to want to keep it under wraps from her stressing of the tradition being something secret before they'd gone in after the compulsion. But if one couldn't trust Albus Dumbledore, who could they trust?

His parents had said something similar more than once.
It was just the things he... had a feeling the headmaster wouldn't quite approve of that he'd be keeping to himself. There was a divide between his duties as a prefect and his duties to his family that he wasn't certain would be... clear from the outside.

Yes, that sounded right. Was right. The thought was correct.

Percy shook himself, smoothed his hair uselessly, and stepped past the gargoyle, which naturally let him pass due to his prefect's badge.

Ticking, quiet whistling, and chiming emanated from the headmaster's office in the usual soft cacophony of the man's medley of enchanted artifacts. Percy raised a hand to knock. He didn't get the chance.

"Ah, come in, Mr. Weasley."

Well, he'd heard the headmaster had a way of knowing who was at his door. "Good evening, Professor Dumbledore," Percy eased in, shut the door behind him, and sketched a short bow, "You wanted to see me?"

"Yes, but before we get down to, say, brass tacks, as it were, I would be remiss were I not to offer you my condolences. While Minerva and I could not attend the service, I would hope Pomona conveyed our sincerest sympathies for your loss." The headmaster's hands were folded together on his desk, and he leaned ever so slightly over them to meet Percy's eyes with the professional grief of a man whose job was holding himself together. No, Percy did not want to have to envy that composure for a moment longer.

"Of course, Headmaster," Percy folded his arms behind his back, "I would not think for a second otherwise, even if Professor Sprout had not made that clear." At least, as far as he could remember. He'd tried his hardest to forget the funeral. From his vague memories of it beyond his siblings' tears and the cold, echoing numbness, he believed Professor Snape might have slipped in and out like a shadow in the back row, as a fellow member of the Order paying his respects, while Professor Sprout had been less clandestine about her attendance. Something unpleasant and stomach-dropping tried to sweep over him, but Percy turned his attention viciously back to reality. "If you don't mind my asking, however, I was wondering as to the reason my presence was required, sir? If this is about Fred and George's most recent harassment of Professor Snape, I can assure you I will be having a talk with them soon." Please be about the twins. Or Ron's grades. Or Percy's grades - no, he couldn't wish that earnestly. Was it possible to fail Transfiguration this early in the year?

"To business, then," Professor Dumbledore began, resettling his half-moon glasses on his nose as he indulged Percy's blatant desire to get right to the point, "Concerns have been raised by your professors that I feel need addressing. Minerva and Severus, in particular, have individually brought me rather distressing stories that I believe require clarification. Is there anything you'd like to volunteer, Mr. Weasley?"

Without knowing what had already been said? Without knowing what Professor McGonagall could possibly have had to report? He would have to be honest - about what had happened, anyway. There was no need to get worked up and start worrying the professors had somehow plucked his plans from his mind - even if Professor Snape had been in it recently - oh no, that wasn't helping. Maybe some of it, from a certain angle, could be seen as unethical - no, no, Percy would not think about this. Stick to the facts. The facts the Headmaster probably already knew.

"I'm sure I can clear up what happened with Professor Snape; it was merely a family issue that caused some minor medical problems. They required specific assistance, but I can answer whatever questions about that you may have, sir, so long as they don't reveal any family secrets -" read: so
long as they didn't ruin Percy's image in the headmaster's eyes forever" - but I'm afraid I don't know what Professor McGonagall may be worrying over, other than my… outlook for Transfiguration in the coming year," he admitted reluctantly. Merlin, he hoped not. To know she'd gone to the headmaster with such concerns would be the final blow. He'd have to drop the class, leave the country and never show his face again.

As it was, Percy was still trying to stop believing Professor Snape's comments on Professor McGonagall's supposed view of Percy continuing Transfiguration at all. He'd only gotten an E on the practicals portion of the OWL after all. And that had practically killed him to achieve. Perhaps that had been more telling to her than Percy had been led to believe.

"This is neither about your brothers nor your classwork." Percy hadn't known a frown to be kind before, but Headmaster Dumbledore pulled it off, his voice soft as if to keep his words from resembling the accusation they might have been, coming from another man's mouth, "Minerva has brought it to my attention that you appeared to have knowledge about the intrusion to the Burrow's wards before she informed you of it. Severus, just yesterday, came to me under an oath of silence on some matter pertaining to you; I assume this to be in regards to the medical intervention you mentioned…?"

An oath? There hadn't been anything binding Percy had witnessed. And if Professor Snape had agreed to an oath like that with Great Aunt Muriel, why would he go to the headmaster afterwards? "What oath?" Percy asked before he could stop himself, adding hastily, "Sir. I mean, it's likely to be about that, but I didn't witness any such oath, professor. I-" he flushed, but confessed reluctantly, "I did fall unconscious towards the end, so it's possible Great Aunt Muriel forced- er," the heat in his cheeks was distressingly blazing at this point, "asked for an oath." Well, he may as well come out with everything foolish he'd done from his first day at Hogwarts since the headmaster's opinion of him likely couldn't dip any lower, now.

He probably thought Percy another Weasley fool. Brave and dumb. Yet- not quite as brave as his brothers.

"Ah, I see." Despite Percy's previous expectations, Headmaster Dumbledore's eyes danced with a merry glee - a rather relieved glee, really, "Muriel Prewitt was involved, was she? As a medical emergency, the lack of visitation papers can be overlooked. I'm sure she used her best judgement in the matter, but I will pen her a letter myself. It's truly been too long since we've last had a chance to chat." As quickly as it came, the relief dimmed, and concern flooded in its place, "Unfortunately, we must return to more serious topics. I was not surprised that you were able to deduce the presence of a foreign hand in the attack on the Burrow this summer. And I know it is painful, Mr. Weasley, but I'm afraid it may be critical information, especially in the light of recent events. How is it that it occurred to you to suggest a house elf may be involved?"

There was no way to explain the Malfoy tangle without explaining the ethics Percy would be… interpreting creatively. It wasn't against the rules, but it wasn't… necessarily… right. The pause while Percy searched wildly for a plausible explanation must have dragged a bit long because Headmaster Dumbledore leaned in, pale blue eyes piercing and intent.

"This could be key to finding and stopping the perpetrator of these tragedies, Mr. Weasley. I believe you are old enough to understand the weight of this situation, even if we may both wish otherwise."

"Yes," Percy agreed on automatic, mind settling on an explanation, "I understand, sir; it's just that it was more of a guess than anything. I- I knew we had strong wards, with the assistance from Bill and yourself. And I knew house elves are able to enter and exit Hogwarts' wards without issue. I must confess, it was little more than a hunch." He looked up, meeting Headmaster Dumbledore's steady
gaze, "I'm sorry I can't be of more help."

"There is nothing more you would like to tell me?"

"No, sir, but if I think of anything, you'll be the first to know," Percy assured him.

There was a flicker Percy almost parsed as disappointment in the older man's face before the headmaster smiled gently, the presence he exuded easing back and tension Percy had been unaware of sliding from him, "Thank you, Mr. Weasley. This has been most illuminating. I'm sure you are eager to get back to your common room and a warm bed."

Percy took the dismissal as it was, standing with a final bow, "Good night, sir."

"Good night, Mr. Weasley."

As Percy's back turned, the smile slipped from the headmaster's expression, leaving a bone deep weariness in its place. At least he could consult with Muriel on the issue of her grandnephew. Perhaps he would even be able to leave it in her hands.

Albus doubted it; Percy Weasley seemed to be more involved in the current most pressing mystery than he appeared.

That had been a bit concerning. Percy rather wanted to know what his Great Aunt Muriel had done - ostensibly for his own good, or perhaps for the family - but Professor Dumbledore had implied he'd be looking into it himself. It was doubtful Percy would get more out of his great aunt than the greatest wizard of their time, and there was the slight possibility that said great aunt might be less than pleased that Percy had set the good professor on her.

Honestly, though, imposing an oath on a professor? Hardly an act he could condone, yet worryingly in character for his formidable relative. Perhaps she was worried this killer had a grudge against the Weasley family, wanted to keep them safe and secret. Make sure any advantages they had remained unknown to the world at large. Because what if the killer came after them? In fact, now that Percy was thinking about it, wasn't this something he should be taking action to-

No. What?

Shaking his head, he stopped in the hallway, one hand on the wall as if he could steady his thoughts with the action. Percy had felt a tiny urge to do something when his siblings had informed him about the serial killer who may or may not have targeted his father, but it hadn't been very persuasive. He was already working on keeping the terminal ward safe. And if he succeeded, there'd be healers around to make sure no one suspicious wandered in. While he hoped the Ministry brought said criminal to justice, Percy wasn't about to drop out of school and become a vigilante. The very idea was ridiculous. His hand fist against the rough stone. Besides being illegal, it was not his place to mete out punishment for breaking the law, especially when he didn't have even the experience of a half-trained Auror. And yet, something had been growing, as if he felt more and more compelled to-

Oh. That made sense.

The remnants of the compulsion. It must be pushing him to- to break the rules? Or endanger himself? The wispy edges of understanding drifted away from him as he grabbed at it, leaving him with nothing but pieces. Neither of those sounded like something he was suited to doing, he concluded reluctantly. It would have been a neat end to that particular mystery around unknown magics in his mind or will or heart or wherever. And it might have led to the caster, if he only knew for what it had all been intended.
Plus, he could remember Great Aunt Muriel warning him he'd need to identify the compulsion on his own if he wanted to be fully rid of it.

The best way to do that would probably be to put himself in as many different situations as he could and pay close attention to his own thought process. However, Percy had things that needed to be done. Like schoolwork. Hopefully, something else would pop up in his normal routine. ...Was it getting cold in here?

"Oh," someone caught his shoulder, and Percy looked up with a shiver at the Slytherin prefect. Grimmett looked back down at him blankly. He patted the wide-eyed Weasley's shoulder lightly, "You're up. That's good."

"Yes, uh, thank you." Be nice. Be polite. There's nothing wrong with Grimmett; it's just you. Somehow, Percy managed a worried smile. It probably looked a bit like he was feeling ill. Maybe if Grimmett's visage was obscured, Percy would be able to ignore it? Reaching deep, he tried to pop back the bit that let him see the overwhelming glow of Hogwarts and its bonds.

A sigh blew past him from taller boy and he got another pat on the shoulder, "Be more careful."
With that caution delivered, Grimmett released Percy, politely stepped to the side, and allowed him to flee, but- there was- huh. When Percy continued to stare at Grimmett's chest instead of running off, Grimmett contorted his lips in a confusing mix of pleasant surprise and bewilderment. "Are you alright?"

"Oh, yes," Percy jolted out of his reverie and took an instinctive step back as he pulled his gaze back up to Grimmett's face. The Slytherin prefect wasn't bonded to practically everyone to whom he'd spoken, like every other person who passed Hogwarts' walls. There were maybe four strong connections Percy could feel stretching off into the distance and seven weaker ones - one of which was between them. He assumed the other six were the prefects in their year. Grimmett didn't "hang out" with people, but he did get dragged about by Gemma to socialize with their fellow prefects.

Why wasn't he subject to the every whim of the castle? Maybe there really was basis for the creepy feeling Percy got around him! It might not be irrational, after all!

"You're staring," Grimmett finally pointed out, since Percy had merely adjusted the angle of his observation rather than starting a conversation like a normal person.

Heat flooded his ears and cheeks at the reminder. He was just being rude now. How could he ask about this? Inquiring after the number of friends Grimmett had would be… insensitive, at best. "Do you ever feel like something's missing?" Percy wanted to slap and silence himself the moment the words came out of his mouth, but it was too late to take them back. Could he have been any more impolite-

"Is- are you- I'm flattered, I think, but..." Grimmett started slowly, brows furrowing, "Wait, is that a line?" Thought fled when what Grimmett was implying sunk in. "I apologize. I'm not used to people flirting with... me." A hand went to his chin in thought, and it was clear he was trying to figure out how to let Percy down gently.

Finally, Percy was able to speak again and he threw a hand out in his own defense, "No! No, I mean, I was just- it wasn't a- a pick up line. It was- It was stupid, but I wasn't trying to flirt- You- just freak me out; I am so sorry. "I didn't mean to sound... rehearsed or something. I'm just... very... bad at talking with you, I think," he confessed on the edge of complete frustration with himself, tugging an earlobe and averting his gaze.

At this point, Grimmett's lips were tightly pressed against one another and twitching. When he tried
to speak, he had to turn it into a cough instead, trying desperately to disguise the laugh he couldn't entirely suppress. His second go had more success, "It's not your fault. I have been letting Gemma's conspiracy theories get to me."

"...What theories?"

It was better to get ahead of that insanity, even if he didn't want to hear what Gemma's twisted mind had come up with lately. Especially if one of them had him fancying Grimmett. Though he would admit to himself that her imagined scenario probably made more sense to onlookers than Percy's reality.

"You deserve fair warning," Grimmett decided more calmly, nodding to himself, "I will fill you in on the way to your tower. Kendra is substituting for Gabriel today on our patrol."

The Hufflepuff prefects were still trying to coach their badgers through their shared grief. If one member of that house lost a family member, the entire group either banded together in solidarity around them, or fell to pieces. It appeared Madam Bones' death had prompted the latter.

"Thanks." Always helpful to know to what depths of nonsense Gemma was diving before one was trapped in a conversation with her. And Percy was partnered with her on patrol Monday.

"What **exactly** is she saying about me?"

Grimmett started walking, "You may want to brace yourself."

Joy.

Grumpily, Ron threw himself into the chair across from where Percy was doing homework Saturday morning. He had his arms crossed over his chest and his eyes on the table as he sighed repeatedly with enough force it almost qualified as a huff. Giving up on Ron initiating dialogue, Percy put down his quill, "Is something wrong, Ron?"

Ron looked up at him through his fringe, down again, and sat upright irritably, "There's no hidden kingdom of house elves, right?"

"Hermione's on about it," Harry put in, making both Weasleys jump as he slid into the chair between them. Where had he come from? Had he been there all along? Sometimes, it was like the kid appeared out of thin air.

"Bloody hell, put a bell on, would you?" Ron complained. The language left much to be desired and Percy took a deep breath before he reminded him, "Honestly, Ronald, I am **right here**."

"Sorry," he offered insincerely, "but really, there's no house elf kingdom that's been lost to time, right?"

"If it's been lost to time, I'm sure I wouldn't know about it," Percy pointed out, propping up his chin with one hand, a half smile tugging at his lips.

"Percy," Ron put a hand on the table, "Come on. There isn't."

"It's possible but unlikely," Percy conceded. Keeping them from learning in order to nitpick might actually physically hurt him. A didactic tone crept into his voice as he continued, "House elves,
before they were bound, were often described as malicious, prank-loving beasts. They had powerful magic but little intelligence, so their pranks were usually along the lines of dismemberment, kidnapping, or death. Of course, they've been reformed with what today would be highly illegal magic in order to make it easier to coexist and some are perfectly kind creatures, now." Harry looked a little ill, so Percy left that topic vague, moving on to his point. "Their ability to hide themselves is unmatched in the wizarding world, and surpassed only by the demiguise's invisibility, but they aren't the most intelligent in its application. Moreso before they were, er, changed. Thus, while they would be able to hide their communities, it's unlikely it ever occurred to them. Especially as they were never quite able to learn to leave wizards alone, so the idea of them isolating themselves from their favorite victims voluntarily is laughable, at best."

"So, I'm right; Hermione's wrong; that's all you had to say," Ron interjected, standing from the table abruptly, "I need to tell her right now."

"Thank you, Percy. You're welcome, Ron," Percy muttered to himself, rolling his eyes as Ron vanished into the distance. When Harry snorted, Percy sent him a conspiratory smirk. A hesitant smile was his reward for the acknowledgement, and Harry leaned in a bit, smile fading into nerves.

"Hermione's really on a rampage," the boy's fingers were gripping the edge of the table more tightly than the situation warranted, though his tone was even, "She wants to set up a refuge for house elves and other magical creatures with all kinds of protections. When I said it sounded a little like the hidden kingdoms, she interrogated me for five minutes, and I couldn't- er. Well, Madam Pince doesn't like me very much, I think, and I could only find the one on my own, so I was wondering if you knew about any… books on them? The hidden kingdoms, I mean?"

"Yes," Percy replied with strong emphasis and a fire in his eyes that kind of scared Harry just a little bit as the older boy whipped a length of parchment from his bag and wet his quill, "And I will write you a list right now." The prefect put word to action with enthusiasm, "Harry, please remember you can always, always come to me with questions and especially if it's about learning something new. There are no stupid questions!" Flourishing the quill a little wildly left a few ink blots along the edge but Percy very much doubted Harry would care about that. With a spell to dry the ink, it was done. "Here you are."

"Thanks," Harry accepted the parchment with twitching lips, amusement fading away to pensive perusal of the list, "I read this one." He tapped the parchment, "But it's just got an entry on quintapeds saying to run if you see one, and it doesn't even describe what one looks like."

"As it is, there's no record of them being found anywhere but the Isle of Drear, and they are confined by very strong wards, so you'll likely never see one. However, the few who have survived encounters have all had similar descriptions of the quintapeds," Percy was on a roll and Harry was paying attention so he elaborated happily, "They've got five club-footed legs, as if the feet were rolled under the ankle, splayed out like a spider. The humanoid face on their central body is said to be very expressive of their everlasting rage. When it comes to diet, they're active hunters and prefer human flesh, hence their high rating by the Ministry. Another name for them is the Hairy MacBoons, due to the rust-red hair covering their bodies, which, incidentally, are also the shape that inspired the symbol for five in the runic alphabet-"

"Wait, Percy, why MacBoons?" Harry's brow was furrowed with thought and as a result, Percy was only a little put out by the interruption, "Is there another creature that looks like a quintaped called a MacBoon? Or was that the person who discovered them?"

Well, that was easy enough to explain. "The story goes that they used to be one of the two wizarding families that once populated the island, and during a feud they were transfigured into beasts by their
rival clan. They ended up winning, since the bodies they have now are, plainly, terrifying, but upon
discovery, they refused to cooperate with the Wizards' Council's attempts to reverse the
transfiguration and actually," Percy looked up thoughtfully, "I do believe they ate at least three of the
envoy sent to help. Basically, they reinstated the wards around the island and left the Hairy
MacBoons alone to this day," he concluded with a shrug. It had been a noble, if misguided effort.

"That can happen?" Eyes wide, Harry had his arms wrapped around himself.

Really, Harry had seen Professor McGonagall's usual animagus demonstration, hadn't he? It was
entirely possible he just hadn't connected those particular dots. "Of course. Battle-transfiguration is
incredibly difficult, but it is something that can be done by masters. The McCliverts - the other clan
on the island - supposedly had a family knack for the subject."

"What I meant was, they just left them there?" Conflicted, Harry's hands held tighter to his arms, "I
guess they did kill a bunch of people, but they should go to jail for that, not be trapped on an island
as a bunch of human-eating animals."

"I've… never thought about it," Percy admitted, "Probably it'd be better than Azkaban, though." Of
course, the Wizards' Council was soon thereafter replaced by the Ministry of Magic in the early
1700's, so they… hadn't established Azkaban as a prison yet, now that Percy was thinking it through.
Well, there wasn't a long gap between the two. "Our prison," he explained at Harry's confused
expression, "Which is guarded by creatures called dementors that feed on positive emotions."

"That's… not fantastic," Harry concluded, sounding a bit disappointed, "Are there any magical
creatures besides unicorns that are nice?"

"Berodach," Percy supplied easily, garnering half a smile from the boy, "But of course there are
more, like niffers and puffskeins. You can ask-" oh, Professor Kettleburn would not be the best
choice to rhapsodize about the positive side of magical creatures, "our groundskeeper, Hagrid, if you
really want to get an in-depth explanation of how wonderful magical creatures can be."

A laugh escaped Harry before he contained it with a grin, "I should think so. He thinks dragons
are cute." He stood from the table, grin fading until he said, quickly, "Thanks, Percy," and clambered
off through the portrait hole.

Honestly, Harry was very good at making Percy worry about him, in a very different way than he
worried about his other- er, his siblings. Well, Harry was a Weasley-by-sweater, anyway. Shaking
his head, Percy checked the hour. Before he met with Malfoy, he had enough time for his weekly
attempt to remind Oliver that he was at school to learn, a task which included homework.

There'd probably be less chance of escape if he ambushed him. In less than a minute, Percy had
swept up his study materials and made it out the portrait hole. From what he knew of Oliver, the
fanatic was probably pacing the Quidditch pitch.

If Percy had stayed a few minutes longer, he might have seen Ginny worriedly scan the common
room and return dejectedly to her dorm.

But he wasn't there.

Chapter End Notes
Deleted scenes and me being weird on the internet can be found on my tumblr: corwynasmith.tumblr.com

If y'all want
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

WARNING FOR REALLY LIGHT GORE / VIOLENCE - look for “A scream.” and stop reading until the next scene (break in page) if that sort triggers you. It’s short.

Also I’m aware I’m changing timelines, it’s okay, it’s on purpose!

And before anyone accuses me of making Percy academically OP, please remember that canon!Percy got perfect OWLs. Twelve perfect OWLs. Honestly, I’ve toned him down by throwing an E on the practical Transfiguration his way. He got an O+ in Transfigurative theory because he went above and beyond his usual overpreparation for his- to him- abysmal casting ability there and it evened out to an O on the official OWL to allow him to keep his twelve outstandings, although not his twelve perfect scores of canon. 11/12. I took one away lol

Okay? Okay.

*laughs and cries at the same time at the ridiculousness of canon!Percy*

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“There you are.” Malfoy stood from where he’d been leaning nonchalantly against the wall of the library. It would have been a more convincing scene if Percy hadn’t seen the boy worrying his lip before he’d noticed Percy’s arrival, “If we’re going to be practicing spells, we should use an empty classroom, and I happen to know one that will be -” a slight stumble in his rhythm as he clearly searched for a stuffy enough word, “suitable for our needs.”

Well, Percy could start with some of the common mistakes kids made in spellcasting - definitely not phrased that way, however. It would give an instant result in terms of power and accuracy, though small in comparison to the more long term gains of deeply understanding the theory, language, and motions of the spell. Now that he thought of it, doing a short quiz on Malfoy’s strengths and weaknesses right off the bat was probably not the best way to impress a twelve year old, anyway.

Even if it was his usual start to a tutoring session, the whole point was to disguise the fact that they were, in fact, just tutoring sessions.

“Lead the way,” Percy agreed with a bow that was, while ridiculous for a prefect to be giving to a second year, less ostentatious than the one that had flustered Malfoy the last time.

The boy seemed a little relieved at that and set off at a pace that probably frustrated his yearmates. Percy tried to stay half a step behind, rather than overtake him. They were heading away from the more frequented corridors, which was likely part of Malfoy’s plan. A classmate discovering him learning from a Weasley would no doubt be embarrassing for the poor kid. Though Percy was a prefect, so that might mitigate it a tad.

“It’s only got a few desks and chairs, so there’s plenty of space,” Malfoy said abruptly, expression hidden from view as the torches grew sparser. Slowing, he reached for the closest door and opened it. His voice gave nothing away, but his words… “Here it is.”
Peering in, Percy cast, “Lumos maxima contigua!” Light blossomed at the end of his wand and with a flick, was sent flying up to the ceiling, where it stuck and continued. Malfoy shifted slightly as Percy gave the room a once over. He sent a smile the Slytherin’s way, “Excellent choice, Malfoy. Well done!” When Malfoy’s response was to puff up with a near-smile, Percy knew he’d hit the nail on the head. The boy had been looking for validation. Interesting.

It appeared that it was less ego and more a lack somewhere that shaped Malfoy’s response to compliments. Or, given the stories Ron had told, a strange mix of both.

To business, then. Percy ushered Malfoy into the room and stood across from him with a smile. He really did enjoy teaching, even if his victims- students often needed to be tricked into it. “We can start off with the severing charm or the wand-lighting spell. From what I recall, your classmates will need another week or so with the simpler version of the wand-lighting spell I just used, but I’m sure you need only to perfect it, so we can go on with the severing charm ahead of time, if you’d like.”

“...Can I learn that one?” Malfoy asked, pointing upward at the ball of light stuck to the ceiling before he appeared to remember himself and resettled his weight, correcting, “I want to start with the more complex version of the wand-lighting spell. It seems much more useful than the one we learn in class.”

Honestly, Percy had been sort of hoping for something along those lines. It would be easier to show demonstrable progress in a spell Malfoy already had grounding in than to teach an entirely new spell. That was why he’d been sure to use a version Malfoy couldn’t possibly have heard about. “Of course. It’s more challenging than the standard spell, and I’m sure you could use a challenge with the boredom you must be facing in class.”

“Yeah,” Malfoy had his wand out and ready, and perhaps Percy could ease back on the flattery for a bit. That last one might have been a little much for Malfoy’s suspension of disbelief to withstand on top of everything else so far.

First, Percy took him through the basic spell a few times. He would have preferred to have a bit longer to observe Malfoy’s casting, but the Slytherin was clearly getting impatient as his expression soured and his wand movements became a bit more terse.

“Alright,” Percy reached out and gently took hold of the boy’s wrist, “You’ve got it textbook perfect, but as I said, there are some tricks they don’t teach in class.”

He was fudging only a tad calling the cast textbook perfect, but he was sure Malfoy would accept secrets before he’d accept corrections.

“The wand movement is minimal, but you’ll want to keep your wrist stiff and straight. Let the movement come from your arm.” Once the boy’s wrist was aligned properly, Percy stood back, catching an odd glance from Malfoy before he continued, “And, even though it always feels silly, enunciating the first syllable in lumos as much as you can will give better results.” Grey eyes darted up at him under raised brows and Percy demonstrated, adding afterwards, “Like a duck’s bill, almost. It’s awful, but it works.”

From the mulish expression he received, Malfoy was thinking, it’d better. The boy mouthed the spell once to himself, keeping his wrist stiff, before he attempted it aloud again. When light shone from his wand again, noticeably brighter, Malfoy said unthinkingly, “It looks like Granger’s.”

Percy wasn’t surprised. Nor did his worldview overturn when Malfoy shot him a glare that plainly conveyed his desire for Percy to ignore and forget the thoughtless comment. So Percy moved on.
“Good show, Malfoy! First, let me show you the cast for this higher version, and watch closely for differences.” The first go through, Malfoy was hesitant to give Percy a straight answer to any differences he might have seen, so Percy dispelled the extra light and extended his arm, “Alright, put your hand on my wrist and I’ll go through it again. It’s a subtle difference that’s easier to feel than see.”

Reluctantly, Malfoy obeyed, but his face lit up in realization as the spell completed, “You bend your wrist on the third word, really fast, like a tremor!”

“Exactly!” Percy praised, glad to see a joy of learning on someone’s face other than his own and Penelope’s, “What you couldn’t possibly see is that the muscles in your upper and lower arm must also tense and relax, in sequence before the wrist, in time with the first and second words. The idea is to emulate a wave of impulse or energy, which buoys the spell enough to allow for the final flick to dislodge it from the end of your wand.”

Malfoy nodded seriously, a pensive expression on his face edging into worry. The spell was fairly complicated, but only in the technical application. A second year could cast it easily for the power requirements, and with Percy coaching someone through it, it’d be a given they’d get it eventually.

After all, he’d created it his fifth year.

The extra credit he’d gotten on the Charms OWL had turned out to be unnecessary, but it had made him feel better to have known it going in.

“Want to see what happens when you don’t complete that part of the cast?” Percy suggested with a hint of mischief.

A half step back before Malfoy controlled himself, “Isn’t that… dangerous?”

“Normally, you would be entirely correct,” Percy agreed, readying his wand and unable to stop himself from adding hypocritically, “Which is why you should only practice magic with a partner or under supervision. As it is, I am intimately familiar with all the permutations of failure for this spell, and none of them are harmful.”

The curiosity of a twelve year old for technically forbidden knowledge was a powerful thing. Malfoy was leaning in now, perhaps subconsciously, “Let’s have it.”

“Lumos maxima contigua,” Percy intoned, keeping everything correct but for the movement of tension down his arm, and a ball of lighted bloomed at the end of his wand… before deflating with a pathetic sound not unlike air escaping a released balloon. Malfoy snorted and Percy grinned, “It gets worse if you try to flick it off.” When Malfoy looked up at him with an expectant grin in return, Percy obligingly went through the motion, allowing the sad glowing sack of light to fall to the floor with a wet plop. “Give it a kick,” Percy suggested, and this time there was no hesitation as Malfoy followed this particular instruction. The force behind the kick sent it sliding across the floor, leaving a glowing trail in its wake like a strangely bioluminescent slug. It bounced off the walls and desks, slipping and sliding about as if it were on an ice rink instead of stone. “Jump!” Percy laughed when it came barrelling back their direction. They hopped over the rogue light ball together and Percy dispelled it before it could leave the entire room glowing, waiting until Malfoy had controlled his giggles to resume instruction.

The boy was grinning and pink cheeked as he calmed, examining the dim glow fading from the tip of his shoe with only an occasional snicker, “That’s brilliant.”

And it also seemed to have lessened the fear of failure Percy had picked up on. Good. They could
move on to practicing the movements now without Malfoy fumbling something from being too in his head with worry.

A crack resounded in the room, and Percy could see a short, familiar silhouette before it raised its fingers to snap. House elf. A house elf that wasn’t actively hiding itself. Alarms had rung in Percy’s head before he could completely register the situation and he lunged at Malfoy, taking them both to the ground just as a wave of concussive force passed through the space they’d been standing, pulling at their hair and clothes wildly in its wake and echoing as it impacted the far wall.

There weren’t many jinxes or hexes that worked well on another person’s house elf. They were often laced with protections so long as they belonged to a wizard, in order to prevent one family from depriving another of their servant out of spite. Usually, this was a reasonable measure to take, since house elves weren’t typically thought of as weapons to send on the attack. But Percy wasn’t quick with defense spells, anyway.

The last charm he’d overpowered came to mind, as Malfoy squeaked with surprise at the abrupt change in position. That one wouldn’t do anything to help, but an overpowered version of - Percy hesitated a moment too long and had to upend the nearest table to block the chairs the house elf sent shooting across the room at them. They shattered against the thick wood of the table, and Percy had to act, not think if he wanted to survive this encounter.

He stood from behind their cover, needing to see to aim, and as he prepared to cast, it felt as if time was slowing with the speed at which memories rushed into his mind. The hours of his life spent scrubbing dishes, cauldrons, floors, laundry- that dreadful day he’d nearly hurt George intruded and the fury of that fight flooded him as his voice came out in a bitter hiss, “Scourgify.”

A scream.

Skin and muscle had come away from the elf’s face in patches. Strings of flesh hung limply, but it remained on its feet, one green eye still intact and glaring hatefully. The sight made Percy falter, unable to follow through. He’d done this. Done it thinking of… Horror filled him as it moaned, hands unable to touch the wounds without causing further pain, and vanished, reappearing with another crack of displaced air behind him.

Thoroughly off balance and finding thoughts of spells slipping shakily away from him in the second he had to act, Percy could only fall back on his duty as a prefect to throw himself in front of Malfoy at the next snap of the pained elf’s fingers.

The blow hit hard, but not as lethally as it might have been before the elf was… wounded. Multiple somethings snapped in Percy’s chest, but the pain was bearable and the elf was… Gone. The sound of its retreat must have been covered by whatever had broken. Smart of it to leave - that much blood loss was probably dangerous for a creature that came up to his knee.

As for Malfoy, he was pale and his eyes bright with tears as he held one of his arms - the forearm was bent at an odd angle - but he was alive and Percy was alive. Now, Percy thought hazily through the shock, would be the appropriate time to get us both to the Hospital Wing. It hurt and that had happened and it had been so fast - Focus.

“Okay,” he managed weakly, levering himself back up to his feet, “Can you stand?”

Madam Pomfrey had initially looked ready to knock them both upside the head for irresponsible magic use before Percy managed to report what had actually happened in between her questions on
the physical nature of their injuries. That had her sending for their House heads, even if she didn’t seem to entirely believe them just yet.

“A house elf did this?” she asked with some skepticism, and Malfoy bristled like a prodded cat.

“Yes, and whichever one is responsible should be put down before it strikes again!” His voice took on just a hint of hysteria, “This is why those beasts were bonded in the first place! Merlin only knows what bleeding heart blood traitor loosed that— that little monster on the world!”

Well, he wasn’t entirely wrong.

However, there was another angle to consider.

“It is possible,” Percy began carefully, “that this wasn’t a free elf.” At the sharp look Pomfrey gave him, he knew she’d been clued in by the headmaster as to what may have happened with the elder Weasleys that summer. “From what I saw when it popped in, it wasn’t exactly ragged or ill kempt.”

“A murder attempt?” Malfoy realized, losing what little color he’d managed to regain from his righteous fury as his voice rose about an octave in pitch, “On me?”

Well, it was more likely Malfoy was the target, based on the idea that this was the elf connected with the serial killer going after Ministry purebloods. Malfoy Manor was bound to be smaller than Hogwarts, and it was improbable for a foreign house elf to be able to slip in without notice from the Malfoy’s elves. Unlike in Hogwarts’ grand labyrinthian design, where blind spots and empty rooms existed as much as part of the decor as in memory of their functional past. For once, it appeared the Hogwarts student was an easier target than the elder Malfoy.

“It’s possible,” Percy repeated quietly, putting a hand on Malfoy’s good shoulder, “but they failed. You’re alright.”

“Mr. Weasley!” The scold took them both by surprise, and Percy looked up at the fury on Madam Pomfrey’s matronly face with confusion, “I’d thank you not to jump to such conclusions in front of a child!” A sulk settled over Malfoy like a cloud.

Oh. Right. Malfoy, being all of twelve years old, really shouldn’t have to fear for his life based on a probability. “I’m still a bit off-kilter; my apologies, madam,” Percy offered, and knew it was accepted when she shooed him to a bed to focus on the visible bone sticking slightly out of Malfoy’s arm. Percy gingerly settled himself to perch on the edge of the other bed, stiff sheets crinkling as he sat and each breath or movement only exacerbating the burning in his chest. There was no way he was attempting to lay down.

“I can fix broken bones in a jiffy,” the mediwitch soothed Malfoy the bed over, indeed doing just that as the boy continued to brood. With his arm fixed and his scrapes healed, she patted him on the head, earning a scowl, before informing him, “That’s you done, but you’ll need to hang about a while longer while we wait for your heads of house.”

He sniffed, turning his head away, but didn’t offer any further discourse.

Madam Pomfrey took this with good grace and a subtle roll of her eyes before moving on to Percy. She waved her wand about him, tisked at whatever it told her, and tilted his head back with the tip of her wand against his cheekbone. “Your eye is bleeding a bit,” she informed him matter of factly before drawing her wand around his eye, tracing a circle on his flesh, and tapped it once against the bridge of his nose, muttering the incantation under her breath. Pain he hadn’t quite registered faded, the absence more obvious as muscles in his face relaxed, and Madam Pomfrey moved on to his chest
and back. “That’s a fine mess,” she commented darkly as soothing coolness spread in the wake of her wand, “One rib broken and two fractured. If Mr. Malfoy hadn’t backed up your story, I might have left the bruises as an object lesson, but as it is, I won’t leave you a Kandisky painting in the making today. You’ll both be getting a calcium supplement and fish with greens for dinner, as well. If I hear either of you have skipped it, you’ll both be back here tomorrow.” Her tone was conversationally threatening, and the boys nodded, resigned to their fate and too deep in the mediwitch’s realm to have a chance of escape anyway.

As she gave a final twist of her wand and turned to retrieve two foul tasting potions - the promised supplements - the fireplace flared green. From the flames, a lopsided figure emerged and came into focus as Headmaster Dumbledore, in sooty robes that had once been a pale green, supporting a woman with graying hair against his side.

She met his gaze with familiar eyes turned strange from their unfocused glaze and Percy jumped to his feet in surprise. Her voice was uncharacteristically airy as she wobbled free of the headmaster and reattached herself to Percy’s proffered arms. “Ah, Percival,” she started with an air of recognition, “that’s alright then.”

That message dubiously delivered, Great Aunt Muriel collapsed against Percy’s recently healed chest. Her weight was concerningly little for the presence she typically bore like a shroud of iron and barely made his fragile ribs twinge. Instinctively, Percy swept her up as if she were Ginny, fallen asleep at the end of a long day, and was disconcerted to find the action didn’t wake her even as he settled her onto the bed he’d just vacated.

“I’d contacted Muriel for her usual biting honesty,” the headmaster was explaining to Madam Pomfrey as Percy maneuvered his great aunt, “and serendipitously appeared to have called in time to interrupt something of an armed robbery. Naturally, I stepped through and put a stop to it before any further harm could be done, but it appears my reputation precedes me. The assailant was unwilling to engage me in a duel and risk capture, insteading spelling Muriel with a discombobulation curse and making her escape in the resulting confusion.” They had made it to Great Aunt Muriel’s bedside by that point in the monologue and Madam Pomfrey began her diagnosis as Headmaster Dumbledore continued gravely, “I took the liberty of checking her for any further malicious magic, but it appears she is, for the most part, merely exhausted from defending her homestead.” Glancing at Percy, he elaborated, more gently, “She did well to hold off a woman in the prime of youth for as long as she did; Muriel’s always been made with a stronger foundation than the rest of us. I’m certain she will weather this storm, as well.”

“You are, as per usual, correct in your slapdash approach to a field you haven’t been trained in,” Madam Pomfrey agreed with a suppressive air that made the headmaster smile weakly in chagrin, “And as per usual, Headmaster, I must impress upon you not to make promises before I have had a chance to make my diagnosis. Even if you’re right, that doesn’t mean it will always be the case, Albus!”

“Ah,” he gave the affronted mediwitch a casual half-bow, “My apologies. I continue to forget myself, my dear madam.”

“See to it you remember next time,” she murmured, already entrenched in the care and keeping of her next patient to the point where her only real response to his acknowledgement of this demand was a vague, dismissive wave of her hand.

“What could they possibly steal from a Weasley?” Malfoy asked abruptly, reminding everyone in the room that he was both present and fully conscious. Or at least, reminding Percy, who could admit he flinched a little at the unexpected voice.
“She’s a Prewitt by blood,” Percy corrected automatically, hardly taking offense at the blunt reminder of the typical Weasley financial situation. More kids than they could afford was par for the course in a strongly intergenerational way. Percy had had plans to break that cycle since he’d been old enough to recognize it.

The headmaster gave them both an unreadably sharp glance, but patted the unconscious Muriel’s hand in an assured fashion that might have seen him lose the appendage, should she have been awake. “Muriel was clutching a wooden box when I first glimpsed the battlefield. Unfortunately, I’m not certain whether she sequestered it during my journey through the floo or the burglar made off with it, since it wasn’t in evidence by the time I arrived.”

A wooden box? A puzzle box? Percy looked up at the elder man with sudden intensity, “Was it decorated with carved animals? Probably barnyard animals?” He still was unsure why the family recipes would be sought after to the point of violence, but the memory of finding more than one such recipe that had been noted as won in combat had lingered the way only truly ridiculous truths could manage.

“I’m afraid I didn’t have the chance to notice any fine details,” Headmaster Dumbledore admitted apologetically, but his eyes were piercing, “Is there any significance to this box you may recognize, Mr. Weasley?”

His first instinct was to answer truthfully, but with a look over his unconscious great aunt, lying pale and still against stark white sheets that only served to make her seem ever more fragile, he ducked his head, “I’m not sure I should say, sir. I apologize.”

If his great aunt was willing to fight to protect whatever family secrets - or god forbid, recipes - lay inside, Percy felt that duty applied to him, as well.

At the raised eyebrows Malfoy was giving him with a healthy dose of incredulity from behind the Headmaster, Percy realized exactly how incriminating that might sound.

“You think, Malfoy mouthed at him from across the room and threw himself back on the bed in exasperation.

“Well, I don’t know what the box was, do I? Percy pressed his lips into a thinner line and examined the fine lines and spots on the back of his great aunt’s hand instead of addressing the Slytherin’s sass or the Headmaster’s gentle amusement.

It was always a glorious day when Percy got to make an ass out of himself with an audience.

He dearly hoped Malfoy was not influenced to end their sessions from the combination of deadly threat and Percy’s subsequent foolishness in front of the Headmaster. If he did, Percy wouldn’t exactly be able to hold it against him, however.

A sigh broke the silence and Percy returned his attention to the room at large in time to see Professors Snape and McGonagall had evidently arrived. As it was Professor Snape pinching the bridge of his nose, he could assume the sigh had originated with him, but McGonagall spoke for both of them, her brogue deepening as her hands found her hips, “I’m getting used to finding a Weasley at the center of trouble with the Malfoys, but I’m not thrilled to find it escalating to the point we need to be called down to the hospital wing, Mr. Weasley!” The presence of his unconscious great aunt only seemed to increase the exasperation making her lips thin to a slash across her face.
On the other hand, Professor Snape had gathered his condescension enough to make a scathing remark and cut Percy back down to whatever size he found most crushable, but to everyone’s surprise, he was interrupted. “It wasn’t Weasley,” Malfoy cut in, almost reluctantly, sitting up again now that the professors had entered the room, “He…” Percy could practically see him discarding words like protected or saved, “helped me.”

At that introduction to the topic, Madam Pomfrey smoothly took the reins of the situation, sweeping the two professors and a curious headmaster into an explanation of the peril that had landed the boys in the hospital wing, as she understood it, with only minor interjections from Malfoy. For the most part, these were innocent hyperbole emphasizing the danger or the fight that had lasted all of ten seconds in reality, so Percy didn’t bother correcting any of the additions. However, the last of Malfoy’s running commentary made Percy lift his head from where he’d been resting, his elbow leaned into his great aunt’s bed and hand supporting his chin, to immediately dive into damage control.

Pomfrey had been explaining that Percy had eventually run off the elf when it realized the battle was too costly to continue - in Percy’s words - when Malfoy spoke up again.

“He ruined its face,” he stated matter-of-factly with a certain amount of vicious satisfaction tinging the underside of his words. And perhaps he was a little paler than usual, but that was to be expected if he’d really caught sight of the elf during its last attack.

There was no way Percy could let Professor Snape have the first word on that, or he’d find himself in detention for attacking a creature inferior to wizards regardless of the extenuating circumstances. That in mind, he opened his mouth to defend himself without time to think it through.

“Not- well, I didn’t intend…” Percy trailed off, finding himself at a loss as to how to go about the aforementioned self defense. It wasn’t that he hadn’t done such damage, nor that he hadn’t meant to do it. So much for damage control. “I did,” he admitted instead, slowly and reluctantly, “but only after it clearly demonstrated that it meant us harm.” When, to his dismay, Professor Snape was the first to open his mouth for a response, Percy added hastily, “It was the only way I could see to stop it when house elves with owners have protections against most restraining curses and other defense spells in order to prevent theft or sabotage.” Catching the irritated tilt to Professor Snape’s mouth at being cut off for the second time since he’d shown up today, and this time with a deluge of babbled information, Percy ducked his head, “Apologies, sir.”

“What spell did you use?” Professor McGonagall pressed, unfazed by her coworker’s agitation as her brows furrowed pensively, “You’re correct in that house elves have protections most creatures don’t, when bonded to a wizarding family. So what would have such an effect as to drive off an elf being cut off for the second time since he’d shown up today, and this time with a deluge of babbled information, Percy ducked his head, “Apologies, sir.”

“What spell did you use?” Professor McGonagall pressed, unfazed by her coworker’s agitation as her brows furrowed pensively, “You’re correct in that house elves have protections most creatures don’t, when bonded to a wizarding family. So what would have such an effect as to drive off an elf that may have been under orders to attack?”

“Well, the blood loss was substantial,” Percy found himself saying, as if answering a question in class, before he snapped his mouth shut with a silent admonishment to himself for making it sound mysteriously worse with every word off his tongue. Try again. But his confidence had been dragged out behind the henhouse and shot with the number of times he’d already messed up. Percy couldn’t quite keep his voice steady as he attempted to rectify the situation, “I-I mean, it had a stronger- it…” He closed his eyes for a breath and fist ed his hands surreptitiously against the scratchy, stiff sheets on which his great aunt rested. The facts. Answer the question. “I only overpowered a scouring charm. That’s all.”

Despite this less than impressive claim, the professors appeared to be taking it, correctly, in the context of everything else they’d heard thus far. Their expressions were less than encouraging.

Percy clenched his fists a little more painfully and waited for judgement.
“Ten points to Gryffindor should be appropriate,” Professor McGonagall decided primly, “For quick thinking in the face of danger.”

“I must object-” Professor Snape started lowly, but the Gryffindor head of house interrupted him for what would be the third time, making his eyes flash with fury as he was forced to fall silent once more.

“May I remind you that your student, Mr. Malfoy, corroborates Percy’s every claim and was, in fact, less injured than my prefect, who has, according to Madam Pomfrey’s expert opinion, sustained wounds consistent with blocking a great deal of force with his body?” She didn’t appear to notice the slip in address in her righteous indignation, and the Transfigurations professor turned back to Percy with fire in her stance, “Thank you for protecting your fellow student when we weren’t there to do so, Percy. You do Gryffindor proud.” Whatever reservations she may have had must have evaporated under the force of Professor Snape’s antagonism. The polarization between the two was stronger than Percy had previously estimated. Unless he missed his guess, they had had a more amiable relationship when he’d first started schooling.

Sometime last year, the twins’ third consecutive year of wearing down the Hogwarts staff and the introduction of the second to last Weasley to the Hogwarts ecosystem, that had turned for the worse. Now with Ginny in school, that brought the Weasley count up to five, and the younger two could begin emulating their elder twin brothers at any time. All in Professor McGonagall’s house.

Percy had already promised himself not to blame Fred or George for anything without actual proof, though. Even if they were occasionally unbearable.

As he’d ruminated on the possibilities, the professors had withdrawn to a more private circle, harsh whispers exchanged between the heads of house as the headmaster presided over them, obviously playing the voice of reason if the calm, steady tone Percy caught once or twice from the man meant anything.

The supplement Madam Pomfrey forced down his throat the next instant wiped all such thoughts from his mind. On the other bed, Malfoy was gagging, and it should have set off warning bells for him, but he’d been too involved with what the other staff members were doing.

“Thank you, Madam Pomfrey,” he coughed, trying not to make any of the faces Malfoy was indulging in across the way. She smiled at him, but it had an edge that bespoke bad things if he didn’t follow through on the rest of her prescribed treatment. Percy had never been fond of fish, but he’d manage.

After an interrogation on the blurred particulars of the house elf that had attacked them and a promise that someone would fetch him should his great aunt wake today, Percy was shuffled out of the hospital wing along with Malfoy so Madam Pomfrey could focus on Great Aunt Muriel. If Percy didn’t know that Madam Pomfrey’s favorite patients were the unconscious ones (more biddable and less likely to reinjure themselves or make their conditions worse), he’d be worrying they had lied about the severity of her injuries.

As it was, Percy realized upon entry into the Great Hall that he’d missed yet another opportunity to ask Professor McGonagall exactly what had happened with his siblings, Hermione, and Professor Quirrell on the third floor last year.

There were just too many mysteries in his life to follow.

As he sat down at the Gryffindor table next to Oliver, keeping half his attention on the try-out plans Oliver was making (“- to be fair to everyone, see, but I doubt any of these newcomers can unseat
my Chasers, not to mention your brothers or Harry. I’m always looking for reserves, though. But no one seems to want the position? I can’t see why not －”) and trying not to butter his fish or filet his greens in his distraction, Percy contemplated whether to tell his family what had happened now, or wait until he had the complete story. If he told them about Great Aunt Muriel and the simultaneous - it seemed - attack on Malfoy and himself without all the facts, he had no doubt they’d get some crazy theory or another in mind and be unable to let it go. On the other hand, if he said nothing and someone else informed them as to what had happened, there might be hurt feelings and then crazy theories leading to reckless action and danger.

Lose-lose situation.

Still, the chance of anyone discovering what had happened was unlikely. The professors weren’t prone to gossip, and Percy highly doubted Malfoy wanted everyone to know a Weasley had saved his life.

Besides, he hadn’t seen the young Slytherin’s bookends following him around recently, so it was possible they were on the outs. Since those two were who he spent the majority of his time with, they were probably his confidants, as well. If Percy could trust his ability to parse social closeness of near-strangers.

He could admit to himself that was probably not one of his talents.

Still, Percy was a Gryffindor, and in this case, it meant he’d take the risk of his siblings finding out another path before he told them something else to worry them. Maybe it wasn’t the bravest decision, but it was still brave. Lower on the scale. Percy was used to it.

He’d delay until he actually knew the whole story, and what his great aunt wanted them to know.

His own incident wasn’t really something they needed to know, either. Any damage was easily fixed, on their side, and he didn’t need to encourage their vendetta against who or whatever was targeting purebloods.

In his distraction, he only found himself returning to reality with the forced halt of his forward momentum. He’d plowed through dinner and conversation with Oliver and, peripherally, Kendra by sheer force of will and stubborn refusal to admit inattention (prompting a mixture of amusement and annoyance from his dinner companions whenever he was caught out). Crowds of concerned people blocking his path had interrupted his otherwise successful beeline to the tower, however, and no amount of determination and flashing of his prefect badge seemed to make any of them come to order.

As it seemed the world was conspiring to ruin any dignity he might have today, Percy gave into necessity and elbowed his way to the center of the mass, where a frozen Derek Chen, Ravenclaw Chaser, stood peering into the Quidditch trophy case beside a pale and hunted Harry Potter. Red paint decorated the glass around Chen with the ominous phrase, The Chamber has been opened. The time has come for magic’s heirs to strike back.

Crossing the distance between them, Percy quickly checked over Chen for any signs of injury and concluded he was unharmed but either under some incredibly powerful version of the petrification charm or frozen in time.

Probably.

One or the other.
Either way, it appeared he had a witness, and Percy turned to Harry with his arms crossed over his chest, “What happened, Harry?”

“I don’t know!” burst out of Harry as if he’d been dying for a chance to defend himself, a full rant following in short order, “I just heard someone talking to themselves about killing someone and I followed it because I couldn’t just let that happen if I knew about it, and then it stopped, but when I rounded the corner, I found Chen like this and some prefects found us so the Ravenclaw prefect told me to wait here while more and more people just kept showing up so she could go get a teacher and it’s been ages!”

“Penelope?” Percy asked before he could help himself, but at the helpless glare from Harry bordering on lost over angered, corrected his course, “Alright, Harry, well if she’s getting a professor, then all we can do is wait, yeah?” He put a hand on Harry’s shoulder, “I’ll stay here with you.”

They didn’t have very long to wait.

“What’s all this, then?” Professor Lockhart waded through the mess with a megawatt grin, “Is a certain someone handing out signed photos again?”

Harry groaned quietly and tried uncharacteristically to melt into Percy’s side, to the prefect’s surprise. The boy was not the type to initiate physical contact but it appeared he wanted to hide at all costs. Unfortunately, this clever trick was lost on Lockhart and the professor frowned as he took in the scene.

“What’s all this, then, Harry?” he asked. Clearing his throat, Percy was about to remind the professor that he was both there and a prefect, but Professor Lockhart took note of this on his own, “Ah, Percy! I see young Harry’s feeling a bit overwhelmed,” if looks could kill, the man could have keeled over on the spot from the venom in Harry’s gaze, but the young Gryffindor remained plastered to Percy’s shadow, “would you mind explaining the situation?”

Telling the frowning blond what he knew took less than a minute, and the professor took on a thoughtful mien. “If only we had some mature mandrakes,” he sighed, “I might have whipped up a potion in a thrice that would free this young man to speak, so as to bring his attacker to justice!” Mournfully, his volume lowered with the gravity of the scene, and the crowd around him followed suit, “Alas, if he is petrified as you’ve surmised, it will be a long few months until our dear Professor Sprout can provide what we need. Of course,” here Professor Lockhart brightened, “If I render my invaluable assistance, we may be able to cut that time by days! Perhaps weeks! I’ve a great deal of experience with restoratives and their ingredients, you know, why in Gadding with Ghouls - your favorite, if I remember correctly, Percy - I had to-”

“So we can’t help Chen?” Harry interrupted, still as close to hiding behind Percy as was possible without the ability to mold into one person and be done with it, “And we’ll have to wait months to figure out who did this?”

“You did hear their voice,” Percy pointed out contemplatively, “Was there anything distinct you could notice about it?”

“They didn’t have an accent or anything, but it was really low in pitch, like Hagrid.” Shifting his weight, the boy added quietly with clear hesitation, “With the path they were travelling, it was like they were going through the walls.”

There were plenty of secret passages in Hogwarts. “An adult voice, do you think?” Percy mused aloud, but Harry shook his head.
“Flint and Montague sound like adults, and so do a lot of the seventh years, but it did sound… male, at least,” he concluded unhappily, “Or maybe just a really, really low female voice, I guess.” Being unable to shed more light on the event was making Harry tug the hem of his shirt, under his open robes, and Percy finally noticed that Harry was deeply and blatantly upset.

*I’ve mismanaged it again*. “Since Harry’s clearly not the culprit of this kind of advanced magic, I should probably take him up to the Tower along with any lingering Gryffindors while you sweep the halls with the other professors,” Percy prompted, knowing Professor Lockhart had probably fallen into the same trap that he had of considering the puzzle before the people, “And the other students should go back to their dormitories, too, don’t you think, sir?”

“Right,” Lockhart said, only a flash of surprise and chagrin crossing his features before he turned a blinding smile on the assembled students still muttering amongst themselves, “Everyone back to your common rooms - upper years, escort the lower, and any prefects be sure to supervise the process!” As if to himself, he murmured in an aside, “I should probably inform the headmaster.”

That man had clearly worked alone for a very long time.

Still, if his only sins were a blindingly bright wardrobe, a healthy self-confidence and a problem remembering to follow convention, Percy wasn’t going to complain after the thieving, stuttering mess they’d had for Defense last year.

As it happened, the Gryffindor prefect took the distraction for what it was, leaving Lockhart to organize the exodus, and ushered Harry away from the traumatizing scene of the crime.

“Gryffindors, with me!” he called in a half-hearted attempt to follow through as they breached the edge of the crowd. Thus, it was with a small contingent that Percy escorted Harry back to the Tower.

The boy’s shoulder felt very thin and fragile under Percy’s hand, and he released it, uncomfortably reminded of how very vulnerable a twelve year old child could be. This wasn’t something he wanted to advertise to the rest of the group following them, so he kept his volume low, “I’m sorry if we pushed you, Harry. You did very well, considering the situation.”

“S’okay,” Harry shrugged uneasily, eyes dropping to the floor.

“I *would* prefer if you didn’t run toward certain death in the future, but nothing can be done about it right now.” Percy concluded, garnering a glance from Harry that balanced artfully between amused and confused. At least no one had been present that was liable to give Harry points for that behavior. Kendra came to immediately and forcefully to mind.

“I’ll try,” was Harry’s dubious promise.

Once he was delivered unto the grasping embrace of his other two-thirds - otherwise known as Ron and Hermione - that was the last Percy got out of him or, in fact, saw of him as they bustled him upstairs to the boys’ dorm in a whirlwind of urgent whispers and suspicious glances at the rest of the room.

When did Ron’s loyalty shift so entirely to his friends that his family was pushed out of the loop?

...Probably when he finally made friends outside the family. There wasn’t a large population of wizarding children Ron’s age in Ottery St. Catchpole. This was a natural part of growing up, right?

Logically, Percy understood.

That didn’t mean he *got* it.
Wrangling the common room to keep anyone from leaving until the professors announced the all-clear occupied his evening and he found himself giving out a generalized version of the incident on repeat until he finally wrote it out and pinned it to the inside of the portrait hole, settling beside it to knit in complete abandonment of his prior secrecy. His great aunt had nearly been robbed, his brothers were all insane, his familiar was acting up, his parents were, for all intents and purposes, gone, and his professors probably thought he was as crazy as the rest of them. Not to mention, he’d been attacked by another house elf and was starting to develop a distrust for the whole breed that he knew rationally was probably unfair.

At this point in time, whether anyone realized knitting was not rated highly amongst his talents or not, Percy didn’t particularly have the energy to care. Sleep kept tugging at him in a strangely physical pull at his core, but he couldn’t rest until the all clear.

Time passed as Percy grudgingly worked his way through rows of yarn in Ginny’s sweater… Was it Ginny’s sweater?

Holding up the mostly completed article of clothing, it was a bright green that seemed to go on a bit longer than he remembered in the sleeves. Since it had been a rose pink before, this was a tad concerning.

From the sleeves, the knit extended down to the ground, where it melted seamlessly into the bright spring grass.

Percy sat up and away from the rough trunk of the tree he was leaning on in alarm.

“Where am I?” he demanded of the rolling meadow stretching before him, the sweater he’d dropped vanishing as it was absorbed into the grass. Clouds stood static in a robin’s egg blue sky, and despite the lack of wind, the soft grass bent and swayed in random directions, dotted with spring sedge and cowslip.

It was strange, though. He couldn’t feel the sunlight on his skin or the dirt beneath his hand - only the softness of the grass and the bark that had been pressing in raised patterns against his back.

“It’s alright. This is Gwent; I grew up here.”

At the deep male voice, Percy jumped a little - hadn’t Harry said-

“No, that’s not me.”

Oh, good, the disembodied voice could practice intense legilimency from a distance. Percy scanned the area for his wand or something he could use as a weapon, but beyond the knitting needles glinting on the ground, there was nothing but flowers, grass, and the tree at his back. He gripped the needles for lack of another option.

Perhaps the voice wasn’t disembodied, but just hidden.

A thought that might have occurred to him sooner had his stomach not dropped out at the unexpected change in location.

When he made to lean around the tree and test his hypothesis however, the voice gained urgency, “Wait! Please.”

Despite himself, the plea stopped him.

“Who are you?” Percy asked instead of looking for himself without bothering to conceal his
impatience with this game.

“I grew up here, with my sisters and my brother; our family was very like yours.” The voice dipped, broke a little, “Before they were killed. It was my fault, and not mine, and those truths will haunt me until the day I finally cease to exist.”

Settling himself back against the tree reluctantly, Percy waited, a stubborn mien to his thoughts. His silence was rewarded with concession.

“You can call me Baladan.”

“Nice to meet you,” he replied automatically, prompting a harsh, breathy laugh from the other man that felt familiar. His voice, too; Percy was sure he’d heard it somewhere before. The name rang no bells, however, and Percy could only conclude it was false. Baladan continued, undaunted by whatever suspicion he did or did not feel radiating from Percy.

“Thirty nights,” Baladan said next, and the grass began to recede into the earth, rolling up into pebbled balls like carpet as the tree trunk smoothed against Percy’s back, flattening. “I will help you, Percy. I will help you save them.”

Any part of him that may have unwittingly relaxed tensed as Percy whipped around, “What do you mean?”

But he was talking to the portrait hole in the Gryffindor common room.

The sweater he’d been working on was a rose pink once more, and nestled between his stomach and legs, enclosed in the ball he’d made of himself. Percy blinked and raised his head from his knees. Darkness cloaked the common room, and silence reigned.

He’d fallen asleep.

It was a dream.

Laughing uneasily, Percy gathered up his knitting and rose. It was past curfew now, and he doubted anyone was awake to wander outside. Though it was concerning no one had visited to announce the sweep was complete, there was always the possibility that the teachers had caught the culprit, and were too busy cooperating with the Aurors to bother with reassuring the students.

No one could get in without the password, anyway. That was the whole point of having protected common rooms and dorms.

Oliver’s snores, when Percy entered his dorm, were comforting in that they were constant and quiet, while Suri snuffled and turned over in his sleep. Percy could go through with his ablutions in peace. If his hands shook a little, no one was awake to tease him. It had been a long day.

Percy checked his wand before he went to bed, clutching it under his pillow as he fell asleep.

His great aunt had woken up sometime during the night, thanked Dumbledore for his service, and told him to inform Percy that she was fine and the box was fine. She hadn’t anticipated the headmaster warding the floo until she told the Aurors everything she could remember about the incident, and had grudgingly obliged, but she’d still managed to abscond from the school before Percy woke for Magical Languages, or so the beleaguered fifth year Hufflepuff prefect - Jake, Gemma’s younger brother - relayed in unabashedly bored monotone.
Percy thanked him, releasing Jake from his duties. The boy took to escape with considerably more energy than he’d approached Percy in the first place.

“It’s Gobbledygook this semester,” Audrey murmured with ill-concealed distaste, dark circles under her eyes and Ron’s sweater sticking out of her bag. “Joy.”

An arm looped around Percy’s shoulders as Audrey shuffled past and into the classroom designated for Magical Languages, as Gemma made her presence known, “What’s up with our little ball of sunshine?”

“The Hufflepuffs have suffered a loss,” Percy reminded her long-sufferingly.

“‘Puffs,” she snorted unapologetically, “Two of my second years lost their fathers in the same attack and you don’t see us losing sleep over it.” Grimmett loomed into existence over her shoulder and she corrected herself, “But we care deeply and sympathize with their pain.”

This was the first Percy had heard of it. “Who?”

“Crabbe and Goyle; they were the mystery bodies ID’d along with Madam Bones,” Gemma relayed easily, before speculating, “What’s interesting is that they weren’t too involved with the Ministry - but their benefactor, the Malfoys are. It’s possible the wards around Malfoy manor are too much for our Ministry Murderer.” At Percy’s less than impressed expression, she elaborated, “I didn’t choose the name. The Prophet’s running it. The Ministry is not amused but Skeeter is a law unto herself.”

“Some of the younger Slytherins have taken to calling them the Mudblood Ministry Murderer,” Grimmett informed Percy tersely under his breath, “It has been a hassle.”

At this, Percy just nodded. It was too early in the morning to struggle through Grimmett’s chill and address him directly. Gemma was herding them both into the classroom anyway, which was spotted with the usual crowd of Ministry-related students and Ravenclaws. Not Penelope, of course. Sunday was her ‘me day,’ she’d told him repeatedly in response to this or that invitation she turned down from him or in front of him.

After allowing the students to settle a bit on entry, Professor Flitwick levitated the book he was standing on up and onto the teacher’s desk, clearing his throat for silence that he was quickly given. Amiably, he welcomed them to the first meeting of the year and went through the usual spiel explaining that the course, like Ghoul Studies, would not be tested nor covered on the OWLs or NEWTs and was entirely voluntary. That said, he reminded them that Choir met in the same room Saturday mornings and that they were very welcome to come try it out next week. As he would periodically throughout the year.

The student body was generally bemused by the Charms master and duelling expert’s desire to run clubs based mainly on language and communication of ideas or feelings, but as it benefited them, no one questioned it too closely.

Still, Percy wondered at the Choir most - Professor Flitwick infamously couldn’t carry a tune himself.

Finally, the introduction on Gobbledygook began and Percy started paying closer attention, taking note of any important cultural and historical aspects of the goblin language that Flitwick emphasized. Unsurprisingly, the picture he painted was one of a warrior-like, money-centric culture dotted with violent bids for complete independence from the Ministry. The language itself, Flitwick explained with clear enthusiasm, had no passive voice; one could not speak a sentence without a subject taking direct action.
“Language and culture shape one another, and a mixture of both shape the people within the society,” he lectured, running off along his favorite tangent, “So is it any wonder that learning these languages can teach beings how to get along?”

“We know, Professor,” Gemma spoke up, “Some of us have been attending for years. Percy’s even making friends with the merfolk, now.”

Bubbling laughter met her interjection, and Flitwick’s tone was wry as he replied, “Thank you, Gemma. I do sometimes get carried away.” He snuck a glance at Percy, amusement and curiosity glittering in his dark, beetle-like eyes, “Back to Gobbledygook…”

As they filtered out of class later, Percy attempted to catch Audrey and ask how she was holding up, but she merely waved at him and vanished as Gemma dragged him in the other direction, heading for the kitchens with Grimmett their silent shadow.

Resigned to his fate, Percy decided he may as well troll for information. Gemma, in a previous life, had probably been a particularly gossipy spider, so if anyone knew, she might. “Do you know what happened with the attack yesterday?”

“Oh, with your adopted famous Weasley?” she prompted, teasingly, but her smile dropped as she continued more seriously, “The professors are united in their stance on Chen. ‘No comment.’”

“But…” Grimmett prompted flatly.

“But,” Gemma continued obligingly, “There’s a rumor going around in our house this morning that the chamber it’s referring to is the Chamber of Secrets - you know, the room with a monster Slytherin was supposed to have left in the school. Not that most beasts could have survived a few hundred years in a small room hidden in the castle without food or water,” she mused, waving this thought away before she refocused, “And that the reason Chen was attacked was because he’d been bragging about how purebloods were finally feeling a little bit of how muggleborns felt all the time what with the Ministry Murderer targeting them. Persecuted, threatened, what-have-you. That would mean it’d have to be someone who’d heard him or heard of him being stupidly open about his real feelings that attacked - though that doesn’t narrow it down.” Gemma rolled her eyes, “He was in the middle of the library and he got kicked out for his volume.”

“That would make sense with the second line of nonsense the culprit left behind,” Percy confirmed thoughtfully, “Fighting back against the ‘uprising,’ I suppose.”

“Probably,” Grimmett muttered sorely, emanating unhappiness along with his usual drop in temperature.

“Do you have a… lower than normal body temperature?” Percy asked, unable to let it lie now that he could form full sentences in Grimmett’s general direction.

Gemma snorted, “If you want a hug, he’ll be happy to comply.”

“No,” Percy denied at the same instant Grimmett corrected, “Not happy.”

“But you’d agree to it,” Gemma concluded gleefully, regaining her usual manic air now that they weren’t talking about murder, “I ship you two so hard.”

A sigh from her fellow Slytherin prefect preceded two words that bore the tired air of repetition, “Not gay.”

“It’d be a love of the mind, then,” Gemma shot back.
Belatedly, Percy echoed, “Ship?” but Grimmett put a hand on his shoulder and shook his head wearily.

“My core temperature is typically within the average range, when I visit St. Mungo’s,” he informed Percy, moving back to the original question and raising his voice slightly over Gemma’s cackles when Percy looked immediately and intensely uncomfortable at the chilling contact. After a moment of waiting, probably to see if Percy would adjust, Grimmett dropped his hand and moved past them into the kitchens.

“That’s progress,” Gemma patted the same shoulder, and her hand was so much warmer that Grimmett had to be lying about his temperature, “Soon you’ll be able to confess your feelings.”

Grimmett’s voice floated back from further in the kitchens, “And be rejected.”

A moment passed before Percy could formulate a response, but when he did, it was driven more by the twinge of annoyance at being the butt of the joke than by any sort of rational plan.

“I,” he informed them indignant, “am a catch.”

This visibly made Gemma’s day, and he realized with a sinking heart that he would neither enjoy nor gain any useful information from this meal.

“Try not to talk,” Grimmett suggested quietly as Gemma worked herself up into some kind of frenzy of excitement. “You were right. You’re bad at it.” That Grimmett also fell into this category, judging by his typical sparsity of verbage, meant the revelation seemed to perk up the Slytherin prefect, as if he had found a brother in arms.

Morosely, Percy allowed them to drag him to the small side table and picked futilely at the large platter of sandwiches the house elves provided, only flinching his hand towards his wand whenever he caught sight of one out of the corner of his eye.

He would curse neither Gemma nor the kindly and helpful Hogwarts house elves.

While he did not want to be here, and would rather have walked with Audrey to the Great Hall, it was true that Gemma had literally forced him to spend time with her and Grimmett, and had been doing so since she’d first noticed him their second year. He’d been almost happy when she’d made prefect along with him, but it had never really made sense to him. He nearly always had to be dragged or blackmailed into hanging out with her - partially because the first thing she’d ever done to him had been blackmail over an embarrassing incident - and the effort she expended didn’t seem worth it when he wasn’t exactly a fount of the information she typically craved.

“Why do you even bother with me?”

Percy only realized he’d asked the question aloud when Gemma stopped talking.

A shrewd glint entered her expression as she eyed him weightingly in the sudden silence. Finally, she said with an aggressive firmness, “We’re friends, Percy.” Reaching across the table, she poked him hard in the chest, “Your stupidity is hurting my feelings.”

“Apologies,” Percy replied blankly, still trying to fit together friendship with ongoing, genial blackmail and physical coercion.

“Don’t do it again,” she sneered, in lieu of accepting said apology, and sat back in her chair with a silent huff. “My fragile heart can’t take it.”
Silently, Percy held his hands up in surrender, successfully suppressing the snort at Gemma’s mention of her own fragility or, in reality, lack thereof.

"I'd give you one date if you managed it," Grimmett said into the awkward pause, breaking the tension and sending Gemma into giggles.

"I still don't want it," Percy replied dutifully and pushed away from the table to take to his feet. The conversation had gone on long enough and he had more to do, "I'll see you both later."

"Friend of mine," Gemma prompted, but Percy wasn't going to play along when he still felt the light heat of embarrassment along his collar and ears and Gemma was grinning in his wake.

Another muttered farewell and he fled the kitchens, mourning the long ago time of yesteryear when he could have a normal conversation or a productive day. Determined to break the chain, he made his way to the library. There was homework and studying and normal school things he could do today. Penelope wouldn't be available and his siblings could find him if they needed him. As for his extracurriculars...

It appeared they could find him, too.

An unassuming barn owl of the type the Ministry favored winged down to him with an affronted expression as he passed through the courtyard. Recurring absences from the Great Hall during meals had clearly done him no favors with the post owls as it perched agitatedly on his dominant arm. Pausing to struggle through untangling and opening the envelope with one hand, Percy's eyebrows jumped skyward.

At least one thing had gone right this weekend.

_Lucius Malfoy_, it read in the stale handwriting of a Ministry Quick-Quotes Quill, _accepts your application to be his Ministry Mentee. Please reply with a formal letter of introduction at your earliest convenience._

Clutching the parchment, Percy turned away from the library, hope blooming tentative and slow in his chest.

Chapter End Notes

Can you tell this is hot off the press? A lot happened this chapter and it's... it's... it's 95% of importance. The last 5% including but not limited to Gemma's shipping preferences. That's just Gemma hijacking the storyline for a few seconds to make her favorite yearmates uncomfortable.

Who is this man in Percy's dreams? (No, Gemma, it's not Ross).

Why did Lucius accept Percy's application? (I bet you can guess)

Who or what is the real threat this year?

...Does Percy have the slightest chance of finishing the Christmas sweaters by Christmas?

Back to our main character, Berodach, next chapter! I know it's nonexistent this go
I don't know if I've plugged my tumblr yet on this fic? Well, if I haven't said, you can follow me at corwynnasmith.tumblr.com for behind the scenes, real life stuff, weirdness on the internet, and deleted scenes from this and other stories!
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Some of you might... hate me...? For this chapter? Um. I don't know. I honestly can't predict how you'll react to this, but it's been planned and partially written from the very beginning. One of you on tumblr guessed it, actually! Almost spot on! But for the rest... Ay.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Words matter.

Dearest Father,

I'm pleased to inform you that I've acquired

Dear Father,

I know you were worried about my grades, but now I have an advantage over that mudblood

Dear Father,

You will be pleased to know my grades are sure to

Father,

I have set a plan in motion to secure the top grades in my year. A Gryffindor prefect has found himself in debt to me and

Hello Father,

How are you? I'm doing well. In fact, I will no longer embarrass you with being second best to some

Father,

All is well. I've secured the services of a Gryffindor prefect by forgiving them a mistake one of their house made against me. With this step and my newfound focus on my studies - boring though they might be - I will definitely surely receive top grades on the end of year examinations. Send Mother my love.

Yours,

Draco

A hand crinkled the parchment into a ball, but he didn't toss it with the others scattered across his bed. Releasing it back to the desk with a mild swear, wand touched the surface and it smoothed, before Draco handed it off to his owl with a resigned expression.
Some words never find their recipient.

Percival,

You will be attending high tea with the family next summer and I expect you to have made considerable progress on that temper of yours. If you are empty-headed enough that you cannot begin to make such progress on your own, I would suggest speaking with Pomona Sprout.

Be careful with that scowling professor of yours. His loyalties are uncertain.

Ink spilled over the rest of the parchment when a blonde woman with a mad glint in her eye cast the first spell.

Others set events in motion with seemingly no intent at all.

Father,

I know I've already written you very recently, but someone tried to kill me today. Weasley - the prefect I talked about in my last letter, not the brute in my year - helped me to defeat the elf-assassin. I'm fine! The attempt was really rather pathetic. But I thought you ought to know. Perhaps Professor Snape has already told you. It's alright, though. Weasley ripped its face off and sent it running for the wards! The point is, I'm fine, but we should really look into an emergency portkey or a duelling coach over the summer. (I will try to bully lessons out of Weasley and my housemates, as well).

Tell Mother I'm perfectly safe.

Yours,

Draco

Some need only a few words to make their point.

Malfroy,

Now do you see?

Crucible

An expensive vase crashed to the far wall in a closed study.

Good evening Mr. Malfroy,

I was pleasantly surprised to find you had accepted my application and hope my letter finds you without too much delay. My name is Percy Weasley...

Words matter.
It was refreshing to speak with someone who truly understood the machinations of the Ministry. Of course, Percy had always known that Lucius Malfoy was deeply involved in several departments aside from his seats in the Wizengamot and the Hogwarts board of trustees. That this information had come from rants or grumbled complaints from his father did not make it any less valid. But it was another thing altogether to probe for information and get it in such eloquent, thorough prose. His father's explanations had always been like the man himself, compact and practical. Mr. Malfoy, on the other hand, seemed to sincerely enjoy both experiencing the twists and turns of the political machine and explaining it to an outside party. So long as it wasn't his own twists and turns.

At first, the older man's correspondence had been… terse, at best, but it didn't take too long for his tune to change. He even asked after Percy's siblings and his own schooling, providing advice about how to manage Ginny's homesickness. Percy would like to attribute it to his own earnest enthusiasm, yet something made him hesitant to trust in that interpretation. Perhaps the stolid formality that remained ingrained in Mr. Malfoy's every turn of phrase.

Still, he felt as if, for once in this nightmare of a year, Percy was making tangible progress on his goals. It wasn't quite the right time to broach the topic of St. Mungo's or the cutbacks in the terminal ward that Mr. Malfoy had influenced, he felt. However, he was close enough that the thought had occurred more than once.

And it had only been a few weeks.

Over that time, Percy had woken up shaken, practically every other day, and unable to remember what he'd been dreaming about, only to find one roommate awake and muttering to himself by wandlight with the other groaning and drawing his pillow over his head. As per usual, Oliver had steadily and disturbingly lost more and more of his grasp on social norms off the pitch in his seasonal mental break from reality. Deep in three open strategy notebooks, he'd actually told Professor McGonagall to wait a moment when she'd asked dryly for permission to start class. Needless to say, she hadn't been amused. Audrey had been, and it had been nice to hear her laugh before she'd turned it into a poor disguise of a cough.

He'd noticed the shroud that had fallen over Hufflpuff house and contemplated telling Audrey he'd handle the Christmas sweaters on his own. However, she seemed more cheerful when they met up to knit together, and he'd seen her, more than once, pull out a sweater when the topic turned to the Ministry Murderer, turning her face away and focusing on the knit, instead. As it was, he felt it was helping more than hindering and tried to push away the feeling he was somehow taking advantage of her.

As for Quidditch tryouts, they came and went without any shock upsets in the team lineup, though Ginny and Ron had seemed a little too longing for Percy's ongoing comfort.

He did not need any more siblings on the Quidditch team, thousands of feet above the ground with hostile combatants in the form of other wizards and bludgers alike.

Of course, as if one life-threatening school-approved extracurricular activity weren't enough, posters for a duelling club had begun sprouting fully formed with a small explosion of confetti from bulletin boards and unadorned walls across the school. Percy had tried and failed to discourage his younger siblings, but when Hermione seemed interested in the club, as well, gave it up for a lost cause. He barely swayed their convictions when she was on his side, and Gemma kept taking time out of her busy schedule to remind him that serial killers and pureblood extremists were on the loose, so shouldn't he ease up a little?
Granted, she was attempting to get him to make time for a 'blind date,' for which he held few illusions regarding who was on the other end, rather than encouraging him to get his siblings the skills they may need to defend themselves, but it had multiple applications.

Fred and George, likewise, were probably going to attend. Honestly, Percy didn't know. They seemed to be avoiding him. The only reason he was certain they hadn't dropped out of Hogwarts to live among the muggles was because occasionally his shampoo turned his hair a different color and he continued to find live mice and beetles in his book bag.

Plus, Luna kept him dubiously informed as to their ongoing campaign against what he suspected to be her bullies.

"I've yet to have any new infestations," she'd confided in him airily in the library one evening, "and I don't know if Ginny's noticed at all, but I fear Fred is attacking the nest."

"At least he seems to have absorbed how to eliminate pests," Percy had conceded flatly, "Good luck and good riddance."

Perhaps he felt a bit slighted by their continued and deliberate absence from his presence, but at least they weren't around for him to take it out on them. Circuitous reasoning, sure. There was no need to pretend he was anything other than a mess in his own head.

Yet, his classes were ongoing and his duties consuming, so he had little time to spare hunting them down when none of the professors had found it necessary to raise any concerns with him about their conduct. That wasn't necessarily comforting, but it did at least limit the possible scope of what they could be up to. Ron continued to scrape by with passing grades, dragging Harry down with him to Hermione's consternation. Ginny appeared to be more and more homesick as time went on, but her grades were more than acceptable, and he very much approved of her newfound passion for academics. He wanted to help her, yet they never seemed to have a moment alone to talk and he wasn't entirely sure what he'd say if they did.

As for himself, Percy wasn't failing Transfiguration, even if he needed to spend twice as much time on it to pass; Penelope was a great help in that regard, though she sometimes derailed their study sessions to fluster Percy with flirting and coquetterie to the most frustrating degree. It was to the point where even Percy wondered if perhaps his feelings were not quite as unrequited as he'd believed.

Thusly, when Penelope asked if they might study together on a Hogsmeade weekend - on a Sunday, no less - Percy allowed himself to feel more cautious hope than surprise. Oliver could remember his own damn homework on his own damn time this week, and he could stand to skip a single lesson on Gobbledygook - he'd more than done the required reading for the day, and he could get notes from Gemma.

"I'd like to get away from Rodger for a bit," she confessed when the day came, rolling her eyes, "He does not respect my 'me' day and if I have to spend it with someone, I'd rather it be you."

"Well," Percy swallowed, heart pounding viciously at the implication and feeling just a little dizzy, "We're both prefects. Have you ever wanted to see Gryffindor Tower?"

His hands felt sweaty as she agreed, sweeping a sheet of blue-black hair behind one ear and grinning with that full-face smile that made him weak in the knees. Her hand in the crook of his arm was a familiar affectation, but for some reason, today it made him swell with pride and affection as he led the way.

She chose me, he couldn't stop thinking, Maybe not forever. Maybe not in the way I want, but for
now, she chose to spend this time with me. It was a heady feeling, and Percy could only half-focus on the texts and notes they pulled out as they settled into the couch closest to the fire. When they met in the library, there was always a table between them, but Penelope sat close to his side as familiarly as if she'd done it every day of her life, the floral scent of her shampoo tickling at his senses even as her arm brushed his with every motion.

They'd been studying and flirting for a while in the common room as it emptied - people having better things to do on one of the few oddly warm autumn weekends than stick around inside – when Penelope pursed full lips at him and shut her textbook.

"I am just done with this Arithmancy and you don't look like you're making any progress with that Herbology essay." He looked up to agree when she leaned into him and pressed a slow kiss to his neck, immediately killing what he'd meant to say and sending him into a still, tense silence, "How about a study break?"

He couldn't quite bring himself to respond, skin burning and mind stuttering over the feel of her lips against his neck.

"It's a Hogsmeade weekend and, I hear, Gryffindor's first practice later today," Penelope whispered hotly into Percy's ear, one hand burning on his lower abdomen, "Your roommates won't be back for hours." She drew back, and winked at him, "No strings."

It took a few moments for the offer to finally register over the sound of his heart thudding fast and loud in his ears and while Percy sort of wanted strings, he wasn't exactly going to turn Penelope down. He took her hand with a wicked grin diminished only slightly by his blush and drew her to him, "What are we waiting for, then?"

Sometime later, they slid back under the covers in Percy's bed in case someone came back early, lying side by side, breathing hard and smiling like idiots.

"You," Penelope growled playfully, turning on her side and drawing her curtain of dark hair over Percy's chest ticklishly as she met his eyes, "Have been holding out on me. Why didn't you tell me I was missing out last year?"

"It's not something that often comes up in polite conversation," Percy teased, drawing a hand up her bare back and more than a little chuffed at the compliment.

Her eyes sparked mischievously, even as her body lay relaxed and languid against his own, but before she could speak again, there was a knock and the door opened without much delay, Ginny entering in a bit of a panic, "Percy, I think I'm trouble." Her eyes rose and took in the scene – Percy thanked every deity that existed that Penelope and he were both under a blanket, even if it was obscenely obvious what had gone on – and both siblings flushed horribly with embarrassment.

"Well, that's my cue," Penelope said wryly, and slipped from the bed without a thought for her state of undress or debauchery –there were a few marks Percy thought entirely unfit for young eyes, though he rather enjoyed seeing them – before gathering her things and slipping into the communal bathroom attached to the sixth year boys’ dorm.

"I- I'm sorry," Ginny stammered, cheeks aflame and eyes not quite able to meet Percy's.

Irritably and with no little embarrassment, he opened his mouth to explain that knocking was useless when one didn't wait for permission to enter, but swallowed it back down. This was the sibling
actually achieving grades in a direct relationship to her intelligence, and it was her first year away from home and without—well without. Yes, Percy felt somewhat abjectly humiliated, but that was no reason to snap at her. He forced the feeling down - he was pretty used to putting them first by now - and gave a dry smile he didn't feel, "At least you knocked."

"I'll just—go. I'll just go," Ginny said, pointing uselessly at the door and backing out of the room.

"Give me five minutes and I'll come find you," Percy replied, snatching his glasses in preparation to stand once she'd left the room, the word trouble not yet having slipped his mind.

"It's fine," Ginny protested weakly, but the look Percy levelled at her – despite being somewhat weakened by his still reddened ears – had her looking down, "Okay. Thanks."

Soon enough, a dressed Penelope emerged from the bathroom as Percy was buttoning his robes, and he glanced up at the noise before refocusing, "I apologize for running off; I need to go speak to Ginny."

"It's no problem," she grinned teasingly, sliding behind him and circling his waist with her arms as she rested her chin on his shoulder, "You've got responsibilities now, but you can dine and dash with me, anytime."

"That's a bit vulgar," Percy said before he could stop himself, and she laughed, backing off.

"People are vulgar," she replied with an air of dismissal.

He glanced at her uncertainly. She clearly didn't find him repulsive. And they were already friends… So why was he still hesitating? "Would you—" he paused, hating himself for the verbal stumble before he cleared his throat, and Penelope slipped the tie from his shaky hands, beginning to knot it around his neck herself, "Would you like to get something to eat together, next Hogsmeade weekend?"

Penelope looked up at him, almost startled, before focusing back on his tie, and smiling, "I'm not looking for a relationship, Percy. I… Honestly, I thought about it this summer, but then I didn't hear from you… Which I get, with what happened and how you've got that, her eyes flicked to the door, indicating Ginny, "to deal with now. Just… This is good. Don't push yourself." He wanted to protest that he wasn't, but she'd already patted the complete tie, and moved toward the exit, "If you want to go as friends, sure." With that, Penelope wiggled her fingers at him, "Bye," and she was gone.

For a moment, Percy stood there alone, one hand on his tie and the other dangling uselessly at his side. He swallowed, shook his head, and tried to drag his heart back up from his stomach. There were things to do and he needed to do them. Briefly, he closed his eyes tight and pushed the hurt, the disappointment, the self-chastisement away, curled them into a tight ball until he could focus again. He couldn't do anything with them, and Penelope didn't deserve them – she'd warned him, after all. No strings. Percy opened his eyes and set for the door; Ginny was still waiting downstairs, and something was, inevitably, wrong.

"So, what is it?" He asked, somewhat brusquely, startling Ginny to a standing position from the couch as he entered the still-abandoned common room. Consciously, he modulated his tone back to something more giving, "What's wrong, Ginny?"

She was still a bit pink, but she nodded, almost to herself, and visibly accepted that they were never going to speak of what had happened ever again, before gathering herself and stating, "I've felt really… drained and I've been losing… losing little bits of time."

That was an odd word to use. Specific. If she had said fatigued, or tired, he might not have thought
anything of it, but…

"Drained?" Percy echoed, and she began to elaborate, looking simultaneously more anxious and more relieved as she continued, but maybe it was paranoia and maybe it was intuition because something about the word twirled a memory of how he felt when he used hedge magic to heal. Of the echoed feelings of the gnome he'd cursed to die. Her words faded out as he focused on her the way he'd been learning to block out at Hogwarts, and felt, abruptly, something like a discordant note, or a thin, reddened line of inflammation, leading from her to her bag. He interrupted her explanation, "What's in the bag, Ginny?"

"Books," she said, instantly, looking ever so vaguely guilty, but when Percy made a demanding gesture, she handed it over and Percy sorted through the bag until-

"Ah," he hissed, pulling his hand back as it brushed the leather cover of a dark book near the bottom. Carefully, he forced himself past the instinctive revulsion, and drew the thing draining his sister slowly from her book bag, ignoring her surprise and increased shuffling.

"That's- it's just an enchanted journal," she said, sounding oddly conflicted, "Charmed to give advice."

"Try again," Percy murmured absently, focused less on the lie and more on reaching through Ginny to the bond between her and the book and tentatively testing the strength. It was still somewhat weak, parting slightly beneath the claws of his will just resting upon it, and Percy slashed the connection without hesitation. Hearing Ginny gasp, he glanced up to see her pale and clutch her stomach.

"I think I'm gonna be sick," she managed, pelting up the stairs to the girls' bathrooms with one hand on her stomach and the other over her mouth, as Percy blinked after her. That was a rather visceral reaction. What the hell was in this thing? He flipped through the empty pages thoughtfully. Probably, he should bring it to Headmaster Dumbledore, but, as the thing in his hands groped weakly about for another victim, he noted that the speed of connection was such that it was only likely to accelerate as time went on.

If Ginny had noticed a drain in the… She'd been journaling for at least a month or so, now- so in mere weeks since she had this, it probably would've become very bad, very quickly. The book felt too hungry to be filled. She could have... died, if it hadn't been caught out this early. A bit of red edged into Percy's vision as his hand clenched around the vile thing– Ginny couldn't have just found this lying around. Someone either got it to her specifically, or left it where it could be found, uncaring who it hurt.

When Ginny made her wobbly way back into the common room, Percy asked, sharply, "Where did you get this, Ginny?"

She glanced up at him, eyes a bit wide, and Percy pushed down the slight sick feeling that caused long enough to wait for an answer. Finally, Ginny replied, slowly, "We got it at Flourish and Blott's, didn't we? I noticed it in my books a couple of weeks ago. I thought Bill slipped it in." Alright, well, that would be an accurate guess if it had been something benign. Bill had a mile-wide soft spot for his little sister, and it had been her birthday.

Still… At Flourish and Blott's? There was no way it had been on the shelves; they were charmed against that sort of sabotage, and he hadn't recognized anyone in the crush of people attending Lockhart's signing that would want to do them harm except- That distance made sense now. The prodding for information about Percy's siblings. The interest in Ginny's state of mind. He'd thought it was just a way to emotionally manipulate Percy at worst, or perhaps a connection, as they both had
school-age children to look after, in the most optimistic view. He knew better now.

"Mr. Malfoy." Percy's grip tightened on the cursed book, his voice low and cold, and he turned to Ginny, pointing at her for emphasis, "You stay clear of Draco Malfoy for now, do you hear me? I mean, stay polite, that part of the plan is still in place, but don't accept anything he might give you."

"He wouldn't give-" Ginny trailed off as Percy raised a brow, almost threateningly, "Alright."

"Good," he said, turning his attention back to the book with an intensity that frightened her a little, but at the same time... Even a half-an-hour ago, she'd be itching to get that journal back and talk to Tom, but right then, she... didn't feel anything. Maybe relieved? She decided not to question it when Percy was in such a mood, even if he hadn't exactly explained what was going on.

Somehow, Ginny felt that everything was going to be alright, now.

Like whatever it was that had been looming over her lately had gone. Maybe it had just been stress-she'd needed to talk about it with an actual person, instead of Tom. Well, that did it; she really needed some time away from that book. Tom had been taking up so much of her time, Ginny realized she had barely spoken to Luna the past few weeks! And they had two classes together! More worried about her ongoing friendship with Luna than the book now, Ginny accepted the silent dismissal and left in search of the Ravenclaw, trusting Percy would handle whatever it was and tell her later. She just hoped Luna wasn't upset. Around her, unseen, her bonds settled under the backlash of such a violent, unexpected loss like water resettling in a bay as the tide came in.

Percy, on the other hand, needed to go down to Hagrid's and spend a bit of time thinking. He found it was easier to focus when he was around Berodach, perhaps because he knew he didn't have to pay as much attention to his surroundings if the ghoul were standing vigilance nearby. Whatever the cause, he soon found himself curled by Hagrid's woodpile, facing the Forbidden Forest, and enduring the concerned crooning of his familiar as Berodach lightly touched his arm, his hair, his shoe, as if to make sure he was truly there, while Percy worked through the near future with a cold fury stilling his insides.

He examined the thing grimly, roughly probing it with his own claws and cataloguing distantly how it flinched and reacted more like a living thing than a curse. When the journal kept scrabbling feebly at Percy's defences, he had wrapped it in another rag, helpfully supplied by Hagrid, and the whatever-it-was seemed to be having a bit of trouble reaching out through it for now. This thing was dangerous, and Lucius Malfoy had given it to his sister.

After Dobby, this made three serious strikes against him and Percy wasn't waiting for outside intervention. The ice crept up from his stomach to his chest, and Percy felt blind with the red in his vision. The sensations reached each other and the world felt distant, but clear. While the first two incidents had only put Mr. Malfoy in his sights, this last irrefutably proved to Percy that the man intended his family true harm – and was still willing to act on it. Even with Arthur out of commission. It was up to Percy to stop him, somehow.

There was little chance that continuing to seek a truce or an alliance with the man would stop an actual assault on his family. The Weasleys held no political power now. With their father comatose and their mother gone, there was practically no threat already, and Mr. Malfoy - Lucius, because he didn't deserve the respect of a title - had gone after their youngest member, with no discernible provocation. With jerky, controlled motions, Percy scratched the ghoul's jaw when it pushed its head into his stomach as he turned over his options, ice setting cold in his stomach and his veins, painfully pulsing through him at the very thought of another member of his family being taken away for the sake of- of- he didn't know. Sheer spite?
His options weren't great or varied- he was working not from a position of power, but of near insignificance. He could try to go to the authorities, but he knew he didn't have the evidence needed for a conviction, and anything less than Azkaban would see Lucius coming after his family again with a bit more motivation. The Malfoy fortune and Lucius' hard-won connections insulated the man against nearly any political or… legal move Percy could make. If Percy focused on just protecting his family through hedge magic- well, his father's coma was proof enough that it wasn't watertight.

Additionally, anyone with a big enough grudge against Lucius Malfoy didn't have the means to help him, and any with the means were likely in the man's pockets. What he needed was something that would keep Lucius from acting now, or reacting later. He needed…

Percy's eyes caught on the ghoul's rending claws, sliding in and out of their sheaths as Berodach worriedly kneaded the ground and felt sick. No, no, he couldn't just kill him, but… The icy fury that had driven him to the thought faltered only a moment, like the water drawing out before a wave. Not death, but… It wasn't the only way, but it was the only way open to Percy that didn't put his family in greater danger. The wave crashed down. Cold. Lucius Malfoy needed to be destroyed.

And Percy needed to be blameless.

With this resolution, a wide new range of options opened up before him. A terrifying, dizzying expanse.

There were things worse than death.

He'd so hoped he could do this the right way. He'd believed he was. That he'd been forging a connection that would help, for once. Percy, as per usual, had been wrong. No one ever seemed to follow the rules. Perhaps he should re-examine exactly how well he was reading the younger Malfoy at their next session.

In fact, perhaps he should remind Lucius Malfoy that he was not a man without weak spots.

No, a flash of regret colored his insides at even the thought, his stomach giving a feeble protest. There was no need for that. Not now.

But first, he needed to get to his brothers' first real Quidditch practice of the year. He had to be normal. Plus, with everything that could go wrong on brooms and the sheer amount of stress he'd been through this year… Well, that worry seemed to bleed over into everything else, and he didn't feel entirely comfortable not being there when Fred and George were apt to break a bone or two for fun. Or, in George's case, to spite him. Plus, he'd actually be able to see both Fred and George and remind himself they weren't just nightmares of his childhood.

Oliver was likely almost done with his speech. After all, he'd started at five in the morning.

Percy patted Berodach in farewell, and left, mind on everything that had to be done, and no room left to wonder why he was taking it so well. Behind him, the ghoul flexed his talons in the dirt before tensely making his way into the Forbidden Forest.

The Quidditch pitch was doubly occupied when Percy wandered onto it, and with a sigh, he continued his walk past the stands and into the tense standoff that had begun between the Gryffindor and Slytherin teams. As a prefect, and as someone responsible for practically a third of the Gryffindor team, mediating between the two groups was the only reasonable course of action.

"What's going on, here?" he asked, inserting himself between the teams as Oliver and Flint fell silent. Percy glanced curiously at Flint, who he wouldn't have expected to care what he had to say. Yet the
hulking brute wouldn't meet his eyes. "Well?" Percy prompted, and Oliver took an agitated step forward.

"They're trying to steal the pitch from us, but I booked it for the full day."

"We've got permission from a teacher to work out the kinks with our new seeker," Flint protested suddenly, rather than smirking and making a snide comment. When they matched gazes, Flint flushed and looked down, "It's not breaking any rules, Percy."

Percy?

...Oh.

Oh, Merlin's staff and stars.

It wasn't Penelope Flint had a crush on. For a moment, Percy's mind spun, putting all the events in their proper place now that the world had momentarily upended, but shamefully, his thoughts caught on one thing. Flint was another link to Malfoy. One he wouldn't think to guard against. Flint's father, an imprisoned Death Eater now, had famously backed up Lucius's claim that he had been imperiused during his own trial, gaining the entire Flint family the favor of the Malfoys for their sacrifice. The elder Flint was already going to Azkaban, though, so it wasn't much of one, from Percy's perspective... That didn't matter now.

"Of course not," Percy said, carefully, "I'm sure this is all a misunderstanding."

Flint nodded, to the confusion and near-mutiny of his teammates before he turned and barked a quiet, I'm the captain at them, turning back to Percy with the pathetically relieved expression he'd adopted once he realized he hadn't pissed Percy off.

All that really told Percy was that Flint liked him, and if Percy was going to be able to use that, it had to be a little deeper than a superficial like. He decided to push, just a bit more. "Well, if you both need to practice today, why not a pick-up game?" Percy suggested, the team captains exchanging wary looks, before Percy continued, "I'd referee. But a good, clean game without any consequence in your standings would be a good way to get back in the swing of things, wouldn't it?"

Flint still looked a bit wary, but seeing Percy's patented earnest expression directed his way full force, he colored again and said, softly, "Yeah." When Oliver looked at him like he was mad, Flint cleared his throat, and repeated more gruffly, "Yeah, we need to break in our new seeker, and you need to get your players in the air – what do you say?" To be honest, Percy hadn't expected more than a hesitant excuse; Flint had to be practically head over heels. Or perhaps he was just as much of a Quidditch fanatic as the Gryffindor captain.

"A clean game," Oliver stressed suspiciously, but Percy could see he was getting too excited at the idea of an unexpected Quidditch game where he could just play to turn it down.

"A clean game," Flint said, shooting an evil eye back at his team, which muttered amongst itself, but sent back some nods.

"Alright," Oliver broke into a grin, grabbing Flint's hand and pumping it up and down once in an over-exuberant handshake, "Prepare to be obliterated."

"Ah," Flint said, surprised, before a smirk slid into place as he regained his faculties, "Funny, I was about to say the same to you." They shared vicious grins, more teeth than smile, and Percy wondered what he'd gotten himself into refereeing. Especially when none other than Draco Malfoy emerged from behind his taller teammates and shared a heated glare with Harry. But Flint caught his eye, and
Percy had the presence of mind to wink. Watching the Slytherin captain trip over nothing was well worth it.

Maybe it was cruel, to plan to play off Flint's affections to get to Lucius, but… This was the best opportunity he'd had so far. If he could just keep Flint wondering – does he or doesn't he? – he might be able to get an invitation to the Malfoy Boxing Day Soiree as a certain Slytherin Quidditch player's plus one. And that's all he needed. Of course, that meant playing this game for months, and continuing it for some time after to keep Flint from getting suspicious, but Percy felt his own crush on Penelope – his mind flashed to that last sensation of her hand pressing against his tie as she rejected him before he hastily pushed it down – had accidentally trained him fairly well for this. He'd make friends with Flint, and be just on the edge of overly friendly. Not enough that Flint would feel brave enough to make an overture, but not so little that he gave up all hope. It would be… difficult. Not impossible.

Still, as Percy herded Ron and Hermione back to the stands away from the ghost of the former confrontation, hearing one of the twins' confused, but pleased conversation with Harry behind them, he knew he'd be able to go through with it. It was his responsibility to keep them safe and Percy took his duties seriously.

However, there was still a part of him that was secretly glad all this was happening his sixth year. He didn't know what he'd have done if he only had this year to prepare for his NEWTs, too. At least that was one blessing counted.

With that, Percy settled in to referee, thoughts swirling and twisting with the future, but he still remembered to shoot a smile at Flint. The awkward half-smile he got in return made his stomach twist. It's all for the kids, Percy reminded himself, throwing the quaffle into the air to mark the start of the game, I can do this.

The match was surprisingly easy to referee. While Harry and the youngest Malfoy couldn't seem to keep from bodychecking one another despite Harry's known skill in the air, Percy gave them up for a lost cause and stopped assigning penalties to either side when their Seekers collided. As long as they both were on a broom still at the end of the collision and neither looked dazed enough for an actual head injury, that is.

Gryffindor won. They'd been close in score, especially with the Slytherins playing somewhat fairly, but Harry still caught the snitch and that was that.

"Good game, all!" Percy clapped his hands as the players swooped down and in. A few of the Slytherins seemed more than a little put off, including one Draco Malfoy who stormed away in a huff, but for the most part, both sides dispersed with wind-reddened cheeks and slight smiles at the intensity of the pick up game.

"Maybe we should do this again," Oliver was saying in an aside to Flint, too casually to be casual, his eyes still a little manic with victory and the all-encompassing joy of Quidditch, gestures sharp with excitement, "It's not as if we need to pull out all our team plays for it, so we don't need to worry too much about bleedover - besides, professional teams play each other all the time, right?"

"You're not wrong," Flint's gaze flicked over to Percy, "But Percy's reffing helped keep it under control, and I'm not sure my players would rein it in on the rules without a referee."

"As long as it isn't every week, I'd be fine coming in to referee once in a while," Percy offered, and Oliver picked up the thread immediately.

"We could have other referees, too," he enthused, completely shedding his too-cool facade in favor
of the maniac underneath, "Kendra hates me a little so she'd be fair to you, and from Percy, I know your prefects in his year are pretty even-handed, too. I know Kendra will be up for it, if only so she can call me out - but on your side…?"

"That'd be Grimmett and Farley," Montague muttered to Flint with a nudge to his side.

"I know," Flint grumbled in response. His expression brightened as he turned back to Oliver, "We can get Grimmett. The kid can't say no to save his life. Farley might cover a week if I say it right."

"Cool," Oliver said with a grin, getting a crooked version of the expression back from Flint before he split off to let the Gryffindor players know the good news. From the cheer that started up, they seemed perfectly fine with the idea.

"I have to say, I'm impressed with how mature you've both been about all this," Percy mused when Flint's attention drifted back to him, "I know Davies wouldn't have agreed to continuing after a loss."

Flint snorted, looking reluctantly pleased and avoiding his eyes, "Yeah, Davies is a right bast- uh, a sore loser, alright." He chanced a look at Percy and flushed when he realized the other boy was still smiling at him, hastily continuing, "I just think you gotta take the hits to give 'em back, you know?"

"Admirable," Percy agreed, but he wasn't entirely sure he had anything more to say on the matter and quickly changed subjects. "You know, we haven't had much chance to talk since our tutoring sessions ended last year." Left unsaid was that they hadn't spoken overly much during said sessions either, and Percy kept the wording of it neutral, too. No need to remind Flint of the jealousy that might have made him break them off.

Air tense, Flint's posture slumped slightly inward at the reminder, anyway, "Oh- uh, no, we haven't." His eyes were a strange mix of apprehension and hope as he added, "I'm… sorry I never explained, Percy. I just had some personal stuff come up and I, uh..."

Time to soothe and redirect. "It's alright." Hesitant now, he had to do this gently or risk pushing too far one way or the other, he continued, "I know the feeling. This year has been... hectic for me and I'm finding it harder to find time for my own studies."

"I heard." The words were spoken with genuine compassion, and Percy looked up, startled from his manipulation. A grave expression met his pixie-in-the-wandlight eyes, "I lost my da to Azkaban, and it's not the same, I know, especially since I still had Ma to take care of Marcie. I can't imagine how strong you must be to still be here, going to all those classes you take and all that stuff you do for everyone else, when you've lost a parent you could actually be proud of." Flint looked almost embarrassed by the words as he was saying them, and his face contorted briefly in worry when he was done, as if he couldn't quite believe he'd just said that out loud.

For a moment, Percy's chest felt tight.

For a moment, he wondered if he could really do this.

"I'm going to steal your spot," Ginny announced from close behind them, making both boys jump and turn part-way toward the interruption. She was wagging a finger at Katie as the chasers stifled their laughter, struggling to control her own mouth and force it from a grin into a scowl, "I saw you drop the Quaffle in the last quarter! What if that point had decided the game?"

"Harry decided the game," Ron interjected with a proud grin, elbowing Harry who couldn't help a small smile in return.

"We all know Harry always catches the snitch," Fred sighed with a putupon air, "So why are we
"Yes, brothermine, Harry is merely inconvenienced by our presence," George nodded firmly, "We should really get off the pitch and leave him to it." Spotting Flint, he grabbed the captain's shoulder, "What do you say? Slytherins versus Harry Potter. The match of the century. Who could predict the outcome of this avantgarde game?"

"I think we'd win," Flint replied seriously. He was evidently unused to being teased. Looking like a small, grumpy mountain probably discouraged the practice. Unfortunately for him, this was the exact wrong response. The twins exchanged sparkling, predatory looks of glee.

Stifling a groan had never been so hard for Percy. As if he had flipped a hand of twos and threes in a poker match to ask the other players whether his cards were any good, Flint had revealed himself to be easy prey. With the camaraderie of the match and Percy's presence softening the usual rough image that had kept him, to this point, safe, Fred and George clearly came to a similar conclusion.

Wriggling between Percy and Flint, Fred took the burly Slytherin's other shoulder, "Ah, but Harry has the luck of the Spinner of his side."

"What in the world are you talking about?" Flint asked, beginning to look a little flustered. Most people did once pinned in place with Weasleys.

"Fred," Percy started warningly, a curl of annoyance prickling in his chest, but George cut him off with a gasp.

"You've never heard of the Spinner?" He turned, not releasing his grip on Flint's shoulder, and addressed the lingering mix of Gryffindor and Slytherin Quidditch players and speculators. "He's never heard of the Spinner!" Percy could already tell this was going to be bad from the implied capitals he was hearing in George's speech. Not to mention the fact that they had remained steadfastly present despite being within ten yards of Percy.

"Everyone's heard of the spinner," Angelina replied sarcastically, "It can't be so."

"Yes, I am appalled," Fred agreed earnestly, "Appalled someone with no knowledge of the Spinner could become a Quidditch Captain at this fine institution. Brother, how could this be allowed to happen?"

"But wait, brother. How did he even make the team? Skill alone?" George speculated in a stage whisper, both twins leaning behind a hunted Flint's shoulders to converse more covertly. At this point, there was no real reason to stop them, no matter how much Percy wanted to slap them both for ruining the momentum he'd been building. It was already done. Flint was practically curled away from them and there was no path to recovery he could see.

"Oh, brother, you are correct. He must have, if he has no knowledge of the Spinner. It is the only way," Fred concluded in a hushed voice, and they leaned back around to the front to grace Flint with open-mouthed expressions of hero worship and awe. The larger Slytherin shifted uncomfortably, attempting to speak in his defense, but he never had a chance.

"Teach us your ways, master!" George declared, falling to his knees and grabbing the side of Flint's robes as Fred mirrored him on the other side.

"We beseech you!"

"Implore you!"
"Beg you!"

"Demand of you!"

Dropping the worshipful look for a moment, Fred turned to George, "Are we changing tacks, then?"

Similarly straight-faced, George nodded and shrugged.

Still kneeling at his side, but adopting a stern expression, Fred continued, "We command you in the name of the Spinner -"

"No one knows what the Spinner is," Montague interrupted, "Stop having him on."

"You don't know either?" George clutched his heart, then his brother's heart, and Fred returned the gesture until they were hopelessly entangled in feigned shock.

"Oh, no," Angelina said in a deadpan, "How could this be? All of Gryffindor does."

Fred added matter-of-factly, still embracing his brother at Flint's progressively more disturbed feet, "Ravenclaw and Hufflepuff know all about the Spinner, too."

A hand over his face, Percy murmured, "Since they aren't here to defend themselves, of course they do." The glance Flint shot him was panicked.

"Does this mean… Could it be?" George was muttering to himself, "No, surely not…"

"What is it, brother?" Fred demanded, sliding seamlessly from embrace to a grip on the front of George's robes. When George continued to mutter, making exaggerated gestures of thought and revelation, Fred shook him, "Keep it together, man! What have you learned?"

A hand on Fred's chest stopped him, and George looked up with the sparkliest, child-like expression of wonder, "None of the Slytherins know about the Spinner."

"None of the Slytherins…" Fred echoed, before gasping, "No."

"Yes," George stood, gravely, and removed his outer robes, "I shed my Gryffindor colors out of shame."

"No, brother, it cannot be!" Fred grabbed his leg, "Don't do this!"

"Brother, please understand," George placed a hand on Fred's head, "For the Slytherins to have a team at all, without the Spinner... How deluded have we been? What lies have we believed?"

"Brother, do not lose faith," Fred sobbed.

"The Spinner is not all powerful, as we all believed," George continued implacably, ignoring Fred's protests, "We must end this worship of a false god."

"No!" Fred tried his best to restrain George, and was dragged the few feet to Harry, where George took the younger boy's face in his hands before he could flee.

"Don't freak out," he instructed simply, before gently cupping his hand over a section of Harry's hair and pulling away.

"Spinner is life," Fred was weeping as George revealed the small spider he'd taken from Harry's head, making Ron stumble back a step, pale.
"Spinner is over," George intoned, and slapped his other hand down on the poor thing.

Dead silence reigned.

And none stepped up to depose it from its throne.

Honestly, Percy was trying to decide whether he could justify a detention, but they hadn't broken any rules.

Yet, he couldn't encourage that kind of animal cruelty, could he? Irritation and anxiety crawled under his skin, and he refused to place exactly where it came from while he was trying to act normally.

While he was struggling with this decision, Flint broke the silence with a sudden bark of laughter, to Percy's surprise. "Was it there the whole time?" he asked as George trotted off to retrieve his outer robes.

"The whole game he clung valiantly to the blackened thicket Harry pretends is hair," Fred confirmed mournfully, "And now the Spinner is dead."

"I've killed God," George added as he returned.

"God is dead," Fred corrected himself.

"Good luck," Flint told Oliver and Percy seriously, before shaking his head with another laugh. It made his face lighter, less inhuman. Percy had never seen Flint express good humor before, and the experience was not helping his reservations about what he had to do to ensure his plans progressed. Uneasy guilt wrapped through and around the simmering impatient irritation, turning his stomach to acid.

He smiled back wryly, "Thank you; I'm sure I'll have need of it."

On the other side of things, Oliver waved a hand dismissively, "They settle when they're on brooms." Flint snorted, obviously sharing Percy's opinion of that statement, but pulling Oliver into a deeper conversation about their teams that Percy had little to no interest in.

Calling Fred or George 'settled' on a broom was a blatant lie that could only have been spawned by victory setting illusion over the insane stunts the twins pulled in the air to make them seem to be perfectly reasonable maneuvers, in Oliver's eyes. Then again, it could be that they were perfectly reasonable maneuvers to him, regardless of the outcome. It was the challenge of Quidditch that drove Oliver so relentlessly, after all. Why would he disapprove of his players giving their all? Even if it did risk broken bones, necks, loss of limb or life…

Percy wasn't sure how much more his stomach could sour.

"...and the first duelling club is tomorrow," Ron was chattering excitedly with Alicia, the show being over and socialization taking its place, "Harry and I are going, and Fred and George. Ginny's too young, but Hermione says we should teach her whatever they teach us…"

Right, then. He wasn't getting anywhere here.

Taking his leave unnoticed would be easy enough. Even Flint was involved in the spirited conversations springing up among the mixing teams. Well, not everyone was engaging; Harry hovered at Ron's side like a ghost, but Percy had noticed that tendency in Harry when it came to large, ebullient crowds. Still, he was smiling, and listening, so Percy left well enough alone and hoofed it.
He had more than enough work to do.

Percy turned the corner and almost walked into a tree that hadn't been there before, startling and drawing his wand.

"You never remember it, but you haven't broken the rules once."

The grass bled greener, brighter, until it was vibrant and lush. Hills rolled down and away on all sides as if the world were unfolding under his feet.

"Now we can finally meet."

The world was quiet, and everything swayed in a breeze he couldn't feel. Percy dropped his wand back to his side, familiarity hitting him hard, "Baladan?"

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**Chapter End Notes**

**SO WHO IS HE, HUH?**

**WHAT DOES HE LOOK LIKE**

**WHERE DID HE COME FROM**

**WHAT'S UP WITH HIS WEIRD NAME**

**WHY IS HE HERE**

Some of that and more, next time on-

Don't kill me

There's so much to kill me for in this chapter but try your best not to or the story will never continue!
Chapter 18

The atrium in Malfoy Manor had strong, layered wards from generations of paranoia and investment in home security. Runes were carved meticulously into the marble pillars and across every stone in the fireplace. Even the floor near the front door had runic protections hidden in the spiraling blue and silver paint.

With an odd doubled *crack*, a stranger appeared, and the current Malfoy patriarch immediately began to address them.

“Look, Crucible, I’m trying my best,” Lucius teetered on the edge of irritation, his voice barely retaining the submissive respect this intruder demanded. “I’ve even taken measures to get a certain artifact to the youngest of the line.”

“Oh?” Crucible stepped into the light, a blond woman with a strange tilt to her smile, “I didn’t know you were being so independently proactive. What is it you’ve managed to accomplish, exactly?”

Some of Lucius’ tension eased as he leaned in closer, smoothly attempting to turn the situation in his favor, “I had in my possession a dark artifact, one which possesses and drains the lifeforce of its victim. It was child’s play to slip the item into Ginevra Weasley’s cauldron in Diagon Alley, and from my correspondence with Percy, it’s clear she is beginning to succumb.”

A thin smile, and Crucible purred, “Where did you acquire such a rare item?”

“The Dark Lord entrusted it to me,” Lucius began with false reverence, “for just such a time as this.” Crucible tensed, but Lucius knew the stranger was somewhat… unstable when it came to He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named. Resistance was to be expected.

“A diary?” Crucible hissed, all signs of playful amusement gone, an almost desperate violence in her stillness, “Was it a *diary*, Lucius?”

“Well, yes.” The admission just came out, Lucius was so taken aback by Crucible’s sudden hostility. Temper flaring, Crucible nearly shrieked, “Idiot! I’ve spared you this long, and this is how you repay me?” She whirled on her heel, heading for the door, but paused at the threshold, nearly vibrating with manic fury, “I may be able to fix this- I *will* fix this, but mark my words. You’ll regret this error, Malfoy.”

“Percy!”

Arms grabbed him around the middle, lifting him into the air and spinning him around before depositing him back on solid ground. Large hands steadied his shoulders, but Percy shook them off, taking a stumbling step backwards.

Alright,” Percy held up his hands defensively to forestall any more manhandling, “Who are you?”

“It’s me,” the man gestured at himself, the glee faltering and fading as Percy didn’t respond. He had never seen this man before in his life. The voice rang some bells, but only those it had hit the first time he heard it. Familiarity, but no memories attached. A breeze Percy couldn’t feel whipped through the man’s - Baladan’s multitudinous reddish braids as the silence stretched into something awkward and the bigger of the two seemed suddenly small as he scratched the back of his neck.
nervously, “So you’ve seen me and you still don’t know…? You don’t remember?”

“Remember what?” That response sucked the wind right out of this stranger’s sails, and he kicked at the dirt as he thought, a spark of hope reappearing as he looked up at Percy with a sudden thought.

“If you can at least say my name here; you know it, come on… B...” he prompted, hopefully, gesturing at Percy.


“Yes, I suppose,” he scuffed his foot against the earth again. A familiar fidget-like flex ran through his fingers before he visibly restrained himself from the gesture, crossing his arms over his chest, “I can still help you, but it will be harder with these constraints.”

Constraints? Did it have something to do with that lackluster acceptance of the only name Percy knew him by? “What is it I don’t remember? Have we met before?”

An uneasy laugh, “I couldn’t say. But we don’t have the time to delve into that. Your Prewitts are in trouble.”

“My Prewitts?” Percy echoed incredulously, “I’m a Weasley, for the most part.”

“The Prewitts of your time. The modern descendants,” Baladan clarified, the scars on his face pulling oddly with his words. “Molly tried to wake me as a failsafe, but you pulled me all the way back.”

When this cryptic message clearly set off several lines of inquiry in Percy’s ever turning mind, Baladan continued hastily, “But we cannot talk about that! You have Prewitt blood, don’t you? You care for your mother’s side of the family? For your siblings, who share that blood? For your mother, who died for it?”

Thrown by the sudden intensity of the questions, Percy found himself answering honestly, “Yes.”

Wait - his mother died for it? The Ministry Murderer really was going after purebloods specifically? The Ministry hadn’t yet confirmed that, even if it had seemed the most likely explanation. “How do you know all this?” Percy demanded.

“Don’t panic.” A hand reached for Percy’s shoulder before Baladan hesitated and dropped it back to his side, “Molly and I have been keeping an eye on the situation - as much as we can - and Molly has told me what she’s discovered about the attack. It seems-”

“What do you mean she told you about the attack?” His mother - or her hedge ghost? - had known something about the - about her own death and hadn’t said anything to Percy about it? Fire licked at Percy’s stomach at the very idea. Fire fueled in good part by a strange sort of fear. “Why wouldn’t she trust me with this? Why would she- What reason could she possibly have to keep this from me?”

He was the only one she could even be seen by at this point!

“Percy, I-” Baladan looked off into the distance, his hair moving faster in the wind as clouds gathered in the distance, and made a frustrated noise that was so damn familiar it snapped Percy out of his downward spiral, “Look, I am not always fully awake and I can’t be until- until-” That noise again, plucking at a memory that wasn’t there, as Baladan focused brownish yellow eyes intently on him, “I can’t tell you everything, but you must know at least this. The attacks. Every attack. They are connected. It might not be the same person each time, but they are linked by chains of cause and effect so far as the dead can piece them together. As long as I am- as long as I am like this, they can only tell me so much while I am lost and I can only tell you so fucking little when I wake.”

Seemingly oblivious to Percy’s startle at the language, Baladan rolled relentlessly onward, gestures
progressively wilder as his urgency mounted, “And this- this Ministry Murderer? They are trying to wipe out families. End the Prewitts- among others. You can find what you are looking for on the track you’re taking, if you keep your eyes open. The Malfoys know more than even they think.”

“Baladan, what the hell -” Percy started, eyes narrowed behind his spectacles, and thoughts churning furiously with the sheer quantity of strange implications that had been dumped on him. Yet he didn’t get to finish the sentence, because Baladan, after flickering a glance at the darkening horizon, pulled Percy into a fierce hug that made his growing frustration falter.

It felt like…

Percy couldn’t describe it more concisely than just family. Like when he’d been small and his father would pick him up after work and smile tiredly at him. Or when his mother would grip his hand proudly as they went over his end of year exam grades. The small moments when his siblings showed they didn’t hate him, really - when Percy felt like he belonged.

He knew him.

He knew him, dammit.

“You did everything right,” Baladan said into his hair, “You didn’t look. For thirty days you just sat and listened to me. You were supposed to know at the end of it. I- I’ll figure it out and I will not fail the family again. You’ll be fine.”

“God damn it, who are you?” Despite the demand inherent in the words, Percy’s voice broke on the question as he pressed his forehead into Baladan’s shoulder and returned the hug. When had someone last tried to comfort him? For a moment, the rip in him where his parents had been gaped ominously wider, but Percy just fisted his hands in the back of Baladan’s old-fashioned robes and pushed it down.

“I’ll find a way to help you,” Baladan promised instead of answering, “You are not alone.”

“Percy, are you alright?”

Hands were on his forearms, and Percy was alone.

“Percy?” Flint pressed, sounding a little panicky.

Okay, not alone, but no longer… where he’d been.

That had been more abrupt than it usually- than it had been the last time. Why would he think usually…? No, that was just a mistaken choice of words; Percy needed to focus on the here and now.

“Yes, thank you; I’m fine,” he shook his head subtly, trying to clear it and remind himself what was really happening around him. “I’m sorry if I worried you; I was just a bit woozy for a moment there.”

“I’ll walk you in,” Flint decided, adding when Percy looked up, “If you’re still feeling off.”

“Better safe than sorry,” Percy agreed. What had they been talking about before? What had been happening before? The Quidditch pick up game, right. And the Spinner. And Baladan had said he was on the right track - said the Malfoys knew more about the attacks than they thought they did. Flint must have come back when he realized Percy wasn’t with the group anymore.

So he needed to…
Percy eyed Flint, easing the calculation into a smile when Flint glanced back at him.

“I feel such a mess lately - I don’t know how I’m going to keep my siblings from overthrowing whoever’s leading that duelling club, tomorrow,” he laughed nervously, allowing the emotion to show through in the hopes Flint would assume it was about what might happen tomorrow.

“Are you going along to practice or are you just planning to keep your siblings in line?” Flint asked with a tilt of one enormous eyebrow, “I wouldn’t have expected you to be all that interested.” As soon as his words caught up with him, Flint flushed, “Just because you take your studying so seriously and you’re already pretty busy. I- I didn’t mean you’re not good at duelling or anything.” Honestly, Percy didn’t excel at duelling, but it wasn’t usually something he needed to succeed. The war was over and he had other ambitions. Or had been over. He had to speak to Professor McGonagall about that whole You-Know-Who situation the boys believed in soon. Making a mental note not to let himself miss another chance to do so, he refocused on the situation at hand.

“Well,” Percy sighed, letting himself walk a little closer to the other boy in a seemingly absent-minded meander, “I tried to convince the kids that it might be dangerous, but I think that just made them more determined to attend.” If he did this right, he might be able to pull double duty and get Flint to attend with him. That way he’d be able to keep his kids - wow, that did sound strange; Percy had to watch out for that - his siblings out of trouble and work on getting to the Malfoys as Baladan had encouraged.

Amusement crossed Flint’s face as his eyes focused on something far away, “My sister Marcie’s the same way. I told her she was too young to fly last summer, so she stole my broom and nearly broke it and her leg in the same hour.”

“And now I’m getting premonitions of Ron snapping Harry’s arm while they practice exactly what the instructor told them not to do,” Percy murmured darkly with stress he didn’t have to fake. It was a distinct possibility. “Then Hermione tries to help but that pulls the twins in so, of course, they all die horribly.” Alright, that was a tad far-fetched, but with Fred and George involved it still became less unlikely.

“If it’d help, I could… come with,” Flint offered, tone unnaturally even as they neared the castle, the noise of the mixed Quidditch team somewhere in the halls ahead of them echoing back vaguely. “I know I’m always happier the more people are keeping an eye on Marcie.” Victory achieved. It wouldn’t have been so simple if not for the easy in of the poor Slytherin’s ill-fated feelings, but Percy chose not to linger on that.

Brightening, he clapped a friendly hand on Flint’s shoulder, “You’re Merlin sent, Flint. That would be lovely.”

It was clear Flint couldn’t help but smile back.

Time to change the subject before Percy gave into the sick guilt oozing up inside and told him the truth.

He feigned distraction, “Marcie sounds like a real handful; will she be joining us at Hogwarts soon?”

“Oh she’s only nine,” Flint laughed, sounding fond, “But she’d stow away in my luggage if she could. One time…”

Only nine, huh? Flint’s father must have had his imprisonment delayed at least half a year. The Malfoys paying back some of what they owed that family? If so, this was clearly the strongest connection to Lucius at Hogwarts - disregarding his son.
Percy barely kept from shaking his head to dislodge the haze of deep thought into which he’d nearly sunk. It would be better if he didn’t think about that sort of thing while he was interacting with Flint. With that reminder, he managed to keep his mind on the here and now long enough to stay charmingly interested in Flint’s life until they had to part ways.

That night he sent two letters.

One to his Great Aunt Muriel - the follow up on the compulsion and her attack that had been forgotten in the chaos of the last month. He assumed since no one had floo called his brothers in a panic, her health had recovered nicely. Great Aunt Muriel was not a social butterfly so much as a social force and her varied visitors were sure to throw up a fuss if she went missing for a few days. According to his last letter from Bill, they had done so while she was recuperating at Hogwarts, after all.

He tried a few times to phrase a request for information on their family tree subtly and gave up on being inconspicuous or making sense after the fourth failure. Percy would just ask without context at all.

Do we have any in depth records of the Prewitt family line? If it wouldn’t be an imposition, I would be most grateful if you might please send a copy of that information at your convenience, as I believe it would greatly benefit my studies.

There, that was sufficiently suspicious. All Percy needed was for his great aunt to think he had met a lovely Prewitt girl and wanted to check their degree of relation to complete the monstrous masterpiece all these strange secrets had made of his life.

Then again, she might approve. Hopefully that would encourage her to send the information along so Percy could scour the tree for names starting with a B. Baladan had managed to pass along at least that much of a hint.

His next letter was harder in some ways to write, and easier in others. He didn’t have to put anything of himself into it - not anymore - but he still needed to come across as earnest and impressed. Not seething with impotent rage.

Percy needed to keep up his correspondence with Lucius, after all.

“I can honestly say I didn’t think I’d need to help,” Flint held George a little further off the ground, ignoring the thin boy’s struggles with an implacable air, “but I’m glad I came along.”

The duelling had devolved into chaos when Professor Lockhart allowed the children to practice without any solid consequences for using spells other than the disarming and shield spells demonstrated. Especially after Professor Snape had aided in setting up the most volatile partnerings Percy had ever seen.

Professor Lockhart, at least, had the excuse of being inexperienced with children.

Oh, Percy had tried to keep order - in fact, he’d nearly managed it - but when a stunning spell hit him from behind, he woke to Professor Snape’s exasperated grimace and the sight of Ron’s year engaged in something like watered down war with some muggle wrestling thrown in for spice. The professor was especially foreboding as he rubbed his own wrist and sent Percy a glare he didn’t think he quite deserved.

Not to mention Flint restraining the perpetrator with arms under the boy’s, allowing George to kick
out at the air with little effect.

“Alright,” Professor Snape stood reluctantly, and held his wand up into the air, emitting a loud bang that made the chaos slow and cease as combatants separated, elbowing their fellows in a chain reaction now that the professor’s attention was on them. His low tone cut through the resulting silence with insulting ease, “That’s enough.” Turning to Professor Lockhart, he added silkily, “Perhaps this should be approached in a more controlled manner, Lockhart?”

“Oh, ah, yes,” Professor Lockhart agreed, looking frazzled where he still stood at one end of the duelling platform, wringing his hands. Abruptly, he threw his shoulders back and smiled, “Yes! We should start with single duels! Why…” He searched the crowd, and his grin broadened as his gaze landed on a resigned looking Harry, “Why not young Harry and… oh, say… Percy, here?” While Percy was growing used to Professor Lockhart calling on him to demonstrate spells to his class, having him mock duel with a second year in front of an entire duelling club might be a bit much. The panic on Harry’s face suggested he agreed. Of course, it could be that Professor Lockhart simply trusted Percy to use the appropriate amount of force and recognized the quietness in Harry that made him unlikely to blow up the stage as, say, Fred or George might.

“Oh, yes, throw the child up against a prefect,” Professor Snape sneered, unknowingly voicing Percy’s thought. “Wouldn’t Mr. Malfoy be a more… fitting choice?”

Well, it would be interesting to see how two of his own students fought. And this time there would just be one duelling pair of which to keep track. That change Percy wholeheartedly approved. Yet, Professor Snape had once again hit on a ridiculously volatile pairing… Plus, Harry was looking a little nauseous at the very thought.

Percy directed his question to Professor Lockhart, as he knew very well Professor Snape had little to no liking for him or his opinions. “Sir, if it’s meant to be a demonstration of the correct spells and customs for this particular practice, perhaps Flint and I can show the rest, being sixth years…?”

“Ah, yes, splendid point, Percy,” the defense professor nodded with a bright grin, and Harry’s relief was obvious. In direct contrast, Professor Snape’s expression soured further as he swept his hands behind his back, silently giving it up as a loss.

As for Flint… He had a hunted look on his face already, so Percy smiled at him.

“I may not practice much, but I hope you won’t go easy on me,” he nudged the frozen Slytherin in the side with a laugh, “I can manage a shield charm, you know.”

Thawing slightly, Flint smiled uneasily back, adding belatedly, “We’ll see how you feel about that when I win.”

Ah, to only worry about accidentally alienating your crush with a win against them. That seemed practically idyllic at this point.

Even if it sent more little shards of guilt into Percy’s gut at the reminder.

“We can stick to the most basic defense spells,” he said instead of dwelling on the feeling. “Disarming and shield charms, light emitting spells, and low level hexes.” Remembering he wasn’t in charge of the demonstration, Percy turned back to Professor Lockhart, “If you agree, of course, Professor?”

“You took the words right from my mouth, Percy,” Professor Lockhart clapped his shoulder with some excitement. “Let’s get this show on the road!”
It was clear from the start Percy was going to lose. Flint was more athletic and more interested in fighting than Percy had had reason to be in the past. Still, he was determined to put up a good show, even so. The point was to help the other students learn, not to win. Even if part of him really wished he could.

*You can’t focus on everything, Percy,* he reminded himself, fighting down the pride that wanted to surface with a hidden grimace.

Luckily or unluckily, he never had a chance to deal with the inevitable defeat.

An unseen force threw his opponent off the stage, and with a crack of displaced air, a large, winged snake was deposited onto the stage. Both inhabitants of said stage were equally bewildered at this turn of events, but Percy did manage to positively identify the creature as an occamy from the deep blue coloration and the slightly twisted fangs that were *far* too close. The snake lunged and Percy leapt off the stage, intending to get his family and shove them bodily out of the room if he had to. Luckily, the occamy was perfectly willing to turn on the next available target rather than follow anyone specific, as it slowly replaced confusion with rage at being forcibly removed from its original environ. Before Percy could reach his goal, however, a small, heavily disfigured house elf had repeated its initial trick and followed up Percy’s fall with a small, impossibly heavy foot on his collarbone. In the pandemonium following the occamy’s appearance and subsequent rampage, it was unlikely anyone had even noticed the house elf… Which may have been the point.

“Where is it?” it lisped, “Wheezy.” It slammed him back against the floor with another wave of force. Percy could barely see Harry running toward certain death again through the students running every which way, Ron fighting to follow. “Girlie Wheezy had it. No longer. Where *is* it?”

At that, the house elf had his full attention.

“Are you a Malfoy elf?” he demanded, but the creature only increased the pressure holding him back.

“Wheezy is not a help,” the elf muttered, as if to itself, “Where does the book go? Books go with books.” Something gripped at his will, and Percy slashed back instinctively. Still it smothered him with a blanket force, warily not attempting any harm once he’d wounded it, but just *touching.* Covering without allowing him to fight back. It was… more disturbing than Percy wanted to admit. More intimate than was comfortable with an ally much less a house elf with a deranged look in its visible eye and a near tangible malicious intent. The other eye was nearly hidden by scar tissue, its entire face twisted and puckered from the damage Percy had done before.

Yes, it was clear this was the same elf that had attacked them earlier.

The same house elf Percy had mutilated.

A squeeze against his will, a tug from the wrong direction, and the house elf snapped spindly fingers, Percy’s bookbag appearing in its hands. It retrieved the diary without hesitation and paused, looking down at him.

“Wheezy owes,” it said, and snapped its fingers once more. Percy had been cut by a slicing spell before. Then, it had felt as if a knife had slid across his skin, sharp enough to easily open a line of bloodied muscle where the wand of his classmate had slipped. Professor Flitwick had rushed him to Madam Pomphrey and she’d clucked over it, but explained that a clean cut like that wouldn’t scar when she was through with it.

The house elf *ripped.*
As if two competing forces had taken hold of his cheek, the flesh split under the strain. Why was it that all of his worst injuries had to happen around his mouth? The thought was a little hysterical. *He’d just gotten his tongue back to feeling halfway normal, dammit.* In spite of the brave front he was trying to maintain, tears streamed helplessly down his face as the house elf vanished, and Percy pushed himself to his feet, holding the hole in his cheek.

The occamy was still there.

It was… was laying down.

It was laying down?

Harry was crouching in front of the occamy, and as the noise died down with most of the crowd having escaped or come to a tense standstill, they could hear Harry hissing back and forth with the serpent.

He was talking to it. It was clear. How the *hell* was Harry a Parselmouth?

Of course, Percy couldn’t ask this question, and he didn’t even really have the chops to linger on it.

Professor Snape approached Harry cautiously, and the boy looked up, his voice loud in the silence, “She just wants to go home.”

Well, that was that, wasn’t it? Immediate crisis averted.

That recognized, Percy blissfully blacked out, leaving the responsibility of the clean up in the professors’ capable hands.
“It was the same house elf,” someone was saying imperiously, “I’m sure of it. Weasley near ripped its face off last time and it had scars in the same places.”

An indignant response, “What do you mean, Percy ripped its face off?”

That would be Fred, actually.

Percy let his flickering consciousness flicker back on out.

Despite his ongoing desire to remain unconscious, Percy found himself wide awake the next time someone bounced onto the bed he’d ended up inhabiting. He snapped back into awareness like he’d never left.

“...so it’s funny he’s named it Berodach. I didn’t think he remembered his imaginary friend,” Ginny stated with the air of someone reading aloud, Ron listening at the foot of the bed with a smirk.

“Ask Bill more about it in your next letter,” he urged. “I bet Percy will love being reminded.”

Rolled eyes preceded the youngest Weasley’s reply, “I’m not stupid, Ron.”

“How long have I been out?” Percy asked groggily, his cheek stretching oddly but without pain as he spoke.

They zeroed in on him like sharks, but the answer to his question came from his other side, making him flinch before Harry revealed himself.

“Just through the night,” Harry explained quietly, drawn in on himself in the other chair. “Madam Pomfrey said the healing would knock you out a bit longer than you would normally be.”

“Malfoy said a house elf ripped your cheek open in bloody vengeance for you tearing its face up saving his life,” Ginny continued, leaning in, “Though I had to sort of figure out you saved his life from context since he wouldn’t just say it.”

“Sounds accurate,” Percy admitted. He hadn’t quite told them about the attempt on Malfoy’s life before, had he? ..Had he? No he didn’t think so. The visit to hospital hadn’t been very long, either.

Staring at white ceilings and fingers tangled in crinkling bed sheets, Percy came to the disquieting realization that he had been here more often in the last few months than he had been in the whole of last year. Hopefully he could buck the trend now that he’d noticed it.

Yet, wasn’t there something he needed to address...?

Oh, right.

Harry was a parslemouth. The only known parslemouths in Wizarding Britain had all been dark wizards. It was like a marker of here there be evil. Percy had never actually met a parslemouth before, and he’d been sure if he did, he would have run screaming the other direction, calling for the aurors. In fact, if he hadn’t known the boy in question, he’d have written him off as a lost cause. But...
Not *Harry*. He was quiet and seemed to truly care about Ron, and perhaps the rest of the Weasleys. It’d be like saying Ginny was going to be the next rising Dark Lord cutting a swath of death and destruction across- he cut the thought off with a shudder, because it hadn’t been as comforting as he’d intended it to be.

“Harry,” Percy reached out, vision blurry without his glasses, and managed to lay a hand on the boy’s crossed arms, “Parseltongue is a dark gift, but if you simply avoid snakes it should be alright.”

“Percy!”

Well, Ron had never reached that octave before. Percy felt Harry share his jump at the sudden admonishment. Glaring at him, Ron appeared a tad embarrassed at the way his voice had slipped, but unwilling to back off over something as trivial as embarrassment.

“What?” Percy asked, bewildered. What had he done beyond be reassuring?

“Harry’s not dark,” Ron stated clearly and firmly. “And he’s not going to become evil if a snake talks to him.”

“People will think he’s a dark wizard if he just does it in front of them, though,” Ginny pointed out. “Like at the duelling club. With all those witnesses.”

“Yeah, and if everyone didn’t already know now, I’d tell him to keep it to himself,” Ron conceded, “but even if people start acting like wankers about it, we know he *isn’t* dark. Percy.” The last emphasis on his name had the weight of a threat.

It appeared Ron had found his calling: protecting his friends and family from all slights against their name. At least it seemed to keep him focused on the here and now rather than the people they were missing. Plus, Percy didn’t exactly disapprove, it just seemed a little unfair that he was always finding himself on the wrong side of the younger Weasleys’ crusades.

“I didn’t say he was dark.” Percy squeezed the arm he had a hand on reassuringly, “I know you aren’t a dark wizard, Harry.” It was true. He resisted the urge to follow up on that statement with a lecture on dark traits versus being a dark wizard when Harry visibly relaxed.

Better keep it to himself for now.

“Bloody well right,” Ron nodded forcefully, making Harry flush and scratch his head, successfully ducking down and away from any confidence others might have in him.

“Keep a civil tongue in your head, Ron,” Percy reminded him. This, of course, led to the conversation devolving into meaningless chatter and arguing. Such noises inevitably summoned Madam Pompfrey who declared him fit to leave if he was fit enough to bother her other patients.

She touched his cheek, and the feeling was oddly distant.

“I can’t do anything about that, I’m afraid,” she shook her head, “The cut wasn’t clean and the magic malicious. I had to focus on keeping your ability to speak intelligibly intact, so the scar will have to stay.”

A mute nod from Percy.

He’d known it was going to scar, after all. Had thought it even in the moment it happened.

His siblings dispersed at the doors to the hospital wing, claiming schoolwork but obviously dodging
any potential emotions Percy might be having.

They needn’t have worried. Percy wasn’t happy with being scarred, but he… He rather deserved it, didn’t he? It felt like eye for an eye, like a balance had been restored. Disfiguring one’s enemy was cruel. If he had been a better dueler, or better at thinking on his feet instead of mulling over every decision until he ran out of time and had to make a subpar choice… Well, the point was, there was no longer a karmic sword hanging over his neck.

It would be a better use of his time to figure out why the house elf had wanted the cursed book Ginny had had in her possession. And how it knew the book was there.

Lucius had slipped it to her in public; perhaps someone had seen. But why wait until now to retrieve it? Now that he wasn’t in the middle of chaos, he could see they clearly weren’t working with the Malfoys to hide the evidence, not with the first attack being on Lucius’ son.

Percy couldn’t quite bring himself to believe this house elf was acting alone. One mad elf he could accept, but not two in the course of a single semester.

Perhaps the book had been the goal? Someone had known Malfoy had it, but hadn’t realized it was no longer in his possession until recently. What would anyone want with a book that drained away people’s health?

Assassination, Percy guessed with a shiver.

This was all speculation, however. Perhaps he could judge something from the tone of Lucius’ next letter. If the man was harried, rushed, it could be possible he knew of the threat to himself and his family. That in itself wouldn’t confirm anything, but Percy was still playing ally to the Malfoy family. He could always pick up on the man’s worry. Innocently ask if there was anything wrong. And what he could do to help.

There was always the chance this could backfire, but only if Lucius thought of him as a threat. Percy rather doubted it. The worst he expected from a letter dripping with concern was a harsh reply to mind his own business. At best… Even if a pawn of the Malfoy family wouldn’t get to see their whole board, Percy would still know the moves Lucius asked of him.

Baladan had told him the Malfoys were more involved in everything going on than even they realized. This turn of events only seemed to confirm the tip.

Classes took priority, as skipping wasn’t an option, but Percy thought through his next move as the day wore on, composing the letter in his head over and over as he edited and tried again.

He was getting a lot of odd looks; how he’d gotten scarred likely wasn’t public information with Harry’s startling reveal taking center stage. The real explanation he’d keep in the family. Plus, the professors, of course. Because…

Percy paused, gathering his books after his last class, Care of Magical Creatures, let out for the day.

Because the professors wouldn’t want it getting around that malevolent house elves could pass Hogwarts’ wards. Right? Or because it was better people didn’t have the puzzle pieces Percy had? Not when it could lead them to figuring out what he was doing with the Malfoys. He needed to keep his family safe, and everyone butting into it would just muss up what trail he had left to follow.

That sounded… right.
He couldn’t muse on it longer, as Professor Kettleburn had settled himself firmly in Percy’s path. Audrey glanced back, but even at this distance, Percy could hear Gemma settling her verbal hooks into the other prefect, intent on dragging her into some form of outing or activity Percy had no interest in figuring out. Especially if the strained looks on Grimmett and Kendra’s faces meant anything as they followed the two like prisoners sulking to the gallows.

He turned his attention back to Professor Kettleburn, and the man took it as cue to begin. “Professor Evermonde informs me your ghoul is capable of understanding wizarding tongues,” the professor raised a weary eyebrow, as if asking Percy to deny it and let him trudge through his last year at Hogwarts without further incident.

That wasn’t something Percy had taken any great pains to hide, however. “Well, yes, but he is my familiar, not just a wild ghoul.”

Pinching the bridge of his nose just above where a large chunk had been taken out of it, Professor Kettleburn made a pained noise.

Honestly. That was just rude, no matter how stressed the professor was. Still he was a professor, so Percy held his tongue and waited for him to get on with it.

Eventually Professor Kettleburn finished availing some deity for patience and said with a hangdog air, “Mr. Weasley, familiars do not naturally understand human speech unless the species in question is already intelligent enough to do so on their own, such as phoenixes or bowtruckles. They may seem to understand their bonded wizard or witch purely by virtue of their tone and emotional state, but not others.” He hovered a scarred hand near Percy’s shoulder, but decided that kind of support was too taxing and let it drop with an exhausted sigh, “You’re investing too much in your familiar, Mr. Weasley. The tug on your magic to maintain the bond is not a sign that the familiar needs more pushed at it. It’s normal. Your familiar takes only what it needs. Understand?”

Berodach didn’t tug on his magic.

“Why is it a bad thing to invest too much?” Percy asked instead, his tone a little dull as he tried to figure out why that revelation was sticking in his craw.

“It’s dangerous,” Professor Kettleburn stated with as much emphasis as he could muster. It wasn’t a lot, but it was enough to get the point across. “The balance of power might shift between you. The familiar bond might make the two of you bleed into each other and you’d both go mad. On a day to day basis, the magic you invest yourself is not available to you when you’re casting, and you may have a spell fail you at a crucial moment. There are so many things that can go wrong when one interferes with a naturally occurring familiar bond. You appear to be mostly unharmed so far, so just stopping should be alright.”

“Of course, Professor.”

Percy had bonds with many people that didn’t tug on his magic. In fact, he’d say most bonds between people didn’t require his magic to maintain, because there was something there at both ends of the bond. A familiar bond, however, was with a creature who could never have as much magic as a wizard did. A creature, not a person who could think. Not a person who had their own magic.

Someone his mother had thought he’d need.

Someone bonded to him, to his family.

Someone with the same kind of magic his family had - not a creature that had imprinted on their
magic as Xenophilius had believed.

 Someone he had to trust for thirty days and nights without seeing, like a curse out of a goblin tale.

 A man with familiar yellow eyes who felt like family.

 Percy didn’t know for certain if he’d said anything to Professor Kettleburn or if he’d just bolted for the castle grounds. He could vaguely recall giving his farewells, so he hoped he wouldn’t have to worry about the professor following him. Stone turned to grass under his feet in a natural progression as he dodged students on break and barrelled down the hill to Hagrid’s hut.

 He nearly lost his footing, stumbling through Hagrid’s pumpkins, but he was caught before he could fall.

 Percy looked up into Berodach’s yellow eyes and clutched the ghoul’s shoulders.

 “It’s you. You’re him. Mum tried to wake you up and I got you back; I can’t believe I didn’t realize how that fit! You made Mum’s hand twitch on the clock- you started to really respond to us when you bonded with me. I should’ve known something was wrong when she could talk to you! I’m so stupid!” The words poured out in a manic churning mix of guilt and excitement. “You’re Baladan!”

 And the ghoul doubled over like he’d struck him.

 “Berodach?” Percy followed him to the ground, voice high and tense, “What’s wrong?”

 Skin boiled over the ghoul’s frame, bones making audible cracking noises. An injured howl ripped itself from Berodach, turning halfway through into something undeniably human as his form tore itself apart and pieced back together. Baladan- Berodach- whatever his name was, lay there for a moment, panting and wide-eyed.

 “Are you alright?” Percy’s tone was hushed. He hadn’t- he hadn’t expected the curse, the transfiguration to reverse like that. Just with Percy knowing who the other man was.

 Arms wrapped around him and yanked him down, “Thank the gods for your marvellous brain, you miracle.” Berodach- or Baladan- well, the man was crying as he squeezed Percy within an inch of his life. A wet kiss was pressed to his forehead and Percy had no idea what manner of wetness it might have been, but he didn’t really care.

 He hugged the other man back in their awkward sprawl in Hagrid’s pumpkin patch and found, to his surprise, that his eyes were burning with tears as well. That feeling of family had only increased now that he had him here in the flesh. It was as frustrating as always- as it had been when- he still couldn’t remember whatever Berodach wanted him to, but he was starting to get the feeling it was still there somewhere.

 What mattered was that he was no longer alone. Berodach knew what he was trying to do and he’d encouraged it. He wasn’t a substitute for Molly, but he was- and Percy hated to admit it, felt a pang in his chest at the thought but it was true - he was solid and real. An adult who Percy didn’t have to take care of and there was so much relief in the notion that the guilt could be ignored.

 His parents weren’t here. They couldn’t be here. Molly would leave him again.

 Berodach, on the other hand, had his arms locked around him and seemed ready to start crying again into Percy’s hair.

 “You clever child,” he breathed one more time, before inhaling sharply and gripping Percy’s arms to
put him at a distance where they could meet one another’s gaze. “Sorry. I’ll regain my composure. There are more important things I must tell you.”

“About what happened to Mum? And how the Malfoys are involved?” Percy sharpened his focus, shoving his softer feelings to the side. There had been some sort of geas or compulsion keeping Berodach from explaining anything before. Now, with the curse lifted, surely the geas could be gone as well…?

A toothy grin, “Without ado. You went about fulfilling the goblins’ criteria in a manner I’d call unorthodox but it seems to have worked. I can’t see how their curse could further restrain me.” He faltered, sobering, “Of course, I don’t know everything, and what I do know is- it’s not joyous news.”

Suspenseful pauses were not what they were cracked up to be, but as Berodach hesitated, the dirt under Percy’s knees and the pumpkins cheerily looming nearby reminded him of their location. “Perhaps not here, however.” Anyone could just wander past. Even if the students weren’t highly inclined to stroll about the groundskeeper’s hut, Hagrid was, after all, a frequent visitor to his own garden.

“Right.” Berodach cottoned on quickly, clearly on the same page as he lumbered easily to his feet, bringing Percy along with him. “I can’t simply take you off the grounds, though. Not without kidnapping charges laid at my feet.”

“And I can’t take you into the castle without bringing the professors down on my head,” Percy concluded with a sinking feeling. “The wards wouldn’t allow you entry without a professor, anyway.”

They favored one another with a shared, pensive look. It was… comforting that Berodach wanted to play this by the rules. Somewhere in his chest, a little coil of tension had relaxed. While Berodach shared the same, strange trust he instinctively gave to Molly, there had still been the possibility that he would have had views more in line with the rest of Percy’s family when it came to law.

Namely, barely knowing it existed.

“Well, I do need to get myself off the list of the dead at the Ministry.” The sentence seemed leading in tone, though Berodach hadn’t quite let go of Percy just yet. That was understandable. He hadn’t been able to touch anything with human hands for Merlin knew how long. “And as I would need someone to vouch for my identity, it would only make sense to contact my nearest living relatives.”

Ah. There it was. “Since you’re practically on top of Hogwarts already, there’s no reason not to look here,” Percy continued the line of thought, “and Headmaster Dumbledore would surely want to help an innocent victim of a transfigurative curse. Transfiguration was once his specialty - there would be an academic interest, at the least.”

At the name, Berodach gave a start, “Not little Percival Dumbledore?”

“Ah, no, likely one of his relatives. The headmaster’s first name is Albus.”

A considering tilt of the head that made Percy blink away flashes of the ghoul, “Haven’t heard of him.”

Well, that suggested a lot about the length of time Berodach had been under that curse. Percy would worry about it when he had time to worry about it. In the meantime, it was a bit more pressing that they resolve Berodach’s legally dead status. “As a prefect, I can approach him directly with matters I believe require his attention.” Normally, that would be the end of the conversation. Percy would be walking away to deal with it. Move things along.
He didn’t want to, just yet.

This man was family, had been his familiar. Unique was probably the best way to describe the situation. And that brought up a question which could be answered without privacy.

“How in the world did we- well, what I mean to say is…” Actually the question was a bit hard to phrase. Choosing expediency over manners, Percy wrapped his will around the bond between them and ‘shook’ it, “What is this?”

Eyebrows went up and a warm spark of mischief ignited in yellow-brown eyes, “You’re learned in hedge magic, Percy. Consider this an impromptu quiz. What can you tell me about it?” He hopped onto one of the larger pumpkins with an expectant grin, clasping his hands in his lap and bouncing one foot restlessly against its side.

The challenge set a smile to Percy’s face before he could stop it. He excelled at tests. “Right, then.”

Step one was obviously to familiarize himself with the bond. He didn’t normally spend his time poking around the bonds he had unless he needed to directly use one, and that tended to be a short ordeal. In Hogwarts, that sort of focus led to killer headaches what with the web the castle seemed intent on weaving between its inhabitants.

What stretched between Percy and Berodach was warm and comforting. It resembled the ones he shared with most of his siblings and Harry, though some of those - George, especially - were a bit cooler. Most of Percy’s bonds were at least lukewarm, and only a rare few stretching off into the distance were cold to his mental touch.

“Is it really just familial?” Percy murmured aloud, but Berodach’s lips twitched in amusement when he heard it and that didn’t seem like an affirmation. He turned his focus further inward, reaching out instinctively for Berodach’s arm as he did. The older man just settled further, leaning his chin into one hand and watching Percy think with a smile.

The contact did help to bring the bond to the forefront of his focus. It didn’t help him to discern the nature, per say, but at least it was easier to keep his attention to just the one thing.

Step two was to interact. Percy felt his way down the bond with surprising ease, and met claws that scraped gently at him, as if in greeting. Not tearing anything away, but just running along the surface. Something like what the merfolk had done, though less intrusive.

It had barely taken a thought and Percy had already pushed his will to Berodach. It had been more difficult with Ginny or Ron, as if there had been a competing current he’d needed to reach through. He hadn’t really noticed it before, because there hadn’t been any cases in which it was absent.

Now, however...

“It would be easy for us to hurt each other,” Percy thought aloud, retrieving his hand from Berodach’s arm and tugging at his own ear lobe. “There’s no pushback. But the bond is warm. Er-positive, I mean. So it’s unlikely we would intentionally do harm. And change would result in something more lopsided. The purpose of a bond like this would have to be to offer aid openly. Which brings me right back around to familiars and the like.”

“I suppose you’re not in an active war, so it might be unfair to wait for the exact wording.” Berodach put his hands on his knees and slid off the pumpkin. “You are entirely correct, otherwise.” He shot Percy a grin that might have been - no, it was proud, and Percy tried not to give away the warmth that blossomed in his chest in response. “Plenty of people in my squad formed bonds like this with
one another, never knowing they were there. Among the Prewitts, we called them shieldmates. Brothers-in-arms.” His fingers touched Percy’s scar again. There were a great deal more across Berodach’s skin, but he seemed a bit more preoccupied with Percy’s. His volume dropped, “We’re two soldiers in the same fight.”

“I’m not a soldier,” Percy denied automatically. The idea of any sort of warrior stereotype applying to him was laughable.

“A protector, then,” Berodach corrected himself with an affectionate clap to Percy’s shoulder, breaking the strange moment as his gaze caught on something behind the younger man. “And lo, a challenger appears!” Then he was striding off towards Hagrid, who he confused with a hug strong enough to lift the larger man slightly off the ground. “Your tea was most welcome in my time of need!”

“Berodach!” Percy’s feet ate up the ground between them as he ran to save the befuddled groundskeeper, “Wait until I can explain-!”

“Fascinating.” Professor Snape’s low, nearly sarcastic murmur was probably not meant to be heard, given the way he was eyeing Berodach like he’d rather enjoy dissecting him. There were already some antagonistic feelings between them and they’d barely known each other an hour.

See, after Hagrid had been pried from Berodach’s enthusiastic gratitude, the explanation Percy supplied had only left the poor man more confused. He’d covered for it with a gruff, “Well, I’d better fetch Professor Dumbledore” but it was clear he couldn’t quite wrap his mind around it yet. Running the message up the hill was likely the easiest escape available.

While they’d waited in Hagrid’s hut, Berodach had been unable to restrain himself from running his hands over everything and ended up putting a kettle on for the sake of being able to put a kettle on. The stove required a wand to light, which was suspicious given Hagrid’s supposed lack, but Percy had handed his over without a second thought as to how it might look. So it was that Headmaster Dumbledore, Professor McGonagall and Professor Snape crowded into the hut and drew wands upon realizing the strange man Hagrid reported was enthusiastically waving a wand about as he spoke to their unarmed student.

Professor Snape, perhaps feeling a bit trigger-happy, had sent some sort of hex Berodach’s way without waiting for an explanation. Berodach had automatically batted it back with a disarming spell on its heels.

Needless to say, once the altercation was sorted out and explanations given all around, Professor Snape was not inclined to give Berodach anything less than his most deadly, disdainful glare. Berodach’s predatory grin in response was likely not the best reaction, but could at least be passed off as friendly, from a certain angle.

Percy had to stop himself from patting the man’s side as if he were still in ghoul form. He redirected his hand to Berodach’s arm, trying to at least be surreptitious about calming him down.

“A tragedy, to be trapped in a form not your own,” Headmaster Dumbledore stroked his beard, compassion in his voice. “I cannot imagine how you have suffered. It came about during a war with the goblins, you said? Might I inquire as to the year this war began?”

“1867,” Berodach answered promptly and the professors exchanged glances.
The headmaster, on the other hand, let out a surprised chuckle that transferred his faculty’s perplexed stares to him. He waved down their confusion, “Forgive me. I hadn’t anticipated finding many who could claim to be my elder in these times.”

Berodach was clearly biting back some ill-fated joke, so Percy stepped into the conversation by physically stepping between them. “As you can see, Berodach clearly needs some assistance re-entering society since he is so far displaced. Being the eldest person here directly descended from Prewitts, that responsibility would logically fall to me.”

“Percy,” Berodach interjected with affectionate exasperation from where he was sat on Hagrid’s dining table, “I feel you may have that backwards.”

“Ah, that reminds me,” Professor McGonagall enunciated crisply. “I apologize for not asking earlier, but what is your true first name, Mr. Prewitt?”

Berodach blinked up at them guilelessly for a moment, glancing over at Percy for something before returning to the professors.

“It’s Berodach,” he supplied slowly with the air of a man reminding a toddler that the sky is blue, not green. “Berodach Prewitt.”

Snorting was rude, but Professor Snape didn’t always seem to care for such things. “You expect us to believe there were two Berodachs in Britain around the time of the Battle of the Coins?”

“Well, that’s possible,” Berodach tilted his head with a hint of aggression in the sudden tight line of his lips. “It’s not the most common name, but I’m not sure exactly what you’re implying.” Percy thought he might. And he wasn’t sure the implication was wrong. He trusted Berodach had no intentions to harm him or his family, but even as a ghoul he had seemed… capable of violence. That thought hadn’t bothered Percy when he’d known Berodach as his familiar, because Percy would never have resorted to violence and a wizard’s familiar did as the wizard did. Yet, even if Berodach was capable of it, that didn’t mean he would. Or that he had.

Did it?

Berodach truly wasn’t a common name.

“You don’t know about Berodach the Berserker? The man who lost his mind at that very battle and slaughtered hordes of the enemy without care to the allies in his way?” Professor Snape queried with a falsely shocked tone.

If it were possible for Berodach’s expression to be stonier, he might have become a statue. “They hadn’t named it then. Or me, I suppose,” he added flatly. “Though that isn’t exactly how it played out.”

“It’s certainly how the papers of the time portrayed you,” the professor goaded. “You vanished not long after, as well. Was it truly the goblins who cursed you?”

Had he just implied that Berodach had been betrayed by his own people?

Any reaction Percy might have had to the previous admission was caught and locked away at that moment. Berodach was on his side, so Percy was on Berodach’s side. They were a team. Percy really, desperately wanted to ask about whatever mitigating circumstances Berodach could come up with, but now wasn’t the time. Not when his familiar? No, not when his shieldmate was under fire.
“Yet he was never charged with anything and he was awarded an Order of Merlin, third class, posthumously,” Percy contended. Actually, that argument helped firm Percy’s resolve a bit, too. The Ministry wouldn’t have given out an Order of Merlin to a mass murderer.

“The public eye is ever harsh,” Headmaster Dumbledore put in serenely, though his pale blue eyes were penetrating over half-moon glasses as he pinned Percy and Berodach in place with his regard alone. Percy noted Berodach straightening out of the corner of his eye. “I believe your request was to take young Mr. Weasley to the Ministry, so as to prove your identity.”

It wasn’t a question, but Percy and Berodach both answered, “Yes, sir.” At this near-simultaneous response, the professors exchanged another meaningful glance behind the headmaster.

“I believe that may be the appropriate course of action. However,” he raised a hand to forestall his staff’s imminent protests, “I must insist one of our professors accompany you. Severus?” Well, Percy could have guessed that he wouldn’t want to send off his deputy in the late evening.

“I can put aside the paperwork for new brooms, Albus,” Professor McGonagall put in readily, sharp eyes on Berodach, “It would be no hardship.”

“Minerva, my dear,” a withered hand clutched her shoulder fondly, “Young Colin Creevey has already managed to break a leg on those brooms. And I’m afraid it was not his own.”

“Oh, heavens,” she cursed, and expectant blue eyes turned to Professor Snape with a sort of gentle pressure.

For a moment, there was only silence, as Professor Snape stared back at him with arms crossed over his chest and a stubborn set to his jaw. Unfortunately for the professor, Headmaster Dumbledore added raised eyebrows to the equation and he folded.

The professor swept from the room with a snide, “Do try not to tarry.”

That was their cue to leave. Hand grabbing for Percy’s, Berodach practically flew him across the room and out the door. They were halfway up the hill when Berodach slowed, still a good distance behind Professor Snape, and leaned in, braids brushing Percy’s shoulder as he started in a low tone, “Percy, I-”

“Come along!” snapped the potions professor, standing at the doors ahead. He gave a disdainful glance to their joined hands and yes, Percy did in some ways agree, but he’d already known Berodach was the grabby type. He didn’t mean to treat Percy as a child. Probably.

Percy wasn’t sure it was that unwelcome if he did. At least in this fashion. If Berodach started trying to make decisions for him, there would be words.

Shaking off that confusion for future pondering, Percy turned back to the task at hand. Namely, keeping up with Professor Snape’s ever retreating dark silhouette so the man wouldn’t snap and turn them into the Aurors for an imagined crime instead of merely accompanying them through the floo in his office to the Ministry.

Since the good professor seemed keen to shave seconds off his last speed walking record, they made very good time.

At the wand check in at the front entrance, there was a bit of a mix-up. First, Percy had patted himself down before he recalled the past hour, retrieving his wand from a sheepish Berodach’s pocket where it had ended up. The guard had taken some sort of offence to that, possibly thinking they were the least intelligent criminals she’d ever known, to mix up who was supposed to be
Impersonating which wizard and switching in front of her. Once Berodach bullied the woman into letting that go with a sort of threatening charm, they had had to explain why Berodach didn’t have a wand at all, and that was a headache Percy took lead on.

All in all, no one was happy by the time they made it into the Ministry’s main atrium. They consulted with the directory for mere moments before Professor Snape was charging bullishly ahead to Records and Census, so there was no chance to talk, either.

Filing onto the small lift, only a few memos flitted through the air in lazy blues and purples. Despite the lack of risk to their eyes - urgent memos had a habit of dive bombing the unwary - the ride down was rather awkward. At least Berodach didn’t mind being crowded into one side of the small enclosure so Percy wouldn’t have to stand too close to the potion professor’s emanated waves of disgruntled murderous intent. Of course, having an arm wrap thoughtlessly around Percy’s back while he was still in sight of said professor was embarrassing the same way his mum’s kisses goodbye at the train station had been, but it was better than being caught at a tense equidistant point between the two men.

Plus, it was the kind of supportive gesture Percy just didn’t get anymore.

He still would rather it not be happening next to Professor Snape.

...Hadn’t he decided within the last half hour not to think about this until he had more time?

Percy shook the line of thought away and leaned a little harder into Berodach’s side until the lift stopped with a cheerful ding.

Records might not be the sort of place one expected a night shift, but since they also kept track of the Trace and literally any spikes of magical activity across the country, they had not only a skeleton crew through the night, but a constant harried air that hung about the office and inspired visitors to make haste with their questions or get out.

The frazzled looking receptionist waved them forward upon their arrival and Berodach approached the young man with teeth bared in a smile.

“Hello, I’m here to prove I haven’t died yet.”

It was testament to how worn down the department had become that the receptionist merely glanced up at Berodach warily and readied a quill, “Name?”

“Berodach Prewitt.”

A vacant nod as the response was scribbled down. “Any other epithets, aliases, or titles?”

“The Berserker,” Professor Snape remarked helpfully.

Another nod. The words were transcribed onto parchment. Then they registered.

“Seriously?” he squeaked, wide eyes losing their glaze and focusing with terrified intensity on Berodach alone.

“It’s not really a title,” Berodach began tightly, but the receptionist had already ducked his head and moved on to the next question.

The information following that all had a bit of wobble to it on the page.
There was yet another hiccup regarding Berodach’s lack of a wand, but that’s what Percy was for.

He stepped forward with a small bow, “I am Percival Weasley, and I can attest that this man is who he claims.” After all, he’d been a key part of the curse breaking and his mother’s hedge ghost certainly had been convinced. Not that the second part would be made known to the Records worker.

“Alright, witness present,” the worried young man had murmured, sweating ever so slightly as he produced the proper forms for Percy. He handed over a quill, “Sign here, here, date here, and you’ll need to- to- er…”

Berodach had narrowed his eyes and this was evidently enough to stop him in his tracks.

Percy refrained from elbowing him where anyone could see and settled for a light kick to his ankle. It worked. However, the receptionist had already been cowed and he swept the papers away from Percy with a stammered, “I- I can fill out the rest. It’s just dates and a report of the event but you already told me that!”

When no one spoke - Percy really didn’t know what to say - the receptionist laughed nervously and added, “Alright, that’s you done! Gringotts or the living Prewitts can see to your assets being returned to you and you can definitely leave now!”

“Thank you, Mr. Cotsburg,” Berodach ground out, barely inclining his head enough to count as a bow before he was gone. The nameplate on the young man’s desk was given a horror-filled look from said young man.

When Percy and Professor Snape followed, they found Berodach waiting by the lift, back ramrod straight and lips tight, flexing one hand in a way that might have made his talons extend, had he still been stuck as a ghoul. With some deep breaths in the lift, Berodach appeared to have gotten his temper under control by the time they reached the lobby once more.

He snagged Professor Snape by the arm when he made to charge off again, “I’d like a moment with Percy to say goodbye. If you don’t mind.”

Right. He wouldn’t exactly be able to stay on Hogwarts grounds now.

There was no reason to have a sinking feeling about it. It would be fine.

Not really waiting for a response, Berodach pulled Percy down the chamber and Professor Snape remained where he was, watching but not interfering. His wand was in his hand, though, being idly rolled between his fingers.

“All right, I’m going to head to the Burrow first to get more information on the Prewitts from Molly and hopefully get back my wand,” Berodach informed him quickly. “Once that’s done, I will be able to retrieve my gold from where it’s hidden —” Right, he had lived through the most recent goblin rebellion. “- and I’ll see about getting set up in Hogsmeade.”

Percy’s heart leapt. Despite the issues they had yet to address, he still hadn’t wanted Berodach out of reach. “Okay,” he nodded. “Good.”

Pausing, Berodach shifted his weight and pushed back his braids nervously. “I know I haven’t had a moment to explain… anything yet. Still, can I- well, you’ve already banded him about all evening, Berodach, might have asked before.” The words descended into a mutter for a moment, but he shook it off and raised his arms in an uncertain offer. “Hug?”

Fighting the urge to glance back at his Professor, Percy pushed away the embarrassment with a
contrary irritability. He wasn’t going to see Berodach for a while. Professor Snape’s desire to be anywhere but here wasn’t going to trip him up. He stepped into Berodach’s arms and gave as good as he got for a long moment.

That’s when the body hit the floor.

It wasn’t really identifiable as a person but for the shape. Skinned and beaten, the body lay sprawled across the Ministry standard tile in silence before the three men snapped back to reality.

Everyone currently in possession of a wand drew them and Berodach scanned the shadows warily. No threat showed itself. In fact, no one else was there at this hour. Only essential staff.

Another body hit the ground with a wet thump.

“Where-” With a hiss, Professor Snape cut himself off, gaze fixed on the ceiling.

Interspersed with bodies and parts impaled on stakes, a message was inscribed on the ceiling in blood.

*In girum imus nocte et consumimur igni,* it read.

Percy couldn’t focus on the bodies. Not because it was too much. Because it wasn’t. No, it was just that it wouldn’t help anyone. Better to think about logistics. Yes, that was the most effective track to take. “Who could have circumvented the Ministry’s security like this?”

Professor Snape scowled. “The… Ministry Murderer,” his tone made it clear he disliked the name, “has already done so before.”

With a curt nod, Berodach visibly pushed past the speculation and focused on the here and now, “We must call the aurors before they-”

Wizards and witches in red filled the room.

One woman stood forward, wand drawn on the trio, “Put your wands on the floor and your hands on your head!”

“Before they find us here,” he finished wryly.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Last time: The duelling club is crashed by an uninvited guest of somewhat lacking height who happily and dramatically teleports in a big ass snake as a distraction from their real goal: getting the journal and revenge. In the chaos, Percy learns Harry's dark secret of being bilingual and, upon waking in the hospital wing, comforts him by reminding him he doesn't HAVE to talk to snakes just because he can. Following this pretty crappy day, Percy is confronted about being a terrible pet owner by the Care of Magical Creatures professor and Berodach, ghoul, is revealed to be both Berodach, human, and Baladan, dream projection astral man. After confusing Hagrid into submission with newly human Berodach, the big man himself sends for the... other big man himself to make sense of this development. In literally the wink of a twinkling eye, Dumblydorr gives our intrepid duo permission to go make Berodach legally not dead with the condition they take his resident soul destroyer, young and perky Severus Snape.

Then they get arrested.

Through no fault of their own, of course.

In a burst of inspiration, the Aurors attempted to separate the three men into different holding cells so as to prevent them from agreeing on a story. Unfortunately for the attempt, Professor Snape and Berodach were each fairly certain they had their own legal claims on Percy’s guardianship in loco parentis. They politely informed the Aurors as much, underlined by the professor’s venomous gaze and Berodach’s baring of teeth in what could be described as a smile.

There was debate.

To say the least.

As it happened, they all ended up in the same cell.

“Where they can’t simply ‘lose’ one of us,” muttered Professor Snape tersely.

Percy very much doubted that. This wasn’t America. Still, neither the time nor place. Leaning back in silence brought him into contact with the cool, stone bricks of the Ministry holding cell and drew Berodach’s gaze.

“Other than our presence, there’s nothing to link us to the crime,” he said, apropos of nothing. “It will be alright.”

“Yes, I’m sure,” Percy agreed, reaching out somewhat bewilderedly and patting Berodach’s hand for the attempt at comfort, regardless of how unnecessary it was. They were innocent; there was simply no reason for the Ministry to actually arrest them. If anything, they were being held merely to be questioned before the memory faded - once they’d done their due diligence, of course, and realized the trio hadn’t the time between leaving Records and entering the entry hall to murder a dozen hopefully adult witches and wizards.
Merlin, he hoped there weren't any children in that mess.

A gentle chime alerted them to the presence of a straight-backed young woman standing before the bars. She tapped her wand to the metal for identification and murmured something which caused the bars to melt down into the floor, revealing a space large enough for a single person to pass through at a time. “Percy Weasley, Berodach Prewitt, would you please follow me?”

Though Professor Snape clearly wanted to say something about his exclusion, given the tight twist to his lips, his dark eyes darted once to the still irritated guards lingering to either side of the cell and he stayed bitterly silent as they filed out.

Evidently, he’d decided not to push his luck any further than they already had.

With a sharp nod, the Auror sent to escort them took wide, loping steps that ate up ground at such speed that Percy would have thought them to be late if it weren’t for her neutral expression and relaxed shoulders.

In no time, they reached their destination: a small conference room off the main Auror office that Percy knew from tours with his father was typically used for interrogation of witnesses prior to an official report being filed. Probably. He didn’t remember exactly the room, but they were in both the right general area and the right situation for it to be true.

Now that he thought about it, he wasn’t sure why his father had had that information.

Percy mentally shook himself - this was not the time.

“Please. Sit.” Their escort gestured at the chairs surrounding the table before them without indicating exactly which she meant, but Berodach and he sat together, backs against the wall, in silent agreement.

Berodach was clearly a bit anxious, given how he’d projected the emotion on Percy earlier. So this was the best position to take, what with his mental state probably not having quite recovered from just yesterday still being stuck in a bestial form, and years of the same behind it.

Honestly, Percy was a tiny bit cross at the thought of how all this might affect him and definitely not lingering on what they’d seen or how it might have come about. He certainly wasn’t getting intrusive flashes of what the murderer must have done to leave the bodies in such a state.

No, better to worry about Berodach and help the Aurors with what little they might have witnessed.

“My name is Sadya Selwyn. You may address me as Auror Selwyn or ma’am, and I require your full cooperation to clear up this… situation,” the auror sat crisply across from them, her wand tucked away and her fingers intertwined on the table. “You are related to Muriel and Parsifal Prewitt, I presume?”

“Yes, ma’am; I’m their grandnephew,” Percy answered promptly, sitting straighter at being addressed and hoping to gloss over Berodach’s exact connection. “And you would be the daughter of Priscilla Selwyn?” He could see a strong resemblance in not only the heart shaped face they shared, but the efficient, sharp manner in which they conducted themselves.

She paused, her expression softening, “Yes. You know her?”

“I’m afraid I only briefly made her acquaintance while receiving my permit for restricted magic use this summer. But she made an impression, ma’am,” Percy admitted, keeping his tone steady and earnest. She had clearly had pride in her job, but otherwise, the woman had seemed rather
unlikeable. That was an impression, nonetheless. “I’m always reassured to see our Ministry employing witches of your caliber.”

Sadya’s eyes flicked upward briefly as a smile just touched her lips. Clearly she saw through the compliment, but it affected her all the same. Beside him, Berodach was watching him with a fixedly neutral expression, but the laughter in lines of his face belied his oblivious facade.

Sobering, Sadya glanced down at her hands and leaned back slightly as if to regain her professional distance, “I’m afraid I haven’t brought up your relatives to make small talk.” She looked from Percy to Berodach, and evidently decided Berodach was the elder of the two as she focused on him to say, “Based on trends I’m not at liberty to discuss, we believe this latest tragedy to be the work of the Ministry Murderer. An… enterprising reporter has gotten ahold of some sensitive information that will likely grace the pages of Daily Prophet within the week, so I can tell you this now, before you learn from the Prophet. In this attack, the Ministry Murderer has left the victims their wands in what we believe to be a power play - though it is unlikely they held the wands at the time of their demise, given their unblemished states.” She cut off the ramble, a crease appearing at her brow breaking through her otherwise stoic demeanor as she hesitated.

She would need a prompt to continue. Percy glanced at Berodach and he must have seen the same, for he placed his hand on the table as he leaned in.

“Surely, this means you can identify the victims right away?”

“It does.” Sadya’s tone was grim and final.

A sinking feeling in Percy’s stomach alerted him to the solidification of the nebulous dread he had been pushing away during Sadya’s monologue. This had to do with his relatives.

“I’ve been given permission to tell you before the news breaks the story that Muriel and Parsifal Prewitt are among the deceased.” She shifted her hands, pushing fingers into a deeper weave and giving away her unease. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

It didn’t hit him as hard as he’d thought it would.

Maybe it was shock. Maybe it was because he’d almost expected it from the way the conversation had evolved.

All he could think was that he’d lost someone he’d just been learning to rely on, someone of whom he’d had questions to ask. Before his mother had died, he’d really only seen Muriel at family gatherings - and Parsifal even less often, as his great uncle frequently lacked the ability to even leave his bed. More than her presence, Muriel’s schemes to guide the lives of himself and his siblings had had more influence - even if his mother had always agitatedly headed them off at their start.

He felt light-headed.

Still he bowed his head, not knowing what might be on his face and unwilling to take the risk it was inappropriate.

“And I really am very sorry about this,” Sadya continued, reassembling her stern air as she spoke, “but we will need your account of the incident, regardless.”

Percy nodded, but didn’t raise his head.

She pulled a sheaf of papers from a pocket they couldn’t have reasonably fit in and slid her wand across the top, with a mutter of, “Nuntidiccio vert.” Her next statement appeared transcribed along
the top of it with perfect accuracy, in blue ink. “Please state your names for the record.”

“Percy Weasley.”

“Berodach Prewitt.”

With a nod as the words shimmered into being in blue, Sadya continued, “Do you, Percy Weasley, accept Berodach Prewitt as your acting guardian for the purposes of this questioning, in full knowledge of your right to deny an interview until such time as the presence of your current legal guardian can be secured?”

“I do.”

With that out of the way, Percy was made to recount the admittedly short event multiple times during the course of an interview that made Sadya’s devotion to thorough investigation clear. She dragged details out of him he hadn’t known he remembered and some he wished he didn’t.

When his recollection had been utterly exhausted, she dismissed him to the custody of another Auror and started a new page for Berodach’s interrogation.

“I know it’s hard. Remember, your cooperation could be key in putting this maniac behind bars,” she assured him, squeezing his arm stiffly as he was escorted from the room.

That, of course, left him in a cell alone with Professor Snape until such time as Berodach’s questioning ended. Or it would have, had they not received a visitor.

“No need, I have permission from Cornelius,” a suave, low voice rolled around the corner, preceding Lucius Malfoy’s easy stride into the depths of the Auror department. Despite the late hour, Lucius was impeccably dressed, and his hair neatly braided down his back as he approached their cell, cane tapping rhythmically with his every step.

Percy felt his every hair stand on end at the way the guards deferred to him, letting him pass on his word alone. Why was he even here? Percy hadn’t made nearly enough progress with the man for him to be interested in Percy’s presence - or he didn’t think he had.

Could he be suspicious of what Percy knew? Their only communication had been through letters and occasionally Draco. When could he possibly have given anything away?

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“Severus,” Lucius greeted pleasantly, standing before them with both hands resting lightly on his cane. The pale green glow of the bars’ enchantments glinted off the metal serpent which served as a handle and transformed Lucius’ nearly white skin and hair into something cold and dead. It did nothing to hide the amused glint in his flat, icy eyes, however. “I heard you were picked up in connection with the latest crime against wizardkind.”

While previously, Professor Snape had been splattered against the wall like a particularly sulky pool of ink, his posture had shifted when he’d heard Lucius’ voice. A change had swept through him until it seemed he was leisurely reclining in a day spa rather than propped up on the cold tiles of a Ministry cell, just as the man walked into view.

The professor languidly waved a dismissive hand, “I have the utmost faith in your ability to make your own judgement call on that, Lucius.” A tight silence followed the statement, but neither Professor Snape nor their visitor were inclined to break it. Percy certainly wasn’t planning to say anything, but the ongoing tension had him hugging the knees he’d brought up to his chest in anxious anticipation.
“And who might this be?” Lucius zeroed in on Percy once it was clear the professor wasn’t giving up any weaknesses just yet. “Well, the resemblance is undeniable. You’d have to be Percy Weasley, wouldn’t you? My, you didn’t say a word about visiting the Ministry in your last letter! I would have insisted on giving you a tour. Granted, it could never be quite as exciting as this visit, but I’m sure we could muddle along.” The cheerful tone was probing, but the words didn’t seem to fit right on his lips. If Percy was right about the way Lucius’ hands tightened on his cane, the Malfoy patriarch might have been worried.


“Given the circumstances, I’m sure it would have been preferable, Mr. Malfoy,” Percy conceded, forcing a tight smile. He was, after all, being detained. There was no need to seem overly pleased with the situation, and thus he could allow some of his tension to show. “As it were, there was a family emergency that needed to be addressed right away.”

“Tragic,” Lucius replied succinctly, leaning forward on his cane with appropriate solemnity. “If I might inquire…?”

There was little that Percy believed Lucius wouldn’t be able to find out in the Ministry, especially with the casual way he’d mentioned Minister Fudge, addressing him by his first name as the one who had allowed him entry in the first place. Even if it was a bluff, he seemed to have confidence the Minister wouldn’t call him out on it, were it to get back to him. Better to tell him outright and allow him to draw conclusions about Percy’s character and views from that than to attempt to hide it.

He leaned towards the bars confidingly. “A goblin,” Percy layered the word with derision, not needing to fake the ill will quite as much as he’d expected, “laid a transfigurative curse on a member of my family, which I was only recently able to lift. Professor Snape was good enough to accompany us in changing his legal status to more accurately reflect reality. The timing was… unfortunate.”

“An understatement,” Lucius murmured with a lift to his lips that betrayed a moment of mirth. It faded quickly. “I am glad to hear none of your family has had yet another unfortunate fate befall them.”

For a moment, Percy wondered if Lucius knew how obvious that probe was. People had a natural tendency to correct false information, when they heard it. It was an easy way to get information without asking for it.

Of course, the probe was only obvious with the knowledge that Lucius had tried to kill Ginny.

His silence came across as hesitation, and Lucius’ face fell in a way Percy could almost believe.

“I hope I haven’t just put my foot into it,” he offered in apology, forcing Percy to respond.

“Oh, just…” Percy glanced over at Professor Snape, as if the information was really quite private, thank you. He had to fight back a jump when the professor’s sharp eyes were fixed unreadably on him. Uneasily ignoring the focus, Percy turned back to Lucius with reluctance, letting his hands wring one another slightly in a mimicry of Fred’s most annoying habit. “I’m sure it’s nothing. I haven’t heard back from my great aunt in some time, and it’s just with that…” Should he say it? He’d actually never said the word before and his professor was right there.

But so was Lucius.

Percy tilted towards the bars, away from his professor, and continued in a whisper, “With that mudblood Ministry Murderer on the loose, I worry. Especially now that they’ve infiltrated the
Ministry a second time; maybe minutes before we arrived.” He flicked his fingers, as if to shake away the thought and the shudder that came with it, straightening once more and continuing at a normal volume, “Then Ginny still feeling under the weather just puts a cherry on top, doesn’t it? Luckily the rest of the brood are faring well, and your son continues to provide them an example of good behavior they direly need, so there’s a blessing.”

He could not look at the professor. Percy had never been so… He’d never said anything rude in front of a professor before, much less a word like that. His heart was beating hard in his ears as he hoped he hadn’t misread the situation.

After all, Lucius had come to visit Professor Snape, specifically. In the bowels of the Auror department at some unknown hour of the night - so probably as soon as he got the news.

While he didn’t like to think ill of his professors, it was possible they had some shared ideologies. There was no doubt in his mind that one would need to share some values with Professor Snape to be anything more than acquaintances with the dour man.

In a rush, Percy’s mind added that of course he was a brilliant potionsmaster and hired personally by Headmaster Dumbledore to teach in a school full of impressionable children, too. So he couldn’t be irredeemable.

Pangs of conscience towards his own thoughts appeased by the concession, Percy pushed the anxiety away and waited.

Lucius appeared briefly taken aback, but vanished it with a sympathetic smile, “It’s always a stress when the children are sick, isn’t it? She’ll likely be better before you know it.”

Oh. Oh, he dared to say something like that- knowing what he knew? Having done what he’d done?

“Thank you, sir,” Percy bowed his head to hide his expression. He couldn’t keep a snarl from crossing his face at the blatant lie. Even though Percy had consciously fed Lucius the information - misinformation, really - on Ginny, it didn’t make it any easier to withstand the bastard’s false sympathy. It seemed he’d need to practice a poker face. Maybe he’d have homework help with the underclassman take double duty when they said something particularly wrong.

Or he could just ask Fred to regale him with his latest achievements under an oath of silence.

That would be a workout.

“Well,” Lucius straightened, as if just remembering himself. The line of his shoulders had ticked down by a degree; something about the conversation had relieved him. Maybe just the trust Percy had displayed. It surely wasn’t the way Percy would expect someone who believed the worst of him to act, and Lucius may have come to the same conclusion. If that was what he had been worried about in the first place. “I might see what I can do about this… predicament. Severus. Percy.”

Oh, first name basis. Percy supposed it was typically the choice of the higher ranked person to decide what they called the other, but it still rubbed him the wrong way. There was no delusion that Lucius could mean it as a sign of closeness. It was merely a power play. Even so, he murmured a farewell and the professor dipped his head in silence at the elder Malfoy, stealing a glance at Percy through the strands of dark hair that had escaped his tie as he did so.

“I ought to take points,” Professor Snape said once Lucius had vanished back down the hall. He was right, of course.
Professor Snape watched him for a moment more with beetle-dark eyes before he released the forced nonchalance of his posture with a sigh, relaxing back against the tile of the Ministry cell walls. He raised a hand to his temple, leaning into the gesture with his elbow propped up on one bent knee, gaze unwavering, the other leg nearly akimbo in front of him. He looked oddly tired like that. Vulnerable and human in a way that made Percy uncomfortable for reasons he couldn’t quite put to words.

Plus he was just *staring* and that was very unsettling on its own.

“You’re not the type,” Professor Snape concluded his thoughts aloud, dropping his arm to hang limply across his knee and blinking for what felt like the first time in a full minute to Percy. “Which means you are playing a very dangerous game for, no doubt, some foolish end you believe worth the cost. *If* you’re even aware what the cost may be.” It was interesting that Professor Snape didn’t quite clarify what type he meant, or whether he himself was of that type.

Regardless, some part of Percy wanted to draw himself up and explain that he knew exactly what he was doing, even if he was ever so slightly out of his depth at times. But the thought of plausible deniability kept him in check. He merely sent the professor what he hoped was a confused frown.

This had been a very long day.

Maybe the professor would just let it go.

To his surprise and grudging gratitude, Professor Snape let his head thunk back against the wall, gaze finally averted, and appeared to do just that. Well, with a last insult thrown Percy’s way to make up for the moment of mercy.

“Idiot,” the professor intoned to the ceiling like prophecy, and said nothing more.

Percy wasn’t sure he didn’t deserve it.

Eventually, Berodach was returned, Professor Snape questioned, and the Ministry had to let them go. There wasn’t any evidence against them and, in peacetime, merely finding someone at the location of a crime wasn’t enough to convict. Auror Selwyn escorted them out with the help of a somewhat clumsy trainee. The girl had tripped three times on nothing between the cells and the floos, once actually losing her wand in the fall. Berodach had caught it - and her - before reuniting the two hastily and setting her upright, away from him.

“Thanks,” she’d murmured, both her cheeks and her hair blooming a fiery red.

Auror Selwyn just sighed.

It was clear the trainee was a metamorphmagus of some degree, and that could probably account for her clumsiness… As well as her continued service in the Aurors despite said clumsiness.

The ability to shift seamlessly into another’s appearance was incredibly handy and all that aside, metamorphmagi had a nearly instinctive grip on transfiguration. Especially human transfiguration. Percy could barely restrain the urge to grill her on it.

Self-transfiguration was something he could really use if he wanted to neutralize Lucius Malfoy. And seeing the man in the flesh - seeing the man relieved Ginny was supposedly dying and Percy had no clue - had given Percy new drive to see him fall.
He was the enemy.

As if sensing his thoughts, Berodach squeezed his elbow. He was hovering by Percy as the Auror and trainee led them to the fireplaces, looming over the rest of the group by a head or so. Moreso with the women. Really just ridiculously tall. Percy wondered if Bill was taller and then why he was even thinking about it.

It was strange how easily he’d been derailed.

Or not so strange, given that it was three in the morning, he noted as they passed an imbedded clock in the Ministry standard white of the walls. While there was an angry undercurrent to his thoughts, it was sluggish and tired. Distracted. It was stranger that he hadn’t noticed his weariness before.

Hadin’t noticed how very long it had taken.

That was just the ups and downs of it, probably. Except for when he’d been waiting out interviews in the Ministry cell, the whole day had just been one thing after another with barely a second to breathe.

Honesty, the minute he got back to Hogwarts, Percy was going to trudge up to his dorm, maybe take his glasses off, and pass out.

...Okay, wait, first he would pen a gushing letter of thanks to Lucius Malfoy for expediting their release. Whether Lucius actually had done anything was up for debate, but the person he was playing for Lucius wouldn’t know that.

...And he’d double check that his swarm of responsibilities were all in bed.

But then he was going to pass out.

Deftly, Berodach snatched Percy’s shoulder and redirected him around a bench, prompting an absent, “Thank you.”

He was going to suffer for not having made a headstart in his Transfiguration homework tonight, but it would work out if he just… kept working through his meals. And he’d be staying up later tomorrow to find somewhere out of the way for his anti-Lucius project, so he could always review while he was searching the hidden nooks and crannies of the castle.

Plus, he needed to suss out if Berodach would remember Percy’s mutterings on that particular plan.

“When is your next trip to Hogsmeade?” aforementioned ex-ghoul asked curiously, receiving a distracted handwave that probably meant soon.

And Draco’s lesson tomorrow would be a pain and a half, as he’d be expected to mention seeing the boy’s father and be appropriately awestruck. That was already giving Percy a headache and it hadn’t even started yet. Then Flint and all the guilt that came with, so Percy could even get what he needed for the whole endeavor.

And studying Grimmett.

He didn’t really want to poke the other prefect too closely with his will, but he might have to if he wanted to pull this off.

“Next week,” Professor Snape grumbled, having fallen victim to Berodach’s switch in focus while Percy was occupied and obviously unwilling to keep the man’s attention on him for any longer than
necessary in an environment where he couldn’t throw a hex.

Percy hummed politely in supposed agreement, still thinking.

Thankfully, Percy’s meetings with Audrey were less of a stress and more of a blessing. Though she was still stressed out herself, neither of them really wanted to rehash it while they were working on something that could have hedge magic consequences, so the conversation was always light. They were making fairly good progress, even, thanks to Audrey’s constant use of the previously half-finished sweaters to escape from the general Hufflepuff malaise. She was really pulling out all the stops.

Hands gently grabbed him under the arms, turning and lifting him slightly off the ground.

“Percy,” Berodach rumbled in amusement, peering into the teen’s eyes at a level height, “You shouldn’t step into a floo without first speaking a destination.”

Snapped out of his thoughts by this sudden assault, Percy patted Berodach’s arms with an edge of frantic concern, “Yep, yes, got it; please put me down, Berodach.” The last thing he needed was to be manhandled by his familiar—by his—dammit, by Berodach in front of two Aurors and his professor. Affection was fine to a point, but to be bodily lifted into the air?

From his neck to his ears, Percy was certain he was bright red.

“Of course,” Berodach murmured through his grin, setting Percy back on solid ground.

“Good to know you haven’t changed at all beyond the makeover,” Percy muttered back, fixing his robes and dusting himself off as if Berodach had dirtied him somehow. The man in question slanted him a smirk.

“I’ll see you next week,” he promised, touching Percy’s cheek like he couldn’t quite help himself, and stepped through the floo with a call of, “The Burrow!”

As seemed to be his default, Professor Snape couldn’t hold back the pinched expression at the familial interaction so close to his person, but as he stepped forward, he took a grip of Percy’s arm, anyway.

“After you, Weasley.” He punctuated the demand with a gentle push toward the fireplace. Whether this was so Percy didn’t run off with Berodach or because Percy had had to be stopped from just walking into the flame a moment before was impossible to discern. Or perhaps, it was simply the same kind of worry that had Percy waiting for his siblings to step through a floo before he did, himself.

Although, given the way Percy couldn’t seem to stop angering Professor Snape this year… Probably, it was the first one.

He hurried through the floo, the nauseating stretch of reality lingering a moment longer before the headmaster allowed them through the wards. They exited into Headmaster Dumbledore’s office, since Professor Snape couldn’t exactly let them into his own from the outside.

“Oh, thank Merlin.” Professor McGonagall half stood from the squishy chair that had been trying, futilely, to consume her. Part of the relief in her eyes was probably from the fact that she’d no longer be sinking into Headmaster Dumbledore’s preferred brand of conjured seating. “Were there complications?”

“We stumbled onto an active crime scene,” Professor Snape related flatly, sweeping past Professor
McGonagall to stand reluctantly at attention before Headmaster Dumbledore’s desk. “Though we managed to successfully reinstate the newest Prewitt to crawl out of obscurity.”

The way he said Prewitt sounded more like pain in my ass, but Percy conceded that Berodach hadn’t made the best first impression, and they had only just been released from Ministry holding.

“Goodness, what an exciting trip.” Headmaster Dumbledore sounded sincere, if concerned. His brows drew together as he glanced at Percy over half-moon spectacles, “Are you quite alright, my dear boy?”

“I am, sir, thank you for the concern.” Percy bowed out of habit, even if he had to stifle a yawn halfway through the motion. Sharp blue eyes caught it anyway, and the headmaster’s face softened further.

“I daresay you could find your way to bed on your own, but perhaps, Minerva…?” He turned to his deputy, and she drew herself straighter.

“Of course, Albus. Come along, Mr. Weasley, we shall see you to your dorm straightaway.” Her tone was crisp, but the hand she placed on Percy’s shoulder to prompt him into motion was gentle. She removed it with a swift, sympathetic pat as they exited the office, door closing behind them on the quiet thrum of the headmaster’s collections.

Comfortable silence - at least on Percy’s end - followed them across the castle to the Gryffindor tower. While Professor McGonagall appeared multiple times as if she would like to say something, she couldn’t quite bring herself to do it, and Percy wasn’t going to open a dialogue when he was mere minutes from, at the very least, sitting down alone.

Plus, if he could mentally compose most of the letter to Lucius before they reached the tower, then he could just jot it down and sleep.

For the most part, he was successful. Though his curiosity perked its ears once more at the professor’s lingering goodbye, he didn’t follow up on it, merely returning the farewell and tromping up the stairs to his dorm. It just wasn’t worth it this late.

Oliver and Suri were dead to the world, so he didn’t wake them when he wrote his letter by candlelight, and when he stood to check on his siblings, Fred, George, and Ron were all in their beds, asleep.

But Harry was gone.

Percy looked at his door longingly, picturing the bed behind it.

Shaking himself slightly, Percy turned back towards the common room with a sigh. He had to look around. For all he knew, Harry had gone looking for Percy as instructed the last time Percy caught him in the throes of insomnia.

His first, casual sweep didn’t catch anything, but upon closer inspection, there did appear to be a tuft of dark hair poking out the side of an armchair, backlit by the fireplace.

Rounding the chair, Percy opened his mouth- and promptly closed it. Harry’s head was nestled against the arm of the chair, cheek squished into the red fabric, and clearly asleep.

 Normally, Percy would wake underclassmen who had fallen asleep in the common room and corral them upstairs - or get Kendra to do it for the girls. However, Harry had no guarantee of falling back asleep if Percy woke him, and lifting the child himself had the same risks.
Silently, Percy turned and made a trip back up the stairs, sliding into the second year boys’ room and stripping Harry’s blanket from his bed in one practiced movement. Keeping it bundled under his arm, he tiptoed back to Harry. With quick, gentle movements, he spread the blanket over the sleeping boy and divested him of his glasses, leaving them on the end table beside the chair with a note. Though Harry had mumbled something unintelligible when Percy spread the blanket over him, Percy was fairly certain he’d accomplished his goal without ruining what little sleep the child had managed to obtain.

Surveying the sight before him with some satisfaction, Percy turned to go before an impulse made him waver. It was an oddly embarrassing impulse, but...

Well… why not? No one would ever know, and he did the same for Ginny all the time. Ron had argued his way out of it, but Percy and he had never had the best relationship. And Merlin knew Harry needed someone to step up. With that last thought, the mass of rationalizations outweighed the embarrassment.

Leaning in, Percy gingerly tucked the blanket in a bit more tightly and brushed Harry’s mess of hair out of his face. “Good night, Harry,” he murmured, dropping a light kiss on the child’s forehead and hastily retreating up the stairs. Even if no one had been there to see him being so soppy, Percy still felt the need to flee his imaginary audience.

In the dark of the common room, Harry sighed in his sleep, and settled into a deeper dream.

My apologies if you were looking for me. There was a family emergency - I'll tell you all tomorrow.
- Percy

“‘He left you this note?’ Ron asked again, shaking the note with some amusement stretched over the deeper concern. ‘‘You?’”

“‘Yeah,” Harry confirmed for the third time, starting to feel a little sting of hurt that Ron was so incredulous. He knew he wasn’t a Weasley or anything, and he’d only known them for a year and some, but… It wasn’t like Harry knew why Percy kept lumping him in with the rest of them.

And he hadn’t thought Ron would make such a big deal out of it.

Luckily, Ron seemed to tire of the joke as he blew out a breath, leaning back at the breakfast table. “I think Percy’s gone a little round the bend sometimes, but I didn’t know he couldn’t tell the difference between a redhead and a brunet, anymore!” Never mind, he was still on it. Harry didn’t think there was any ill will there, but it was starting to chafe uncomfortably against his patience.

“‘Harry’s got a Weasley sweater’” Fred pointed out from across the table.

“‘So how can you expect Percy to suss him out?’ George concluded with a malicious twinkle in his eye. ‘We’re all the same to him, after all: rebels to his dark order.”

Fred elbowed George for the less than kind addition to the joke, and George elbowed him back until the two were close to falling off the bench in their mock battle. Ginny, thankfully, was silent on the matter since she’d joined Luna a table away.

“‘From how often he reminds me I can take my work down to breakfast, I’m surprised he isn’t here yet, even if it is a Saturday,” Hermione put in absentmly, turning a page in some legal tome she’d
picked up for ‘reasons, Ronald’ and scribbling furiously on the parchment she kept wedged in its pages. “Take that.”

Shooting Harry a good-natured roll of the eyes at Hermione’s continued distraction, Ron shoveled another ravenous bite of food into his mouth and let the joke finally die in favor of eating. There may have been a relieved exhale from Harry’s general direction.

He picked up his own fork and eyed the note sitting, slightly crumpled, beside Ron’s plate.

I guess that wasn’t a dream, after all, he thought, and felt his cheeks heat lightly at the memory. While he hadn’t quite known who was there, Harry did sort of remember someone taking off his glasses and tucking him in like a child. They’d even… Or, Harry supposed, it was Percy that had…

Harry’s other hand went up to his forehead, his fork paused halfway from his plate.

At least his own sad, little imagination hadn’t come up with it.

“Ah, there you all are,” Percy announced his presence with a frazzled air as he approached the table, book bag overflowing on his arm and a hunted look in his eye. “When you’re done eating, meet me in the classroom across from the library. Tell Ginny.” That said, he added a roll to his pile and made an about face, ignoring all questions and greetings into submission as he left the hall with his ‘meal’ secured. Harry couldn’t help but track the prefect’s path out, as if clues would jump out at him from the way Percy walked.

Just before the door, the Slytherin Quidditch captain waved at him and Percy stopped, giving Flint an actual smile of acknowledgement as he waited for the hulking brute to catch up. Which was… weird, but didn’t help Harry at all.

Then he was gone. Again.

Harry rubbed at his forehead.

“Harry,” Hermione’s hand touched his arm, and he looked up to see her brow knit in concern. She pursed her lips at him and glanced around the table before leaning in, “Is it your scar?”

“Oh.” He dropped his hand to the table, not having realized what the gesture would look like after Quirrell last year. “No, it’s nothing.”

“Well, good,” she breathed out, taking his words at face value and edging her book over between them. “So, I know Percy’s got his own plan, but I was thinking, house elves would know a lot about the household they live in, right? And the one you know,” her tone was furtive as she referenced Dobby, “seems like he hates his masters. It’s already terrible that house elves are enslaved by wizards, but the state of treatment and welfare laws for them is deplorable, too. I’m honestly surprised there hasn’t been an uprising—”

“They are supposed to be right terrors if they aren’t bound,” Harry reminded her, but she waved this away.

“That doesn’t excuse treating them as subhuman.” She pressed on, “And we could have a lead if that- if that one you know is just a little… traumatized by their experience. If they act like they do because they really are trying to help and don’t know how.”

On Harry’s other side, Ron swallowed enough food in his mouth to mutter, “Get to the point.”

“We should free him,” Hermione whispered excitedly, “and ask him to pretend he’s still bound.
Witches and wizards can’t feel the bonding break; his family would have no clue so long as he kept up the act!”

“Why?” Ron asked before Harry could. Sometimes Hermione reached a conclusion without really explaining all the steps in between.

She didn’t seem at all put out that she had to explain, nearly grabbing Harry to pull him closer and merely shooting Ron - out of her reach - a manic look, “Because then Dob- that one you know could tell us everything they know! I’ve been doing the research, and there’s some old magic system that has to do with bonds- mostly squibs using them for small magics, but- but we’re witches- and wizards! Figuring out a new approach will be easy!”

Ron and Harry exchanged worried looks as Hermione began to hiss out the schedule she’d devised to work them up to beginning proficiency in whatever it was.

More studying.

Yay.

Long distance clinginess was a major feat, but Berodach was accomplishing it. Periodically, the claws of his will scraped gently against Percy’s along their bond, with a kind of absent-minded air that made Percy think of Bill ruffling the twins’ hair whenever he passed them by.

It would have been fine if it wasn’t making him forcibly aware of all the bright, singing bonds around him all morning. He was going to need to write Berodach and ask him to cut it out, but the sheer unthinking aura to the action had him worried Berodach wasn’t really doing it on purpose. And thus, wouldn’t be able to stop on purpose.

Still, something had to be done; the soothing feeling of the contact did not make up for the way his ears were practically ringing. Maybe he could just-

“...right?” Flint was looking at him expectantly, his last sentence having ended on some kind of querying tone. They’d technically been having a conversation, but Berodach had kept distracting him as he had been all morning, and Percy felt a twinge of guilt sink deeper into his gut. He could at least pay Flint some attention if he was going to use him like this. And since Flint had helpfully relieved him of half his stacks of textbooks without so much as a how do you do on the way.

“Yeah, sorry, you’re right.” Percy agreed to whatever the hell Flint had just said, explaining the awkward pause with a smile, “Headache took me by surprise for a second there.”

“You’ve been getting a lot of those.” The small mountain spoke, lips twitching downward and his hand moved up, hesitantly, before he seemed to come to some decision and laid it gingerly across Percy’s forehead for a moment. He removed his hand hastily before Percy could say anything and informed him, “You don’t have a fever, so that’s one bludger missed.”

“Oh, thanks,” Percy quirked a half smile up to him as Flint followed him into the unused classroom. “Good to know.”

Flint was such a ridiculous sap, Percy had no idea how he hadn’t seen the guy’s feelings sooner. Well, actually he did. It was because Penelope had usually been around when Flint ‘crossed paths’ with him.

“Anyway, I’ve got some bad news I’ve got to share with the kids, so you might want to flee when
they show up,” Percy continued, dropping his own stack on the dark wood of the desk and plucking the rest from Flint’s other arm. “However, I planned to study until then, if you wanted to join me…?”

“I, er, I don’t want to bother you,” Flint confessed, one hand going to the back of his neck as he shuffled slightly back from the table. “I wouldn’t really be any help.”

Tilting his head slightly, Percy shrugged, “I can always use the company.”

What a blatant lie, but… Percy had only so many hours in the day, and if he wanted to draw Flint in, he’d need to actually spend some of them with him. Not exactly a revelation, but more of an uncomfortable truth.

Berodach reached out again and the castle lit up like Flitwick’s Christmas trees.

For the love of all that’s sacred.

“On the other hand, maybe I won’t be studying at all,” Percy forced out a laugh, dropping his head into his hands as if it could block out the feeling of the bonds. “This headache is really fighting for my attention!”

Feet shifted against the stone of the floor nervously before Flint could bring himself to speak.

“I, uh- I could…” He cleared his throat. “I could help.”

Percy’s eyebrows raised before he could stop himself and Flint flushed horribly as he met his gaze. Despite the accidental attack on Flint’s confidence, he bolstered himself back up again and walked around the table to stand behind Percy, hovering his hands for just a moment over Percy’s before he nudged the Gryffindor’s hands away and very gingerly replaced them with his own. Hastily, Flint explained, “Marcy and my ma swear this helps. If it’s okay…?”

Percy was a little worried, given that Flint’s hands dwarfed his head and that he could very easily snap Percy’s neck like a toothpick, but he reminded himself that Flint was straight up infatuated with him and forced himself to relax. This was good. This was progress. Weird, untimely progress, but progress.

“I’ll try anything,” he admitted, leaning back into the hold. Flint started off with small, overly gentle movements, but as time wore on, he grew more confident, turning the searching fingers into more a kneading motion that actually did help distract from the pain.

...Though it couldn’t quite make it go away, since it was in his head, rather than literally hurting his head, but good enough.

It was also incredibly awkward. Especially when he couldn’t stifle a small hum of appreciation and could practically feel Flint have a heart attack behind him. Was this how Penelope felt that day she’d asked him to help with a complicated braid?

... Probably not, as Penelope hadn’t had malicious intent to battle with and Percy, despite being embarrassingly nervous, had kept himself rather professional as he’d worked through her hair.

He hoped.

As it was, Percy wasn’t quite sure how long it had been, and he didn’t know whether or not he should say something. Or what to say. A conversation would probably be a good idea, but he just couldn’t break the fraught silence.
And how was this supposed to end, anyway? Should he say something? Would Flint say something?

Even as he thought it, Flint dragged fingers down to his neck, pushing ever so slightly forward until Percy rested his forehead on his arms, and continued with a broader range, sweeping down to his shoulders at times.

If Percy wasn’t careful, this could wildly escalate and while that would be, technically, great for his plans and, judging by this, probably not unenjoyable, it would be kind of despicable on a moral level. A level he wasn’t exactly ready to sink to. Oh, and especially with his siblings being due to show up any minute now.

Yeah, that was a good reason to keep this appropriate even Flint would agree with.

After all, Flint did know his siblings were going to show up so Percy might be safe for the moment, despite Flint’s massive leap forward. That Flint had made this stride already truly was… impressively bold and incredibly worrying. Flint might be more keen than Percy had judged.

How concerningly guilt inducing.

As it happened, Flint was, in fact, keen on Percy to the point that he had yet to get over the novelty of being able to actually touch him before the first Weasley peeked in the door. In an alignment of the planets and an excellent example of Percy’s bad karma coming back to bite him, it was Ginny. Again.

Before fleeing, Flint had startled out of his fascinated trance, given Percy a panicked, definitely-just-friendly pat on the back and said hastily, “Oh, looks like your sister’s here.”

Then he had practically jumped over the table and vanished with a grace not typically seen from those built more like a troll than a human being.

Attempting to play it off, Percy had merely sat upright and waved in resignation at his retreating back, opening his mouth to ask Ginny about her homework or something to distract her, but she dropped the textbook she was carrying heavily on the table to cut him off.

Following this aggressive move, she sat in the chair across from him and scooted loudly and obnoxiously forward, then leaned across the table with wide, intent eyes.

“Percy Weasley.” Her voice was a mixture of strident disapproval and bubbling disbelief. Percy literally could not wait for whatever question was going to follow it up. Fortunately, he didn’t have to. Ginny was utterly earnest as she asked, “Are you a huge cad?”

“I- I am not,” Percy sputtered, and again Ginny had more to say.

“You’re cheating on Penny!” she exclaimed, stabbing accusatory fingers at him as if she had to physically point it out.

Automatically, he denied the blatant untruth, “No, I’m not!” What had even- Oh, right. But he wasn’t, dammit.

The tone of confused panic seemed to give her pause, and she fixed him with a considering look before abruptly changing tacks.

“Percy,” Ginny took his hand across the table and patted it like he was a small child, “the Slytherin Quidditch captain wants to date you. As you are dating Penny, you cannot accept anymore weird
“Ginny, I’m not dating Penelope!” Percy had yanked his hand away from her at weird back-rubs and turned a ruddy red. Now he threw his own hands up defensively in front of him as he protested, “I’m not dating anyone!”

Her brows drew together, “So you are a huge cad.”

“Oh, for the love of-”

This would probably take a while.

Harry could already hear voices behind the door as he and Ron approached, and they didn’t sound happy. Still, they weren’t Gryffindors for nothing. He looked to Ron, as if to bolster their spirits before entering the fray as brothers in arms.

Ron was clearly ready to eavesdrop without entering at all, his ear on the wall and his nose crinkled as he tried to understand the muffled shouting.

Okay, Harry wasn’t a Gryffindor for nothing.

He cracked open the door with what he believed a reasonable amount of caution.

“What do you think dating is, Percy?” Ginny shrieked, standing across a table from the mentioned brother with her feet set in a sturdy battle stance. “Just because she said she doesn’t want a relationship doesn’t mean you guys aren’t nearly in one already!”

In response, Percy slapped a hand down on the table, as if to win the argument with a single blow, “Tell that to the line of suitors leaving her door!”

“Well, you’re not exclusive yet!” Ginny threw her arms up in exasperation, “And you’ve got Flint on the side, too!”

“We’re not anyth-” Abruptly, Percy’s eyes narrowed as the second part of her sentence registered, hissing, “I do not have Flint on the side! I already told you-”

“-Oh not this again! Just because I’m eleven doesn’t mean I can’t tell when someone’s in love-”

“-Yes it does, Ginny!”

Harry quietly closed the door.

“They’re not ready yet,” he informed Ron solemnly. Pulling out his potions essay, Harry sank down to sit beside where Ron was futilely attempting to eavesdrop without taking Harry’s more dangerous approach. The boy hummed in acknowledgement of Harry’s conclusion, eyes screwed shut as he tried to hear through the wall.

Not too long after, Fred showed up with George in literal tow, one hand wrapped around his brother’s arm as if to restrain him from making a break for it.

He glanced between Harry’s placid studying and Ron’s position near the door and came to a conclusion, “Percy and Ginny having a row, then?”

At this, George perked up for a moment before slipping around his brothers to open the door a
“I JUST WANT YOU TO BE HAPPY!” Ginny’s voice roared out into the hall.

A quick retort from Percy, “Well, YOU shouldn’t have to worry about me when I’M the older brother, Ginny!”

“Ugh,” George groaned, shutting the door before any more of it could leak out, “It’s one of those.”

“You see,” Fred began immediately with the air of a showman, spreading his hands elegantly at Harry’s confusion, “despite being our favorite sister, Ginny has one glaring personality flaw.”

“That Bill is her favorite brother,” George pointed out, slouching down next to Harry and pointing at a random line with a straight face. “That’s wrong.”

“It isn’t,” Harry protested, but surreptitiously checked his notes anyway, repeating more firmly, “It isn’t.”

“Okay, two glaring personality flaws,” Fred conceded with an airy wave of his hand. He drew his heels together with a light click, settling deeper into story-telling mode and confirming his status as Fred. Harry was never quite sure until one of them began to monologue. “Throughout her youth, Ginny was a girl among men, a flower among dogs, and a brat among the unspoiled children she was grateful to call brothers. In many ways she was, thusly, the odd one out. Despite our very best efforts to include her much the way we did Ron—” Here, Ron mumbled something sounding like, *I wish you hadn’t,* “-this strange sort of isolation twisted her mind and made her vulnerable to…”

He flicked his hand at George, who sighed and spread his hands wide, “The Percy.”

“The Percy.” Fred repeated with satisfaction not unbecoming the cat that got the cream. “Oh, I’m not saying she didn’t fight. She struggled against his miry hold on her mind in amazing shows of tomfoolery and chicanery such as the Firey Apple Incident, the Owl Exodus, and… the Great Muddening.”

George nodded, looking genuinely wistful, “I’ll never forget the Great Muddening.”

“To this day,” an elaborate gesture that really didn’t convey anything, “Ginny sometimes surfaces from her conditioning to cause great and terrible swathes of chaos across the land.”

“Such wasted potential,” George bemoaned.

“But it is not to be.” With a swirl of his hand, Fred pulled it down in a fist before his chest, bowing his head dramatically. “Our dear Ginny…” The pause stretched, until George forced Harry to lean forward slightly by flicking the small of his back. As if that were his cue, Fred finally concluded gravely, “actually values Percy’s opinion a little.”

“I wouldn’t go that far,” Ron mumbled, pressing harder against the wall, “and keep it down; I can’t hear.”

“Okay, in that case, I’ll say that she cares for Percy… like a brother,” Fred revealed again, wiggling his fingers in a spooky manner.

Having been on the Quidditch team with Fred and George for a year, and having spent part of a summer at their home, Harry didn’t point out that this was actually a favorable trait in a sibling and instead nodded mutely in the hopes their storm would pass over him without harm.
This essay was due on Monday, and he felt kind of like he wanted to get it done now. For no reason beyond Hermione sort of making sense when she argued that more time and a better product to turn in would give Snape less chances to scrawl less than kind notes along his margins.

Yep. Pure pragmatism and nothing else.

“Honestly this time, this bit’s wrong. It’d blow up in your face,” George put in suddenly over his shoulder, looking weirdly focused. Nearly concerned. It freaked Harry out just the smallest of bits. The last time he’d seen anything similar to it, George had missed a bludger during practice that ended up on a collision course with Harry’s head.

Fred crouched in front of both of them, crowding in to read Harry’s paper upside down, and winced. “Oh, yeah. That was a bad summer. Easy mistake to make, though, crushing the wings instead of slicing them.”

“Was it?” Strange serious feeling quickly broken, George smirked at his twin, “Was it, really?” Unnoticed, Harry let out a small sigh of relief between them.

“Yes,” Fred hissed, and the two descended into a squabble that was at least not as loud as the one going on in the other room. Ron hushed them irritably anyway, throwing him against his will into combat as the twins flipped their focus intently on the entry of a common enemy into the fray.

With a sigh, Harry flipped through his notes again and tried to fade into the wall.

“...Ginny,” Percy had his head resting defeatedly in one hand, “I do have news to share with you all and I’m pretty sure everyone’s waiting outside.”

Drawing herself up to snipe him while he was down, Ginny took in the genuine wary resignation in the hunched shoulders and pinched expression of her second or fourth least favorite brother (Fred and George were walking a thin line lately). She sat, abruptly, her tone bereft of all anger as she asked with a light waver, “Did something happen to Dad?”

Sharp, blue eyes darted up at her from behind horn-rimmed glasses and softened. “No. No, Dad is fine. That’s not what this is about.” Percy hadn’t even thought of that. While a part of his motivation to end Lucius’ assault on his family was his father’s safety, he didn’t... Well, he didn’t keep it in the forefront of his mind.

He tried not to keep Arthur in mind at all. Not when there was nothing he could do about it.

It wasn’t his father’s fault that- that everything had happened, he knew that now. Maybe he had just been grasping for loose ends to justify his resentment in the first place. To cover what should only have been fear, concern, and affection. He had those, too! Of course he did.

That’s just not all that lingered behind the tightness in his throat.

Pushing that away for now, Percy let Ginny have her quiet moment of relief as he went to the door. It opened onto a three way tussle of pulled red hair and weak blows that immediately fell apart into a matching set of falsely innocent Weasleys, stumbling up from the stone floor and dusting themselves off.

“So what’s going on?” George asked casually when he straightened. Or rather, he spoke in the same way a swordsman would find unsheathing his weapon with a flourish ‘casual.’
“Come in,” Percy said instead of answering. This wasn’t the sort of topic that took well to public places. He swept the door open further, leaning against it and extending one hand into the room. Surprisingly Harry, after he shoved some parchment into his bag, followed the directive first, hurrying away from the previous battlefield and into the room before Ron, Fred, or George could react.

He had never been part of a family emergency briefing, and while it was usually nice to be included, this was one weird family thing he just wanted to have over and done. With the Dursleys, a family emergency was something that inspired both pity and a strange, curdling vindication in his gut.

With the Weasleys… Harry had never felt quite this kind of trepidation before.

He sat heavily beside Ginny and laced his fingers together tightly under the table, the rest of the Hogwarts-aged Weasleys following him in.

Then they sat in silence.

Nerves jumped back and forth from each inhabitant of the room in a ping-pong of anxiety. Of absolutely no help, Percy just had his fingers steepled in front of his mouth, eyes slightly distant, as he visibly decided what to say.

Finally, George shifted his weight in the uncomfortable wooden chair he’d snagged as far from Percy as possible and demanded, “Well? Did somebody die?”


Whoops. Percy hadn’t meant to give that away quite so quickly. He wasn’t even sure what expression his face would show when he told them. He’d had half a day to get used to it, but he felt more distanced than he would have anticipated, yesterday.

“There was another attack.” He chose his words carefully, adding hastily when he remembered Ginny’s recent conclusion, “Not on Dad. But there were a… Well, a good number of people killed, and unfortunately Muriel and Parsifal are among them, according to the Ministry. Though they aren’t entirely sure who’s done it, yet.” A minor lie, for Percy’s sake of mind. Until the Prophet came out, they would have no target for which to run away from school and follow on a vendetta of revenge. Plus the Ministry didn’t know who the Ministry Murderer even was, making it definitely not a lie, actually.

“Where?” Fred had leaned back from the table, hands clutching the edge of it, but his eyes stayed on Percy, “Wasn’t she just attacked by some maniac last month or something?”

Right on his heels, George loomed in over the table, jaw set, “Did they catch them?”

“She… was attacked last month, too,” Percy held up a hand to forestall questions on that subject, “and I don’t know why or by whom.” Also technically true. “Her… Well, they found her last night. The Ministry is doing what it can, but…” The hand tipped, helplessly.

“What a fucking mess,” George snapped out but didn’t elaborate, neither retreating from the table nor explaining himself, merely crossing his arms over his chest and fuming in pensive silence.

His younger siblings hadn’t said anything yet. Of course, Harry didn’t appear to know what he could say, but Ron looked torn between directionless anger and worrying quietly to himself. As for Ginny… Her face was pale and her lips tight, fists clenched on the table. She was ready to blow her top or cry and Percy wasn’t entirely sure which of those was worse.
“There’s some good news, too,” he added hastily, before Ginny could work herself up again to react. Or was it good news to explain that a family member had been under a curse for over a century? He amended aloud, “In a sense.”

“...What?” Ron asked with an edge of exhaustion already.

How to phrase this. He could just go for the most direct route, but even then it would be confusing. Judging by the impatient, raised brows, tapping fingers, and barely restrained tempers he could see building around the table, Percy had better just wing it.

“Berdach is actually - or was actually? I suppose is, since he is now.” Percy paused, taking in his own words. That had been worse than what he’d been thinking before. He would simply say it outright. “Berdach the ghoul is actually Berodach the wizard, and a Prewitt besides, who’d been cursed during the last goblin rebellions to be trapped in the form of a ghoul until now.”

“...Like quintapedes?” Harry offered quietly, breaking the deathly still air that had fallen on the table at Percy’s sudden break from reality.

“What the living hell have you been smoking, Percy?” Fred put in with some awe and a small, contemptuous twist in his lip that held a fine smattering of disappointment.

Picking up the line of thought, George finished flatly, “What a load of crock.”

“I know it sounds...” now that he’d heard it aloud, Percy could truthfully conclude, “insane, but Professors McGonagall and Snape can verify it.” As could the headmaster and the Ministry, though Percy wouldn’t exactly be bothering them to prove something to his siblings that he could just visit a professor to achieve the same results.

“Wait, wait, wait.” Waving her hands around as if to stop anyone else from speaking, Ginny’s brow crumpled in thought, “If that’s true, Berodach is your familiar.”

“Technically not anymore,” Percy began, but Ginny was shaking her head. Denial had hit her hard, it seemed, but it wasn’t like he couldn’t just show her someday.

“Hear me out,” she held up her pointer fingers for silence, “Hermione is doing a thing lately and if you sit near her for more than a minute you get this, like, melty slush of laws about non-humans poured directly into your brain and I remember that the whole familiar thing is legally recognized, no matter what transfiguration is done to the familiar.”

A smile tugged at Percy's lips against his will, “...But he was always human.”

“Okay, whatever,” George interjected, cutting off Percy’s half amused protest. “The point is, who the hell is he? And why didn’t he try to, I don’t know, tell us that he was a person? Didn’t he sleep at the foot of your bed a few times?”

“He- he wasn’t awake,” Percy stressed, feeling a flush of heat slide up his neck that held as much embarrassment for himself as secondhand indignation for Berodach. ...Though if he’d known there was more to Berodach than an intelligent animal, he probably wouldn’t have gotten so used to being manhandled by him, but Berodach didn’t mean anything inappropriate by it. They were family, of a sort.

Rolled eyes greeted this less than eloquent explanation from both twins, and they replied in unison, “Well, yeah, since he was sleeping.” Only one of them snorted following the statement, but Percy didn’t have time for that.
He needed to clarify. Now. Taking a quick, calming breath, Percy tried again, “I meant to say, his mind was affected by the curse.”

Harry nodded to himself across the table, probably reaffirming the comparison to quintapeds in his mind, but the rest of the assembled Weasleys didn’t look ready to end the question-answer session just yet.

At least it had distracted them from the deaths.

Another affectionate scrape of wills, and the world burst into technicolor just as the table exploded into noise. Closing his eyes, Percy pulled agitatedly at one earlobe. But that wouldn’t exactly let him escape, would it? With a sigh, his eyelids fluttered open and he leaned into it, prepared to weather the storm.

He could always pull the prefect duties card to run away when it was time for Draco’s tutoring. Percy wasn’t exactly made of honor, after all.

At the thought, his heart twinged.

But that didn’t matter.
Chapter 22

For the first time in years - many years, according to pretty much everyone - Berodach was completely himself. He was free. Free to… walk through this overgrown forest that was definitely not this creepy when he lived near here. The trees rattled ominously with the wind and were… Honestly much bigger and more menacing than when he’d last been there, with the night washing away any color that might have softened their silhouettes. The brush was worse than it should have been, if a lord was still in charge of maintaining this land. It wasn’t healthy and it provided a lot of potential cover.

Like for an ambush.

Though the war was technically over but they’d all thought that was the case during the last ceasefire, and look how that turned out.

At least he hadn’t hid his stash closer to the house. Berodach wasn’t sure he could handle whatever would be left.

And he’d already seen the ruin once.

“All right, let’s not think about that,” he chuckled nervously to himself, mentally reaching out unthinkingly and getting- Percy. Which helped. He scraped lightly against the edges of Percy’s will in greeting and let the awareness fade away.

He had to focus.

Digging through the dirt helped. He had a borrowed wand from the Burrow which he had used to excavate to the proper depth; Molly had helpfully pointed out her brothers’, hidden in the family clock, which- well, he had fixed it. That’s what mattered.

It was nice to do something with his hands. Real, human hands, with the scars from his training, and the blotches of familiar freckles he thought he’d never see again. When his eyes grew hot again with unshed tears, Berodach wiped them with the sides of his hands, avoiding getting dirt in them to compound the issue.

Okay, he was almost there. Aside from the sentimental aspect, he was too close to unearthing his belongings to keep using magic. It wouldn’t react well with the ward scheme.

It was, of course, a little terrible to contemplate why he knew this would still be here.

But he had Percy now, and he wouldn’t let it happen to him, too. The war was over.

Berodach finally dragged the small trunk out of the dirt and sighed a little before gathering himself and vanishing any stray dirt.

Next step, gainful employment.

With that, he apparated to Hogsmeade.

The next Hogsmeade weekend, Percy swore as a fluttering scroll nearly escaped its brethren in his arms, but redoubled his pace anyway. “Audrey, hey-” he spun to the right to avoid trampling a
Ravenclaw first year and finally caught up with his quarry, “Audrey!”

“Oh- Percy!” She steadied him reflexively with a single hand as he skidded to a halt. Her lips calmed from their tight line to half a smile, “Did you hear, then? I think they’re up there now.”

“I wanted to- wait, hear what?” What could possibly have happened in the past two days? He’d spoken to Audrey the last time they’d met up to knit together! Well, judging by the way her shoulders sat low and the strong line of her jaw relaxed, it shouldn’t be anything to worry about. Hopefully.

“Look,” she pointed up past him, towards the entrance to the Great Hall. Above the towering wooden doors hung the four hourglasses displaying the points for the Houses. Ravenclaw had been passed up by Hufflepuff, it seemed, given the large number of yellow jewels shining above them. That was nice but hardly reason enough for the lines of laughter building up around Audrey’s pale green eyes. He followed the line of her finger to the Gryffindor hourglass.

Percy dropped his head briefly into his hands to take a deep, steadying breath.

“What did they do?” he asked, voice muffled until he looked up at her once again with a small amount of hope. “Unless it was someone else?” Fred and George had just learned about Muriel and Parsifal’s death. He’d have thought that would put them in a somber mood. Although it was possible they were making trouble out of grief turned anger. That would be… understandable, but not an excuse.

“You’ve still got a brother involved, but it wasn’t the twins,” Audrey informed him, warming up to unapologetic glee as she went on. “Sorry, but this is just the thing my ‘puffs needed to cheer up and I’m going to knit Ron and Harry each a scarf after Christmas to match their sweaters.”

A little more uncertainly, Percy repeated, “...What did they do?”

With a half-strangled cackle, Audrey tried and failed to relate the news of their morning escapades, until finally she managed to get across precisely what had cost Gryffindor a sizeable chunk of their accumulated House points.

“You kidnapped a house elf?”

The occupants of the room eyed Percy with varying degrees of terror and disapproval. Perhaps barging into Professor McGonagall’s office upon catching sight of Ron, Harry, and Hermione awaiting further judgement and immediately spilling the words that had been circling incredulously in his head the past ten minutes hadn’t been the most intelligent of decisions but honestly… what had they been thinking?

“We didn’t know!” Hermione near-wailed, the outburst surprising even herself as she clapped a hand over her mouth with a look of utter, hopeless despair. Standing at attention behind the miscreants, Kendra snorted. When the professor’s disapproving stare snapped from Percy to Kendra, she looked upwards innocently, putting her hands harmlessly behind her back as if to say she had nothing to do with the situation, anyway.

“We were just trying to ask her some questions,” Harry jumped in quickly, clearly this was the opening he’d been waiting for up until now. His explanation came out in one breath. Percy had noticed Harry had that tendency; he almost seemed frightened he’d never get the chance to explain if he didn’t get it all out in one go. “About house elf culture and stuff, but she didn’t want to talk about
it in public and Ro- we accidentally ordered her to come with us instead of asking, and we didn’t know it was off the grounds. It was just an accident.”

“It was my fault,” Ron admitted miserably. “I said ‘come with us’ and she had to.”

This appeared to be too much for Hermione to remain silent. Despite the ongoing reddened glow of embarrassment lingering in her face, she jumped to Ron’s defense, “But I was the one who wouldn’t leave her alone when she didn’t want to talk about it there!”

“And I’m the one who led us to the far side of the quidditch pitch,” Harry put in hastily. “So it never would’ve been kidnapping if I hadn’t chosen a place off the grounds.”

Huh. Percy hadn’t realized the pitch was that close to the wardline, and he slanted a confused glance at Professor McGonagall. She nodded confirmation with a sigh, the stern lines of her face softening as she rubbed tiredly at her temples. At least they hadn’t been actively attempting to drag a house elf into, say, the Forbidden Forest.

“Professor Snape has already deducted quite a large number of points for the infraction,” she began wearily, “and I feel you’ll be punished enough by your housemates’ reactions to the loss. Still, I will require an essay from each of you on where, precisely, you are allowed to wander on Hogwarts grounds, to be turned in your next Transfiguration class, as well as a written apology to Toddie that you will deliver by hand to the Hogwarts kitchens by tomorrow. Am I understood?”

“Yes, ma’am,” the three second years mumbled in response. Although she hadn’t been expelled, the drooping of Hermione’s posture like a week old violet revealed her ongoing devastation.

With a quiet noise of disgruntled resignation, Professor McGonagall dismissed them back to their usual chaos, waving a hand at the prefects in a silent order for them to stay. Harry sent them all a strange look as he followed Ron and Hermione out the door, but didn’t speak. Probably for fear of bringing the professor’s attention back to his friends.

Professor McGonagall sighed and stood from her desk slightly to reach for a tin on the nearby shelf. She popped the lid off manually and helped herself to a biscuit with a long-suffering air, “Mr. Weasley, do remember to knock next time.”

“My apologies,” Percy offered immediately. “I heard that Ron and Harry had done something foolish and my emotions got the better of me.” Though, seeing as he was here at the castle, he really should have been informed what they had done before the rumor mill got a hold of it. Honestly gossip moved like something was chasing it at Hogwarts. Taking a chance, he added, “Though - if it’s not too inconvenient, ma’am - if they, or my other siblings, are involved in something like this again, I would appreciate being informed.”

He almost wanted to squeeze his eyes shut and grit his teeth as he waited for a response to his impertinence. When that response was silently raised eyebrows, he revised his desire to, instead, die now before he could disrespect a professor any further.

He already had sworn in front of one, and now the other was looking at him like he was in dire need of a user’s manual to explain exactly what she was supposed to do with him.

“He completely means what he just said, ma’am,” Kendra put in abruptly, sounding far more cheerful than Percy thought the situation warranted. “If Harry or Ron or some other Weasley is in trouble, he would like to be there for his beloved charges.”

“I didn’t say beloved,” Percy argued before he could stop himself, but Professor McGonagall
interrupted his argument with an extended chocolate biscuit and an altogether too amused smile on her face. When Kendra only grinned knowingly and the biscuit was not retracted as Percy stared at it, he took it with hesitant fingers. “Erm, thank you, ma’am.”

“No. Thank you, Mr. Weasley.” Her smile softened and the professor briskly nodded, “I’ll be sure to keep it in mind in the future.”

Well, it was time to back out of that particular discussion with the win he’d obtained. No need to figure out exactly what had put the women in the room in such a mood. Even if he felt somewhat like an especially clever dog being praised for a trick. “Thank you- again. Ma’am.”

“Yes, well.” McGonagall drew herself up. “I’m glad Harry has someone looking out for him, with all that boy has been through. Now, I kept you back to let you know Mr. Filch has updated his list of forbidden items yet again.”

“Speaking of what Harry’s been through,” Percy interjected when she paused to locate the thick scrolls Filch painstakingly compiled each month. There was still that strange rumor he had to address. Too many chances had slipped by forgotten already. “He seems to be under the impression that Professor Quirrel was… working for You Know Who, and it’s keeping him up at night. Ma’am, do you know…?”

“Professor Quirrell was not working for You Know Who,” Professor McGonagall said after a short pause. Her fingers danced anxiously for a moment before she placed them into her lap. “The two of you are responsible enough to know, and I’ll let you use your best judgement regarding whom you confide in. Professor Quirrell was possessed by You Know Who.”

That was…

Percy had to sit down.

“I have something to tell you,” Percy walked past Berodach standing in the open door of his new apartment and began to pace.

“Hello,” Berodach said, emphasizing his open arms, and Percy gave him a matter of fact hug. Though he attempted to return to pacing, Berodach did not release him, “Welcome to my apartment that I just rented above the tavern in which I now have a job. Thank you for your interest in my ongoing well-being. I’m glad to see you and look forward to the influx of Weasleys at noon.”

Deflating, Percy put his arms around Berodach again, “Sorry.”

That had been rather rude of him. It wasn’t like he’d been able to see Berodach face to face for the last week. Even if it had felt like he was there with the whole reaching out multiple times a day thing. Which needed to be addressed on top of everything else.

“It’s fine.” Berodach stepped back, “We do have things of importance to discuss.” His eyes flicked away, revealing his reluctance to dive right into the darkness that permeated their lives and Percy kind of understood. It made him a little sick just thinking about everything on his plate.

“Yes,” Percy pointed at him in emphatic agreement. “Yes, a lot, actually, but I can take two minutes for a tour.”

“Right! As it is, this is the living room, and the kitchen, and the dining room, and in that, we’ve covered a great deal of ground in a very compact amount of time, if I do say so myself,” Berodach
gave a little, self-deprecating bow, indicating the shabby room. It was clean, and nothing Percy wasn’t already used to in terms of wear and tear. The living area had three mismatched chairs: two armchairs and one wooden creation that seemed permanently tipped to the left. Taking up the space between them was a rickety table that could handle probably four meals worth of food, max. It was bracketed by a small couch that had clearly been reupholstered more than once, though the pattern was entirely worn away.

Finally, there was a small kitchen area shoved into the far corner with a small window peeking over the yellowing counters. From the sink, he could easily watch people walking into and out of the Three Broomsticks.

“How did you even get a job here?” Percy tipped closer to the window, watching the swing of the bar’s sign below them, “I thought Madam Rosmerta liked to keep it in the family.”

Leaning on the counter beside Percy, Berodach slapped a smarmy grin across his face and rubbed his chin, “This old soldier still has his charms.” He sobered when Percy didn’t seem amused, “And a decent sob story. I told her the truth, mostly, and she sympathized with wanting to stay near my remaining family.”

“Smart,” Percy nodded, pushing himself upright. “Any other rooms?” While he was mostly just curious, it would help to know the layout. Especially since they were probably going to be in deep trouble if literally anything went wrong from here on.

“Why, Percy, this is the first time you’ve entered my home and you’re already sniffing after the bedroom?” The affected falsetto and cadence heavily reminded Percy of his late grandmother, and the mental image made him snort in surprise. Berodach grinned in response, resuming his usual tone, “Yes, this way.”

The rest of the apartment consisted of a bedroom and a bathroom, all in varying shades of aged yellow. It looked like the apartment had sat unused for years under constant barrage of dripping water from the number of water stains that painted the walls and surfaces.

“I’m going to update it with our patented penny-pinching ward scheme,” Berodach informed him when Percy’s eyes lingered on the damage. “Which I hear Molly put to good use as a Weasley, so I suppose it would be familiar to you.”

“Bill messed with it when he got his mastery,” Percy replied before he could think through the implications. Abruptly, they hit and Percy twisted around to Berodach, “Mom told you? You can still see her ghost?”

“I’m a Prewitt, too,” the finger pointed into his own chest was probably not necessary, but Berodach felt it would underline the meaning. “And I lived there for years. I could see her imprint before she even died.”

For some reason, the sentence sent a chill down his spine. He couldn’t put his finger on it. Of course, the imprint would be forming before it appeared. It- she wasn’t a ghost in the same way the spirits at Hogwarts were.

And it wasn’t important right now.

“Okay, so I’m going to sit down, and you should, too, because I do actually have some fairly... game-changing news.” Gingerly, Percy put action to words, sitting on the edge of the small, weathered bed and waiting for Berodach to bemusedly follow suit before he spoke again. “You-Know-Who is not dead.”
“...Molly?” Berodach asked after a moment of blank staring.

“Oh, my god, you don’t know,” Percy put a hand to his own face. Pre-empting the potential attempt to mitigate, he held his other out defensively, “Give me a second. It’s difficult to talk about.”

“I’m sure our conversations this morning will all be difficult,” Berodach remarked with false cheer, raising a fist in a mockery of triumph. “We will make it through.”

“Oh, good,” Percy sighed somewhat sarcastically as he prepared to explain Voldemort to a veteran of the goblin uprisings. And then ask if he really needed to keep mentally brushing up against him. And figure out what he knew about the Malfoy situation. And the whole… Berserker thing.

It was going to be fine, probably?

No, Percy was not sure of that at all.

...and he called himself Voldemort,” Percy finished in a whisper, quickly straightening as if erasing the confiding posture could erase the whole previous conversation. “But with everything he did and the curse he put on his name, everyone just calls him You Know Who or he-who-must-not-be-named, which is… longer. Death Eaters called him the Dark Lord, and some pureblood families. It turns out he is not entirely dead and is fully invested in both regaining his power and probably getting revenge, which would likely be on Harry.” With a groan as the thought occurred to him, he added, “And Ron, since he had to be a right little hero last year.”

Berodach nodded. His hands gripped the edge of the mattress with white knuckles, “That is very bad.” The words came slowly, “But it does clarify a few matters. There is someone behind the Malfoys, using them to their own ends. If it’s, er, that person...”

“But I thought it was the Ministry Murderer,” Percy’s brows drew together. “They’re killing purebloods, you said so yourself.”

“It’s possible that this murderer and that person are one and the same,” Berodach replied, still not releasing the bed. It was a heavy thought, one that Percy would rather not have. Especially not when it was only Berodach and he who might have had it.

On the other hand, You Know Who’s usual tactics weren’t typically including attacks on pureblood families. Or... well, Percy supposed You Know Who had killed many purebloods during the war, but mostly in retaliation to political moves. In this particular case, however, only purebloods had been targeted - and You Know Who wasn’t around to move against. Actively, in the political arena, anyway. Still, Berodach might have more information that would shed light on why he might think the two were connected.

Besides, there was a strange sinking feeling in his gut that made him believe it. Even if he didn’t have all the facts, just yet.

The room was very quiet with just the two of them in it.

“Walk me through it, please.” Though the request was delivered politely, Percy belied the show of manners by throwing himself back on the bed. He was going to be here for a long time this morning. And it would be difficult, as Berodach had already noted.
In fact, Berodach clearly was having a similar line of thought as he made himself comfortable in much the same way. A wry sidelong glance to Percy acknowledging the event was briefly returned.

“Right,” Berodach started, interlacing his fingers on his chest. Difficult conversations were always easier when everyone involved was facing the ceiling. “According to the dead Malfoys, the living head has had some sort of visitor or mail that caused him to panic or rage before each attack by the murderer.”

“The dead Malfoys?” Percy interjected, waving a hand above them so Berodach could see, “Please elaborate on that part.”

There was a long moment where all Percy could hear was Berodach breathing beside him. A deeper intake of breath preceded the dull whisper, “My mind was trapped between... Well, I was not… as alive as I could have been before you saved me, Percy. I didn’t want to be.”

That needed a bit of processing, but Percy valiantly pushed through. Berodach had barely had control of his own mind for years upon years so it was… understandable. It still sent a quiet shock of cold fear into his gut. Had this all gone differently, he might have lost family again, before he’d ever even known it was there. Blindly he felt for and grasped the back of Berodach’s interlocked hands. “And now?”

One set of fingers freed themselves and slid over Percy’s.

“You saved me,” Berodach echoed a little hoarsely, and the two of them aggressively avoided eye contact until such time as they could move on with the conversation. He cleared his throat. “I- in any case, the Malfoy head was also seen with a woman whose house elf matched descriptions of the one who accompanied Amelia Bones’ murderer. And recently, they’ve been, well, disfigured.”

Percy’s heart skipped a beat. He sat upright, leaning on the hand on Berodach’s chest to meet his reluctant gaze, “The house elf that attacked us at school is involved with the Ministry Murderer? It might be the one that- that tripped the wards when- well, when it happened?”

“I believe,” Berodach said carefully, “that the house elf may tie this all together. The victims were mainly those that opposed that person, but I didn’t know what that name meant until now.”

“What about Crabbe and Goyle?” Percy pressed, both literally and in conversation. “They serve the Malfoys, and if the Malfoys serve You Know Who again…” It didn’t make sense for those two to have been killed. His father always said the Malfoys had been Death Eaters before the war ended and that was something Percy could believe, given what he’d seen and heard at the Ministry recently.

Berodach’s braids were disarrayed as he shook his head, “I don’t know. Perhaps they displeased him. Or perhaps I am wrong, and we have two fronts to fight.”

“You don’t think you’re wrong,” Percy said, certain. It was in the way Berodach’s voice tipped over into resignation. Two enemies would be awful but You Know Who pulling all the strings? That was terrifying in its own right.

“I don’t, but… The potential for devastation is great if I am. If we ignore one side...” He glanced away. “Regardless, the Malfoys are a powerful tool in anyone’s hands. And this is…” A little, bitter laugh before Berodach covered his face with one tired hand, “It sounds like a war is really about to begin.”

“You’re right,” Percy flopped back onto the bed beside him, putting his hands over his own face. “And we need to get our family out of it.”
“I know you had some kind of plan for the Malfoys,” Berodach turned over reluctantly to meet Percy’s gaze. “What exactly are the details, there?”

This was exactly what he’d wanted. Someone to help who could know everything. Although everything did include…

Oh, Merlin, now he’d have to explain Flint.

Once that landmine was dealt with, awkwardly and with much confusion all around due to careful phrasing, they dissected the rest of his plan to the point that Percy felt they’d covered practically every likely twist and he really would prefer anything else.

Which is probably how they ended up here.

“Looks like it’s open,” Fred said, opening the door without so much as a knock and pausing on the threshold. He drummed his fingers once against the door he still held open, lips quirking pensively as he informed them in a dry tone, “I honestly don’t know what to make of this, Percy.”

There was so much he couldn’t explain that Percy found himself momentarily at a loss for words. His wand at Berodach’s neck was probably item one of confusion. The fact that they had still been dancing and Berodach was actually grinning might have been item two. And then breaking away to hastily shove a stack of paper into the fireplace was likely item three.

All of them had very rational explanations. For example, Berodach and he had been rehashing the whole invitation to the Malfoys’ Yule celebration in his plans and they realized he didn’t know how to dance formally without leading. So that had escalated to them tripping around the living room and shoving Berodach’s timeline onto the tattered blue armchair by the fire to make room to dance.

Much laughter was had on Berodach’s part as Percy tried to do everything backwards.

Then he had had the audacity to bring up Percy’s tendency towards forthrightness and how that might not be altogether advantageous when an objective required stealth.

Percy had grown up an all O’s student that valued the sanctity of his homework, with Fred and George constantly in his space.

Percy was modestly accomplished at sleight of hand. Even if he typically had no use for it.

That had resulted in his wand making its way to Berodach’s neck without his notice to prove the point. And of course, Berodach was happy to be wrong because he was an aberration. ...Or he wanted Percy to succeed in life or stay safe during this whole mess. Whichever.

In the now, however, Berodach took over, straightening and turning off the wireless with a wave of his wand, “Self defense training.”

“Why-” Fred began, gesturing towards the papers but at that point George barged in, dragging Ginny behind him.

“Don’t be a wuss,” he told her with relish. “I’m sure a cursed, grown veteran of the goblin uprisings will be very forgiving of your use of him as a jungle gym.”

“Oh, sure,” she snapped back, before recognizing said veteran standing beside Percy with an amused grin. “I am….” She visibly panicked, before falling back on training Molly had drummed into her head as a child and Ginny had promptly discarded years ago. Thus, Ginny swept a wobbly curtsy, “I am really sorry. I wouldn’t have done all that if I knew you were a person, I swear.”
Adopting a stern expression, Berodach stepped forward to loom over her, arms crossed over his chest. “Ginny, is it?”

She nodded mutely.

Like a pane of glass to a jovial bludger, his facade broke to irretrievable pieces.

“My favorite little niece!”

With that, he plucked her from the ground and spun her around, to much delighted laughter from the victim, before placing her on his shoulders with finality. With a sharp pivot, he turned to address Fred and George, “You have obviously guessed I am Berodach, given that you arrived at the address Percy gave you and here I am. You’re correct, and I hope you’ll forgive me for being much less interesting than I used to be.”

He held out a hand for them to shake, which they predictably grabbed together and pumped with exaggerated enthusiasm.

“Not at all, my dear man! You’re living history!” Fred cheered.

“A relic!” George put in, “Practically the oldest person around!” At this, Berodach deflated slightly.

“Disregarding old Flamel, of course,” Fred pointed out, making Berodach rally slightly before he realized the man in question and the added injury that he would be an additional century or so older.

“Can’t forget old Flamel,” George nodded gravely.

“Charming,” Berodach returned with just a hint of sarcasm. "I'll have to ask for a senior's discount next time I find myself at the shops."

Fred laughed, George gifting him a wry smile. Ice officially broken, the Weasleys unleashed their patented interrogation technique: ask all your questions at once, loudly. An upside to this was that it allowed Berodach to pick and choose what he answered until Ron and Harry showed up.

Thus, Percy learned through passive absorption a few mundane facts about Berodach he hadn’t yet had the inclination or the time to ask. It turned out he’d been 35 before the goblins cursed him and wasn't willing to do the math for how old he "really" was. Blue was his favorite color because half his family had had blue eyes.

"And still do, I see," he'd added with a fond glance at Percy.

Given half a chance, he gleefully regaled them with facts about rocks, of all things. Fighting against the goblins, he had had the chance to sort through quite a few goblin mines and armories. They had other uses for the minerals he would find, but he had had quite a collection at one point. He was also thrilled to work as a “barmaid” and had been a soldier since he was fifteen, so he’d never had an actual job before but had had ample time to add to this legendary, now lost, collection.

This had given every Weasley at the table pause, though Berodach gamely went on about Rosmerta’s kindness unflinchingly.

The math there was a little tough to think about. A simple calculation, but… Twenty years fighting was nearly unfathomable to Percy. Especially since it eclipsed his entire lifespan thus far.

Luckily for everyone involved, the silence Berodach was attempting to cover was swiftly put to death by a knock at the door. Percy stood to let Harry and Ron in with some relief, watching them
peer about curiously the small apartment.

And, of course, at Berodach.

Greetings were exchanged, Harry and Ron nearly crushed in the exuberance of Berodach’s hug, and Ron shoved his way onto the couch between the twins, leaving Harry to fend for himself in terms of seating.

Ginny flushed a little, fingering the arm of the chair she was in and looking torn. Clearly she wanted to invite Harry to share the seat, but Percy could only see that ending in tears or horrid embarrassment. No, Percy was going to head this off at the pass. He plucked her out of the chair entirely, ignoring her protests that he was just going to make her stand and what kind of a brother was he to do that to his favorite sister.

When he sat and motioned for her to sit with him, she quieted easily enough. After all, was there anything more grandiose than having another human being functioning as your very own perch?

Okay, that probably wasn’t what was actively going through her head. Still Percy figured there was some subconscious part of her that felt that way. It was either that or she was ready to die of mortification and stubbornly refused to let it show, instead treating it as Totally Normal that she was sharing a chair with her older brother at the ripe old age of eleven.

Whatever her internal thoughts on the matter, she was outwardly content and had even unthinkingly curled her fingers into Percy’s sleeve like when she was truly little. That was enough for him to consider the situation well-handled.

Sadly, Ron hadn’t gotten the memo that a social crisis had been averted in the past three seconds of action. Harry hadn’t even fully committed to sitting down in the newly open chair before Ron had opened his mouth and let the question fall out. “So were you really a berserker?”

Percy had to close his eyes for just a moment.

Just to breathe and pretend that didn’t happen.

“You’re an idiot sometimes, Ronald,” Ginny snipped from his lap.

Ron frowned, instantly riled. “What? I am not!”

“Hey!” Berodach tapped the table lightly to break the momentum of the fight. When all eyes were on him, he pulled off a smile that only looked like a grimace if you squinted. “It’s alright. I… I can understand the curiosity and you have a right to know.” He glanced at Percy again, “Some more than others.”

There was something weighty in the room. It had been there all along, but only now decided to rest its bulk on the inhabitants expectantly, leaning over their shoulders in the hopes of progress.

Percy felt Berodach’s will reach out once for his and Berodach took a deep breath.

Berodach was, in fact, a berserker. The condition had had that name for a very long time, but he hadn’t been the berserker. There was a whole squadron of them that had been specially trained, apart from the normal hitwizards, aurors, and conscripted infantry. To the surprise of absolutely no one, the majority had been Prewitts.
Going berserk was a risk and an advantage that took careful measures to properly guide in combat without losing control of the berserker entirely. It conveyed immunity to most harmful spells and internalized the berserker’s magic to make them incredibly fast and strong. They’d been a wave of unrelenting melee between their own spellcasters and the goblin warriors. Given that Prewitts had both early training that made them susceptible to compulsion and truly transcendent tempers, it wasn’t exactly unheard of for them to have natural berserkers before the goblins had had yet another uprising. That resulting plummet in wizarding populations had put a strain on their most important resource: soldiers.

Something needed to give.

His parents had been proud when Berodach had been singled out. They’d noticed his tendencies early on and they were nothing if not pragmatic. Goblins didn’t accept anything but complete and total surrender; there was no way out of this war except to win it. So the Prewitts were ready and willing to do their part.

He’d rarely seen them after that.

They’d loved him, and he them, but from a distance. Every time they met, Berodach always had the feeling they were saying goodbye.

His siblings, however, had written him enthusiastically. Tiffany, Ignotius, and Pernilla were his lifeline to reality, to an existence outside the war. Ignotius and Pernilla were almost squibs, and Tiffany too kind to be any sort of warrior. He couldn’t resent them for it. They’d sent him books on smithing and artifact creation when he’d mentioned all the strange things the goblins left behind and failed to disguise his fascination. They’d press flowers and write entire short screenplays and sometimes treat him as a living diary and he’d adored them for it. If he was to say so himself, the feeling was mutual. Pernilla, in particular, hated the way he’d been separated from them for so long and often tried to create new, practical potion recipes to help the war that made Berodach’s hair stand on end at the very thought of her attempting them.

His cousins were his brothers and sisters in arms, but his siblings had been his purpose. Every wound, every loss, was weighed against their lives and came up short. Berodach could have fought until he died for them.

Of course, a week before what would be known as the Battle of the Coins, his commanding officer had brought the news. His family had been a small branch of the Prewitts, but they had still owned a modest amount of land. A farm, a house and an outbuilding in Gwent.

All that was gone. And so were they.

An attack in Gwent was so far outside the goblins’ typical movements, Berodach hadn’t quite been able to understand it. At first.

Pernilla had been telling him about a breakthrough before they… Well, before. Something she believed could end the war. It had been inspired by her own state as a near squib making heavy magics such as curses and transfiguration entirely beyond her abilities.

Something that suppressed magic’s flow in a living being.

She’d been making noises about making it effective through topical application so it could be thrown similarly to a grenade.

For goblins, that was a death sentence. They were too dependent on magic to survive a complete
stop to its circulation like that.

He’d been given two days leave for the funeral, and he’d spent one of them searching frantically through the burnt timber and ashes of his childhood home. The goblins had done this, and if he could make them pay, make them die at the very hands they had laid still, then it might...

Even in the current day and age, Berodach couldn’t explain exactly what he’d wanted out of it. Other than revenge.

But it was not to be.

No matter how many tiny pieces of charred furniture he sifted through or the small bits of jewelry and metal he’d found, there was nothing left of his sister’s creation.

And as he’d sat there defeated in the ashes of his home, he’d begun to think.

His sister was not the type to brag. She was a relative unknown and liked it that way. If she’d told anyone aside from Berodach, they might have tried to stop her, given the sheer number of life threatening potions incidents he’d read about.

How exactly had the goblins known?

In the here and now, Berodach rubbed a hand over his face. No one spoke as he searched for words.

“My… my commanding officer read everyone’s mail,” he said simply. The sentence sat there for a moment between them. Even Ron had nothing to say, his face as white as his siblings’ and his gaze riveted on Berodach. In response to this silent scrutiny, Berodach shifted uncomfortably, drawing in on himself both physically and through his bonds. To Percy, it felt rather like the tide going out as Berodach withdrew, wrapping his will about himself and nearly vanishing to Percy’s senses. Though he was still plainly visible, his voice was almost a shock when he spoke again, “The thing about… going berserk, is that it’s unpredictable. Your mind washes out and all that’s left is instinct. Normally, that meant looking out for our cousins and the other berserkers and… fighting goblins.”

Despite his investment in the story, a small part of Percy’s brain thanked Berodach for the censorship, given their current audience.

“If a berserker… deviated, we were compelled back by our handlers. We had to trust them - with our lives, with our friends and families. We had all worked together so well, and plenty of us attributed that to our commanding officer. He was trusted.” Berodach’s large hand clenched into a fist on the table. “I’d trusted him, too. I couldn’t… I couldn’t say a word. So when I returned and we were all preparing for battle I thought… I’d confront him afterwards. I’d find out who he’d told. Who they’d told. I thought it had been a mistake. My fury at him remained, but the goblins took the dragon’s portion. I trusted him.”

Berodach laughed, the sound harsh and dry as a desert’s wind.

“He pointed me out. Clear as day. A troop of goblins saw him and they paused. They recognized him. Or something on him. I don’t know. And he just… pointed at me. And I knew he had done it.” He flexed his fingers as he had as a ghoul, when he had had talons to expose. “I can’t remember what happened after that. It’s…” He glanced up, assessed the various ages of the group and tilted his head. “What I can remember is not really appropriate to share and furthermore,” he held up a hand, forestalling the protest brewing in George and Ron’s thunderous expressions, “I can’t relive that. Not… right now.”
Alright, time to change the subject to something that would be equally thought provoking, but less likely to give everyone nightmares. Percy mentally parsed through the details and realized, “The potion could be applied to wizards and witches, couldn’t it? Was it permanent?” At Berodach’s nod, his eyebrows shot up and he sat back in his chair. “She could have ruled the world with a thing like that.”

“Instant squibs,” Fred summarized, looking a little sick.

“She wasn’t the sort,” Berodach said quietly. His hands relaxed on the table, but his shoulders were still a touch too high, “I suppose I wasn’t, either. We didn’t think of the implications until it was too late.”

There was a vulnerability to the curve of his lips that had Percy taking one of his hands before he could really register the action. “I’m… sorry, Berodach.”

He’d hated it when people told him that, but it just came so naturally to his lips. Still useless, yet he could kind of understand why so many people had said that to him this summer. Sometimes ritual was all that was left.

“I know,” Berodach turned his hand, curling his fingers around Percy’s - and Ginny’s, too, as she reached out impulsively from her position in the middle of it all. He looked down on the two hands in his and laughed slightly, “You two are rather proving my next point before I can make it.”

“There’s more?” Ron blurted out incredulously. His face had been tight with borrowed pain, but he flushed when he realized he’d spoken aloud.

“Nothing terrible, this time, but… with a family this large, and such a strong Prewitt heritage, it was inevitable that you’d have one or two people with berserker tendencies. They tend to... er... feel things more deeply than most and there are... other obvious signs.” Berodach lifted the two hands clasped in one, brightening a tad, “Here they are.”

_Oh, Percy thought in the ensuing calm before the storm. That explains a lot._

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